



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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A U S T R A L I A

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Notre Dame's junior entrepreneur inspires change

A Notre Dame student has used her positive experience of access and inclusion at the University to inspire a global organisation to make itself more accessible to people with disabilities and learning impairments.

Maria Vakafua, who is partially blind, started at Notre Dame's Sydney campus in 2017, nervous about how her disability would impact on her goal of completing a Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Commerce.

But six years on, Maria detailed her overwhelmingly positive experience during a stirring speech to more than 300 people from around the world at the Junior Enterprise World Conference 2023 (JEW23) in Italy.

Maria and her fellow Notre Dame students, Charles Hurst, Jake Schloeffel and Jose Corpus, are the founding members of Australia's first Junior Enterprise project.

Junior Enterprises are student-led, non-profit organisations. There are almost 2000 Junior Enterprises in 54 countries around the world, and Notre Dame is about to launch the first Junior Enterprise in Australasia.

Maria joined the Junior Enterprise project in March and was given the job of focusing on finance and the establishment of an access and inclusion framework for the project.

She based the framework on Notre Dame's learning access plan model, which provides students with a disability with individualised plans to help them achieve their goals and participate equitably at university.

The innovation of the Notre Dame students caught the eye of Junior Enterprise Global and earned them an invitation to the JEW23 in Florence in September.

Maria was invited as a guest speaker at the closing ceremony because of her access and inclusion framework, and her speech inspired Junior Enterprise Global to advertise for a diversity and inclusion manager for the first time.

She is now also in talks with a United Nations Young Leader for Sustainable Development Goals about organising a hybrid event on access and inclusion at Notre Dame in Sydney next year.

"When I came to Notre Dame I was introduced to the learning access plan which meant I didn't have to worry about justifying why I needed certain provisions to comfortably and confidentially operate in a classroom," Maria said.

“This gave me the ability to pursue any opportunity I wanted and any goal I set for my academic career.

“It enabled me to be a student without worrying about the extra things that come along with my disability, and that’s why I wanted to reflect the learning access plan model in the Junior Enterprise Project.

“I wanted our Junior Enterprise Project to be as inclusive as possible and I want all students to feel confident to join us because we do have mechanisms in place to accommodate for any provision they have.”

Notre Dame’s Junior Enterprise is multidisciplinary and offers services across Arts, Science, Law and Business, including communications, architecture and marketing.

The Junior Enterprise is actively recruiting students.

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