

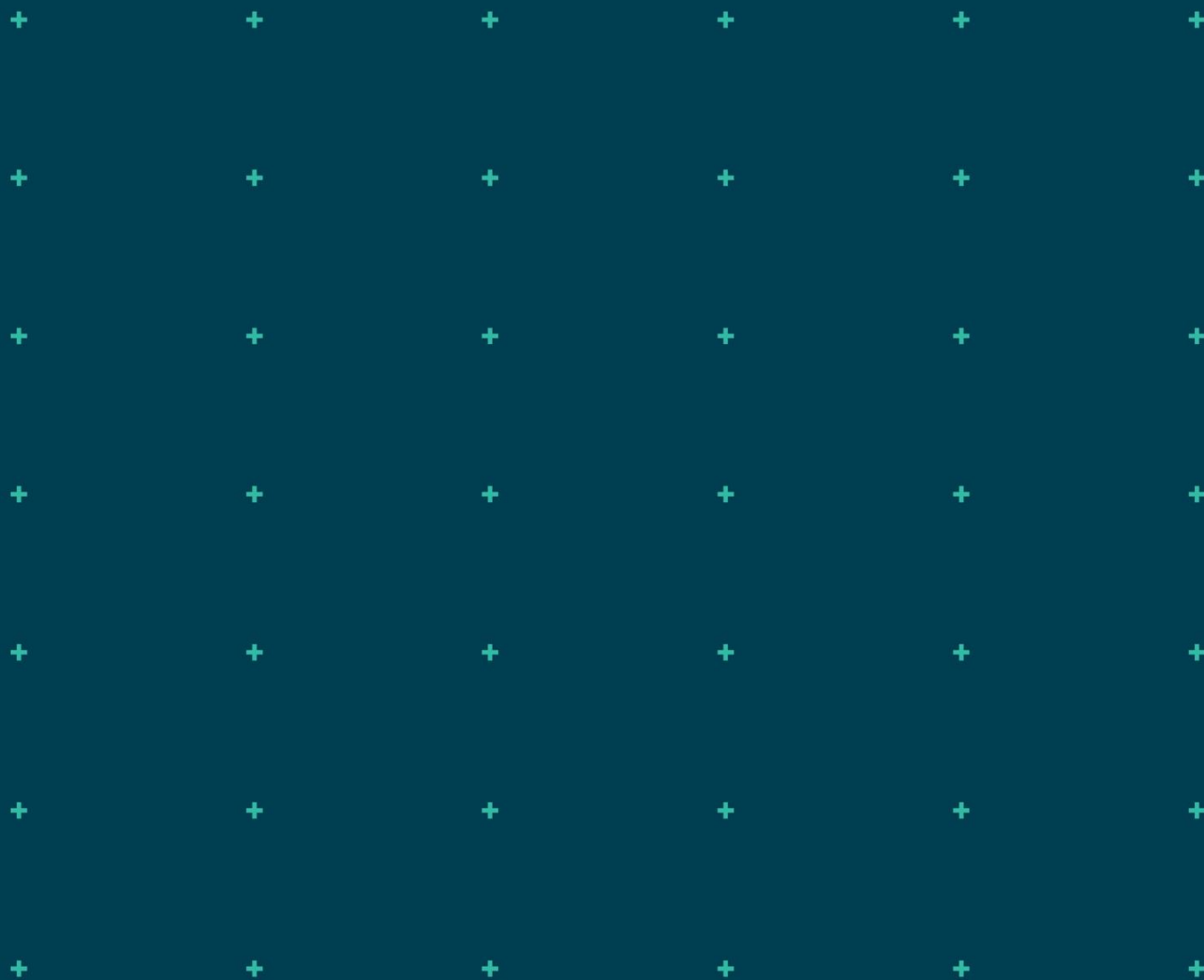
**WIN+
WELL**

**Inspiring
Australians**

**AUSTRALIA'S 2032+
HIGH PERFORMANCE
SPORT STRATEGY**



Australian Government
Australian Sports Commission



Understanding Barriers to Entry and Progression + in the High Performance Pathways for Para Athletes

Findings Report

August 2024

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples of this nation, the traditional custodians of the lands and seas on which we live. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past, present, and emerging.

Through this Strategy, we are committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters, and seas. We recognise the outstanding contribution they make to sport in Australia and celebrate the power of sport to promote reconciliation and reduce inequality.



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The lead-up to the Brisbane 2032 Paralympic Games is one of the great periods of opportunity in Australian sporting history, with actions over the next eight years to impact generations to come.

The sector is united through [Australia's High Performance 2032+ Sport Strategy](#) (HP 2032+ Strategy) to reducing inequity of opportunity for Para athletes to make the most of their talents.

The HP 2032+ Strategy and its vision, we win well to inspire Australians, has driven work to uncover the barriers that Para athletes face when entering and progressing through High Performance (HP) pathways, and take meaningful action on feedback provided by Para athletes, coaches, role holders, and the broader Para sport community.

The outcome of this project is to understand the barriers and take aligned, actionable steps in working towards addressing them to break the cycle and create the change that the system and Para athletes need.

Many of the barriers uncovered are systemic issues that cannot be addressed in isolation. Dismantling barriers and promoting equity for Para athletes requires a collective effort from the entire HP system.

If unaddressed, the barriers Para athletes experience upon entry and throughout the HP pathways could impact not only Australia's performance at Brisbane 2032, but the long-term health of Para sport in Australia.

In July 2024, the Federal Government recognised the sector's work to uncover barriers by committing record funding for Para sport, with the \$54.9 million over two years doubling existing support.

Through the leadership of the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) and collaboration with all HP Sport System partners, the Federal Government's investment will address better classification opportunities, access to fit-for-purpose training environments, and specialised coaching and performance support.

The support from the Australian Government represents a critical opportunity to take a systemic approach to reversing the downward trend in our Paralympic outcomes ahead of Brisbane 2032. Achieving this will require a united effort across the system, including increased investment and support for National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) to strategically enhance their Paralympic programs for the Los Angeles 2028 Paralympic Games.

Now is the time for Australia to create the most successful era in its Paralympic sporting history.

Our vision is to create an inclusive and equitable HP sports system where Para athletes can fully realise their potential and unite, inspire, and motivate Australians for generations to come.

Our Approach

In the first Horizon of the HP 2032+ Strategy implementation, the ASC led industry working and advisory groups to conduct a three-phase research project using a hypothesis-driven approach. The hypothesis was: do barriers to entry and progression exist for Para athletes in the HP pathway?

Our hypothesis was confirmed through an iterative process of evidence collection and refinement. First, we identified challenges through extensive literature and policy reviews. Then, the HP 2032+ industry advisory and working groups contextualised these challenges within the HP sport landscape, confirming over 140+ unique barrier statements affecting Para athletes. Finally, an extensive system-wide survey completed by 386 athletes, role holders from across the HP system, parents and support personnel validated these barriers and identified any additional challenges, ensuring feedback from a broad cross-section of the HP system, particularly Para athletes. The Para Barriers survey was rolled out late April – mid May 2024.

Outcomes

The analysis revealed seven major themes, representing the most persistent barriers impacting Para athletes and the areas where change can be most impactful. These themes represent the areas that current athletes are experiencing and/or retired athletes have experienced the greatest challenges in achieving their performance outcomes. Similarly, the seven themes reflect the primary areas in which systemic change could have the greatest and most widespread impact in addressing barriers and creating a more inclusive and connected environment within the HP system.

1. Access to & Navigation through High Performance Pathways
2. Coaching Depth, Support and Development
3. Knowledge & Literacy of Para Sport
4. Access to Domestic & International Competition
5. Classification
6. Para Workforce Structure & Capacity
7. Appropriate Training Environments & Equipment.

