The Study-To-Work Transition of University Students With a Disability

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 Abstract

A career development approach to disability and vocational rehabilitation indicates the need to empower clients' capacity to enter the workforce through 'career enhancement'. This paper outlines a forum for university students with a disability that was informed by the notion of career enhancement and was conducted with the purpose of linking students, with one another, employers, employment agencies, State and Commonwealth Government agencies, and with key staff of the university's careers service. Feedback from students indicated the value of the event in terms outcome and process.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2004a) estimated that one in five Australians had a disability in a survey conducted in 2003. Previous research into Australian employment patterns found that the proportion of those with and without a disability was generally equivalent across most industry sectors (Athanasou, 1999). This finding is ostensibly positive, in that disability is evenly distributed across industries. However, people with a disability face considerable uncertainty and disadvantage in the Australian labour market (Buys, Buys, Kendall & Davis, 2001; Gillies and Knight, 2001) and internationally (Szymankski and Vancollins, 2003).

Athanasou's (1999) analysis of ABS data revealed, however, a disparity within the participation and unemployment rates. This analysis indicated a clear disadvantage for those with a disability. People with a disability experienced higher chances of unemployment; as indicated by a differential rate of 5.0% unemployment for those without a disability, and 8.6% for those with a disability. Furthermore, of the people who were employed, those with a disability were over-represented in the part-time work category.

The nexus between employment and education complicates the experience for Australians with disabilities. With respect to higher education, one in eight people between the ages of 15-64 years without a disability had completed an undergraduate degree, in contrast to the ratio of one in five for people with a disability (ABS, 2004a). The positive impact of higher education upon employment status is evident in differential rates of unemployment. For example, in 2003 people with schooling of Year 12 or below represented 69% of the unemployed population, whereas those with a bachelor degree represented only 9% (ABS, 2004b). A more refined analysis reveals however, that graduates with a disability may not necessarily enjoy the full employment benefits of a university education. Data collected by the Graduate

Careers Council of Australia (GCCA, 2004), presented in Table 1, indicated that disabled graduates were more likely to be seeking full-time work, or were in part-time work, in contrast to non-disabled graduates.

Table 1 Here

Given these statistics and other Australian and North American research (Mungovan and O'Day, 1997; Hynes, Syme, Lawn, Jones, Brown, & Edwards, 1997; Conyers, Koch, & Szymanski, 1998), the truism that people with a disability face considerable uncertainty and disadvantage in the Australia labour market, can therefore also apply to a relatively advantaged group of disabled people (i.e., those with a university education).

Rehabilitation Through Career Development

Apart from the major textbooks commonly used in the field of career development (e.g., Herr, Cramer & Niles, 2004), there has been until recently, a relatively limited scope of publications on research into the career development needs and outcomes of people with disability (Patton, 1997; Patton & McMahon, 1999). This state of affairs may be inherent in the problem highlighted by Olkin and Pledger (2003), who suggested that there has been a disconnection between the literature and research methodologies of disability studies and psychology. In their treatment of disability and career development theory, Patton and McMahon aimed to counter this problem by including 'disability….. in its own right, rather than as an adjunct to ability' (p.158).

Szymanski and Vancollins (2003) have proffered a model of vocational behaviour for people with a disability. This model emphasises the fluidity of contemporary careers and the ecological context in which careers exist and develop. Their model is akin to the Systems Theory Framework (STF) that highlights the multifarious qualities and dynamics of an individual's career (Patton & McMahon, 1999). Both models exhort practitioners to move beyond a purely psychological view of career, which has been predominant in rehabilitation psychology, and to adopt a systems perspective that indicates the need for career interventions that include other elements of a person's career not traditionally considered. Their aims are consistent with Olkin and Pledger's (2003) suggestion that attention should be given to disability in context, as distinct from a purely individual/medical model of practice.

Career development, as a goal or service, has, in various theoretical and practical forms, featured within the field of rehabilitation psychology; and typically through vocational assessment for the purpose of job placement (Buys et al, 2001). Buys et al were nevertheless critical of the focus upon job placement and suggested that this focus had diminished the overall career outcomes of rehabilitation programs. Although Buys et al (2001) and Buys, Hensby and Rennie (2003) recognised the important work of assisting individuals with a disability back into employment through job placement services, they further advocate for the emphasis of career development within the overall process of occupational rehabilitation. Buys et al (2001) argued that the process of overall career maintenance was not being adequately addressed in rehabilitation programs. They cited evidence within the North American context, which highlighted an emerging argument in favour of broadly integrating career development into rehabilitation (e.g., Rumrill & Koch, 1999).

Buys et al (2003) offered a working model of career development that can inform rehabilitation counselling and services. The model posits three initial phases:

1. career exploration and decision making

2. career enhancement; and

3. job realisation.

