DII Podcast S3E2 mixed\_mixdown

Wed, Jun 21, 2023 7:59PM • 24:41

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

unsw, disability, people, students, disabilities, campus, ableism, university, bit, institute, celebrate, podcast, cultural shift, autism, services, barriers, adjustments, heard, disabled, michael

**SPEAKERS**

Jackie Leach Scully, Michael Rahme, Isabella Burton-Clark

**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 the latest in the Disability Innovation Institute's series of podcasts. I'm Jackie Leach Scully. I'm Director of the UNSW Disability Innovation Institute, the DIIU. Now, last season on the podcast we spoke to UNSW's 2022 Student Representative Council President, Nayonika Bhattacharya, about UNSW students with disability and the University's Disability Inclusion Action Plan, or DIAP. Today, we're very pleased to be able to speak to the 2023 Students With Disabilities Officer, Michael Rahme, about what he's hoping to achieve for disabled students, and about some of the barriers that they face at UNSW. So, welcome, Michael.

**Michael Rahme**

Thank you so much for having me.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

So would you like to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about the role of the Students With Disabilities Officer?

**Michael Rahme**

Yeah, of course. Hello, I'm Michael Rahme, I came into the role quite early, last year in September. Students With Disabilities Officer, as a little offcut of SRC, it's my job to raise issues that students with disabilities flag or try and target any gaps or holes in UNSW's disability support systems or flagging ableism on campus. So, a majority of my job is either sitting within advocacy and supporting students with disabilities on campus, or via helping them the flag down, track, and hopefully improve support systems here at UNSW.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Great, I wondered if you could maybe tell us a little bit more about some of the issues that come to you about perhaps the, the barriers that UNSW students with disabilities face, or even the good experiences that they have at UNSW. I know it's usual that somebody in your position will tend to get the complaints rather than the praise, but you may have heard a little bit of both. So tell us more about that.

**Michael Rahme**

Of course. Just like students with disabilities, the complaints are incredibly diverse, fitting to, of course, their very unique disabilities. A lot of them do stem across finding student services, the largest, largest issue. And I like to say that I'm a glorified link finder. Because that is pretty much a majority of the job, just tracking down what student services we do offer to display to students with disability. So I'd say that overall, the biggest issue is a lack of visibility/centralisation of UNSW student services, and really an understanding of what we offer, because sometimes I'm still discovering in my position that we have specific services, and some of them do range across to, and the more serious ones are issues in the complaints system. So, wanting to flag, wanting to complain about ableism on campus, usually they do come to me because they feel they have troubles or grievances trying to raise grievances, which is not the way it should be. Another bit would be just around accessibility on campus, physical accessibility, even though students with physical disabilities raise that a lot, we also have students with invisible disabilities raising that there are no designated quiet spaces, no designated sensory spaces, which are very important for students with disabilities to help them go through their day to day and also help students with physical disabilities unwind. And you know, it is if anyone wants to try this, and I very much recommend that they do. Try and go from one side of UNSW to the other only using accessible bits, because you're going to find that it takes you twice the amount of time. Now imagine a student with physical disabilities trying to do that and get to class within five minutes. You know, you can't do that. It's impossible, even if I sprint and yet people with fatigue, muscular disorders, trying to get to these classes, and it is very tough, it is very tough,

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Right. So, a very wide variety of issues being brought up there, and you have to be a bit of a man of all parts to try and point people in the right direction and find them the information. I know that the issue of the accessibility of the campus has come up before; the University is not the most accessible place, it's built on a hill. But many universities of course, were built at a time when access wasn't as much in people's minds as it is nowadays. Not that that's any excuse but there's kind of legacy there. The DIIU, the Institute, itself is a research centre, we do research into disability issues, but we also promote the use of inclusive research and inclusive methods of teaching and learning across the University. I'm Director of that Institute but I'm also at the moment the Executive Sponsor of the Disability Inclusion Action Plan, the DIAP, and those questions about access, of course, come very much under the DIAP umbrella. So not only is this podcast hopefully of interest to our listeners, but it's also very useful to me in gathering that information. So thank you, Michael. As we are now, slowly in some cases, faster in others, returning to on campus and in person teaching, what can you say about the pros and cons of that for students who have disability?

