JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Hello and welcome to this latest podcast from the Disability Innovation Institute at UNSW, the DIIU. I'm Jackie Leach Scully and I'm the director of the DIIU at the UNSW Disability Innovation Institute. Our vision is to produce a sustainable change in the lives of people with disability, creating and sharing knowledge that's interdisciplinary, innovative and inclusive through research and through education. And with this in mind, in this episode of our podcast, we follow on from previous episodes introducing the human rights of people with disability and Disability Inclusive Research by focusing on the principles of disability inclusive education. But currently, mainstream education is not built with people with disabilities and therefore accessibility in mind. Increasing the profile of inclusive education is essential to redress these exclusions and to work towards a more equitable society that upholds the right for all people, including disabled people, to access education and to talk about that, I'm joined by the DIIU Academic lead for education.

Professor Terry Cumming. Terry is a professor of Special Education in the School of Education and a Science Education Fellow at UNSW Sydney. Have a research interests centre around special education, focusing on areas such as positive behavioral interventions, use of technology in the classroom, universal design for learning or UDL in schools and at the tertiary level and lifespan transitions for people with disability. So, welcome Terry. First of all, I'm going to ask you why is it that you're so committed to making education accessible for disabled people?

TERRY CUMMING:  
Thanks for having me, Jackie, I'm excited to be here. My interest in making education accessible started off probably with my own education. I'm neurodiverse myself and that I have ADHD and I'm old enough that it wasn't a thing, so to speak, when I went to school. So school for me, although I loved learning and I loved being at school. It was a rather punitive kind of thing. We were expected to sit in rows and be quiet and stay still for long periods of time. And these are things I still don't do well as an adult. So, I was interested in the fact that there were other ways, and when I got to high school, they were finally starting to actually have special education classrooms. But they were still at the point they were hidden away. And I always wondered where those kids were coming from at lunch because I wouldn't see them the rest of the day. And my boyfriend actually at the time had a nephew with cerebral palsy, and I used to babysit for him quite a bit and help him with his schoolwork.

And I could just see that things weren't quite the way he needed them to be to be successful. So when I went away to uni, I was trained primarily for my undergraduate as a special educator, and I taught high school special education for 20 years in a variety of settings, including a mental health hospital for adolescents that was like a lockup residential kind of a situation. So, there were so many ways that I could see that things could be improved, although they really were headed that way, and I received a lot of training and universal design for learning back then when I was a teacher and learned how to implement it in my own classroom and see how well that would work for a lot of my students. And then when I got to the university at the tertiary level and I started teaching, I realized that this system was not set up for people with any kind of neurodiversity whatsoever.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Clearly for you, it's a very personal thing, as well as being intertwined with the kind of intellectual interest and I suppose a sort of ethical and professional commitment to accessibility. One thing you touched on there just wanted to ask about, too it's about the expansion or the extent of accessibility, because I think there's still a lot of people if you think about access in education, particularly for disabled people, they immediately think, OK, people with visual impairments, people with having impairments, mobility impairments, maybe not so much neurodiversity in different ways of learning says that a change you've seen come in recently?

TERRY CUMMING:  
Interestingly, in the United States, learning disability, which in the UK is the term they use for people with what the US would call intellectual disabilities. But in the US, it's an umbrella term for things like dyslexia, dysnomia. So pretty much those hidden disabilities, but they count as a category in the U.S. and schools actively test students for that. So, I feel that schools are a bit more accessible there than they are here, simply because it isn't often recognized as a category. And in the US, it is the single largest category. They're very prevalent. Dyslexia is a very prevalent kind of a thing. So, yeah, I've seen it move along from when I first started back in my 20s to now. So, we're looking at over 30 years. The movement is to make things accessible from the start because when I started, it was all about intervention. So we've waited until a student had a problem to be eligible for services even they had to fall to grade levels behind before anybody would test them for anything.

So, now you've lost two years of your education, and that's not accessible at all. And all the emotional and mental health things that go with experience that failure over and over again.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Yeah, yeah.

TERRY CUMMING:  
It's just a big, vicious cycle. So, a lot of that has changed and it's positive. But gosh, it seems so slow to me. And mostly in the U.S., the only thing that changes things is litigation and that changes law. So, it's really all about making people do stuff, not making them want to make sure that their classes are accessible right now being compliant.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Yeah. I mean, that need leads very nicely into my next question, which is about, what are some of the barriers that you face and you personally perhaps or the organization faces in making education accessible?

TERRY CUMMING:  
Are you talking about at this level, at the tertiary level?