The objective of a career development program would be to facilitate independence within the client through their career self-management. Career self-management implies a cyclical process in which one phase leads onto the next, and through this the individual sustains a successful career. The model clearly places career development work as a prerequisite of the actual job placement process (i.e., job realisation). Buys et al situated this process within ecological notions of Szymanski and Vancollins (2003) and the STF (Patton & McMahon, 1999).

Career and Rehabilitation at University

Students with a disability have been recognised by universities and the Commonwealth Government as one of the major equity groups (e.g., Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, Wyld, 1991; Australian Education Council, 1991; Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999). In recent years there has been considerable energy invested in enhancing the participation rates of disabled students within the Australian higher education sector.

Rehabilitation programs would certainly utilise tertiary education as a means of re-training individuals with a disability to open new career pathways. Employment outcomes certainly indicate that higher education is a powerful vehicle for enhancing employment opportunities (ABS, 2004b). Being admitted to a degree, however, does not guarantee a positive employment outcome for a student with a disability (GCCA,

2004; O'Connor & Watson, 1995). The transition out of tertiary education (and into employment) requires as much attention as the transition into tertiary education (for the purpose of future employment). Conyers et al (1998) found that American undergraduates, who were preparing for the transition from education to employment, were concerned with issues relating to: lack of work experience; financial disincentives; knowledge of systems within the employment market; and preparing for their support needs in the work place (e.g., disclosure).

There has been considerable progress since O'Connor and Watson (1995) highlighted the employment-related needs of Australian university students with a disability. For example, most websites of the careers services of Australian universities have some pages dedicated to the employment of graduates with a disability. What follows is a selection of exemplary Australian programs that have focused upon the career and employment needs of students with a disability.

The National Regional Disability Liaison Officer (RDLO) Initiative commenced in 1993 under the auspices of the Commonwealth Government (O'Connor & Watson, 1995). The Initiative aims to enhance the post-secondary education, training and employment prospects of Australians with a disability. Evaluation of this program indicates that it is having a positive impact across various levels of its objectives (Kable & Heath, 1999).

An important achievement of the RDLO Initiative was the review of international best practice on the process of bridging university graduates with a disability into employment market (Boardman, 2003). Furthermore, the website *Choosing your Path. Disclosure It's a Personal Decision* (Mungovan & Quiqley, 2003) was launched under the aegis of the RDLO Initiative. *Choosing your Path* is a website that addresses some of the challenges for people with a disability, employers

and educators. This website provides substantial information about options and pathways that people with a disability can use in disclosing their disability in post secondary education and employment environments. The website also articulates the role and responsibilities of employers and educators in relation to disclosure.

The NSW Universities Disabilities Co-Operative Project funded the *Education to Employment Package*. This package provided a range of information sheets such as, workplace modifications, disclosure of disability and specialised employment services for NSW graduates with disabilities seeking employment.
Setting Directions - Employment Seminar for people with disabilities provided information regarding career opportunities and services, negotiating workplace adjustments, and job search strategies. This seminar identified disclosure of disability as a major challenge for people with disabilities.

Deakin University has had success with the Willing and Able Mentoring (WAM) Program (Murfitt, 2004). The WAM Program aims to match final year students who have a disability with mentors in leading corporations for a series of eight 1-2 hour meetings. The students gain valuable corporate connections, information about the work culture, and better skills in presenting a professional profile.

The Careers Employment & Welfare Service (the Service) of the University of Southern Queensland aimed to address a portion of the career-related needs of the university's students with a disability. The Service specifically aimed to implement a working example of the career enhancement phase of rehabilitation (Buys et al, 2003). Moreover, we set out to inform our practice through the ecological and systems theories of career development applied to disability (Szymanski and Vancollins, 2003; Patton & McMahon, 1999).

We planned to address career enhancement through an interpersonal, group-based solution for students with disability, which would link students to services in terms of acquiring knowledge, skills, and working relationships. Furthermore, we were guided by Buys and Rennie's (2001) position of establishing stronger relationships between rehabilitation partners for the betterment of client outcomes. Finally, we aimed to develop a service/product that could readily be integrated into the existing careers and employment services of the unit without the burden of extraordinary financial or staffing outlays. With these principles in mind we established a learning forum for student with a disability.

Establishing a Career Enhancement Forum

Participants

Students with a disability were advised of the forum through their contacts with the Service (e.g., disability counsellor) and through local advertising on the student intranet. In order that participants would have credible outcomes from the day it was determined that local community organisations would be invited to present a 'real world' perspective. Only organisations that had supportive employee policies were considered. The twenty-two participants of the forum included:

- undergraduate students with a disability (10);
- employed university graduate with a disability (1);
- Centrelink staff (2);
- Disability Services Queensland staff (1);
- a local employer (human resources manager) (1);
- representatives from two local employment agencies (2);

- representative of a local disability advocacy group (1);

- the Regional Disability Liaison Officer (1); and

- careers Service staff (4).