Underpinning Levers for Change

When considering the seven overarching barriers that contribute to the inequity Para athletes experience, no one barrier is mutually exclusive. Rather, it is the complex interaction of several unique barriers that overlap and contribute to the level of disability an athlete may experience.

When assessing the current landscape, there are four key factors that underpin many of the barriers. Equally, these factors are the levers that will drive change and enable a collaborative, aligned approach to addressing the barriers across the seven aforementioned areas of impact.

1. Resources (human and financial)
2. Governance
3. System Alignment
4. Perceptions

Strategic Recommendations

As a result of identifying and understanding the seven major themes which comprise the greatest barriers for Para athletes, the following initiatives have been proposed and mark a crucial starting point in addressing their respective barriers. Given the major systemic shift and degree of alignment required to create the change, the ASC, in collaboration with its system partners including Paralympic Australia, the State and Territory Institutes and Academies and National Sports Organisations, will take a leadership role in driving these initiatives forward.



Classification system reform

Implement a centrally led, coordinated, and connected system to reform the delivery model and oversight of Classification in Australia. This will remove bottlenecks in accessing Para sport, from recreational competition right through the athlete pathways to High Performance and prepare sports for the changes in the Classification Code scheduled in 2025.



Increased access to high performance pathways, daily performance environments (DPE) and performance teams

Leverage broader system partners to enhance and accelerate the pathways for Paralympic athletes. This includes innovative approaches to increase impact at scale and provide necessary support for athletes with higher support needs.



Resource uplift for Paralympic sport programs

Provide a direct uplift of resources to Para sport programs, ensuring current athletes receive support at an equitable level comparable to their Olympic counterparts.



Development of coaches and performance support

Establish new pathways to attract, develop, and integrate coaches and performance support personnel into Para sport, ensuring a sustainable talent pipeline.



System approach to facility and equipment access

Adopt a system-wide approach to maximise economies of scale, enabling better access to facilities and equipment for Para athletes.

Summary

There are significant barriers to entry and progression through the HP pathways for Para athletes, stemming largely from historic gaps in resources (human and financial), awareness and understanding, governance and system alignment.

If left unaddressed, these barriers could hinder the system's goal of reducing inequities and achieving success at the Brisbane 2032 Paralympic Games and impact the viability of Para sport in Australia for generations to come.

The Australian HP Sport System is united in its aim to reducing inequity of opportunity for Para athletes to make the most of their talents. This work has already begun through the HP 2032+ Strategy and the Australian Government's record investment in Para sport.

The build-up to the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games gives us a generational opportunity to win well and inspire Australians by creating an athlete-focused, performance-driven, exceptionally led and inclusive environment that supports sustainable success. With the unified commitment to the HP 2032+ Strategy, the time is now to break the cycle and create meaningful and sustainable change.

2. PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document aims to bring into focus the barriers that Para athletes face when entering and progressing through High Performance (HP) pathways. These issues have been consistently raised by the system, about the system, and Para athletes and those that support them want to see change.

Recognised through [Australia's High Performance 2032+ Sport Strategy](#) (HP 2032+ Strategy), the system has committed to act and work together towards reducing inequities for Para athletes and creating environments that enable them to make the most of their talents. Dismantling barriers and promoting equity for Para athletes requires a collective effort from the entire HP system, united in fostering a more inclusive sporting landscape with equal opportunities for all, regardless of existing inequalities.

Following the principle of not making decisions without the participation of those persons affected by those decisions, this project has been led by the ASC, supported by Paralympics Australia (PA), and guided by the expertise of specialised industry working and advisory groups as part of Horizon 1 in the HP 2032+ Strategy. Group members hold 10 – 30+ years of experience in Para sport, comprising current and former Para-athletes, Para coaches, Para sport pathways managers and senior leaders representing eight National Sporting Organisations (NSOs), two State Institutes/Academies (SISSAS) and PA. Additionally, an extensive and anonymous survey was conducted by the ASC to give the broader Para sport community and HP sport system an opportunity to contribute to the project.

This document will identify the barriers that Para athletes are (or were if retired) experiencing upon entering and progressing through the HP pathway and will outline several strategic recommendations to address them. The barriers discussed in this report are persistent and entrenched within our sporting system. Thus, it is important to recognise that many of the necessary actions and solutions required to address them will be part of an evolving, iterative process. The systemic and long-term changes required cannot happen overnight or exclusively within the first Horizon of the HP 2032+ Strategy.

The strategic recommendations provided here aim to provide practical advice for organisations, teams, and individuals committed to the HP 2032+ strategy, dedicated to breaking down barriers and creating more equitable and inclusive environments for all to win well.

3. VISION

Our vision is to create an inclusive and equitable HP sports system where Para athletes can fully realise their potential and unite, inspire, and motivate Australians for generations to come.

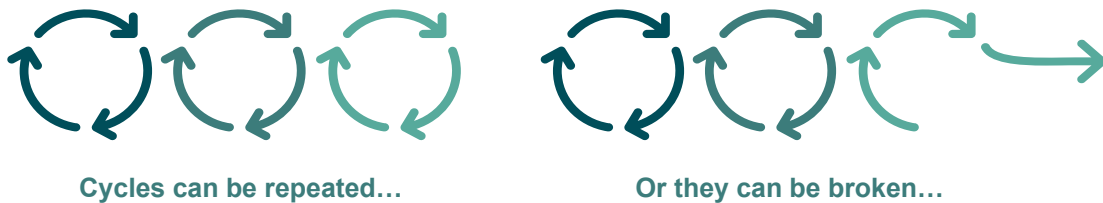
We are committed to dismantling systemic barriers and fostering an environment that values and amplifies the voices of all athletes, in particular Para athletes, coaches, and their allies.

Through the unified commitment to the HP 2032+ Strategy and a collaborative, system-wide approach, we can ensure that all Para athletes have equal opportunities to thrive, from entry through to the pinnacle of their sporting careers and beyond.

Together, we can drive transformative change, enabling the Australian Paralympic team to achieve unprecedented success in Brisbane 2032 and beyond, as well as inspire a world where diversity is celebrated.

4. BACKGROUND

Para athletes, coaches, role holders, and members of the broader Para sport community have experienced a repeated cycle of being asked for feedback, providing it, and then seeing little to no action taken. Paralympic sport has the power and a platform to engage, inspire, and challenge inequality.¹ At the same time, the HP sport system's commitment to the HP 2032+ Strategy has created an opportunity and provided the platform to work towards reducing the inequities that Para athletes face in making the most of their talents.² The united commitment from the HP system and its partners aims to break this repetitive cycle and create a meaningful and sustainable change as we look towards Brisbane 2032 and beyond.



Everyone will encounter challenges and hardships at some point or another, but for persons with disabilities, these barriers are often more frequent and persistent, and have a greater impact on their everyday life. For this report, it is important to distinguish the difference between persons with disabilities and disability:

- Persons with disabilities are those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments.³
- Disability results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition or impairment and attitudinal and/or environmental barriers that hinder their full participation in society on an equal basis with others.³

The evolving concept of disability is anchored in the 'Social Model of Disability'. The Social Model of Disability asserts that societal structures and attitudes impose disability on individuals, rather than the health condition or impairment itself.^{3,4} This model seeks to challenge societal, attitudinal and environmental (social and physical) landscapes to be more inclusive, fair and equitable for those with impairments. This is where we, as a sports system, also need to do better.

Participating in sport, at any level, should be inclusive, accessible, and equitable for all. However, the lived experiences of current and alumni Para-athletes indicate that the design and operation of the current HP system creates challenges for full and equitable participation in sport. This needs to change.