**Michael Rahme**

I can certainly tell you that for some students with ADHD, it's a miracle, godsend. Coming from a family that has ADHD in it, my sister, she is hip-hip-hooraying, because, you know, every five minutes I see her trying to water a plant, pet the cat, during online lectures. So it's good to have a place to sit down and like, you know, it is a space to help you focus at least, a physical space. For some, on the other hand, it is a bit if not a lot of dread. I've heard stuff from all over the spectrum to people with physical disabilities, dreading around making that trek to campus, because navigating public transport is tough as hell, even, and then, of course, navigating the campus to try and get to their exam rooms, to try and get here, trying to get there in time, especially for early morning classes. It is, it is tough. And I do have some stuff voiced from people of the neurodiverse spectrum, just you know, worried about the school environment, the education environment. While online was great, because you could tune out whenever you did feel overstimulated it, it's tough to try and do that here. Especially because we have no sensory rooms, no quiet spaces, and, you know, going, transitioning from being all online, everything online, life is online, to now everything is in person, it's wow, it's, you know, even for people that aren't neurodiverse it's a bit of a shock.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Yeah.

**Michael Rahme**

So trying to try and find that perfect line between digital and reality, in person, sorry, is something that everyone's trying to look for. But yeah, the navigation to mainly in person for many is a troubling scenario, especially assessments.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

And I think a lot of people with disability realised during the pandemic and the pandemic measures that a lot of accommodations, like assessments online, and so on, were actually possible. And so it's doubly frustrating when some of those now are being withdrawn, are becoming harder to access. Now, you mentioned there earlier in passing, sort of, ableism, on campus or within the university. Can you say a little bit more about that, how does that manifest itself?

**Michael Rahme**

In numerous ways. Ableism can arise in the most discreet way possible. That can be from the way a Moodle page is structured, all the way to the way a lecture is structured, all the way to even what is talked about, what is educated about, and how the Uni goes about in its day to day. A small section of people that are very loud, they kick up a bit of a ruckus, refusing to make accommodations and rather expecting students to accommodate around them, and around people having misunderstandings, skewed perceptions, on disability. And even me, as a person that studies Politics and International Relations, it's an indirect way of seeing ableism. And people don't think that, it's saying ableism, but in my courses, we will touch on topics of sexism, we touch on topics of gender, touch on topics of racism, and classism, everything. But disability, I can confidently say, is never spoken about. And these, all these topics are given a week to talk about. And I've never heard once a topic on disability. And you know, people think, 'Oh, what is the use? What's the significance?' but it is very much empowering, but also raising awareness because when you don't talk about it, you let a lot of the misconceptions grow. And the misconceptions are what we're seeing a lot of.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

What kind of misconceptions?

**Michael Rahme**

I'd say a majority of them, especially around "invisible" disabilities; having an understanding of autism, what autism is, how it affects a student in the study environment. I have autism, people that will be listening in to this won't see it at first glance. As a result, they just assume that there's no adjustments that's needed for a person like me and for a lot of people with autism. And as a result, when we seek reparations or adjustments, it's like 'Well, do you really need adjustments or are you fishing?' and that judgment in itself is the scariest bit. And even in raising adjustments like that in classes. And this is not even to ELS type of adjustments: ELS has been amazing. It's more so around our learning structures and conversations on campus. People with autism, oftentimes, you know, are given a really big side glance when they say they've experienced ableism, because a lot of the time, it's like, 'Well, you're very borderline,' but that's far from the truth. It's non-visible, which is what people misinterpret. The conceptions are still very much rooted in physical disability being a majority, when really, 90% of the disabled demographic have non-visible disabilities. So yeah, you're catering to actually the minority there.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

That's really interesting to know. And I think probably not many of our listeners might know that, those kinds of statistics. Something I've said previously in this podcast series--so listeners, if you heard this before, you can stop listening at this point, or come back later--that sometimes, very often in my life, actually, people will say something to me, like, and this happens to other disabled people, too: 'Oh, I never think of you as disabled,' or, 'I never notice that you're disabled.' And they mean it as a compliment. And I understand the good place that that's coming from. But I often want to respond, 'Well, that's because I'm actually working very hard for you not to notice that.' And I think that's true for many people with disability, that they're actually doing an awful lot of work.

**Michael Rahme**

Yes, it's very draining.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, to pass, you know, to, to fit to the existing systems. And, of course, it's a, it's a double edged sword, really, because the better you do that, the less people will notice. And the less they'll think there was any need for accommodation. So it kind of goes, it's a reinforcing circle. OK, people, you can start listening again now if you've heard that before. I'm going to ask you what you think about what the UNSW as an institution, or the DIIU as the Institute, can do to make the campus more accessible? That's the, obviously the physical campus, but also the virtual environment, and perhaps just the university culture, what can we actually do to make things better for students with disability?

