



CDL HUB

Career Development Learning Hub

Career development learning for neurodivergent tertiary education students

A case study of best practice career development learning for students with disability

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This project aimed to critically engage with existing good practice in CDL for students with disability and then develop, pilot and showcase further examples of best practice programs and resources to complement what already exists.

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Introduction

Curtin University has an existing program in which students with neurodivergent conditions are mentored by final year honours and postgraduate students to support them on their university learning journey. The Curtin Specialist Mentoring Program (CSMP) provides advice and guidance to neurodivergent students on accessing career development services and information. Previous research has demonstrated the positive impact that mentoring can have on student learning and grade outcomes (Johnson, 2015). The pilot program extended the reach of the CSMP at Curtin University to a broader cohort of students with neurodivergent conditions as well as providing an additional focus on career development learning (CDL). For the purposes of this program, neurodivergent has been deemed to be a term to describe a variety of conditions related to cognitive abilities, including (but not restricted to) autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Weathington, 2020).

The CDL program for neurodivergent tertiary students added value to the range of existing services available at Curtin. The focus was to provide a broader cohort of university students, from first year of study to postgraduate, with the necessary skills and information on establishing meaningful careers and understanding their career and employment options. The primary focal point for delivery of this pilot program was through face-to-face workshops in which students engaged as both receivers and sharers of information and resources through the lens of neurodiversity. The workshops also assisted in facilitating a community of practice across the broad neurodivergent university student cohort.

Feedback from workshop participants, via survey responses and focus group sessions, facilitated the development of additional resources with emphasis on the delivery of concise and easily accessible information sheets to facilitate CDL.

Evaluation of the pilot program also includes recommendations for further improvements and expansion across the tertiary education sector.

Context

Curtin University is an innovative and global university that has built a reputation on developing strong industry partnerships as well as equipping graduates with the necessary employability skills to gain and sustain meaningful employment. Curtin is also ranked in the top 1% of universities (according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2021).

Curtin prides itself on forging a reputation as one of the most diverse universities in Australia with a focus on inclusivity, community mindedness and commitment to reconciliation. With a specific focus on disability, Curtin has in place a long-term disability access and inclusion plan, which includes a range of specific goals and milestones. Support services provided include psychological and counselling support, access plan, career support, assistance with studies, assistive technologies and access to resources.

With a focus on neurodiversity, Curtin also runs the Curtin Specialist Mentoring Program (CSMP), which is one of Australia's first and largest peer support mentoring program specifically designed for neurodivergent students with an autism spectrum or related condition. CSMP provides weekly social groups supported by student mentors to facilitate the development of friendships and to discuss relevant issues.

Program aims

The aim of the overall national project is to establish the first **dedicated** National Career Development Learning (CDL) Hub for students with disability. The CDL Hub will create an accessible range of freely available resources and practical examples of programs that address CDL for students with disability across the student lifecycle. This pilot program supports the overriding project by trialling and delivering best practice approaches to supporting the CDL of students with neurodivergent conditions.

The aim of the CDL for Neurodivergent Tertiary Education Students project is to provide a range of resources, inclusive of specialised workshops, tools and resources, which will aid their understanding of employment and career opportunities, their unique strengths and skills and access to resources. The workshops also assist in facilitating a community of practice across the broad neurodivergent university student cohort.

Program delivery

A literature review was undertaken to both frame and better understand the issues and challenges associated with employment and career exploration through the lens of neurodivergence.

Typically, successful transition to adulthood uses engagement in the paid market economy as a marker of achievement of financial independence and goal setting. Unfortunately, for those with neurodivergent conditions, achieving such a milestone is difficult, anxiety ridden and often unachievable (Patton, 2019). Additionally, those who were able to obtain employment post schooling found themselves in work that was low paid, low skilled, less contracted hours and took longer to obtain than work found by those who were "neurotypical" (Anderson, Butt and Sarsony, 2020; Tomczak, Szulc and Szczerska, 2021). A recent US study suggested that over 85% of college graduates with autism were either under employed or unemployed as compared to the national unemployment rate of 4.5% (Pesce, 2019). Jones et al. (2019) also found that long-term unemployment was a key feature in the lives of those with autism even though their skill sets often exceeded the job requirements for the roles they were unsuccessful in securing. The same study found that the most significant barriers to finding employment were the perceived lack of support and information on needs and adjustments.

