

# Towards More Strategic Inclusion. Students with Disability and WIL

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## Abstract

WIL that actively includes students with disability (SwD) is an acknowledged need in the theoretical literature, however national guidelines that target the specific issues facing them and WIL providers are yet to be developed. This article applies a constructivist Career Development Learning (CDL) lens to the issue by drawing on current national research (Eckstein, 2022) into careers support in Australian universities. The research did not focus specifically on WIL, but key findings from the research are summarised in this paper so that their ramifications for WIL can be considered, and that SwD are afforded – instead of denied – important CDL opportunities. It is suggested that these opportunities be embedded in the fabric of the WIL life cycle in order to enhance SwD's experience of inclusion, the authenticity of their engagement and their development as emerging professionals.

**Keywords:** students with disability, work-integrated learning, WIL, career development learning, careers thinking, employability, inclusion

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## Introduction

University students with disability (SwD) do not do as well as other students when it comes to getting work after their studies. QILT data consistently indicates that they are more likely to be unemployed and more likely to be in work that does not use their skills or education compared to graduates without disability. (QILT National Tables 2018-2021). The impact that work integrated learning (WIL) has on the employability and graduate outcomes is not disputed but the need for WIL that is actively inclusive is noted in the literature (Sachs and Rowe, 2017) and also in the national WIL strategy (ACEN, 2015). National guidelines that support the curation of disability-inclusive WIL are, however, still to be provided. The purpose of this article is to use findings from my recent research into careers support for SwD in Australian Universities (Eckstein, 2022), to indicate likely barriers to the provision of WIL that explicitly engages with the career development needs of SwD. The Fellowship did not include a formal survey of WIL material in Australian universities, and I use ACEN WIL information as a national point of reference. It is the sustained and expert work of so many that make it possible for me to make a few suggestions for progressing disability-inclusive WIL principles.

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## **A constructivist theoretical framework**

### **1. Foundation principle**

The theoretical framework for my research is grounded in a constructivist approach to careers education that is well established in the theoretical literature (e.g., Patton, 2019; Patton & McMahon, 2006). It focusses on the way people think about their careers and the range of formative influences and experiences that influence individual careers thinking. The foundation principle of this framework acknowledges:

- people's subjective experience of reality; and,
- students' expertise in their own circumstances.

The baseline aim of constructivist approaches to careers education is to work with students to develop their capacity to better manage their own careers.

### **2. Employability and Career Development Learning**

A dynamic notion of employability is central to the framework. It includes career adaptability, and knowledge of self as well as the world of work. Instead of a fixed characteristic, employability is continuously developed (Bennett, 2018; Bennett et al., 2016; McIlveen, 2018) through cycles of organised Career Development Learning (CDL) activities. CDL activities, including WIL, engage people with learning about both self and the world of work (e.g., Bridgstock, 2009; CICA, 2019).

### **3. Disability Career Development Learning (Disability CDL)**

Actively applying these principles to the needs of SwD is a specialist area (Patton & McMahon, 2014) that may profoundly impact an individual's career. Alas, this has received little attention in the theoretical career development literature (McMahon & Patton, 2019; McMahon & Arthur, 2019). Disability CDL activities need to:

- avoid deficit discourses based on different kinds of disability
- validate SwD's professional aspirations
- acknowledge individual responses to disability experience, and support students' consideration of its effect on their careers thinking
- support SwD to develop their sense of themselves as emerging professionals.

(Eckstein, 2022)

### **A note on methodology**

The Fellowship used national surveys of SwD and university staff to compare their perspectives about the career development needs of SwD. A total of 1604 usable responses

were obtained from the student survey (n=1604), while the staff survey received 150 usable staff responses (n=150). These data streams were complemented by staff focus groups which were held by Zoom and organised by State. A total of 75 staff participated in these discussions (n=75). In addition, email interviews were organised for regional heads of service, and Swinburne University's specialist careers service for SwD, the AccessAbility Careers Hub, provided case study insight for this project. The case study provided a variety of university documents, as well as student and staff interviews. Please refer to Eckstein (2022) for a detailed discussion about the project's methodology and individual data streams.

### **Findings summary and ramifications for WIL**

The findings indicated that as-a-whole, staff misunderstand the way SwD think about their careers. The misunderstanding includes baseline careers issues such as students' own career aspirations and sense of career challenges. The findings are detailed in the Fellowship report and that detail is not provided here. Instead, the following select summary is offered so that their ramifications for WIL can be considered.

The Fellowship found that SwD knew the work they would like to do, but university staff thought they did not. SwD were also concerned about having to deal with people making inaccurate assumptions about their abilities and did 'not feel confident addressing this issue directly by providing employers with information and evidence about the usefulness of their abilities' (Eckstein, 2022, p. 24). In fact, both staff and students appear to under-rate the importance of SwD being able to demonstrate a sense of professional fit with specific jobs and employers based on how and why they want to use their skills. This represents a significant opportunity to deliberately engage SwD with this important skill and in the process gain skills related to the "qualities, conduct, culture, and ideology" of the profession they would like to join (Jackson, 2016, p. 926).