Historically, there have been many siloed attempts to address the persistent barriers faced by Para athletes, but these efforts have largely failed because many barriers stem from broader systemic issues that cannot be resolved in isolation. If left unaddressed, the prevalence of many of these barriers to entry and progression for Para athletes have the potential to limit the High Performance Sport System's (HPSS) ambitions to have its best Games in Brisbane 2032.

That is why the time is now. Now is the time for Australia to create the most successful era in its sporting history by having the biggest Australian team celebrating more medallists than ever across a greater breadth of sports in Brisbane 2032.² To achieve this, individuals, teams, and organisations across the HP system must unite to create the systemic and sustainable change needed to address the barriers to entry and progression for Para athletes. The HP 2032+ Strategy has aligned and united us as a system, and now we must act on it to achieve and sustain Paralympic success.

5. WHY THE TIME IS NOW



Para athletes, coaches, and those working within Para sport are frustrated with the repetitive feedback cycle and lack of action.



Many barriers faced by Para athletes stem from systemic issues that cannot be resolved in isolation; a system-wide approach is needed.

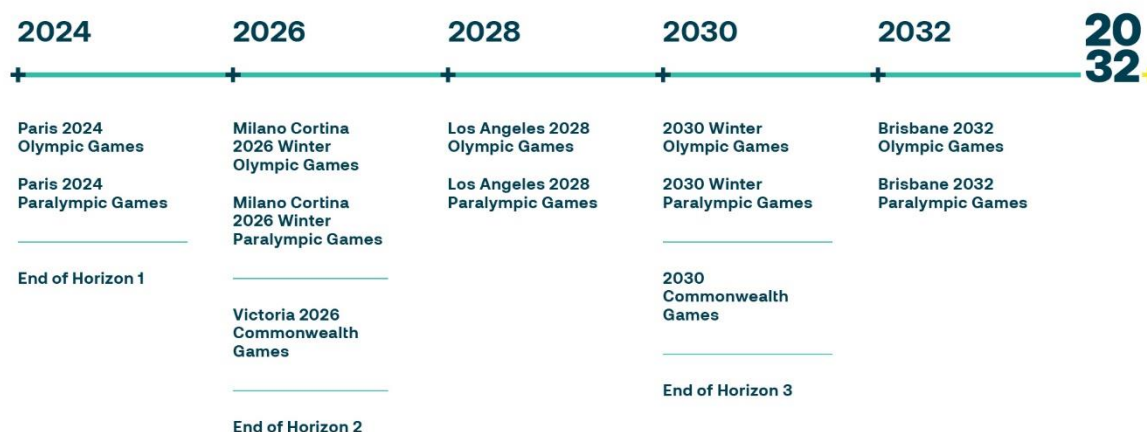


The unified commitment to the HP 2032+ Strategy has created a platform for change, holding all system partners accountable for driving this change.



If unaddressed, the barriers to entry and progression through the HP pathway could hinder the HPSS ambitions to achieve its best performance in Brisbane 2032.

Together we can break the cycle and create the change in preparation for Brisbane 2032 and beyond.



6. OUR APPROACH

In the first Horizon of the HP 2032+ Strategy implementation, the ASC led industry working and advisory groups to conduct a three-phase research project using a hypothesis-driven approach⁵, which focuses on solution-based strategies to streamline data collection and analysis. The hypothesis was: do barriers to entry and progression exist for Para athletes in the HP pathway? We confirmed this through an iterative process of evidence collection and refinement.

In phase one, we identified challenges faced by people with disabilities through extensive literature and policy review. Phase two involved contextualising these barriers within the HP sport landscape through the formation of specialised industry advisory and working groups. The groups confirmed the prevalence of approximately 140+ barriers that impact Para athletes, which were mapped to five key themes, each supported by sub-themes and lived examples.

Phase three involved an extensive system-wide survey to validate our findings by confirming or rejecting the identified barriers highlighted in phase two and identifying any unknown barriers. This allowed us to hear from a broader cross-section of the HP system, particularly Para athletes. The survey was 10 – 15 minutes in duration, anonymous and the questions were underpinned by the themes and sub-themes identified in phase two. The Para Barriers survey was rolled out late April – mid May 2024.

This report confirms our hypothesis: barriers to entry and progression for Para athletes do exist in the HP pathway and have the potential to hinder the HPSS's ambitions for the 2032 Games if left unaddressed.

This report brings into focus the barriers that exist in the Australian HP sport pathways for Para athletes and more importantly, seeks to provide strategic recommendations to address them.

7. SOCIAL MODEL FOR DISABILITY

The Social Model for Disability sees disability as the outcome of the interaction between people living with an impairment and the barriers they experience in their physical, attitudinal, communication and social environments, rather than an impairment alone leading to disability.^{6,7} The 140+ barriers identified by the HP system, about the system, are indicative of the many challenges, hardships and perceptions that Para athletes may be experiencing (if current) or have experienced (if retired) during their time in HP sport. The 140+ barriers have been mapped to five overarching themes that are consistent with the Social Model for Disability.



Attitudinal barriers

Encompass prejudiced beliefs, societal misconceptions and lack of awareness towards persons with disabilities, such as stereotyping and discrimination, which hinder individuals from fully participating in everyday activities.



Systemic barriers

Comprises persistent challenges entrenched within a system, where the interplay between physical, policy and attitudinal factors originates and perpetuates these barriers.



Policy barriers

Are often associated with insufficient awareness or enforcement of current laws and regulations mandating accessibility for individuals with disabilities, or the absence of governing policies ensuring equitable outcomes for all individuals within the system.



Physical and social environmental barriers

Encompass structural obstacles in both natural and manmade environments, preventing mobility or access. Social barriers, on the other hand, pertain to the conditions within individuals' daily life, such as home, work, school, and community settings, that can contribute to decreased function and inhibit their full participation in society.



Technical barriers

Relate to operational, day-to-day factors within sports, including classification, talent identification, progression data, equipment, and logistics. Overlooking operational aspects often leads to technical barriers, particularly when they intersect with any of the other four barriers.

Using the Social Model of Disability, many of the inequities Para athletes experience cannot be attributed to their health conditions or impairments alone. Rather, these inequities and barriers stem from the interplay between these five overarching barriers and the context in which society and/or the HPSS impose them. The impact of these barriers is further nuanced by individual experiences, as even two athletes with the same impairment can be affected in vastly different ways.

We are highlighting these barriers to ensure the HP 2032+ Strategy's platform for action is fully utilised. To break the repetitive cycle and drive change, the entire system and its partners must work together to address the systemic issues that are ultimately at the root of many of these barriers.

By embracing inclusive design, we can create sustainable solutions that consider all users and the full range of human diversity. This approach will help overcome attitudinal, systemic, policy, physical and social environmental, and technical barriers, creating equal and fair opportunities for Para athletes, coaches, and role holders in Para sport to maximise their potential.

8. BARRIERS – PRIMARY AREAS OF IMPACT

Following the analysis of the 140+ unique barriers identified through the working and advisory groups, supported by the literature review and the data gathered from system survey, seven major themes were recognised. Each theme presents unique barriers to entry and progression through the HP system for Para athletes.

1. Access to & Navigation through High Performance Pathways
2. Classification
3. Coaching Depth, Support and Development
4. Knowledge & Literacy of Para Sport
5. Para Workforce Structure & Capacity
6. Access to Domestic & International Competition
7. Appropriate Training Environments & Equipment

Whilst these are the most persistent themes contributing to barriers within Para sport, equally, they represent the primary areas of impact in which change is required to break down the unique barriers within them.

The use of the term “*barrier*” from here on out in this report, is indicative of the current state of play. Whereas the “*primary area/s of impact*” terminology signifies the area where change will have the greatest impact in breaking down the unique barriers.

