

This letter was written on Dharawal country and land, the home of the Eora nation. This land always has been and always will be Indigenous land.

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Dear Australia,

This is a letter about inaccessibility, exclusion, and under-representation: the daily (sometimes hourly) realities for those of us living with disability and chronic illness. It's about a world literally not built for a body like mine. There are shops I can't access because of steps or narrowness, venues I can't go to, paths I can't use. There are roads without kerbs, train stations without lifts, disabled toilets used as storage rooms, if they're even there at all. There are so many ways this country can be more tangibly accommodating to the needs of people with disabilities. But that requires conversation and consultation, something that, on current form, our leaders aren't particularly concerned with.

I want Australia to be a fairer place. A more tolerant place. A place where people like me don't have to fight so hard. I am a strong and capable disabled woman. I'm working hard on being proud of that fact.

Feeling pride about this part of me, a part that's as intractable as my hair or eye colour, is hard in this country. It's hard because we're rarely seen or heard. Australians can be expert at ignoring what we don't want to see, despite the narrative of the fair go, the lucky country, mateship.

The issues faced by people with disabilities in this country run deeper than inaccessibility. Under Australian immigration law, applications for Permanent Residency Visas can be denied on the grounds of an individual having a disability or chronic illness. This blatant discrimination is justified by the argument that people with disabilities and the cost of their potential care needs are an unnecessary burden on the taxpayer. Basically, disabled people cost too much. This issue isn't exclusive to Australia, but it remains one of the only places in this country where systemic, government discrimination is legally allowed to occur. It goes unchecked, because people don't know about it. And there's more.

When I was completing my HSC in 2017, I had to deal with the rigmarole of applying for special provisions. That meant getting permission to use a laptop because the fatigue caused by my Cerebral Palsy means my handwriting gets illegible quickly. During this months-long battle fighting for my right to a level playing field, my mum was told that those in charge of the HSC didn't care about my mark, only that I completed the exam, the insinuation being that maybe university was beyond me. At the time of writing this letter, I am just months shy of completing my Bachelor of Arts and International Studies, a four-year degree.

During my first year of uni, desperate for the independence of employment, I decided to try a specialised disability employment service because, according to the recent SBS documentary, *What Does Australia Really Think About Disability?*, 15 percent of Australians believe disabled people are either incapable of, or will perform badly at work. I thought if anyone was going to get me a foot in the door, it would be these guys given their whole premise is combatting systemic exclusion. As it turns out, those services are only available

to people who aren't uni students because someone with a disability is apparently unable to manage work and study at the same time.

Now, I'm a uni student, a successful freelancer and the editor-in-chief of a global publication platform, Missing Perspectives. I got to where I am through putting myself and my writing out there on social media and being unafraid to ask people to help me get where I wanted. I've spent the last couple of years as I move from teenager to twenty-something, growing into a politically aware person, trying to figure out how we can begin to change things up so a fair go might become more than a myth.

So, what can you do? How can you help? It starts with awareness. Start actively taking notice of accessibility in your local area. Look at the paths. The shops you go into. The public transport you use. If you're a business owner, investigate what it would take for you to improve accessibility. Make sure your websites and social media posts include image descriptions and screen readers, and look up Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Make sure the experiences of disabled people are represented in who you follow online. Listen to their experiences and support their work. Then start reading, or listening to Carly Findlay's book *Growing Up Disabled in Australia*. It'll explain a lot.

All I want from Australia is acceptance, inclusion, tolerance, and empathy. One in five Australians has a disability so if you're not an ally or you don't have disabled people in your life/community/workplace, you need to do better. We deserve better. Listen. Learn. Deconstruct. Rebuild. There are so many of us out here, working hard to teach people about our lives, offering resources and moments for growth. Take us up on it. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Hannah Diviney.