Pre-workshop interviews and a focus group session were also undertaken by one of the research team, a current Curtin University Student Career Advisor, along with volunteers from the CSMP to gather knowledge on career development topics for the workshops. The interviews also looked to extrapolate themes on the current obstacles and challenges to employment search activities from the students.

Two workshops were developed with the primary aim of assisting neurodivergent students with information to improve their understanding of their career and employment options, assess their own individual strengths, and to supply relevant resources. Tips on dealing with employers and knowing their rights about needs and adjustments were also included.

The workshops were designed to cover the following topics:

- Identifying your unique strengths in relation to your neurodivergent characteristics
- Understanding the pros and cons of sharing your needs with employers
- Deciding what types of adjustment you can ask for in the recruitment process
- Learn how to sell yourself on a résumé and confidently address gaps in experience
- Explore coping strategies for when you don't get the job
- Discover where to access further support for careers and employment advice

The workshops were developed and facilitated by the project lead, Associate Professor Jane Coffey; Emma Lovegrove, research team member and Curtin careers advisor; and Sandhya Subarmaniam, joint program coordinator, CSMP.

The workshops were limited to a 2.5-hour duration and a cap of 25 participants was placed on attendance. Both these limitations were aimed at enhancing engagement and learning retention as well as reducing hyperstimulation and anxiety.

Copies of slides and an interactive handbook (developed specifically for workshops) were provided to participants in advance; mentors and support people were also invited to accompany participants. Rest breaks were built into the workshop structure and an email to participants encouraged requests for further adjustments. This emphasis on the unique structure of the workshops was a key element in designing learning strategies for a neurodivergent audience.

As part of the wider research project, participants were also informed (in an information email prior to the workshops) of the opportunity to remain for a further 30 minutes at the conclusion of the workshop to provide feedback on both the workshop as well as any further information or support they would like to successfully navigate their CDL and preparation.

Prior to the workshops, participants were provided with the research project information sheet and consent forms to participate. A clear emphasis was placed on the voluntary nature of their involvement along with their ability to withdraw such consent at any time.

All who registered and participated in the workshops were Curtin University students (54 in total registered; 17 attended). There were no mentors or support people present.

Research methods

Three approaches were employed to extract meaningful and authentic feedback from participants:

1. **Survey completion by workshop participants.** The code and link for the survey was shared with workshop participants prior to and during the workshops. Copies of the QR code were placed at the centre of each table to allow participants to scan from their mobile devices at any time. Seven responses were received.
2. **Focus group interviews with participants at the conclusion of each of the workshop.** Students were invited to join the focus groups on a voluntary basis at the conclusion of each of the workshops. The questions were circulated beforehand along with the participant consent forms. Eight students attended the first CSMP workshop with only one volunteering to participate in the focus group. Nine attended the second workshop, with eight volunteering to participate in the focus group.

Four questions were posed to each of the focus groups:

- a. What did you find useful about today's workshop?
- b. What could be changed or improved in the future?
- c. What would you like to learn more about?
- d. Do you have any other thoughts about the workshop that you would like to share?

One student from the CSMP workshop participated in the focus group session and eight from the second workshop. Focus group sessions were recorded and then transcribed. The main themes emulating from the transcriptions were shared with the project team for feedback to facilitate further literature gathering and analysis and to inform the preparation of resources for neurodivergent tertiary students and career practitioners.