Note: the order that the barriers/areas of impact are presented does not imply order of importance. Collectively, they mark a crucial starting point for strategic decision making and necessary changes that the ASC is equipped to lead on.

8.1 Underpinning Factors that Contribute to Para Barriers

When considering the seven overarching barriers that contribute to the inequity Para athletes experience, no one barrier is mutually exclusive. Rather, it is the complex interaction of several barriers that overlap and contribute to the level of disability (see Social Model for Disability, pg. 12) an athlete may experience.

The following four factors are those that ultimately underpin the barriers as we currently know them to be. Likewise, these factors are the levers that will drive change and enable a collaborative, aligned approach to addressing the barriers across the seven aforementioned areas of impact.



Resources (human and financial)

Resource limitations such as insufficient funding and a limited workforce with specialised Para knowledge create suboptimal environments and impact the stability and sustainability of the Para pathways. These resource constraints hinder the system's ability to support the unique needs of Para athletes, deliver relevant education and professional development, and raise disability awareness.

Resource challenges are even greater at grassroots level, whereby local clubs may face larger funding limitations, inaccessible facilities and either overextended staff, particularly coaches with Para-specific expertise or a lack of personnel with adequate disability knowledge to support Para participants.



Governance

Strengthening governance requires enhanced Para representation, transparency, and accountability across the system to ensure that Para programs receive the necessary support and resources, enabling Para athletes to thrive. Governance in Para sport is hindered by policies that often prioritise other programs, leading to inadequate funding and support for Para athletes in the HP pathway. This lack of recognition for the unique needs and costs of Para sports, such as specialised equipment and travel expenses, undermines effective governance.

The lack of transparency and accountability for how funding is allocated and utilised across Para sport remains a significant area of improvement across the HPSS. The development and deployment of shared resources and systems (e.g., Athlete Management System (AMS)) that are fully accessible to athletes of all abilities, particularly those with cognitive impairments, is also an area that requires greater consideration.



System Alignment

Inconsistent approaches to Para athlete development, talent identification, and sport transfers stem from systemic misalignments, including a lack of centralised data and communication platforms. Furthermore, inconsistent education policies and frameworks across states impedes the development of unified pathways between school sports and high performance sport.

To address these challenges, it's essential to establish clear roles and responsibilities across organisations and build strong, collaborative partnerships. No single organisation can achieve this alone; a united and aligned effort is required to drive effective change and promote best practices.



Perceptions

Perceptions of Para sport are often shaped by attitudinal biases (pg.12), that can contribute to barriers experienced by Para athletes. Paralympic athletes often feel undervalued compared to their Olympic counterparts, facing systemic differences in resource availability, funding, recognition and sponsorship opportunities. In addition, it is often felt that Olympic medals are seen as more important than Paralympics medals

There is also a false perception of what talent looks like in Paralympic sports. For example, talented Para athletes do not necessarily always enter the Paralympic pathways at a young age as is often the case in an Olympic context. Many of these indifferences are compounded by the tendency to overlook success on the assumption that things are operating as they should or dismiss underperformance. Thus, highlighting the need for a cultural shift within the HPSS to reorient attitudes towards Para sport and drive meaningful change.



8.2 Para Barriers Survey

The Para Barriers survey aimed to validate the barriers impacting Para athletes' entry and progression through the HP sport pathways identified in the first two project phases and highlight any overlooked barriers. The anonymous survey, developed using information from earlier phases, was open to all HPSS members and the broader Para sport community, focusing primarily on Para athletes, coaches, and role holders (who work in Para sport). The feedback from the system confirmed our hypothesis: barriers to entry and progression for Para athletes do exist in the HP pathway and, if left unaddressed, could hinder the HPSS's ambitions for the 2032 Games.



386
respondents

completed at least one or more sections of the survey (90% completed the full survey)



25
sports represented



50% of respondents were female
47% of respondents were male
3% preferred not to select their sex



181
Para athletes

140 (36%) current Para athletes
41 (11%) retired Para athletes
48 (26% of all athletes) identified as athletes with Higher Support Needs



7
athletes

and 3 role holders identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander



205
role holders, parents,
support personnel and
other (53%)

35 (17%) Executive/Senior Leader
32 (15%) HP Coach
51 (25%) Performance Support (PS) Practitioner
28 (14%) Administration/Operations Staff
59 (29%) Other (parent, support person, other)



76% of athlete respondents had a physical impairment
16% of athlete respondents had an intellectual impairment
8% of athlete respondents had a visual or other type of impairment

Para Barriers Survey – Highlights



ONLY 27% (*n=160*) of athletes (current & retired) and **39%** (*n=175*) of role holders understand how funding is allocated across non-disabled and Para sport programs in the HP system.

An overwhelming **87%** (*n=160*) of athletes (current & retired) and **80%** (*n=175*) of role holders strongly agree or agree that a lack of financial support prevents Para athletes from reaching their very best.

70% (*n=160*) of athletes (current & retired) and **58%** (*n=175*) of role holders strongly agree or agree that Paralympic sports receive less funding per athlete than Olympic sports.

Only 21%

current and retired athletes (*n=161*)

32%

role holders (*n=180*)

believe that the extra resources required by Para athletes are a priority for senior leaders.

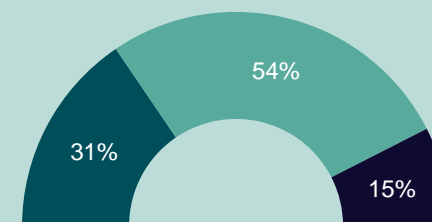
Only 31%

current and retired athletes (*n=162*)

46%

role holders (*n=182*)

believe that Para athletes are able to reach their full potential in the current HP system.



Out of 152 athletes (current and retired), **ONLY 31%** feel (or felt) valued by the HP system.

- Feel (or felt) valued
- Don't (or didn't) feel valued
- Unsure



Athletes and role holders find **classification progressively more difficult** to understand and obtain as athletes progress through provisional, national and international ranks.



ONLY 37% (*n=180*) of athletes (current & retired) and **45%** (*n=150*) of role holders strongly agree or agree that sports and state/territory institutes work together to support Para athlete's development.



50% (*n=166*) of athletes (current & retired) and **54%** (*n=148*) of role holders believe that the availability of coaches with the right level of experience is either very poor or poor.

8.3 Access to & Navigation through the High Performance Pathways

When it comes to accessing and navigating the HP sport pathway, there are inconsistent and unsustainable talent identification (TID) processes, limited data to inform athlete progression and insufficient resources to support athlete progression and transfers between sports. Resource constraints such as budget, workforce and venue availability and accessibility limit the number of available Para TID programs across the system.

Given the lack of centralised communication and system-wide frameworks across sports, athletes tend to navigate sports using resources only available to them in their current sports with very little knowledge of opportunities in other sports. The lack of a framework and inconsistent processes around transfer opportunities contributes to the lack of synergy across sporting pathways. This disconnect also extends beyond HP sport, whereby establishing pathways between school sport and Para sport is hindered by inconsistent education policies and frameworks between states.

When asked about opportunities to sample sports in the survey, slightly more than half of the athlete respondents (58%) from the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they had opportunities to try different sports if they wanted to. Similarly, of the 48 athletes who self-identified as Higher Support Needs (HSN), 62% agreed that there were opportunities for them to try different sports, whereas 33% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case. An interesting consideration here is that these are the athletes that have withstood the systemic barriers, yet just over one third of the athletes with HSN who completed the survey still feel as though opportunities to try different sports are lacking.

