DII Podcast S2E3

**Isabella Burton-Clark**

Welcome to the UNSW Disability Innovation Institute podcast, where we discuss the work of the Institute and other issues related to disability inclusive research.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Hello, and welcome to this edition of the Disability Innovation Institute's Podcast. I'm Jackie Leach Scully, the director of the UNSW DIIU. And I'd like to start by acknowledging, in the usual way, the Cammeraygal people who are the traditional custodians of the land that I'm on. I'd also like to pay my respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who may be present with us today. We previously mentioned on our podcast the importance of accessibility and inclusion at all levels of education, and that includes University, and that includes, of course, UNSW. Today, we're going to hear more from UNSW Student Representative Council President Nayonika Bhattacharya about what accessibility and inclusion actually mean for UNSW students. So welcome, Nayonika, and would you like to say some words to introduce yourself and also the role of the Student Disability Officer?

**Nayonika Bhattacharya**

Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me, Jackie, before I do get started, I do want to pay my respects and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land in which I'm gathered today, I'm on Bedegal Land of the Eora Nation and recognise that sovereignty was never ceded, and there was always connection to land, waters and air. I'm Nayonika, I'm a sixth year Arts-Law student, I use they/she pronouns. And the role of the Students with Disabilities Officer is to ensure that we have a connection. And we have a collective, there's a Students with Disabilities Collective that convenes throughout the year to obviously discuss the issues students with disabilities are facing, but also to make sure that these issues are addressed both structurally as well across the university, and that there's a, you know, a long term response provided to these issues. So students feel like they're accommodated. And we create cultural change. So these students can actually feel like they're involved in the wider society that we talk about. Beyond that, they obviously, you know, interact with other bodies across UNSW. So that would be different departments, different faculties, you know, that work with your fantastic, you know, committee, the Disability Inclusion Action Plan, as we all know, but they also work with the Equitable Learning Services, with a special consideration team, and across all of the faculties and their wellbeing officers as well.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

So you really try to work as widely as possible across the entire university and at all levels of the university, by the sound of it. You've already mentioned this briefly in passing, but perhaps you can give just a little bit more detail here about what kind of experiences do students with disability have at UNSW? And do they, do they face particular issues in common? Or are they very widely disparate? Are there particular strengths that UNSW has?

**Nayonika Bhattacharya**

Yeah, absolutely. I think in terms of issues experienced by students at UNSW, it's actually quite a wide range, so it could be anywhere from experiencing physical disability, to experiencing long term learning disability, intellectual disability. And you also have a lot of people who are in different journeys of their disability, so they've either experienced it, you know, since a young age and have an experience on how to navigate it, or a lot of people have acquired disability in their adulthood, and are navigating how to understand that disability, and how it impacts them academically, or even professionally as well, in terms of support and how they feel about it. You do sense a degree of desperation because University institutions, you know, were quite inclusive, unfortunately, in the middle of a pandemic, and at the end, now that you know, we're getting out of those adjustment factors that we had, it's becoming quite difficult to make those accommodations and adjustments as well. So it's always a back and forth struggle between making sure the accommodation is made. And you know, the limited resources sometimes that's provided to teachers and staff. So, you know, you're stuck in between a rock and a hard place, which is quite unfortunate for a person with a disability because, you know, they're the ones who are left with the short straw at the end of the day every time. And that's that's something that we see quite a fair bit of in terms of what the university is getting, right? I think the universities are recognizing, even if it's quite slowly that students with disabilities exist in more numbers than they expect. And they're also young people, you know, who go on and become quite successful in society, and providing adjustments for them, and making sure that, you know, we're an accessible and inclusive campus that understands disability doesn't only advantage them, but it actually makes learning a more inclusive process for everyone, whether that is, you know, a typical able bodied neurotypical student, or whether that's a student who needs adjustments, because of whatever disabilities they may have. So I think there is a slight, slow positive shift that you're seeing in terms of understanding how disability, you know, informed education is having an impact on young people

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Right, okay, so you're, what I'm picking up from you there is that there's actually a huge diversity in terms of impairment, in terms of disability, let's say in terms of difference that has an impact on people's ability to, to integrate and be just like anybody else, if you like, on, at UNSW. Do you get the sense that there's there is greater awareness than there used to be of that diversity? Or is it still fairly, sort of fairly stereotyped about what what a student with disability might be like? Or look like?