**Michael Rahme**

That's an amazing question. And I certainly won't be able to tell you a full answer, myself, because even other students with disabilities, they actually very much inform my approaches, because I try not to make my approaches, I try and let them decide the direction and be a device and a tool to help them get around. But I'd say that, from everything that I've heard, and in my own personal beliefs and experiences, that visibility is not just an issue, or a thing that needs to be upped on UNSW but in Australia as a whole, around the world as a whole. Visibility for people with disabilities is not that big. We have an abundance, and I say this, to every single one of our student support staff, we have an abundance of support. And it is amazing. It is amazing the amount of support that we have, but no one knows about it. And I say no one I mean, the majority. A lot of students don't know that these services exist. They should, because there's students that come to me and they go, Oh, I'm tired of ableism this, ableism that, like I feel you, but we have this service, we have this service, we have this service. And they're like, 'Huh, that exists?' And I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm just as surprised as you, I found out it about last week, because I was doing my own research for another student.' We have amazing staff. It's just not, there's not enough visibility on it, we need to talk more about the amazing services we have, we need to integrate that into the university culture to celebrate the amazing services that we have, and the amazing stuff that people are doing on campus. It is, we have an amazing, amazing, services here. And I actually don't--I think, to take it from another personal perspective, that people further up the chain at UNSW should be heeding more to the voices of these amazing staff that we have and the feedback that they're getting, because these are people on the front line, they see exactly what's happening, because they're getting the reports. And then even then, they're not getting the handful of reports because they need help going down the reporting system. Students with disabilities don't know where to report if they're having difficulties, if they're having issues. They come to me thinking that I am a reporting service. I'm not, I'm a support service within the SRC, not even for the University. And then when they do make complaints, they do have troubles following up those complaints even then. It's hard to say what needs to be fixed when we don't know what needs to be fixed. And we need to improve not just our visibility, but our reporting mechanisms for students with disabilities and for students as a whole because that's the only way that this University is going to become more equal and going to become more prosperous, successful, for not just students with disabilities, but for all students because these adjustments do benefit, even benefit, students without disabilities.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

That's wonderful. Thank you. I mean, it's great to know that the University is doing something very well, like having these resources available, but what needs to be improved is people's awareness of them. I think disability always has a little bit of a problem that other aspects of what you might call minority status, or marginalities, or special interest groups, or whatever phrase you want to use, you mentioned racism, sexism, earlier on, many of those groups, people can recognise the positive about them. They can celebrate, you know, LGBTQIA+ pride, or they can celebrate other kinds of positivity, about cultural diversity and so on. But I think many people still have a sort of knee jerk reaction that being disabled is sad and depressing. And so it's not something to celebrate or feel any kind of pride about, but it's basically something to cure, and hope it will go away. So I think that that may be some kind of cultural shift that we need to achieve.

**Michael Rahme**

Big time. But, yeah, nail on the head.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

How do you think we could best do that, the cultural shift within UNSW? Because it'd be, we can't just kind of go out there and say to people, 'Well, it's not all doom and gloom, you know, being disabled,' we need to do something, we can perhaps hold an event in, you know, Diversity Fest or something, something like that. And coming up, I know, July is Disability Pride Month. Is there anything happening there?