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Primarily, yeah.

TERRY CUMMING:  
I feel like and I've been here almost 14 years and I feel like it's only been the last couple of years that we're really starting to look at it on a broad scale. We've always had student support services that students could go to. But the onus was always on them to show proof that they had a disability, that they were eligible for support. So, I would say the biggest barrier would be all the red tape. If you're already having difficulty understanding things, going through the system can seem just insurmountable to people. And then having to declare their disability over and over again all the time. Two different instructors, you know, even sitting in a group of peers doing group work and things. Sometimes you have to say, Hey, I need help with this.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Yeah, I think going to university for many people is just overwhelming anyway. Certainly those first days, weeks, even months and having to get over this additional bureaucracy, perhaps and I guess the other thing that also reminded me of is the way that the language that we use around this isn't particularly helpful. So, I'm very struck when people talk about disclosing a disability as if it's something like a criminal record or whatever, but you have to...That you should be ashamed of.

TERRY CUMMING:  
Yeah or even to prove it. I prefer to look at education the same way when architecture changed due to universal design, where if you change what you're doing in the first place, it helps everybody. When I was teaching high school, I would learn strategies that were supposed to help my students with learning disabilities, for example, and they would have things that involve post-its and highlighters and doing things a different way. Well, I never just kept any strategies to the students with learning disabilities. I offered those strategies to everybody in the classroom. And what I would find is a lot of people who may be either students who don't have their disability identified or people that are right on the edge or just people that prefer to learn that way. Those things would really help. And some of the students with learning disabilities, they didn't help at all. But it really helped with everybody's metacognition to have these different choices of how to access things or how to study, you know, just every little bit that anyone can get is helpful because university is overwhelming for everyone.

It's not meant to be easy, apparently. (LAUGHS)

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Yeah. And I also think that anybody could benefit from having access or ability, the ability to think about different ways of learning something for themselves. You might just have a different style of learning and not something that's identified as a particular disability.

TERRY CUMMING:  
Absolutely, and take, for example, the hoops you have to jump through to get an extension on an assessment. Meanwhile, I go to get a prescription filled at the chemist and there's a big sign saying we write medical certificate for $5. So really, all it is is a paper game and a money game. So, if you're coming from a low socioeconomic background, disability or not, you're already disadvantaged. Why don't we just give everybody the opportunity for an extension? Oh, because it breaks the system. We have due dates. Things have to be in computers. This has to be done. And while I understand all of that, some people take a little while longer to learn. And now that we've cut those semesters into terms that people are truly struggling with that 10 weeks, not a lot of leeway before the next term starts. I think another example would be assessments. I could do a whole podcast just on UDL as you know, it's my passion, but it's really about student choice. So, if I want to give my students a choice of how they demonstrate their learning by giving them a choice of assessments, there's a lot of committees that have to approve that and to try to make people understand whose background isn't what mine is.

Why this is. It still meets the same learning objectives if they sing me a song about something or create a poster or a visual, rather than writing some long essay. So there's a lot of red tape on both sides, even when instructors do want to make things more accessible. We really have to fight hard for it sometimes.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Yeah, and it sounds like what you're saying is that within the university and perhaps a society in general, we've got a lot of talk perhaps about celebrating difference and maybe a lot of rhetoric and also very positive doing that. But that's the intention with with bureaucracy, with organizational structures and with a fairly fixed idea of how people to do things and within what kind of timescale people to do things. It's interesting in that what you're saying, the problem is not with the instructors or lecturers who you know, don't want to do to change the way they do things, is that right?

TERRY CUMMING:  
That's a pretty big blanket statement. (LAUGHS) I have truly, in all honesty, come across both. There's plenty of instructors that would love to do it. They just don't know what to do. You know, my thing is, I always start asking my class, what can I do to make this course more accessible to you to make it easier for you? I don't single out the people that have identified themselves to me. We could all use a little hand and up and maybe my style of teaching, especially with my neurodiversity, does it match your style of learning? I get a bit frenetic sometimes, and I generally tell my class, you can be my external brain. If I'm talking too fast or if I go off on a tangent, raise your hand and stop me. It's OK. I never get offended. This is a welcoming place. If you need me to repeat something, I will do that I usually try to run, now that we're online, mostly, I usually try to run the subtitles all the time while I'm speaking. PowerPoint does that pretty well now, which is great. And there's other people that say, If I do this, if I make this allowance, it's not fair to everybody else who had to do it a different way.

