MOLLY DOLLINGER: Welcome everyone to our podcast hosted by the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training. My name is Molly Dollinger and I'm a Senior Lecturer at Deakin University, and I'm joined today by a Deakin University student Daniella Prezioso, and we are here to discuss the complex topic of doing a work integrated learning placement at university. So just real quickly, the purpose of today is quite simple, we are here to alleviate some of the stress for anyone out there listening who is thinking about doing a placement, because placements are stressful and you know what, they're actually stressful for everyone, but I think for those of us with disabilities the stress can be even more amplified. Like do I disclose or not, will the environment be supportive and flexible, will my supervisor judge me, and these are all really good questions. So today we're just going to chat it out, Daniella and I. I'm super excited so over to you Daniella to introduce yourself and share what stresses you out about placements.

DANIELLA PREZIOSO: So, hi everyone, my name is Daniella and I'm very excited to be here. I'm studying a Bachelor of Nutrition Science, the dietetics pathway at Deakin University. So I hope to work as a dietitian someday, specifically working in the invisible chronic illness/disability area and the main reason why I want to work in this area is because I also have an invisible chronic illnesses/disabilities, so I want to continue to advocate and actively create positive change or improvements within the tertiary education system, so that in turn will help facilitate a diverse range of individuals, including myself, to experience all faceless barriers in achieving their dream careers. So, because of my situation when it comes to academics, I also have supports in place through the university as a Learning Access Plan and I also have disability counsellor support. So I'm currently halfway through my degree, and I'm going to be completing work experience and placements soon, so I have a lot of queries and things that I worry about to ensure that my experience will focus on and reflect the application of what I've learned in my classes, rather than on my actual disability or chronic health situation. So yeah, I wanted to share and address some of my concerns and I hope this will help myself and other students who are a bit anxious about working placements and put them at ease. So my first concern that comes to mind is about the flexibility of work experience, specifically about the lengths of each work shift. So for me, I don't have the physical capacity to do full-time work experience, eight hour work shifts, five days a week. So for me, I'd be looking at maybe four to five hours per day, non-consecutive days, that sort of thing. So yeah, I just I guess wanted to see would the work placements be flexible at all. It's something that I'm worried about.

MOLLY: I think Daniella, this is such a good question and one that we hear a lot from university students all over Australia and I think the answer to it, and part of this is really frustrating, is that there is no single answer. It depends so much on the placement that the student is choosing to do, and look, obviously there are exceptions but anecdotally we know that nursing placements and teaching placements tend to be a lot more rigid than perhaps placements that you might see in businesses or small organisations, and things like that. I mean that's a huge component of it there as well I think.

DANIELLA: What about the actual activities in the work placement. So for me, like I said because of my physical capacity and energy capacity, I'm a bit worried about the intensity of things. Perhaps I might need to go online some days rather than being in sight and needing to prioritise it, like tasks that need to be done in person. How do I go about asking for those considerations, what should I do?

MOLLY: Absolutely such a good question, I mean I think step one for anyone listening out there is if you don't already have a Learning Access Plan, and what we mean by that is essentially a plan that's sponsored through your university where you've shown evidence most likely about having a disability or some other condition that might impact your ability, then it's really important to go ahead and get that plan, because that plan is your ticket, for lack of a better word, into opening up these discussions and really making sure that you're supported by the university to have these discussions and that the supervisor, the work supervisor, that you might have is aware of what's going on as well. Now I have a few caveats in all of this, the first is that once you have your plan you don't have to disclose what your specific disability or condition is to your work supervisor. So, all they need to know is what your accommodations are. So Daniella, as you talked about different activities, you know something that might be on your plan is that you don't like reading aloud in public in front of other people, I shouldn't say like, but you might struggle with that, you'd prefer to do something different, and that doesn't have to go into any detail, any other detail, other than that. And I think it's really important with your supervisor, on that note, to talk about what you do feel like is your strength in the workplace, you know, what do you bring to it, how do you perhaps feel most comfortable and confident in contributing to the team environment, and that's a really important conversation to have. But going back Daniella, to your original point, I think this is a conversation for you to have with your work supervisor once you're in the placement. I will say, if you feel uncomfortable about having that conversation, a great point of contact is to see if your university does offer either a disability counsellor, or a lot of universities have work placement coordinators - so these are professional staff whose job it is essentially to help the student find a placement, and either of these people might be willing to speak on your behalf, or to be in that conversation with you and your supervisor, and you can also potentially ask your academic. So if you're a lecturer, or whoever's you know running or overseeing the unit, they might also be able to have that conversation. But what I will say, that it is really important, though perhaps challenging, to share around the need for flexible arrangements and again taking that strength based perspective on what you can bring and what activities would work best, because you'll have you'll get so much more out of the placement, as difficult as those conversations might be.