A barrier to this engagement is the finding that SwD ranked sharing disability information with employers as a top career challenge (Eckstein, 2022). In another marked contrast, staff ranked this concern last in the same list of career challenges that SwD could expect to face (Eckstein, 2022). Less than one-third of students (around 32.5 per cent) said they felt able to share disability information with employers (Eckstein, 2022). SwD also said that they planned not to share disability information with employers even though they acknowledged that not doing so would make life harder for them at work (Eckstein, 2022). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Fellowship data also indicated that the less visible a student's disability, the less able they felt to share disability information with employers (Eckstein, 2022). These deficits in staff's baseline understandings of the careers thinking of SwD makes it hard for staff to design effective careers support measures for them.

The Fellowship also found that this difficulty is compounded by additional factors (Eckstein, 2022). Staff reported a lack of confidence when it comes to providing careers education for SwD (Eckstein, 2022). There was a concern that interventions for SwD are fraught with risk because the consequences of getting things wrong are greater for SwD than

for other students (Eckstein, 2022). Careers staff also reported that they did not have the knowledge or expertise to help SwD (Eckstein, 2022). Interrogation of these perspectives revealed the view that staff felt they needed encyclopaedic knowledge of disability detail to help SwD (Eckstein, 2022). The help that staff envisaged amounted to using disability labels to recommend career pathways based on pre-determined ideas of ability associated with those labels. This medicalised form of support assumes expertise in a person's career possibility. It is therefore at odds with constructivist notions in the career development theoretical literature, which emphasise helping students develop the way they think about their careers instead of imposing limitations on that thinking.

The Fellowship report also suggested that staff, regardless of which part of the university they are from, feel that SwD require specialist support from another staff group (Eckstein, 2022). Ultimately, this lack of confidence in the sector's ability to cater for the career development needs of its SwD results in students being referred outside the university for careers education, but the details of how they are to be supported are not necessarily understood. In the process, the education system risks demonstrating to SwD that they represent a problem that universities are not equipped to fix. SwD are also denied the opportunity to examine the role disability plays in their careers thinking, and to be supported to test that thinking through curated contact with the world of work, such as the experience that WIL has the capacity to provide.

### **Ramifications for WIL**

The ramifications of the Fellowship's findings for WIL seem clear. If students do not share disability information with placement staff and WIL employers, there is less chance of them experiencing an enabling environment for their WIL placement. This is a familiar issue which compromises their WIL experience. It means they are more likely to be focussed on trying to cope, and more likely to be focussed on being seen not to have flaws, instead of taking proper advantage of the learning that is inherent in their WIL placement. Employers are also not given the chance to provide enabling arrangements for their placement students.

If we want our students to learn about work and the application of their skills through WIL then we need to make it safer for them to share disability information with WIL staff and employers. Fear of not being understood is key to student reticence to share disability information, as the following student comment makes clear:

People don't understand my condition, so I can't disclose to an employer, even though holding back is going to make it harder at work.

(SwD paraphrased comments in Eckstein, 2022 p. 22)

The choice of words in the above quote is also important. 'Disclosure' indicates revealing something difficult or negative.

Unless WIL is structured to embed this issue as a series of routine learning opportunities, we lose the chance to validate this potent and legitimate student concern. We have the chance to help students:

- interrogate their individual response to their experience of disability; and,
- re-evaluate the role disability plays in their careers thinking.

Doing so means they will be supported to ground their careers thinking in their sense of who they are. The ‘inseparability’ of these two things - career and life (McMahon & Patton, 2016, p.270), explains SwD reporting feelings of relief to the Fellowship when disability ceases to dominate their careers thinking: “I feel now that I have a chance of getting a job after uni after all” (SwD paraphrased comment in Eckstein, 2022 p. 40). We can make a start by acknowledging that the way people think about their careers is grounded in individual experience of a range of existential influences, including managing disability (Patton & McMahon, 2014; 2006) and that this affects their engagement with WIL.

The systems theory framework of career development by Patton & McMahon (2006) represents a systems approach to understanding career development. It indicates that people’s careers thinking is formed by personal interplay between and responses to individual and societal influences. These things are not fixed but change over time and are subject to the impact of chance events. This view provides foundation perspectives for designing WIL information, processes, supervision, peer support, and assessment for SwD that takes account of their response to their experience of disability. Taking this kind of action means that inclusion will not be reduced to tokenistic statements in student WIL information, such as:

- Employers have legal obligations not to discriminate against people with disability
- It’s your legal entitlement to have a placement

Such statements may aim to reassure but they signal difficulty. Instead, to make it feel safer for SwD to share disability information, we can embed acknowledgement about disability throughout the WIL journey.

Introductory WIL information needs to explain how sharing select disability detail with employers will be supported and what the student stands to gain from doing so. Most importantly, setting a career development context to justify the suggestion that students share disability information is imperative. A good start would be to acknowledge that the workplace, and universities for that matter, are imperfect creations that facilitate performance in some ways but impede performance in other ways. Consequently, it is helpful to point out to students in general that *everyone* needs to develop a strategic plan to better understand the area of work they want to join and how they might best fit themselves into it. Furthermore, we can point out that employability itself is not a fixed concept or an attribute but is constantly developed through repeated cycles of learning, and that a WIL placement stands to make a great contribution to it.