And that is the age old barrier of thinking that we've run across in education from kindergarten straight up through PhD probably.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
So, there's a sense that offering alternatives is making life. It's unleveling the playing field is making life too easy for some people and...

TERRY CUMMING:  
Well, that's what some instructors think. And I think well, and it's more work. When I started to redo my courses to give people choices to make the learning objectives, it takes a long time. But once that course is done, you're just keeping up and updating it.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Yeah, but it's doing it for the first time, I guess.

TERRY CUMMING:  
Yeah. Well, because you've got to find all different methods of representation and engagement where students can engage in the way you're going to show the material.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
So, if I were playing devil's advocate here, you know, I'd say, Well, you know, How did the university benefit on? How do other organizations or institutions benefit by making this effort, by making spaces more accessible?

TERRY CUMMING:  
Well, that's really interesting, just being human to other humans (LAUGHS). Well, and if you look at it from the hard line university standpoint of numbers and student experience and things like that, that would make a huge difference. You know, we talk about retention. I think internationally in undergraduate programs, we lose the most students in the first year, and it's because they don't find the university to be a welcoming place, they don't feel connected to that environment, there's a whole field to study on school connectedness, and it's only now starting to be something we're looking out at the tertiary level because really you can come in and take your classes and leave. And now that we're online, you can do that. And I don't know how that forms a bond of being connected, especially if it's always a struggle and you don't feel like there's anybody who cares about how you're doing or not. So, it doesn't help the university to have a lot of people drop out their first year. And even if you just look at it from a financial point of view and our rankings, you know, part of that is student experience.

Students have a lot to say about things.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
That is all the hard numbers, stuff and the pragmatic stuff. But as you said at the start, it's about a being a good human being and being a human oriented organization that's trying to do its best for a wide variety of people.

TERRY CUMMING:  
Well, yeah. And I think if you look at our 2025 plan and some of the some of the principles we're espousing, we can't just talk the talk. We need to walk the walk.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
OK, I want to pick up a little bit, maybe in some more detail about obviously we're focusing on accessibility needs from disability, but there are other ways in which students can be or feel excluded. You mentioned the kind of intersection with low socioeconomic status, and there would be other cultural barriers, maybe religious barriers or identity barriers and so, when you're talking about accessibility or universal design for learning, do you come to an end point to which you're saying, OK, well, this is about disability and this is about something else? Or can you conceive of a way in which everyone is included?

TERRY CUMMING:  
I don't think it's about disability at all, to be honest with you. And Universal Design was started as a general education initiative in public schools in the U.S., basically to keep people out of special education to keep those kids that were over identified, for example, African-American boys, because they're culturally tend to be boisterous, kept getting shifted into classrooms for students with behavior disorders that we were looking to have all this accessibility and support in place to stop that from happening in the first place. And those support should help everybody, all of those different marginalized students, no matter what level of education you're talking about. I really think when you talk about accessibility, you can't separate all those things, and so many of them do intersect. I'm not running it, the students are running up, but I got involved with that diversified group, so sure that I can talk a little bit about. But we ran a few workshops with neurodivergent students, and very few of them only identify with a disability or one disability.

Most of them have a lot of things going on, whether it's trauma or identity issues, you know, and they've been excluded all through their lives in different contexts for those differences. It's just about and any more...What is normal? You know, what is neuro typical? I'm not even sure that that exists.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
This is really interesting because it's not looking. And I think that is a shift that I hope has happened in the way in which our society looks at disability. And you're saying it's not about disability per say. I kind of agree because it's sort of shifting away from thinking, he was a weird person who doesn't fit. We need to do something special to make sure that weird person can succeed. And thinking more expansively about all of society is very diverse and our community is very diverse. And how do we build something that can encompass all of that? Is that in a little bit more like it?

TERRY CUMMING:  
That's exactly exactly what I'm trying to say. You just said it way more eloquently than I did.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
No, I don't. I think so. But I do think that your personal experience has been with neurodiversity. Mine has been with deafness as a child in the education system then the university system. And in my experience, at least by now, some years ago, some decades ago, and hopefully it has changed for the better. But yes, it's very much here is an oddity and we're going to be very kind and do things to help this oddity. But it was never a sense of this is going to happen as a matter, of course. And certainly not of the onus being on the system to do something rather than the onus being on me and it sounded like, no you as well to approach the system and try to get something out of it.