Forum Content

The topics of the forum were drawn from the expressed interests of the students who agreed to participate and the knowledge of professionals in the area whose awareness of critical issues indicated their inclusion. Topics for the forum included:

- employment and disability legislation;

- discrimination issues;

- disclosing disability;

- transition from study to work;

- job search and application skills;

- representing ability, not disability in the job application process;

- stress management;

- working examples of employment of people with a disability from the perspective of employee and employer; and

- engaging with community support services (e.g., financial assistance; employment assistance).

It must be emphasised that although the forum content was important in itself, it was secondary to the rehabilitation counselling experience of engaging in the group for the purpose of learning. Hence group process was considered the vital element of the forum. The students were also given an information pack containing brochures on rights and employment conditions, rights under disability legislation, employment-related websites, and government and community support services.

Forum Process

Conduct of the forum was guided by the recommendations for group career counselling offered by Herr, Cramer and Niles (2004). Using this framework the group was primarily established for information dissemination, exploration and motivation. The forum was conducted in a semi-formal atmosphere in which the agreed aim of learning from one another was considered to be a shared goal and responsibility. This was a crucial element of the program's intent and process. Each presenter was introduced by way of a brief description of his or her topic and organisation. Upon completion of their presentation the forum participants discussed the topic and emergent issues. On occasion the discussion became intense with difficult issues and questions being raised by students. The group leader did not quell this atmosphere because it was considered an important process in the students' learning and ultimately their rehabilitation. Moreover, it was considered important for community organisations to be fully exposed to the concerns and needs of the students without censorship. The intensity did not rise to a level that would have required intervention.

The group was held in a wheelchair accessible venue. A Microsoft Power Point display of the agenda for the day was placed on screen in large font. Handouts of the agenda were also made available to all. The University has its main campus in Toowoomba and an alternative campus in Hervey Bay. The university is committed enhancing access to its educational facilities through the use of advanced technologies. Video conferencing was therefore used to live-stream the forum to the alternative campus. Evaluation sheets were handed out to the students for their input of the day.

The forum was well publicised by attracting local media. Both radio and television interviews were held which enabled the Service to promote the day. Furthermore, this media exposure was used to raise awareness of the issues of disability and employment in the general community. Although not a core process of group work, the aim to positively raise awareness of the issue was perceived to be an important component of the overall objective of operating the forum.

A discussion between the students and the Service manager was held at the end of the forum. This discussion was introduced as an opportunity for the students to provide direct feedback to the manager in relation to both the forum and wider issues of service provision related to the careers and employment needs of students with a disability. A staff member wrote minutes of the forum throughout the day. These minutes were presented to the manager before the discussion with the students. The manager presented a précis of the minutes to ensure that an accurate understanding had been achieved. Presentation of the précis to the students by the manager acted as a stimulus for that grounded dialogue. This meeting was a vital part of respecting the students' contribution and a genuine attempt to open clear dialogue between the Service, the University and the students as consumers. Furthermore, it served as a mechanism for the Service to critically examine its practices against the expressed reality of its consumers.

Evaluation and Outcomes

As a group-process, dialogue was an integral component of the both the forum *per se* and the evaluation. Students were enthusiastic with their questioning of the guest speakers. Students at the Toowoomba campus and the Hervey Bay campus indicated that they felt 'part of the group'. This sense of belonging was considered to be a

crucial outcome in terms of the aim of building group cohesion for the purposes of shared learning. This was particularly important for the students from the alternative campus who joined the forum electronically.

Student Evaluation Form

At the end of the workshop the students were provided an evaluation form. The form instructed the reader to provide honest comments on 'the most useful aspects of the forum', 'the least useful aspects of the forum' and a question on how the workshop could be improved. The evaluation form also contained also a Likert-scale evaluation of a range of performance criteria relating to learning objectives, encouragement of participation, presenters knowledge, and the relevance and utility of the content. Scoring ranged from one to four with 4 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree.

Critical comments from the students indicated that the information provided was relevant to their respective situations. Both groups of students expressed their desire to be involved in planning future events. A summary of evaluative comments provided by the students is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Here

Students also provided evaluative feedback through the Likert-scale assessing the main performance criteria. A summary of the data is presented in Table 3. The overall ratings indicated that the students agreed that the performance criteria were met.

Table 3 Here

Emergent Themes

A significant and consistent theme that emerged from the group discussion and meeting with the manager was the students' perception that community agencies were not properly addressing the needs of university students with a disability. Although each student presented a different example of how they believed community agencies had overlooked their special needs as a university student, they all clearly expressed an aggregate belief that they could be better served. For example, one student believed that agencies were focusing on clients with greater disability to the exclusion of those who were genuinely committed to finding work, but fell outside of agencies' service criteria, and commented:

> We are seeking help, and learning to cope with our disability, at a higher level of independence than [community agencies] can offer.