**Nayonika Bhattacharya**

I think it's, I think you definitely still do have this sort of mental expectation of what a disability looks like. I think there's a general awareness that disabilities are broader now. And I think there's a general appreciation for more patience to respond to, you know, disability needs. But I think there's still this sense of, you know, judgment that lingers, that, you know, disabilities need to look a certain way, I think there's still a limited understanding and acknowledgement of invisible disabilities, which we're seeing a lot more students, you know, talk about, you're seeing a lot more students seek support for a lot of these invisible disabilities. And it becomes quite difficult, because if you don't have an outwardly manifestation of this disability, which can be quite traumatizing, you know, for that student, to be honest, I think it becomes really difficult to advocate for things that I think, when advocating for more disability inclusion, there generally, is this weird and, you know, unsavory expectation that the student has to hit rock bottom for them to receive the support that they need, and we can't let them flourish from the beginning. So it almost seems like you know, intervention only happens when something goes wrong. But we don't have an understanding of early intervention, and you know, ongoing support to prevent the student from ever hitting rock bottom, which, in my opinion, is quite troublesome. Because, you know, every time you interact with all of these amazing students in the Students with Disabilities Collective, you know, the one line that always stands out to me is, I wish someone just told me this, or did this thing for me or made it easier for me in my first year. So I wouldn't struggle as much as I am in my third, fourth, fifth or sixth year, and feel like you know, I haven't done anything. And I think there's that really stood out to me is the fact that, you know, a student with disability, is already fighting against so many obstacles, and then to fight through all of that, and then come here and not receive early intervention support, and then to, you know, hit rock bottom is just really disheartening.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Yes, of course. So, you're saying that there's a sense that almost waiting to see people fail or begin to fail and then move in to help pick up the pieces, rather than sort of stop that happening from the from the outset? And I think maybe that's something perhaps also you can comment on the time that intervention takes because I know also from comments that have been made to me that that students in particular can wait a very long time before the university manages to work out, in a sense, what it is they might need and how to provide it.

**Nayonika Bhattacharya**

Yeah, no, absolutely. And I think I think the problem that happens with that sort of approach of early intervention is it's not a one size fits all approach, right? You can't have a standard response for students who may have similar disabilities, but every individual experience and interaction is different. So, you know, providing early intervention for someone on the autistic spectrum or someone with ADHD, ADD, or someone with Tourette's or someone with a physical disability, or you know, someone with dyslexia or dyscalculia, or dysgraphia, it sounds quite easy, right? It's like, oh, cool, you've got this one thing, and we can all just, you know, provide you this one set of resources, and you should all feel included, but that's not the case. Because for everyone, disabilities have so many ways of manifesting differently. And there's an impact of, you know, environment, cultural, you know, discussions, awareness, access to support and things like that. So, I think the problem there that exists, and that even if the university does try and do early intervention is that the university can't create a one size fits all model. And I think a lot of that also requires the faculties to be appreciative and to be flexible, and acknowledging that just because they've accommodated a student with a disability before and it worked for them, it doesn't mean that the same model and the same support can be regurgitated and like applied every time. And that's not to say that, you know, faculty doesn't try sometimes. But you know, the trying involves a relearning, of understanding how this student needs a specific support. And I think that's where the issue does come into play is that we have centralized systems and processes, which assist to a large extent, but when it you know, trickles down to a school and a subject, then a course level, you don't have staff who are trained to understand what disability inclusion looks like. You don't have, you know, support services staff, or Student Wellbeing staff, or course administrators or heads of schools sometimes, who are unaware of what disability inclusion looks like. And so I think it becomes quite draining for everyone, you know, the student involved, the faculty members involved, the external people, sometimes that could be the SRC doing the advocacy. Because everyone's just working off of these different assumptions that this is what disability inclusion looks like. So I think to get it right, the university needs to repeatedly and if not, every year, do this once in three years, which is, you know, have a mandatory refresher for teaching staff to understand what disability inclusion looks like, because, you know, you might be one of those people who doesn't have someone with disabilities in their class, but you never know. You know, you never know who's got invisible disabilities. And if you create that comfortable environment, they might feel comfortable enough to, you know, walk up to you and disclose that actually, look, I have these conditions, and I need this adjustment. I'm comfortable to share it and and their learning journey and student experience is going to be so much better than a student who's suffering in silence and just like going through all of these difficulties. So I think that sort of bottom up approach that requires staff to be trained every two years, and obviously does so in consultation with the DIAP team as well, because it's coming from so much informed knowledge, it's, you know, driven by lived experiences as well, I think there's a lot of opportunity to work together. And I don't think it has to be a competitive, you know, stage where faculty have to feel like they're being called out and being put on the spot for not doing something right. I think it's just an invitation that, you know, we are providing them as students to help us have a good student learning experience. And it's not, you know, to sort of air dirty laundry for lack of better words.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Yeah, I think there's always a problem, in an institution like a university, of the turnover. There's always a turnover in three or four years of undergraduates so that kind of memory goes but also the turnover of heads of school or something like that will, is relatively quick too. And that institutional memory and experience kind of is constantly getting disrupted and diffused across the university. You said there about making kind of embedding this knowledge and making it more and more consistent, more continuous and I think that's part of the the ethos of what the university and what also of course, the DIIU is working towards is in a sense for this to be normalized and universal. So it's not making special accommodations or adaptations for any individual but the whole of teaching, research and everything else is as inclusive as possible for absolutely everyone. Now of course, you'll be aware as many of our listeners will be of the new revised and recently relaunched Disability Inclusion Action Plan, or DIAP, of UNSW, which had been a little bit on pause during COVID, as so many things were during COVID, but has been, post a consultation exercise, the draft went up for consultation. And some of the responses have been incorporated into the revised version. The DIAP, as a plan, is an ongoing thing. It's not a project that we can see having an end, at least not in the short term. But it's something about changing the culture and the way of working of the university. How important do you think that is for the students and also how aware are students on the whole of the existence of the DIAP?

