Progress Bulletin

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2020 NCSEHE Equity Fellow

Meaningful jobs for graduates with disability: From luck to business as usual

## Project overview and introduction

Brief summary

Students with disability (SwD) make up 6.8 per cent of the national tertiary student population (Koshy, 2018). However, after graduation they are seven per cent more likely to be unemployed and six per cent more likely to be in work that does not use their skills or education compared to graduates without disability (2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey). They also make up only two per cent of students taking part in employers' graduate programs (AAGE Graduate Survey, 2019) which are important employment pathways. There is little argument that more targeted careers services for university SwD (TCSSwD) is needed in Australia. While scarce resources and lack of service integration stop more universities providing them (Harvey et al., 2017) the inability to address these matters is not explored.

This Fellowship project focuses on issues affecting the provision of TCSSwD and investigates the following research questions:

- Why are some universities able to provide TCSSwD?
- What kinds of services do they provide?
- What would help:
  - more universities provide TCSSwD; and
  - universities enhance existing offerings?

The project's key aim is to add disability to the national conversation about graduate employment by identifying best practice initiatives and developing open access tools for all universities to use.

Co-Equity Fellow Tim Pitman and I are investigating different aspects of the student disability experience at university. We decided to join forces by creating a short student survey and a short staff survey to provide insight for both of our projects. There's been a fantastic response to the surveys with participants spread across Australia's universities. It is also encouraging that staff members from different university areas
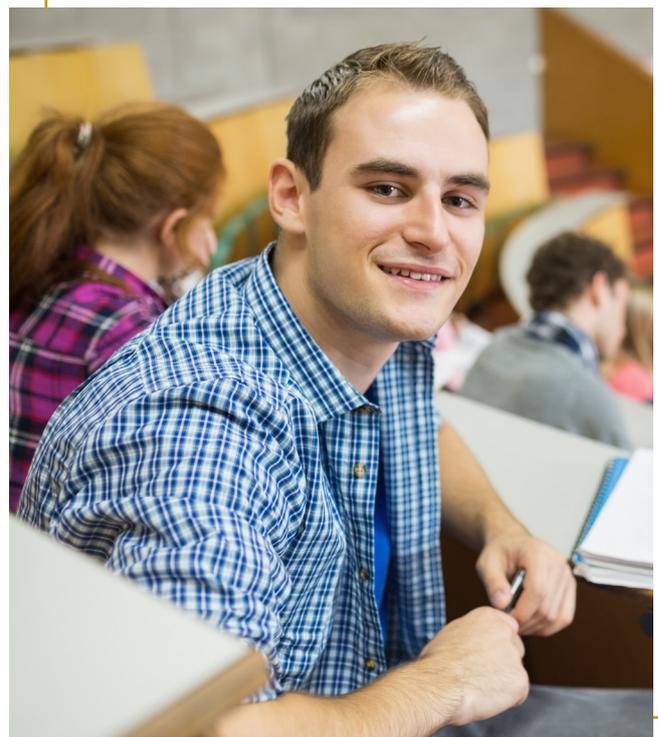
(careers, disability support, faculty, student services, and senior management) are expressing interest by taking part. Over 1,100 student and over 160 staff have completed the short survey. If you haven't done so, please complete the staff survey by the end of July to have your say.

Preliminary findings

A desk review of TCSSwD conducted for this project indicates an increased number of offerings but the nature of this support varies across institutions. Student and staff surveys are currently gathering data that will be used to investigate matters.

Survey data is complemented by national staff focus groups and organisational case studies. Preliminary findings from the staff data streams indicate that concern about staff expertise is a significant barrier to service provision. So too is awareness of available resources. The capacity-building partnerships available through the UNISPECIALIST Employment Partnerships (USEP) program or WISE Employment's GradWISE program are still news to many university staff. It also appears that the choices available to universities considering these partnerships are not clear and that the potential they offer to enhance existing engagement with other sources of support, including JobAccess and the Australian Network on Disability, is also not readily understood.

There is also significant difference of opinion among staff about what is needed to improve a university's ability to provide targeted careers services for SwD, where internal sources of careers expertise lie, who owns the issue of career development for SwD and what constitutes the best kind of help. While data is still being gathered and analysed, it nonetheless appears that universities have the opportunity to use internal stakeholder differences to construct locally-nuanced iterations of careers support that are responsive to local circumstances. This is what lies at the heart of international good practice examples of service integration cited, for example, in Williams et al. (2019, pp. 33–4, 87–9). A common language would facilitate better understanding of student dilemmas, as well as clarification of institutional issues and choices. This points to the usefulness of the open-access online repository of tools and guidelines that will be launched at the culmination of this project. These resources will exist alongside a national community of practice to support their use and development. The community of practice will also provide a safe place for universities to discuss issues, priorities and strategies.

The student voice in the project so far is also diverse. Feedback to date has been frank, constructive and insightful. It speaks to a range of issues and expresses both faith in, and frustration with, university careers support. Preliminary data suggests a link between student perception of their career management responsibility and their ranking of university careers support. Students that appear to expect their university to get work for them seem to be more likely to express dissatisfaction with university careers support. Universities could do better at helping students understand their career management responsibility. It appears that as a sector we need to get to know our students better. The majority of SwD say they know what work they would like to do, while the majority of staff report the exact opposite, i.e. that SwD do not know what work they would like to do when they complete their studies. We know that inclusion is a long journey, but getting on the same page as our students is likely the most important way to start. It is extremely encouraging that the data is showing interest in collective effort, not just within universities, but between them too. This kind of collaboration makes it practical to take better, more strategic advantage of the resources that wait at our fingertips, and that will make it more practical for universities to provide the targeted careers services that SwD need and so richly deserve.

Please feel free to contact me to discuss the Fellowship or register for the end-of-year summit.

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