3. **Direct observation and note taking during the workshops.** The project lead, Associate Professor Jane Coffey, was present at both workshops, and observations were recorded. These observations focused on the way in which participants engaged in the workshops, how this may have changed over the course of the workshop delivery and which topics garnered the most interest.

Findings

The evaluation of this CDL intervention is presented in two sections:

- Assessment of program delivery
- Opportunities and implications

Assessment of program delivery

As outlined, at the end of each workshop a focus group session was conducted with participants wishing to provide input to the circulated questions. These focus groups were recorded with the consent of the participants.

It was observed that the CSMP participants in the first workshop took much less time to become comfortable and interact with each other due to them already knowing each other. Discussions and questions with these participants were also more focused. However, only one participant from this group was willing/comfortable to remain behind at the end of the workshop to take part in the focus group.

The second workshop catered to a wider cohort of students with none of them knowing each other beforehand. It was seen that this group took longer to engage in conversations with each other and to engage in facilitated discussions. However, once comfortable, this group were extremely vocal and willing to share stories. Also, all but one participant from this workshop volunteered to stay and take part in the focus group discussion. The discussion itself was robust and extremely informative.

It is also important to note that the students attending the second workshop nominated based on self-diagnosis as neurodivergent and feedback demonstrated they appreciated the opportunity given that a number were still on the overly complex and convoluted medical journey of “labelling” their conditions.

In response to the first question on what participants found to be the most useful aspects of the workshops, the following key themes emerged:

1. Stories from others: authenticity and relatability
2. Own strengths through the lens of neurodiversity
3. Needs and adjustments
4. Interactive resources
5. Alternatives to résumés

1. Hearing everyone’s stories, perspectives and experiences

Across both workshops, the feedback received was that it was both enlightening and reassuring to hear the stories of others through the lens of autism. It made the participants feel part of a community, that they were not alone and that they could learn from each other's experiences.

I suppose, yeah, just like discussion. I want to see what other people said. And I wanted to get my own opinion and hear what they thought about that. And then I want to hear more people's experience about stuff.
(Workshop 1 participant)

The second workshop, unlike the first workshop, was a larger and more diverse group who did not know each other; thus, it was the first time they had had such an opportunity. However, they also articulated that they enjoyed the opportunity to share stories and perspectives.

I also found just being able to talk to everybody, just hearing everybody's little stories also helped. I think it was quite good, just to kind of get a sense of where everybody's at. (Workshop 2 participant)

2. Evaluation of own strengths through the lens of neurodiversity

As part of the workshop content, participants completed a self-assessment of strengths. This was based on the Image Autism career profile builder and is contained in the interactive workbook provided as part of the session. The students welcomed the opportunity to evaluate their own strengths, apply them to their job search endeavours and realise they had a great deal to offer in thinking differently. In both workshops, this was the section where students really demonstrated an interest in assessing their own strengths and sharing them with each other.

3. Discussion on needs and adjustments.

This was an area of the workshop in which participants asked the most questions and were keen to learn more (as outlined later in the case study). While some of the participants were aware of their rights in terms of asking for adjustments, others were unsure about when in the recruitment process they can request this, and what they can request.

I wrote notes about appealing the recruitment process because I thought that's been interesting to learn about. It's something I might need to know in the future. You know, like, can you disclose things? (Workshop 1 participant)

4. Interactive book with resources.

The workbook was a tool the participants worked through as part of the workshop. As outlined earlier, the self-assessment of strengths was included in the workbook, along with a range of other resources and information. Observations made, along with participant discussion in the workshops, suggest that the use of such a workbook added value to both the level of interactivity it generated among participants as well as the actual relevance of the content to a neurodivergent audience.