**Nayonika Bhattacharya**

I think in terms of awareness of existence of DIAP, in my opinion, unfortunately, it is quite low. And I think that's because we just in general don't have a culture of disability inclusion at UNSW. And I think that's, that's where the issue really lies is that I think we have an awareness in a very scattered sense of disability support and accessing ELS services if you know students need it. But just understanding that disability inclusion can be holistic, and can be done really well in a way that you know, doesn't just support your academic, you know, assignments, but also support to being a better and supported person who's aware of what options are out there, once they graduate. I think that that speaks to a huge lack of disability discussion culture, or a lack of inclusion culture that we have. So you know, something as simple as making sure that we still have accessibility to online classes and you know, streaming services or disability inclusion within classrooms in terms of physical space and making sure classrooms are, you know, close by, we don't have a wet weather friendly campus either. So small things like that really make it quite hard for you to feel like you are valued as a person with a disability beyond the you know, tokenistic level. In terms of the significance of the DIAP from a Student Representative Council, but also from a Students with Disabilities Collective perspective, it plays a critical role in you know, reaffirming the genuine rights that people with disabilities have to be very thoroughly included. And be involved. I think it does this phenomenal job of making sure and re-emphasizing that people with disabilities don't need to be treated like they're vulnerable, you don't have to walk around them on eggshells, and that they're not, you know, second class citizens who need people to speak for them, they're more than capable of speaking for themselves, they know what they want. And all that you need to do is to make sure that you understand that they're not coming from a place of entitlement, they're coming from a place of genuine basic human interaction and a need for you to respect them. And I think that's basically what it does. The DIAP says, I am a valid person. And any of my you know, lack of mainstream abilities doesn't make me any less of a person. So you should really respect me for everything that I bring to the table, not for what you think a person should be like. And it's really important that you know the DIAP gets implemented and in its entirety, and in all of its forms, and gets the sort of you know, airtime and the sort of main commercial slot that it deserves. Because the DIAP does so much for people who are carers for people with disabilities, it does so much for people who are, you know, trailblazers, and they do such fulfilling research, you know, we've got fantastic people like yourself, we've got a completely fantastic disability network as well. And all of these are young people, people who are establishing their career or living fulfilling lives. And I think what the DIAP does is, it shows it generally puts UNSW's commitment to the forefront and shows that when you come here, we will make sure everything that you do gives you a sense of belonging, and it gives you a sense of respect. Because at the end of the day, if a person's dignity and respect is not upheld, you know, it only goes so far to say that you're at a global university where you're learning all of these amazing, you know, global ranked degrees and courses, but you're not treated with respect. And we don't know whether we have given you enough information so that when you walk away, you have capacity to treat people with respect. So I think the DIAP really challenges that narrative to a large extent. And I think it's super important that you know, we have people understand that it's, it's not giving anyone an edge over other people. It's not giving anyone else, you know, a benefit or a margin that others don't have. All it's doing is it's saying that we're going to follow a certain set of things that actually makes everyone's life so much easier. There's so much research that suggests that disability inclusion makes an able, you know, neurotypical person's life easier as well. So I think at the end of the day, all we're trying to show everyone through the DIAP is that we just want everyone to have a good time. And that includes people who have different abilities as well.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

That's fantastic. Thank you. I mean, in a way, you've already answered this final question of mine, but maybe you can have a go at itanyway, which is, in a nutshell, what, what would you see the future holding? Perhaps better, what would you like to see the future holding? What's your ideal vision of UNSW for students with disabilities in the future?