DANIELLA: Those are some really great tips Molly. My second stressor is around, I guess on that note, should I be choosing or opting for online rather than in person because my condition can vary so much, and I might be having a flare-up in the morning or something so I can't go to work like in person in the afternoon. What's your advice around that?

MOLLY: This is such a good question, and something for every individual student to really consider. I mean the easy answer right now is blended. So try to find a placement opportunity that will allow for some of the time online and some of the time in person, but I don't want to, I don't want to give an easy answer in case that's not an option for people. I think it really depends on what you want to get out of the placement. If it's about experiencing a work environment in real life, having that social network, feeling what it's like to do the daily commute and working in a shared office space perhaps, and having those conversations around the kitchen space and all of that, then obviously an in-person placement, if that's feasible for you, I think definitely gives you that first-hand experience. But there's lots of benefits to an online placement as well. Perhaps you have carer responsibilities, or the price of gas and parking these days is extraordinary and you just don't have the time and the resources to go into the office every day, and so an online placement is a really good option because it does allow for a bit more flexibility, and perhaps you do save a bit of money, and juggle all those other commitments that you might have. So I mean, Daniella for you, what do you think would be your preference?

DANIELLA: For me, I guess it depends how fast I want to get my work placement done. I'd love to attend in person as much as I can, but if I'm experiencing a flare-up it's going to be a bit hard to do that. So to have the option to switch online for the day would be great. I guess I would be looking at, like if I had to be in person or as I'm saying I want to prefer to be in person, I'd probably be looking at like three times a week on non-consecutive days like a Monday, Wednesday, Friday but if I wanted to get more hours done I could do like half days in between that that are online because, yeah in my field there's a lot of patient one-on-one work and some of that doesn't have to be in person with the development of Telehealth and that over COVID so I know that that's some things I can chat about. I'm just, yeah I wasn't sure how to go about it so those are some really great tips.

MOLLY: Yeah definitely.

DANIELLA: But the other thing I also wanted to talk about is asking for other adjustments, like my actual work placement environment where I'm looking for a cool, quiet, working environment and I guess with that my other main concern was like how do I go about actually disclosing my disability to my work colleagues, because I know that you mentioned previously you don't have to disclose initially around like a Learning Access Plan but if you're working in person and your work colleagues are seeing what you're doing, they might have a few questions and, although like some employees have good intentions, this intention doesn't often very transfer well in real life and it can be quite embarrassing and humiliating or isolating if I'm singled out in front of everyone. I don't mind people knowing in my case, but I guess I would like to control of like how and when people around me find out. You know, I just I just wasn't sure how to go about that.