5. Introduction to Studium as an alternative to résumés.

Participants in the second workshop articulated how much they learned about different resources that existed and the way in which job search platforms were emerging as a welcome relief to the traditional résumé:

And actually, with the Studium, it's very much a strengths-based profile you're building – it's not just a standard resume, and more and more the employers are coming sourcing, and particularly at this point in time, because it is an employee's market. (Workshop 2 participant)

The use of such mediums allows those who are actively seeking employment to showcase their strengths and transferable skills in a way that is often restricted with a traditional résumé. For the neurodivergent community, it provides a medium for them to think about “selling” themselves in a different way.

The use of such a platform also has the capacity to showcase the skills and strengths of neurodivergent job seekers to a larger audience than more traditional targeted campaigns where they may only apply for a limited number of vacancies.

Opportunities and implications

Feedback from participants during the workshops, focus group input and observations supplied rich data on further opportunities and implications for practice. Overwhelmingly, participants wanted more information and further workshops covering specific topics.

Workshop 1 with Curtin Specialist Mentoring Program students

“More” was the clear message received. Participants were “hungry” for information and resources to aid their job search endeavours. In addition to this, they wanted specific information with examples to follow. Much of the feedback received focused on their desire for more detailed information on needs and adjustments as well as examples of how to prepare for interviews. They found it difficult to access such information and were hesitant to seek such support from family and friends:

But I feel like I, you know, family and friends get sick of having to be my interviewer. And a lot of them are not HR [human resources] people, or in positions where that got any value for me really, coach, being able to find, you know, somewhere where I can have a mock interview with someone who actually works in HR, or, you know, they might not have to be currently working in HR, but they've got that expertise to then give me feedback real time and say, Hey, you did good. Here's how you can improve. (Workshop 1 participant)

It became clear that more support was required to assist neurodivergent students with building their job search skills. Given the hesitation these students appeared to have in accessing existing resources and support (such as existing career centre resources and support), the provision of targeted and regular workshops should be considered.

Workshop 2 with wider neurodivergent student community

As with the first group, specific, relevant and targeted material on requesting adjustments and preparing for interviews as well as how to network was requested. This was a source of frustration for most of those who took part in the focus group:

They (career practitioners) want to know what resources have you tried to look for in the past and you gotta give up, you know, you're on there searching the internet trying to find resources for your condition for looking for work, and it's like I give up or you do find it. And this this, it's just a plethora of words without guidance. If there was something that you could say, I just want to know what it is. I want the information or one example. (Workshop 2 participant)

Participants outlined how they had spent time searching for specific examples of “how to” prepare for interviews as a neurodivergent person but had little success. They were keen to have access to templates and guides on how to approach employers on needs and adjustments for interviews, including having actual wording and phrases to use.

The participants also discussed the need for specific information on how they ask for adjustments and how to address their condition in a résumé:

I have such a patchy looking resume and there is no way to come with my pages of disclaimers first and an explanation for everything. They would see that and go 'well, that is just too much for us to deal with. We just want a normal resume where it makes sense to us.' Um, so, that would be for examples where I would like to have more information and advice. (Workshop 2 participant)

The participants had a clear understanding of the types of employers who were more conversant with the needs of neurodivergent employees. However, as most of these tended to be in the government and not-for-profit sector, the requirement to address selection criteria in job applications was a source of anxiety and confusion.

I think, just with like, even just the examples used and stuff, having a template for the phrasing of things, because again, like you were saying, it's all well, and good to say, oh, you can ask for adjustments. And to have a list of things you could ask for. But having a way of actually like, seeing a written out of this is how you can ask for it. And like this is the way you phrase it so that it still sounds professional and to the point. (Workshop 2 participant)

There was keen interest on a specific workshop addressing the way in which the government and not-for-profit sectors required selection criteria to be addressed, such as the SAO (situation, action and outcome) approach. Participants also indicated they would like material that provided written examples.

The word “networking” was the source of animated discussion as well as anxiety and stress. This was a clear area of discomfort for the participants, and questions focused on how to make it work through the lens of neurodivergence.

I would rather be anywhere except in a group [in] a room with people. I don't know, making small talk, but it's almost like the 'how to [do] it' could almost be like those conversation starters. What are the questions you ask?