As one survey respondent summarised it, *“there are opportunities to try Para sports, the problem is to find out about them in the first place”*. Thus, the barrier to entering and progressing through the HP system may not be in the opportunity to try different sports itself, rather it is in the frameworks, communication processes and guiding resources that are required to create (and support) awareness of the opportunity in the first place.



64% of athletes (current & retired) and **58%** of role holders agree that there are (or were) opportunities for athletes with impairments to participate at club level in their sport.



58% of athletes (current & retired) and **68%** of role holders agree that there are (or were) opportunities for athletes to try different sports if they wanted to.

62%
current and retired athletes (n=162)

57%
role holders (n=182)

either **agree or strongly agree** that it is easier for talented non-disabled athletes to enter the HP pathway than it is for Para athletes.

“Unless an athlete is HP, they are really left to navigate everything on their own. There is no direction or encouragement.”
– Current Para athlete

“Talent transfer support could be improved by capturing categorised athletes who already have HP knowledge and behaviours but, due to several reasons, choose to leave a sport (injury, time commitment, etc.) and instead could be better supported to explore and enter other Para sports.” – Retired Para athlete

8.4 Classification

Understanding and navigating the Para classification system drives some barriers to entry and progression through the HP pathway for Para athletes due to its complexity, insufficient educational resources and the difficulty in accessing classification opportunities. In relation to getting classified, Figure 1 indicates the increasing level of difficulty athletes experience in moving through the classification ranks. The progressive challenge in athletes getting classified is also felt by role holders with 39% agreeing that it is difficult for athletes to attain provisional classification, 45% in becoming nationally classified and 65% agreeing that achieving international classification is more difficult again.

Systemic barriers include limited capacity and capability within sports organisations to administer provisional and national classifications, creating bottlenecks for athletes seeking to advance. A varied understanding and miscommunication among senior role holders regarding classification responsibilities often further complicates the process. Scarce budgets restrict the ability of sports to explore international classification opportunities and/or host classification events domestically. Policy-related barriers, such as potential changes to Paralympic programs and classification rules introduce uncertainties that hinder long-term planning and commitment for athletes and sports organisations alike.

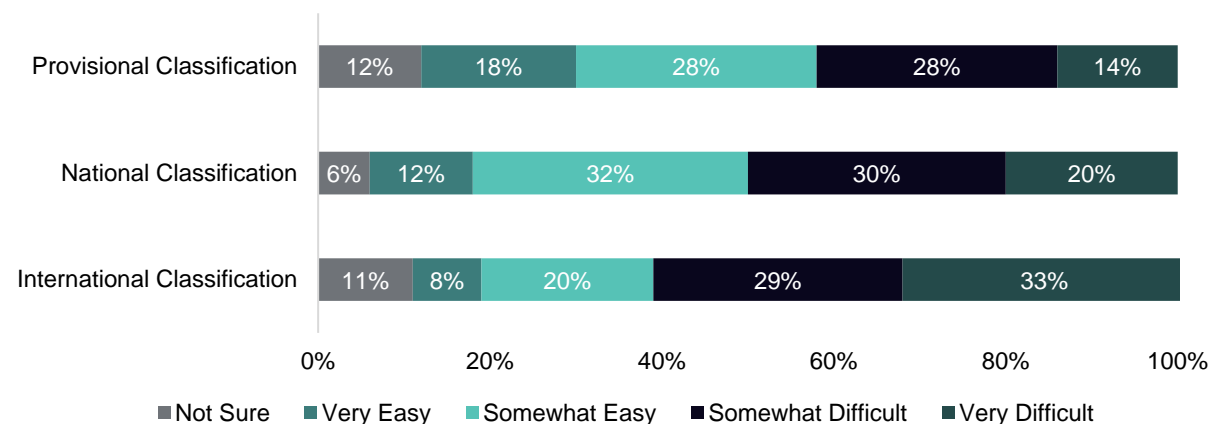


Figure 1. Highlights the level of athlete (current and retired; $n=141$) agreement for the following statement: “How easy or difficult it is to get classified at a Provisional, National and level in your sport”.

53%
current and retired athletes ($n=147$)

61%
role holders ($n=123$)

believe the classification system to be either **very difficult or somewhat difficult** to understand.

“If you are selected to a team and have someone guiding how to prepare for classification it is easy, but if not, you have to try to work out what is the relevant documentation, etc. on your own which is hard.” – Current Para

“There is a lack of collaboration and cohesion among NSOs, SSOs and LSOs to provide classification opportunities. The lack of understanding in the communities means that young athletes and families don’t understand that only certain classifications can compete at different levels or be available in the sport at the Paralympics.” – HP leader

8.5 Coaching Depth, Support and Development

There are coach-related factors that drive some barriers to entry and progression across the HP pathway for Para athletes. At present, there is a lack of coaches within the HPSS with sufficient disability knowledge required to coach Para athletes. Current (46%) and retired (65%) athletes, reported that the availability of coaches with the relevant level of experience to coach them was either very poor or poor. Similarly, 57% of athletes who identified as HSN reported either very poor or poor access to sufficiently knowledgeable coaches either at present or during their time in sport (if retired).

Coaches with the appropriate expertise often lack the capacity to take on new athletes due to being under-resourced in HP sport and at club level. Further, professional development opportunities for Para coaches are scarce and resources to support new Para coaches are limited. Coaches and staff are often required to wear multiple hats, increasing the workload and increasing chances of burnout. Both athletes and role holder survey respondents agreed that the resources available to enable coaches to do their job well is insufficient and will continue to impact the depth, support and development of Para coaches if unaddressed (see Figure 2 for a breakdown of the responses).

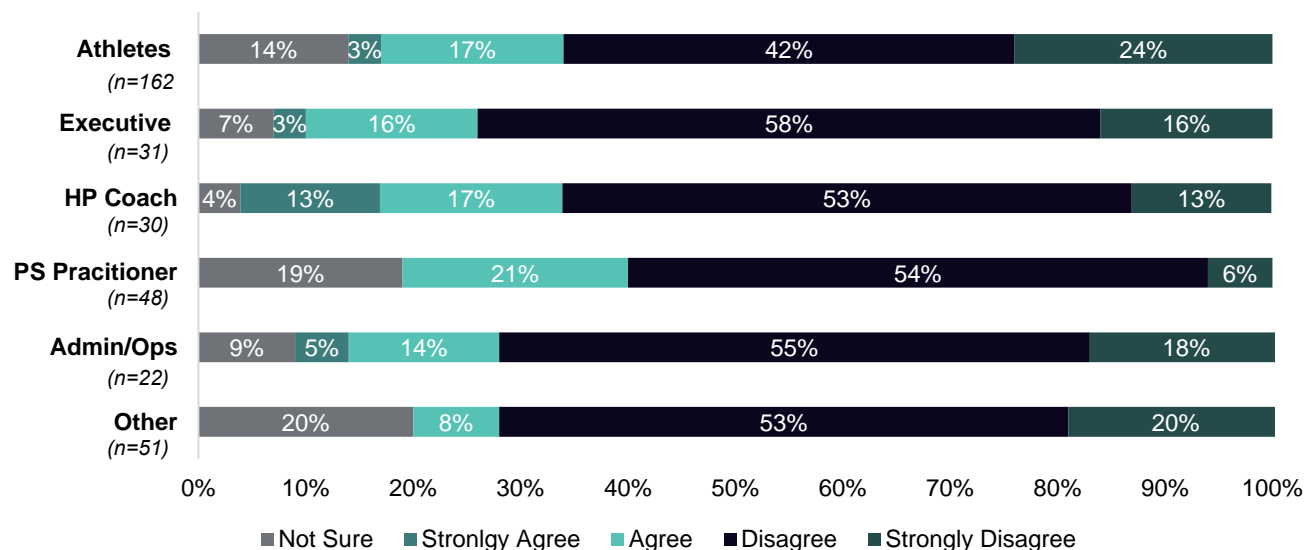


Figure 2. Highlights the level of agreement for each cohort for the following statement: “Coaches have everything they need to do their job well”.