**Michael Rahme**

Yeah, I'm planning some large, or trying to plan, some large-scale events for Disability Pride Month. And the largest thing that I have heard from everyone, really, is 'Oh, intersectionality between LGBTQ and disability?' That's far from what that is, very far from what disability pride is. And that's kind of a reveal of all that as well. You're very much right that people feel, there's a very, very big shared belief that people feel sorry for people disability and that it's something to be cured. And I actually know that 72% of Australians believe that, because I'm a big, big fan of statistics. That's a pretty big, large demographic. And it's definitely seen here on campus. So I think that having Disability Pride Month doesn't, and the whole point... OK, let me just also define what that is, because I didn't, it was very much rude of me not to define what Disability Pride Month is. But it is very much a celebration of, not the barriers and people with disabilities' experience, but it's a celebration of the immense strength and endurance and beauty that people with disabilities navigate social barriers with; we've become so good at it, some of us. It's quite sad, but it's celebrating our strength, our resistance, our ability to always keep fighting, and not back down with ableism, we have a lot of strong fighting students with disabilities on this campus that want to see a lot done. And we have to celebrate that, that power and not let it get to them. Because it has gotten to a lot of people with disability. 31% of people with disabilities in Australia don't engage themselves with society out of fear of that judgment. So Disability Pride Month celebrates that and celebrates the beautiful diversity because not two people with disabilities are the same. It's a very, very diverse demographic, incredibly diverse from what a lot of people think, who tend to pigeonhole people with disabilities. And the main role as well of the month is it's actually, a lot of it's for people outside, you know, it's for people that aren't neurodiverse, it's for people that are able-bodied, it's for them, to show them that, you know, you don't need to feel sorry for us actually, what you should feel sorry for is the Western workplaces, the shopping centres, and the welfare systems that don't cater for us, you know, that's what you should feel sorry for, that society is, you know, full of barriers. And it's to show that, you know, we are here we are very, very present, and we're not chalked up to what everyone thinks that we are, we're not a referent object of care, we're people with goals and lives and lots of things. That's a big shift. That's the big shift and that, that's welfare, like welfare systems and support systems don't exist, you know, as a secondary to society. Like it's not something as a gift that we should be thankful for. We have to start understand that these support systems are there because they should be, you know. Who says that every individual has to be self-contained, self-built, self-motivated? It's a very, very sad and lonely place when you think about it like that. Everyone's here to lift and build each other up. And that's the whole point of the welfare system.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

So the key there is the interdependence, rather than independence and dependence of two contrasting things, but the interdependence of the whole community. I think I can probably speak for many of, let's say, my generation, that when I was at university, there were so few students with disability either visible or invisible, because access was so poor, but also the level of acceptance was so poor. That has changed enormously. And I think UNSW is particularly good among universities in that respect, not perfect by any means, but better than many. And that is a cultural shift. And hopefully, that generation of students will then, and successive ones, will then go out into the wider world, taking with them the assumption that the community is diverse, and that it includes, on an equal basis, people with disability. And that will be a major cultural shift. I'm coming to my final set of questions now, Michael, it's been a really, really interesting conversation with our time running out here. But I'm just curious, first of all, what made you particularly interested in becoming Students With Disabilities Officer, or did somebody push you?

**Michael Rahme**

A bit of both, but before I get into that, I actually want to say thank you very much for being able to sum up so eloquently the weird here in their thoughts that I have, and just spill out. Thank you very much for that you're doing a great job. Because I can't even keep track of my own thoughts. I was pushed into this role by the previous Students With Disabilities Officer, because I actually wanted to get very much into the activism of disability rights. I didn't really know where to start. And I think this is the best, definitely the most perfect place for me to start. I've lived with autism all my life, I've been forced to adapt my behavior, my facade, my personality, in order to not be bullied as a child, which is something people with disabilities still experience today, even into their adulthood. And I have a brother with a disability, an intellectual disability, and autism and OCD. And I'm his secondary carer, I help look after him. In a single parent household, I've seen how much not just people with disabilities struggle to get support in this nation, but the parents, the carers and the support workers, and that's what also makes me go on to support work, so support work is my second job alongside studying, so yeah, I'm very much immersed myself in the disability rights area.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

So, personal as well as a political commitment there. Well, that's really interesting. So my final question here, Michael, is, when it comes to the end of your term as Students With Disabilities Officer, how would you know that you've had a successful year? What would tell you that you've had a successful year?

**Michael Rahme**

That's a very great question. I'm not even thinking about success, I'm just thinking about starts and ends. I know that the fight for disability equity and fairness on campus is going to be a long fight. That's something that I cannot cover during my term here. So all I can really work on is the continuity. So my success is based on the continuity of that fight. To think that we can do it in the short term is a very funny, funny thought, because you can't change people's minds in a day, or a year.

**Jackie Leach Scully**

Three semesters, two semesters, whatever. Thank you. That's a really modest, but also insightful and inspiring response there. So thank you, Michael Rahme for being with us this afternoon. And we really look forward to working with you for the rest of your term and seeing how it all turns out.

**Michael Rahme**

It was an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for having me, and to you and everyone listening, I hope I can invite you all to celebrate Disability Pride Month, share the word, and keep an eye out on campus because this is something that I think everyone needs. Thank you very 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.