The second major theme related to the confusion surrounding government support for study, disability, and employment. Students consistently expressed concern that the relationships between the various Centrelink and employment agency support services were often confusing and sometimes incompatible. The most notable experience for all was the sense of confusion in terms of knowing their eligibility for services and the correct bureaucratic process for securing that support.

The student-manager dialogue highlighted the risk that service agencies may not comprehend the disjuncture between ostensibly useful career services and the expressed needs of clients. The students felt respected and recognised through the forum process; however, they reiterated that there was a need for continuation of the

forum across the various stages of a degree. For example, the forum would be empowering for first year students, as it would be for final year students because it would generate a sense of continuation from entry to university and exit into employment. They expressed that this sense of continuation would be a buffer against the potentially overwhelming conditions of completing a degree program.

Discussion

The forum described in this paper highlights a group approach to meeting the career enhancement needs of students with a disability. The forum was a relatively simple intervention both in terms of its operation and goals. It achieved its goal of bringing students with a disability together with employment-related community professionals in the community. Student appraisal indicated that the forum was successfully delivered and was of value in terms its content and relevance.

The forum tentatively represents an approach to serving the needs of students with a disability in a cost-effective format. The alternative of individual career counselling sessions with the number of participants at the forum would have been considerably more expensive. Individual counselling and education sessions cannot be replaced by a group format; however, group based learning harnesses the resources of more than just a single student-counsellor dyad.

The forum engaged students with the process of networking with 'real players' in the employment market. The opportunity to interact with community and employment professionals in a supportive, learning environment enables students to meet some of their needs in terms of information and to practice the career management skill of relating to employers. This type of communication with one

another and the representatives of the employment market is a crucial tool of career education and cannot be understated as a means toward career enhancement.

The forum embedded the careers Service in a grounded learning experience which highlighted the needs of students, the community, and the dynamic needs of appropriate service provision. We learned about the lived experience of students with a disability and this has brought into focus the career services offered by the University and partners in the community. In this way the forum also served as an informal qualitative needs survey that could be used to better manage service provision.

The evaluation methodology does not permit testing of the forum's capacity to facilitate students transition from career enhancement to job realisation. Evaluation of future forums of this kind may include assessment of the employment outcomes of students who attended the forum and qualitatively assess the students' appraisal of how a forum affected their employability.

University students with a disability are members of a significant equity-group. The rehabilitation experience and concomitant career development needs of Australian university students with a disability are not fully understood. Much work has gone into the use of higher education as a powerful tool for rehabilitation outcomes. Realignment of professional direction or retraining in context of a rehabilitation plan is frequently addressed through university studies. However, there has been only limited attention paid to the career outcomes of students with a disability with respect to their transition from study to work. This intervention is a small but significant contribution to addressing that particular issue.

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Table 1

Employment Status of University Graduates With and Without Disability

Employment Status	With Disability	Without Disability	Combined
Full-time	1352 (61.0)	55350 (73.9)	56702 (73.5)
Part-time	488 (22.0)	13179 (17.6)	13667 (17.7)
Seeking	375 (16.9)	6395 (8.5)	6770 (8.8)

Note. Percentages for each category are expressed in parentheses. Figures are based upon the sample of respondents who were available for full-time work and not in full-time study.

Table 2

Selection of Evaluative Comments from Participants

Most Useful Aspect

Centrelink and employment agencies
Section on job search and selection criteria
Reality of content
Meeting other students in the same boat, networking
Learning what is available and not available
To raise issues that were and not being addressed fully by agencies at all levels
The video link helped told us what we needed to know
Useful for including rural students with less access to metropolitan services
Practical suggestions for relevant situations we are likely to encounter in the near future

Least Useful Aspect

Time restrictions
Students from [other campus] would like to meet agents 'face-to-face'
The 'politicking' on difficult questions
Sometimes the agencies had no answers to difficult questions

Recommended Improvements

Hold each year or semester
Not so long
Keep having them, more often and more locations
Run during the semester breaks
Wider range of topics
Extended and on a regular basis
I would have preferred this forum earlier in my studies

Note. Some comments specific to particular individuals were not entered.

Table 3

Number of Students Endorsement of Performance Criteria

Criterion	M	SD	Mdn
The presenters provided learning objectives	3.62	.52	4.00
The presenters encouraged participant questions, opinions and responses	3.50	.93	4.00
The presenters demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the topic	3.50	.53	3.50
I found the content relevant and will use it	3.62	.52	4.00
I found that the level of content was appropriate to my needs	3.50	.53	3.50