66%
current and retired athletes (n=162)

68%
role holders (n=182)

either **strongly disagree or disagree** that Para coaches have everything they need to do their job well.

“One of the greatest challenges in Para sport is a lack of coaches who understand disability or have knowledge of how to work with athletes with a disability.” - Current Para athlete

“I think while improving, the level of coaching with Para athletes is generally poor. They are often admirable volunteers who are giving up their time to support athletes who have a disability and then progress to higher level coaching as the athlete progresses. Often these individuals don’t have the technical or physical skillset to deliver the required services at the elite level.” – PS Practitioner

8.6 Knowledge & Literacy of Para Sport

There is lack of awareness to the specific needs of Para athletes across the HP system. Systemically, the lack of knowledge regarding Parasport often results in overlooked (athlete) needs, scarce resources, and high staff turnover, forcing athletes to repeatedly reorient new staff to their preferences and optimal means of support.

Para athletes and role holders within Para sport programs have had to become very resourceful with the limited resources available. Survey results revealed a divide in perceptions regarding senior leaders' awareness of the additional resources needed by some Para athletes (Appendix A, Figure 3). Nearly half of the athletes (48%), administrative/operations staff (55%) and other cohorts (parents, support personnel; 49%) believe there is a lack of awareness among senior leaders within the HP system. In contrast, 54% of coaches do feel that senior leaders are knowledgeable about these extra needs. Whereas 40% of coaches do not feel the same way and don't believe senior leaders have sufficient knowledge. Among executives and senior leaders, themselves, opinions are split, with 41% agreeing they are aware, while 42% disagree.

Developing appropriate Para-specific education is further limited due to the lack of existing research that can inform best practices in supporting athletes with different impairments and tailoring DPEs to achieve optimal performance outcomes. The knowledge gaps that exist in understanding the types of resources unique to Para sport programs and the differences among Para athletes is further exacerbated for athletes with higher support needs.

“There is a lack of understanding and expertise broadly within sports organisations about Para sport and athletes with a disability - it's often left to the one person looking after D&I (Disability and Inclusion) or classification, other sports staff don't concern themselves with Para so knowledge gets lost with high staff turnover.” – HP Leader

***“We need to get a really good understanding of where an athlete has come from first before we can support them in the HP system. Para athletes all have very different journeys as to how they have become a Para athlete and that really impacts on how you can support them.”
– PS Practitioner***

60%

current and retired athletes (n=165)

54%

role holders (n=148)

believe that disability education for coaches and staff is **very poor or poor**.

8.7 Para Workforce Structure & Capacity

In some cases, the structure and capacity of the Para sport workforce presents significant barriers to entering and progressing through the HP pathway for Para athletes. As indicated in Appendix B, Figure 4, a key issue for Para athletes is the lack of representation within leadership roles. Para leads are often excluded from executive positions and strategic decision-making roles, leaving them feeling undervalued and overlooked. To better support Para athletes, it is essential to position knowledgeable (Para-specific) role holders at relevant levels and ensure they have authority to influence strategic decisions. As well as provide clear roles and responsibilities, and ensure they have the capacity to perform their duties without being overburdened.

Coaches and staff with the required disability knowledge are scarce and are often expected to perform multiple roles (e.g. carer/ramp operator, coach/carers, manager/video and data analyst), stretching their capacities thin. Only 41% of athletes feel there are enough staff to support them during competition travel. Interestingly, 63% of coaches agree that there is adequate staff, but 55% of executive and administrative/operational staff disagree. The HPSS has become accustomed to resourcefulness with limited funding, but in some cases, this has led to inadequate baseline 'duty of care' support and high staff turnover among the few experts with Para knowledge.

Carers, essential to an athlete's support team, are often overlooked with challenges in connecting with and supporting (funding) qualified carers. While 51% of athletes (current and retired) feel their carers are part of the Para team, 43% report inadequate financial support for additional needs, such as carers. Similarly, 80% of performance support practitioners, 47% of senior role holders, and 45% of coaches acknowledge carers as part of the team, yet 50% of all role holder respondents rate funding for additional athlete needs, including carers as very poor or poor. While some progress has been made in recognising the role of carers, greater emphasis on athlete-carer compatibility is needed to create fully inclusive environments.

Overall, limited financial and human resources, combined with policies that prioritise other programs, severely impact the support networks available to Para athletes, including specialised medical staff, performance support, and trained disability personnel.

64%

current and retired athletes (n=161)

68%

role holders (n=180)

either **strongly disagree or disagree** that there is enough Para representation in HP leadership roles to ensure Para needs are understood and met.

Challenges are often masked by passionate athletes that are getting results well above the support and commitment from leadership. – Retired Para athlete

“At board level, HP directors and many other key roles (including media) there is far less advocacy and consideration for Para sport. There has been great shift, but if key people don't champion the Para movement inside organisations across roles than it is not prioritised.” – HP leader

8.8 Access to Domestic & International Competition

Access to domestic and international competition drive some barriers to entry and progression through the HP pathway for Para athletes. Systemic barriers include a lack of competition opportunities, both domestically and internationally, due to limited athlete depth and financial constraints. This often forces athletes to self-fund international competitions, creating a self-selection bias and reducing the availability of developmentally appropriate competitions compared to non-disabled sports.

Policy-related barriers involve some sport policies that prioritise other programs over Para. This can result in reduced resources for camps and competitions and can greatly affect athletes with higher support needs. For example, 57% of athletes with HSN reported (in the survey) that the financial support for travel to competitions was very poor or poor.

Additionally, some policies overlook the unique expenses of Para programs, such as the need to cover athlete carer costs in the DPE and during camps, and competitions. As shown in Appendix C, Figure 5, a substantial portion of executives and senior role holders (74%), along with administration and operations staff (68%), perceive the financial support for Para athletes particularly, in offsetting competition travel costs as inadequate, rating it as very poor or poor compared to other cohorts.

Technical barriers also arise, as athletes and staff face numerous challenges managing travel logistics for training and competitions, such as air travel, accessible accommodation, training and competition facilities.

“There are barely any opportunities for international competition unless you are a medal chance. My area of work has some support but that is because I personally advocate inclusion into events.” – HP Coach

“I still have to work full time to pursue my Paralympic dreams. I don’t call myself a professional athlete as I make no income from my sport, I’m doing this because I love it, but it takes a toll. Financial support has only been adequate for competition since being categorised as a podium athlete, otherwise it is very tough to cover international travel, accommodation and living expense whilst overseas.” – Current Para athlete

38%

current and retired athletes (n=180)

8%

role holders (n=150)

strongly agree or agree that there are enough domestic athletes at every level to push them to improve.

39%

current and retired athletes (n=171)

37%

role holders (n=150)

strongly agree or agree that there are enough international competition opportunities for Para athletes.

8.9 Appropriate Training Environments and Equipment

Access to appropriate training environments as well as equipment related factors drive some barriers to entry and progression for Para athletes. System conventions like centralised DPEs can be more challenging for some Para athletes, and the additional resources required to support non-centralised athletes strain an already resource-limited system.

While 53% of athletes reported having training facilities in convenient locations to them, 44% of athletes did not feel this way (3% were unsure). The survey did not address the accessibility or scheduling availability of these facilities. Which in turn, these challenges in and of themselves could be contributing to attrition rates in Para sport and/or the lack of engagement from those within it. Access to sports programs and facilities is especially limited outside urban areas and in schools, particularly for young people with higher support needs.