**Nayonika Bhattacharya**

That's a good question. I mean, do I have unlimited money, because if I do, there'd be so much we could be doing. But no, quite frankly, I think what it would look like it would look like, you know, students with different abilities, walking through any or like, you know, coming through any of the gates of UNSW and feeling included, you know, knowing that, you know, their, their space, and their intelligence, and their efforts would be respected, that they have a fair shot at, you know, seeking an education that they want, where they don't have to feel like they're fighting for basic accommodations, where things are actually done for them before they even walk or like come through those doors of UNSW, where, if they decide to come here, we have services that understand what their needs are, have made those accommodations and adjustments, have communicated that through teaching staff members, and provisions are made for them to you know, feel included, where class timetabling does not prevent them from you know, having to juggle a lot of movement around campus, it looks like making sure UNSW is wet-weatherproof, so students can move around campus safely as well. And you know, that doesn't impact them as well, it looks like having a sensory room across every faculty building. So people can have chill out zones, whether that's staff or student members. So they can, you know, gather themselves as well, it looks like you know, having Braille and having Auslan as a subject offered across you know, the faculties. So students can understand how to be more inclusive as well and understand that, you know, sign language inclusion is super important. And it's super, you know, necessary for us to make sure we don't leave people behind. It looks like constant training available to staff and students who understand how, you know, proper disability inclusion works, understanding how support in terms of health, you know, inclusions work. So, if they need support from the health services, what that looks like, and reducing the onus, I think reducing, you know, the limitations we have on including people and not making excuses, that we can only run events a certain way. And then we can only organize things a certain way. And it doesn't have to be that way. We need to get creative, we need to be expansive as to how we allow people to be involved, whether that's online, through designing through, you know, volunteering through donations through just giving us a little shout out, I think just reconsidering how people can be involved in our lives and creating a support network for them, and making sure there are fulfilling opportunities, you know, throughout their degrees, and even staff, giving, making sure staff have the, you know, professional development opportunities, are considered equally and fairly for promotions. And, you know, aren't, you know, made the tokenistic sort of none of these people are made the tokenistic photograph that you know, goes on a website sort of thing? I think, you know, those are just a few things that I think, even like two or three years from now that if we did this, I think would be so huge. It would be so amazing, just to have an understanding of that.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Okay, thank you, Nayonika, that's absolutely brilliant. Thank you for your, your thoughts there. Do you have anything that you'd like to add to what we've discussed today?

**Nayonika Bhattacharya**

I think, it's one, dangerous to leave me with the mic, I can keep speaking forever. But I would say that I think it's really nice and fantastic to sort of see this conversation happening, you know, with with you also chairing the DIAP. And I think it's really refreshing to know that people are, you know, putting the good fight for people with disabilities, no matter how hard it seems sometimes. And I don't know who's going to be listening to this. And whoever does listen to this, I genuinely hope you'll give you know, people with disabilities, the benefit of the doubt and make sure you reach out to the community and try and see how you can be a good ally. I think more than anything, we are in need of good allyship at this hour, to make sure that you know people understand the needs that we have, and people who can support us as we try and live just you know, respectful and fulfilling lives. So really, really come and support people with disabilities when you can, be respectful and try and get trained when you can. But no, I think that that's always a good start.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Brilliant. Thank you, Nayonika. I'm sure that the DIIU and the students throughout UNSW and student council will have more to do with each other in the future. Thank you again.

**Nayonika Bhattacharya**

Thank you so much.

**Isabella Burton-Clark**

Thank you for listening to the UNSW Disability Innovation Institute podcast. The podcast is hosted by the Institute's Director, Professor Jackie Leach Scully, and produced by me, Isabella Burton-Clark. We would like to thank our guests for their time and insight. You can find out more about the Institute and subscribe to our newsletter at disabilityinnovation.unsw.edu.au. You can also find further information about the topics discussed in the podcast on our website and in the show notes.