MOLLY: Yeah, absolutely. I mean this is such an important topic and I'm certainly not going to be able to give the topic justice in a podcast here, but okay let's kind of start back at the beginning, again getting that Learning Access Plan, that evidence that you can bring to your placement coordinator as well as your workplace supervisor, having that conversation early and often about any adjustments or modifications, and again thinking about your own personal preference around disclosure. So maybe you just want to disclose what adjustments or modifications, or maybe you want to talk about your condition itself. Again it's really up to you, so as early as possible having that conversation. I think the next step then, and this is really difficult, is to have that conversation with your supervisor about what you're comfortable with your work colleagues knowing or not knowing, and also really importantly stressing to them that that might change. So you might feel one way at the beginning of the placement and change your mind by the end of the placement and you are totally allowed to do that. So it's difficult because, of course, your supervisor has this power imbalance with you right, like they're your supervisor, you're the student, but the benefit of a placement is you're not their employee like at least not yet anyways so you can have that conversation, and I think actually a lot of supervisors would feel relieved that the student brought this up, that they told them these are my preferences around communication, around disclosure. I think that's something that actually a lot of supervisors are looking for. You know recently in some research that's come out, it actually shows that most employers in Australia are looking to hire more people with disability, I think they just don't have always the training, anything to be etiquette really, to understand how to create an inclusive work environment, because it is sort of a new phenomenon for a lot of people, depending on the industry of course. Daniella, going back to the other questions around asking for those additional adjustments modifications, I think most supervisors are receptable to all of that, I think it's just about you know putting it politely and understanding any constraints that they might be having. They probably can't, for example, some office places just have horrible lighting that would give anyone a migraine and it's not always feasible to like be able to change that, but I do think most people are supportive and interested in making sure that everyone who's contributing to their workplace feels comfortable and supported to do so. Daniella, what other, is there anything else out of this, I mean you also spoke a little bit about I think you were talking about stigma or discrimination. Is that right?

DANIELLA: Yes, definitely, because it's kind of a fine line between you know wanting to make things comfortable for me but also I guess that worry that if I disclose what's going on then, especially earlier on, then they might not want to take me on like for future career opportunities beyond work placement, or like if I want to get like a reference from them or something so yeah I'm just worried it'll like change their opinion of me and, I don't know, just like I'm more than my disability I guess so yeah definitely.

MOLLY: 100%. I mean, again I wish I could say on this podcast that every supervisor and employer you're gonna have, is gonna be awesome and non-discriminatory, but you know in reality we know that that's not the case, and on the flip side of that you also don't want to be treated like, of the poster child for disability and like asked to like go around and do essentially calms and you know info talks for the workplace either. So it is definitely striking that balance. I think it is important to talk about the adjustments and modifications, again not necessarily sharing your exact disability with the supervisor up front, and if they have an issue with it that's their problem and you can find another placement and forget that person. So I mean, I would go ahead and, personally I would go ahead and do that and then see what happens, but as far as once you're in the placement, or after the placement, if you feel like they have discriminated against you or stigmatised you in any way, you know it is important that we, there are laws in Australia of course, you're not allowed to discriminate your employees based on a load of factors, including disability, and if you do feel like you need to make a complaint, you should definitely do so and probably speak to your University first, but then you could even bring it up with the work right safety and so on. But I think, yeah I think that more universities should also have these peer mentoring programs with students with disabilities who are going through these work experiences at the same time to provide that source of support that community around just being able to share about what it's like, and you know sometimes people make a comment and maybe it's not necessarily coming from you know a place of discrimination but it's coming from a place of ignorance and you still want to talk it out and be like I can't believe this happened to me, this is so frustrating and to have someone else be able to say, ah there's something similar has happened to me before, and I think that's just so important.

DANIELLA: I completely agree, that's an awesome idea that I wish universities would implement, because I think the hardest thing about undergoing work placements when you have disabilities is not having anyone like you in that situation to help, just even just talk smack with each other about what's going on so yeah, yeah I completely agree with that. Yeah, thanks for all those awesome ideas, I'm feeling a lot more confident about going into work placements now.

MOLLY: Yeah, that's awesome and I hope everyone listening also feels, just that they were able to sort of connect and, and just feel like their concerns aren't… they're not alone you know, that we're all we're all thinking these things having these conversations with ourselves or with others, and hopefully you feel a bit more empowered to do a work placement because they are such wonderful experiences that I would hope every University student gets to try out at some point, and thanks so much Daniella for joining us today.

DANIELLA: Thank you so much for having me.

MOLLY: All right, goodbye everyone.

As we gather for this meeting, physically dispersed and virtually constructed, let us take a moment to reflect on the meaning of place and in doing so recognise the various traditional lands of which we are on today. Daniella and I are joining from the land of Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We'd like to acknowledge that this land was never seated and pay our respects to Elders past present and emerging.