Para athletes also face equipment-related challenges, with 62% of current and retired athletes rating financial support for necessary equipment and customisations as poor or very poor. Similarly, 52% of role holders agree that funding for specialised equipment is inadequate (breakdown per cohort is highlighted in Appendix D, Figure 6). The need for costly, customised equipment and the challenge of finding qualified personnel for modifications can add significant stress to athletes, where in some cases, their equipment can be their competitive advantage. Moreover, system-wide resources and technologies, such as AMS, often lack inclusivity and accessibility, particularly for athletes with cognitive impairments.

In some sports without a non-disabled equivalent, barriers to accessing Para sport can be more pronounced, as the number of local clubs and subsequent opportunity for programs across the nation can be somewhat limited. In some HP sports the lack of a non-disabled program can reduce the opportunities for shared resources (staff, training, equipment, facilities), whereas in others, it may mean that the program is sufficiently resourced to achieve training and performance outcomes.

53%

current and retired athletes (n=156)

54%

Parents, social sports, other (n=39)

agree that they/athletes have training facilities in convenient locations that allow them to train regularly.

“I am often allocated people who don’t know anything about my sport and it’s a constant ongoing battle to use the SIS/SAS facilities (nearest to me) which I am desperate to use but am forced to just use what I have at home or in commercial gyms unless my coach comes up to train me.” – Current Para athlete

“There is often a lack of adequate facilities to support Para-athletes within HP spaces, including access, bathroom and showers, specialised gym equipment and adequately staffed PS teams to assist the athletes achieve their best.” – PS Practitioner

9. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

As result of identifying and understanding the seven major themes which comprise the greatest barriers for Para athletes, the following initiatives have been proposed and mark a crucial starting point in addressing their respective barriers. Given the major systemic shift and degree of alignment required to create the change, the ASC, in collaboration with its system partners including Paralympic Australia, the State and Territory Institutes and Academies and National Sports Organisations, will take a leadership role in driving these initiatives forward.



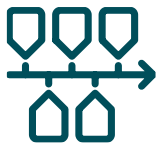
Classification system reform

Implement a centrally led, coordinated, and connected system to reform the delivery model and oversight of Classification in Australia. This will remove bottlenecks in accessing Para sport, from recreational competition right through the athlete pathways to High Performance and prepare sports for the changes in the Classification Code scheduled in 2025.



Increased access to high performance pathways, daily performance environments (DPE) and performance teams

Leverage broader system partners to enhance and accelerate the pathways for Paralympic athletes. This includes innovative approaches to increase impact at scale and provide necessary support for athletes with higher support needs.



Resource uplift for Paralympic sport programs

Provide a direct uplift of resources to Para sport programs, ensuring current athletes receive support at an equitable level comparable to their Olympic counterparts.



Development of coaches and performance support

Establish new pathways to attract, develop, and integrate coaches and performance support personnel into Para sport, ensuring a sustainable talent pipeline.



System approach to facility and equipment access

Adopt a system-wide approach to maximise economies of scale, enabling better access to facilities and equipment for Para athletes.

10. SUMMARY

Para athletes face significant barriers to entry and progression within the HP pathway, largely due to systemic gaps in resources, awareness, governance, and alignment. According to the Social Model of Disability, disability arises from the interaction between an individual's environment (biopsychosocial and physical) and their impairment, rather than the impairment alone.^{6,7}

This report highlights how various barriers within the HP system exacerbate the challenges faced by Para athletes, effectively increasing their experience of disability. Our collective goal is to minimise societal, attitudinal, and environmental barriers, thereby reducing the level of disability within the HP sports system for individuals with impairments.

The Australian High Performance Sport System is united in its aim to reduce the inequity of opportunity for Para athletes to make the most of their talents. The ASC and its partners are committed to leveraging the system's collective talent and resources to reduce inequities for Para athletes, enabling them to fully realise their potential and unite, inspire, and motivate Australians for generations to come. This work has already begun through the HP 2032+ Strategy and the Australian Government's record investment in Para sport.

The build-up to the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games gives us a generational opportunity to win well and inspire Australians by creating an athlete-focused, performance-driven, exceptionally led and inclusive environment that supports sustainable success. With the unified commitment to the HP 2032+ Strategy, the time is now to break the cycle and create meaningful and sustainable change.

11. REFERENCES

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12. APPENDIX

Appendix A: Knowledge & Literacy of Para Sport – Figure

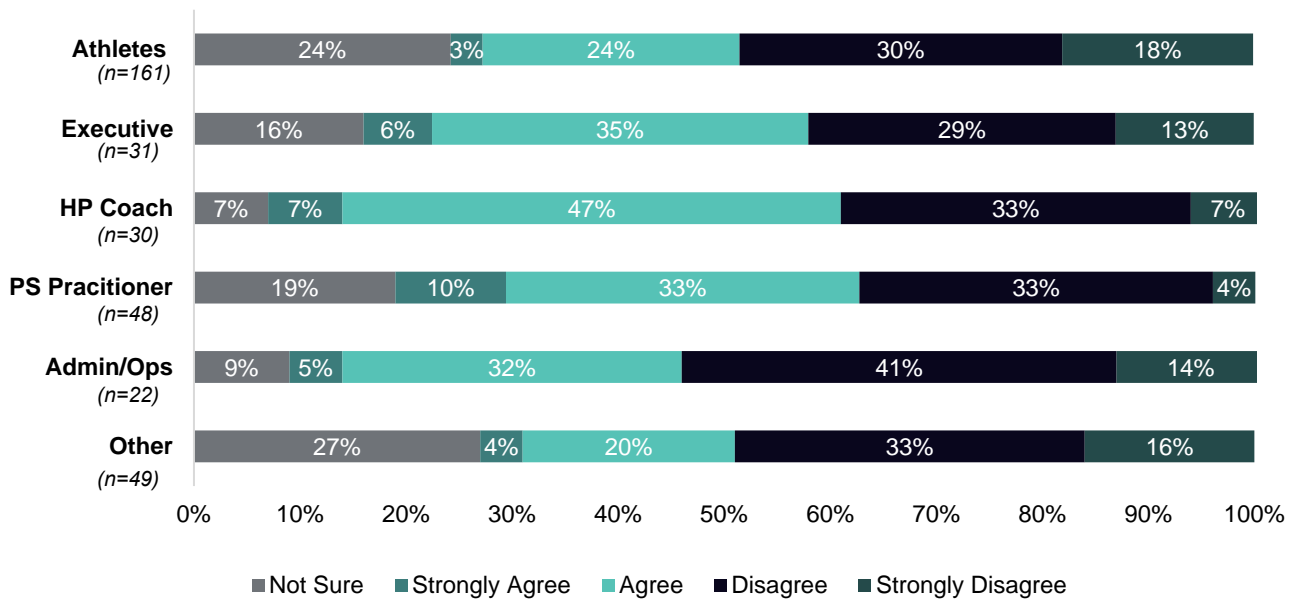


Figure 3. Highlights the level of agreement for each cohort for the following statement: “Senior leaders in the HP system are knowledgeable about the extra resources some Para athletes need”.