*What are discussions you have? How do you do it through social media?
(Workshop 2 participant)*

Overwhelmingly, participants were uncomfortable with this concept, and a specific session and resource sheet on how to network through the lens of neurodivergence was requested. It was also evident that existing networks were limited and this was an area in which they needed the most support.

I think, for me, the concept of friends in the neurotypical world is so odd to me. Like, you have people who you would trust implicitly, yes, that's a friend. But neurotypicals are all like, here. These people I talk to, like, once every two months, and we don't talk about anything other than small talk and therapy, great friend. And I, and that's, I think how neurotypical is able to maintain a network. But I can't do that. Like that's completely against like, I'm not going to talk to someone, just to keep them there just in case they have a job down the line. (Workshop 2 participant)

*Because it's, it's the whole network concept is just, and it varies so much person to person it does. And like, I know, for me personally, just maintaining any form of network is biggest, exhausting, exhausting.
(Workshop 2 participant)*

Interestingly, once the activity of networking was posited within a frame of “asking for directions” the level of anxiety appeared to diminish.

Finally, participants were unanimous in their desire for a list of resources, “How To” tip sheets and further workshops covering specific topics.

Workshop observations

The 2.5-hour format was quite limiting in that we could only deal with topics in a very superficial manner. Further topic-based workshops and the creation of a series with the same participants enrolled in all will be a more comprehensive approach. This will also aid in developing a network and community of practice among the participants.

Recommendations for practice

Based on the discussions with neurodivergent students in formulating the workshops and discussions/observations with workshop participants, the recommendations focus on the development of resources.

Further workshops

The workshops conducted were designed to provide neurodivergent university students with employment search information and tools, the opportunity to identify their own strengths and information on their rights regarding needs and adjustments in the career exploration process.

Due to the need to keep the workshops concise and short, it was clear that further workshops would need to be developed. The purpose of the workshops was also to give participants a voice to articulate what those future workshops should be.

Based on the various sources of data collection, further workshops should be developed as follows:

- Regular introductory workshops (as already conducted)
- Specific workshops focused on the following content:
 - Résumés
 - Addressing selection criteria
 - Preparing for and coping with the interview process
 - How to network
 - Needs and adjustments
 - Dealing with failure

Physical resources

A plethora of information already exists, but most of it is overwhelming for neurodivergent students to navigate. There is a need for concise, one-page resources that are topic driven with specific examples.

Resources

As highlighted, there is a clear need for a range of concise materials and resources for neurodivergent tertiary students. Resources which might support the implementation of the above best practices have been made available:

- Workshop: content PowerPoint slides for career development practitioners
- Workshop: interactive workbook for participants
- Resource guides:
 - Transitioning to Employment: Embracing Your Neurodivergence
 - Tips for Career Practitioners: Supporting Students with Neurodivergent Conditions
 - Tips for Careers Practitioners: Careers Fairs
 - Tips for Employers: Quiet 60
 - Tips for Employers: Hiring Practices
 - Tips for Employers: Hiring Students with Neurodivergent Conditions
 - Tips for Neurodivergent Tertiary Students: Résumé Writing
 - Tips for Neurodivergent Tertiary Students: Networking Reframed
 - Tips for Neurodivergent Tertiary Students: Addressing Selection Criteria
 - Tips for Neurodivergent Tertiary Students: Interviews
 - Tips for How to Request Adjustments for Job Applications and at Work

Conclusion

The development and delivery of this pilot program for neurodivergent tertiary students was an opportunity to not only provide these students with specialised, focused information on employment and career options. It also provided a voice for workshop participants to articulate their challenges, barriers and needs. Importantly, this also became a safe environment to build a support system and community of practice. The resources developed will assist in demystifying the employment processes and practices of employers and will also offer targeted tools for career development practitioners and recruiters/employers to support the employment of neurodivergent graduates.

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