We can also support SwD to lead discussions about workplace adjustments with employers instead of denying them this foundation CDL by doing it for them. A useful starting point would be to make this an opt-out arrangement – the assumption being that students would be provided with support to interrogate their decision not to have a leading role in negotiating arrangements to compensate for otherwise inadvertent deficits in the operational environment. Regardless of their decision, students would be supported to consider the impact of the operational environment on their performance and will have this experience to refer to in subsequent contact with employers. This would provide another avenue for developing student agency – listed as a priority in ACEN (2018a) information for staff. It is also consistent with the assessment item in the same resource indicating that staff: “Build in opportunities for students to reflect on performance during WIL in the assessment profile” (ACEN 2018, p.2). Creating this kind of reflective experience caters to the needs of students with and without disability. It is also consistent with the point in the ACEN (2018b) student guidelines that “diversity brings opportunity” and is valued in professional environments.

Incorporating room for failure in the list of WIL benefits could be used to support the engagement of all students, including SwD. Lists of WIL benefits tend to include messages of success. WIL is also an opportunity to experience workplace realities, including the reality that things do not always go according to plan. ACEN’s excellent list of benefits in their guide for students (2018b) could make more of a point about “authentic working relationships” and “getting to know each other” (ACEN, 2018b, p. 1) by including a note about getting to know more about yourself as an emerging professional. Such a note could be underpinned by reflective tasks that ask students to consider what they do well, what they would like to improve, why some environments may suit them better than others, how the workplace can help or hinder their ability to make professional contributions, and what they’d like to learn next about the world of work.

Referencing these perspectives throughout the WIL life cycle, in introductory information, supervision and mid-placement check-ins as well as in assessment and reflection guidelines, can be used to give students multiple opportunities to be supported to share disability information. It would also provide a context for equipping staff with disability confidence to enable their discussion of issues with students, and employers. Partnering with employers in this effort stands to help all WIL stakeholders. Research shows employers want to be more inclusive, but many do not know how (Kantar Public, 2017). Engaging with supportive WIL staff and supported SwD would make matters easier for employers as well.

## **Conclusion and further suggestions**

This brief discussion of progressing disability-inclusive WIL involves supporting students’ discovery of a key concept; that is, disability inclusion in the workplace accommodates ability for the benefit of the employer and the employee. It fundamentally has nothing to do with compensating for some kind of employee deficit. Instead, it identifies and removes inadvertent barriers in professional environments for the benefit of students, universities and their employer partners.

We can let SwD know how employers use disability information to provide more enabling environments for them to do well in. Employers do this routinely and most frequently it involves flexible arrangements that do not cost anything (VPSC, 2018). We could also help this process by providing scope for students' researching employers (to learn about what the work environment is like, how they will fit in, what kind of adjustments they may need to maximise their effectiveness) to be built into both assessment and supervision processes. This is imperative because students sharing disability information is a start of a process, not the end of it. Sharing disability information creates vulnerability that needs to be managed. WIL students and supervisors can be supported to continue to learn about each other by building the ongoing management of enabling arrangements into assessment tasks and supervision guidelines.

Both students and employers will therefore experience that disability inclusion is not a form of samaritanism. Instead, they have the chance to experience inclusion as a strategy that helps employers recruit the best talent instead of missing out on it through their failure to remove inadvertent barriers to recruiting that talent. This means that host employers will be assessing their placement students on the basis of their performance and their ability to function as self-managing professionals. This speaks directly to points in the literature about the importance of taking a holistic view of students' lives (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2015), shaping students' engagement with the culture of their prospective professions (Jackson, 2016), and understanding how their personal and professional values align with each other (Trede et al., 2012). Disability-inclusive WIL therefore means creating contexts and scaffolded activities to support SwD's ability to bring their whole selves to their WIL and thus engage with it more authentically. This means providing activities that help them reconsider their experience of disability and the role it plays in their careers thinking. Such activities will also help SwD learn more about how the world of work operates, what they need to be successful in it, and how they can negotiate having that need met. As they are supported to maximise their performance in the workplace, SwD will be better able to indulge the development of their own professional curiosity by reflecting on how they want to use their developing skills and aspirations, and which part of the world of work they want to learn about next.

The Fellowship findings indicate that SwD are not a problem that employers or universities, much less SwD themselves, need to fix (Eckstein, 2022). They are the same as all students insofar as they are valuable emerging professionals, with things to learn and talents to offer the world of work. It is an enduringly interesting point that, as my Fellowship findings indicate, that universities' response to the needs of SwD is frequently to do things to them instead of collaborating with them as higher education learners (Eckstein, 2022)..

Making WIL more inclusive of SwD will always be a work in progress because it is not possible to predict the inadvertent workplace barriers or deficits. Working with SwD and employers to create enabling experiences is part of the broader, ongoing task providing all students with environments and materials that facilitate their authentic, personalised

engagement with WIL. Consequently, and most of all, we will be better able to model inclusion and help SwD experience inclusion throughout their WIL experience.

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# Work Integrated Learning

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