TERRY CUMMING:  
Well, yes, and it's not just students like you're saying, I'm sure that even since you've been here, there are things that you've had to advocate for yourself for. In order for me to pay attention, I don't do long meetings well anyway, but they were something I had to do. I was deputy head of school for a while, so I would have these massive two, two and a half hour long meetings. And the only way I can pay attention is I need to be moving. So, I doodle. I just, I color in agendas. I make designs on them, but I'm not making eye contact with whosever speaking, but I am listening and I'm getting it all. But I noticed in meetings people were calling me out like, you'd call it a naughty school child who wasn't paying attention, and they'd say things like, "Well, what do you think Terry?" Like they were expecting me to go, "Huh?" And I always had an answer. But I think so much of it is just people don't understand that disability doesn't go away when you grow up and get in a professional position where the expectation is that we're all going to be like these big intellectuals and sit in these meetings that have big thoughts in these deep conversations.

And all I want to do is get up and run around the room.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
And I think I've certainly failed on the big thoughts, but never mind. And there's also, I think, an expectation that they, whoever they are, sort of know what accommodations or changes are going to be needed. And if in fact one needs something different, they're a little bit, you know, puzzled like you're doodling or somebody else might be knitting or somebody else might want to get up and move around. They're all culpable with, but they're not within the supposedly standard range of professional academic behavior.

TERRY CUMMING:  
I gave a lecture once, it was my Scientia lecture, as a matter of fact. And they actually paid for closed captioning to happen so it would be accessible because I had that demand. I'm talking about universal design. We need to make this talk as accessible as possible.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
And a bit embarrassing otherwise.

TERRY CUMMING:  
Well, yeah, exactly. And one of my colleagues came up to me afterwards and said, "That was a great lecture, but the subtitles were so distracting.". And I had to take that deep breath that you just took. You know, how do you politely say, "Well, I'm sorry you were distracted, but there were people sitting here that wouldn't have been able to access the lecture at all without those subtitles."

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
So, on the one hand, you have nobody and people not being able to follow the lecture. On the other hand, you have you being a little bit distracted. Well, tough.

TERRY CUMMING:  
Well, I think everybody's got to make some kind of... Because if you think about all the concessions you've had to make with your disability and I feel like mine, trying to fit into that box of what we're supposed to do as academics and how we're supposed to behave as academics. I think that other people could be a little uncomfortable sometimes also. Close your eyes then, don't watch me, listen to the lecture.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
And of course, getting back to thinking about education and learning and so on, it's hard enough for us as professionals and academics to make those sorts of claims and be that different. But it's that much harder when you're a student and you're new to the environment and you feel you have no power over that.

TERRY CUMMING:  
Exactly. And having to ask a professor that, you have all this respect for it to do something different for you, most students aren't going to do that. They're just not. And a lot of students won't even go to the ELS and get those supports because they don't want to disclose.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Just want to go back to what you mentioned earlier, very briefly about one of the projects that you've been involved with last year, in part with the university and with the DIAU. Do you want to say anything more about that or other projects that you want to talk about?

TERRY CUMMING:  
Sure. Well, I'll just give a little bit of background and that'll kind of cover all of that. So, when I first started as the academic lead education with the institute, I decided my platform would be universal design for learning because that was a good place to start. And there were a couple of people in the PVC that were starting to look at it, and I was kind of consulting with them beforehand. But we really upped that. And then we were consulting with the EDI and we've got an article published about how you deal looks in tertiary education. We developed a framework for the university and the one thing we were doing every year was we were doing an inclusive education showcase because I realized that I have colleagues that are doing inclusive teaching or really embracing the principles of UDL without knowing that it's a thing. You know, they didn't have a phrase for it and they'd say, "Well, I don't know that I'm really doing anything about good teaching." Well, that is good teaching.

UDL is good teaching. So, in the process of doing this, people got to know each other and who I am, and I ended up getting acquainted with Ian McArthur and his student, Jose Bobber, who Jose has... She's neurodiverse and she has difficulty with some of the course material, so she rewrites them. She literally rewrites course outlines so she can understand them better and timetables and things like that. So, her and Ian worked together when she was in his class to produce different materials. And we got to talking and we decided we needed a group because there ended up being a lot of people involved in this conversation. It was getting bigger and bigger, and it was both students and instructors and other people in the staff in the university. And it was all about co-production for education because I know that the DIAU has been in that space and research from the beginning. And so, we formed a group called Diversified and got a small grant from the EDI, and we ran three workshops of instructors and students last year.

