

Commonwealth Games have better integrated para-sports, but society needs to catch up

Written by Simon Darcy, Professor of Social Inclusion - UTS Business School - Centres for Business and Social innovation, and Business Intelligence and Data Analytics, University of Technology Sydney

The [Gold Coast Commonwealth Games 2018](#) is the largest major sporting event to integrate para-sports. But the inclusiveness of the Games only highlights the challenges of the everyday lived experience of people with disabilities in Australia and the other 72 countries competing.

Australia's best known para-sport athlete, Kurt Fearnley, [identified](#) the introduction of the wheelchair marathon (for

[54 classified athletes](#)

) as the perfect swansong to his illustrious career.

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Fearnley and the more than 300 other para-athletes are [well catered for](#) within the sport arenas, Commonwealth Games village, transport arrangements and official functions.

But what of the thousands of friends, family, officials and spectators whose access needs are not catered for in the surrounding communities?

Right on the doorstep of the Games, for example, Queensland Rail's [newly acquired A\\$4.4 billion trains](#) have inaccessible bathrooms and walkways. Not to mention a lack of staff support when people with access needs are boarding.

This is just one example of the institutionalised discrimination in the everyday lives of people with disability in Australia and around the world.

Read more: [Three charts on: disability discrimination in the workplace](#)

As outlined by the [Commonwealth Games program](#), these Games have shown an outstanding

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commitment to the expansion of para-sports. The 38 medal events being contested represent a 73% increase from the Glasgow Commonwealth Games 2014.

Along with this increase in events is a [45% rise](#) in the number of athletes competing across seven sports, including swimming, javelin, cycling (track), lawn bowls, table tennis, triathlon and power-lifting.

The overall responsibility for accessibility and inclusion of the athlete experience has been integrated as part of the broader [sustainability program](#) of the games.

The sustainability program clearly states the importance of accessibility for the athletes in a sporting context and the Commonwealth Games Village. But it also [emphasises](#) the importance of accessibility for all those attending any of the events:

Providing a safe and enjoyable experience for all, ensuring all competition venues will be accessible for people with mobility and other impairments and providing a range of accessible facilities and services.

Read more: [***First person: how the Paralympics changed my life***](#)

In February 2017 the GC2018, Gold Coast Tourism and Gold Coast City Council hosted a [community forum](#) that sought to encourage the tourism industry to leverage the Games well beyond the closing ceremony.

That forum can be thought of as an extension of the International Paralympic Committee's objective of an "[accessibility legacy](#)" for host cities and destinations.

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Building on the integrated inclusiveness of the [previous five integrated Commonwealth Games](#) the Gold Coast has raised awareness for providing accessibility across disability dimensions for the event, such as mobility, hearing and vision, but potentially raised the expectations of an [ongoing legacy in the community](#) and [those visiting the Gold Coast requiring accessible accommodation](#)

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Simultaneously, the Queensland government launched a guide, [Inclusive Tourism: Making Your Business more Accessible and Inclusive](#), for business.

This guide was later supported with research, [Accessible Tourism in Victoria and Queensland](#), carried out in conjunction with Tourism Research Australia, which valued the market at A\$8 billion annually.

However, even before the opening ceremony the disregard for people with disabilities in other areas of life had tarnished the tremendous efforts by the organising committee and the Queensland government.

To achieve an accessibility legacy for all beyond the life of the event requires all levels of government and the private sector to be involved, in areas such as urban planning, transport and development, to ensure there are continuous paths of travel for people with disabilities.

People with disabilities have the same right, and the same interest as others, in being able to access buildings, buses and bars in order to [participate fully in all aspects of life](#).

Disregard for people with disabilities

Disability advocacy groups, individuals with disabilities and law firms were outraged that [Queensland Rail's new trains](#) did not meet the [Disability Discrimination Act's standards](#), despite six years of planning.

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Rectifying this has [been estimated to cost A\\$150 million](#) , which Queensland Rail has said would come from its contingency budget.

The State of Queensland and Queensland Rail had made a joint application for a [temporary exemption](#) from the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#) from the Disability Discrimination Act and the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport to carry out its works. The Australian Human Rights Commission [refused the exemption request](#)

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Leaving aside the technicalities of the accessibility of trains, this case signifies that a major state government, its rail provider, as well as previous governments of both major party political persuasions, did not value the citizenship rights of people with disabilities.

Transport is the lifeblood of social participation, whether that is going to a major sport event, getting an education, or keeping a job.

That the trains did not meet the Disability Discrimination Act (in place since 1993), and the specifics of the [Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport](#) (in place since 2002), was aptly described as Twitter lit up as a “[debacle](#)”.

Read more: [A brief history of the Paralympic Games: from post-WWII rehabilitation to mega sport event](#)

Para-athletes whose elite athletic experiences can be some of the most inclusive on offer are still subject to all forms of discrimination that the community of people with disabilities regularly

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face beyond the major sport event experience.

This was nowhere more evident than the experiences of wheelchair racer Nikki Emerson [on an Emirates flight to the Games](#)

. Emerson was made to wait an hour to access the toilets as a member of the cabin staff challenged her right of “climbing on the floor” to get to the toilet as it “upset other passengers”.

These examples suggest that people with disability live in a world where some experiences and activities (like a major sport event) are valued as they signify to the world that the Gold Coast, Queensland and Australia are fair and equitable.

Yet the everyday lived experiences suggest an ongoing struggle for fair treatment in all areas of citizenship.

It’s so frustrating when we see the political will to deliver an inclusive major sport event when the eyes of the world are watching.

Prof Simon Darcy presented at an accessible tourism workshop organised by Gold Coast City Council, Gold Coast Tourism and Gold Coast Commonwealth Games 2018.

Tracey J Dickson does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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