Appendix B: Para Workforce Structure & Capacity – Figure

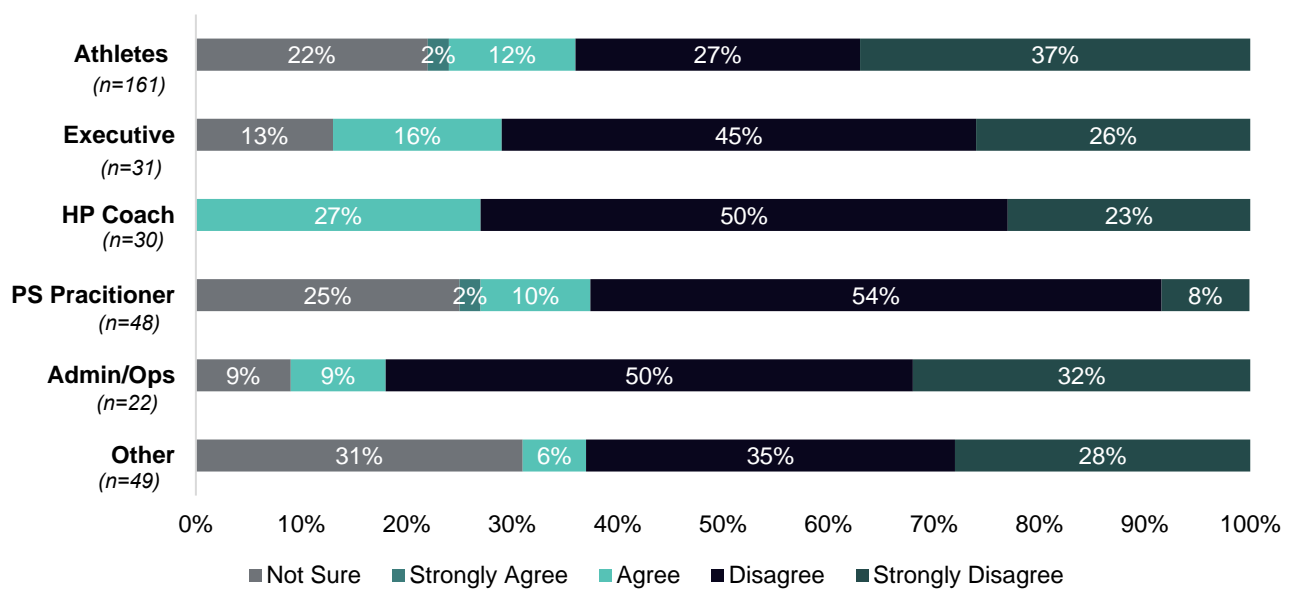


Figure 4. Highlights the level of agreement for each cohort for the following statement: “There is enough Para representation in HP leadership roles (e.g., executive and board members) to ensure Para needs are understood and met”.

Appendix C: Access to Domestic & International Competition – Figure

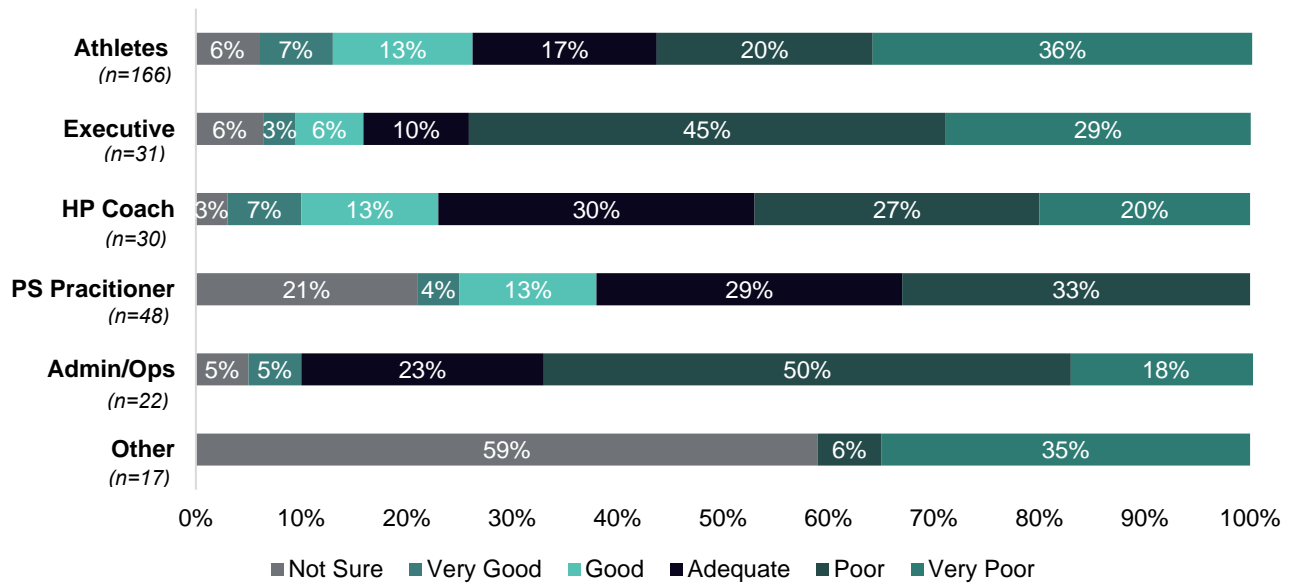


Figure 5. Highlights the level of agreement for each cohort for the following statement: “The level of financial support Para athletes receive for travel to competitions”.

Appendix D: Appropriate Training Environments and Equipment – Figure

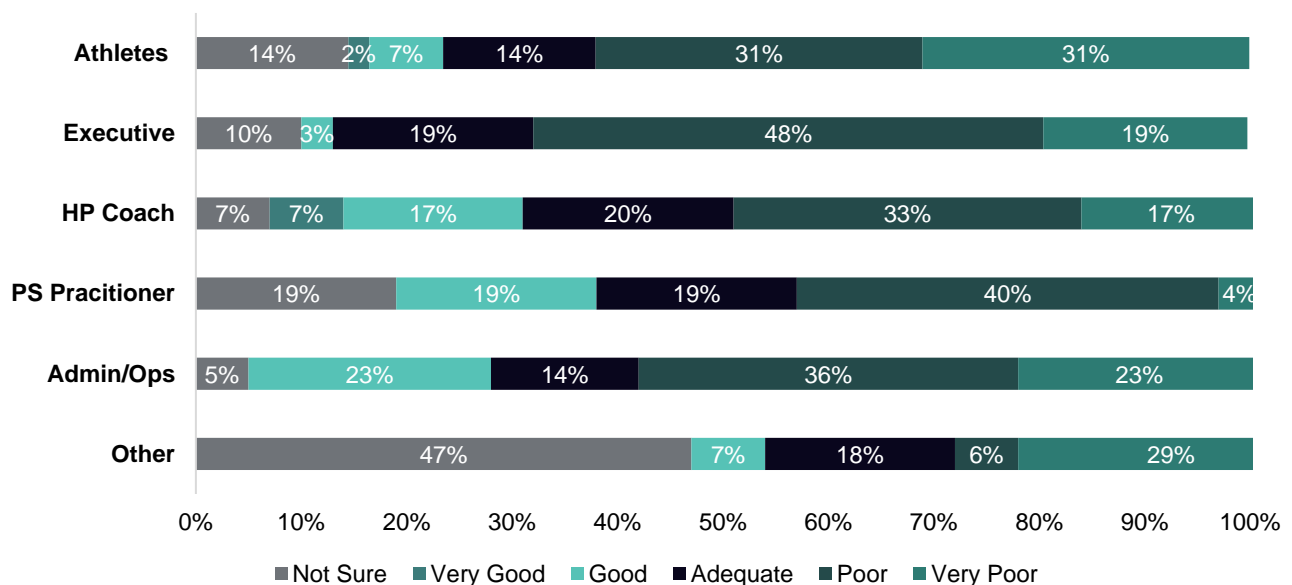


Figure 6. Highlights the level of agreement for each cohort for the following statement: “Financial support for special equipment/modifications to improve Para athletes’ performance is”.

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Australia's 2032+ High Performance Sport Strategy is a sector wide initiative supported by the Australian Institute of Sport.