And our goal was to produce materials, and that never happened. It was like an onion. We were just unraveling all the different ways and all the barriers and all the things instructors were asking questions of What can we do? So, we're ending up with some very solid recommendations. And our disability champions actually got funding and just last week, the students made a video of what it's like to be neurodiverse on campus. So, I think some of what we're really going to promote is awareness, which is so important because, like I said, a lot of people just don't even know, they just are teaching. And they're not born teachers like I was because they came to university with a specialty area that wasn't education. You know, I'm an engineer, I'm brilliant, but maybe no one ever really taught me how to teach. So, they're not taking all of that into account. So, hopefully this will help. They're so invested. I would like to see this be a permanent group on campus that students actually maybe get compensated for and run the group themselves because it should be student driven and they're unbelievable.

They really are. I'm very still super excited about being involved. We meet twice a week.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
That sounds really fantastic. And something with the future. Hopefully we can talk about that more another time.

TERRY CUMMING:  
Yes.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
Wanted to ask you, do you think there have been any particular effects from COVID, from the COVID pandemic on accessibility, either in UNSW or sort of more broadly?

TERRY CUMMING:  
That's such an interesting question, and there are some small studies that are being published already. Between the studies and just anecdotally, what I've heard from parents and students, online learning has been really, really good for some people with disabilities. They're thriving. Some people with anxiety, some people with autism that they have to put so much energy into being on campus around people, that not having to do that anymore they're just being very successful. Then you've got people that thrive on that interaction, that human interaction in person with and without disabilities who suddenly find people that are neurotypical suddenly now have anxiety or depression, or, they're just sad. That's not the way they learn. They learn by that interaction. And for a lot of people, it needs to be in person. The face to face of online and just for me even, Zoom exhausts me so much more that if I had to sit in meetings all day face to face, which I often do on Tuesdays before COVID, I was less tired than I am now.

So, I think screen time affects people, I don't know. I think there's positives and negatives to it, and I think it's a very personal thing. So, we can't make a blanket statement, whether it's been bad or good.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
I know that there was a time, it feels like decades ago, but it was in the early days of COVID in the early days of the pandemic, and people had shifted to working from home and stuff was going online and so on. And in the disability community, there was quite a strong sense that this was overall good. Not so much in itself, but because it showed the world at large that things were possible, that different ways of doing things are possible, that different modes of work and study could be accommodated. And there was the hope that that would continue into the future. Do you have any comments about that?

TERRY CUMMING:  
I absolutely do. I think that's the biggest positive of it all because that is UDL. People have a choice of how they study, how they work. I went to a training last week that was so fantastic. I've been trying to do high flex learning with one of my courses since they put it online because I get more out of my teaching if I'm face-to-face. So, I'm really anxious to get back to that. But at the same time, I don't want to disadvantage my students who are more comfortable online. But I was terrified to do high flex because I was thinking about the equipment we have. And I was like, How do I do this well so the experience is not the same for everybody, but equal for everybody? And I went to a training and we're starting to have the infrastructure here on campus now. They have a camera that follows you as you walk around the room, so I am not chained to my lectern. It even switches if people are speaking different. Every table has microphones, so, if students interact, the people at home can hear them also.

I was just like, wow, and none of this stuff is difficult to use. So, I am really looking forward to trialing this in T3. And I think this is the future. And it's not that you sign up to be online or be in-person, you should be able to choose every week. What if you're just not feeling well, one week and you need to stay home or you're just like, "I've been working all day, I just can't go to university." But yeah, I can put my computer on and interact, hoping that that's the wave of the future, so, everybody gets a choice.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
It's there ever a lot of awareness of these possibilities because that's certainly not something I'd heard of.

TERRY CUMMING:  
No, I think they said, 15 rooms. So, it's very much a pilot, and I'm really excited to be part of that because I think if it's successful, that will be... Remember when we had an overhead projector and no computer in our lecture halls? I mean, it's just technology moving onwards in a good way.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
In a good way. But that's great. Thanks, Terry. Is there anything else that you would like to comment on or add that we haven't covered?

TERRY CUMMING:  
I don't think so. I could talk about this all day, but I think for this short podcast, I know we're looking at doing more in-depth podcasts later on, and I'll be happy to focus my energy on one thing.

JACKIE LEACH SCULLY:  
I think this is a kind of a taster for people. And then later on, we hope to be able to go into more detail around UDL and maybe the philosophy behind it and so on. So, that's great. Thank you, Terry, for coming in and having this conversation with us about inclusive education, and we hope to hear more about that as it works at UNSW and elsewhere in the future. Thank you.

TERRY CUMMING:  
Thank you for having me.

ISABELLA BURTON-CLARK:  
Thank you for listening to the UNSW Disability Innovation Institute podcast. The podcast is hosted by the institute's director, Professor Jacqui 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.