VET career pathways for school students living with disability: working with employers

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

Project team:

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January 2023

Acknowledgements

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.

This document has been written by the University of Tasmania (UTAS) project team of Professor Sue Kilpatrick and including Dr Sarah Fischer.

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The project team was also supported by Dr Jodi Lamanna, Dr Janine Delahunty and Ms Trish Morton-Smith.

We would like to thank the members of the Expert Committee for their ongoing commitment and advice regarding this project. The members are:

- Dr Matt Brett, Deakin University
- Professor Julia Coyle, University of Wollongong
- Claire Field, Claire Field and Associates
- Elicia Ford, National Disability Coordination Officer Program
- Anthony Gartner, La Trobe University
- Professor Sally Kift, James Cook University

- Dr Mary McMahon, University of Queensland
- Emeritus Professor Wendy Patton, Queensland University of Technology
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Please use the following citation for this document:

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Introduction

The Launceston Chamber of Commerce was invited to partner with the University of Tasmania (UTAS) and the Tasmanian Department of Education in a pilot project aiming to increase the willingness of employers to engage in work-based learning for school vocational education and training (VET) students with disability. The project achieved this by developing practical guidelines (hereafter the Guidelines) that answer common employer questions and provide easy access to a range of resources to support employers and students. The project targets a wide variety of sectors across the economy.

This pilot project recognises that employers and industry are key partners in work-based learning experiences and can hinder or enhance access to VET (Atkinson, 2016). Research has also shown that VET can be a conduit for economic growth and a driver for social inclusion (Nilsson, 2010). The project focused on increasing employer and industry understanding of what is involved in engaging in the work-based component of school-based VET for students with disability. The project also identified barriers and enhancers to both employer and student participation in work-based learning in workplaces in a regional city (Launceston, Tasmania), as well as strategies to address these. An intended outcome of this project is to increase the capability and skill base of the region's workforce.

Background

Context

As the Australian economy continues to shift due to globalisation, changes in technology, environmental challenges and, most recently, COVID-19 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a, 2022b), there are increasing calls to strengthen vocational pathways at the senior secondary school level (Firth, 2020; Joyce, 2019; Shergold et al., 2020). Coupled with that, in Tasmania there is a call to promote inclusive workplaces and increase work opportunities for people with disability (Premier's Disability Advisory Council, 2020). It should be noted that Tasmania has the highest rate of disability in Australia at 26.8% (Premier's Disability Advisory Council, 2020). In addition to this, like many regional areas in Australia, Tasmania is experiencing a shortage of workers in key industries. The region of Hobart and Southeast Tasmania had the biggest jump in job vacancies nationwide at 42.7% in July 2022 compared with July 2021 (Regional Australia Institute, 2022).

Program aims

The aims of this project were twofold. First, it sought to identify barriers and enhancers to both employer and student participation in work-based learning in workplaces in a regional city and has developed strategies to address the barriers. Second, it sought to increase the willingness of employers to engage in work-based learning for school VET students with disability by developing the Guidelines, a practical resource that answers common employer questions and provides easy access to a range of resources to support employers and students. Our overarching research question was: How can employers, industry groups, students, teachers and other influencers of student education and career pathway choice work together to increase opportunities for successful participation of students with disability in the work-based component of school-based VET? To address this, the following sub-questions were asked:

- What factors influence employer decisions to engage in work-based learning for school VET students with disability?
- What are the barriers and supports for employers and school students with disability regarding participation in the work-based learning component of VET courses?
- What is effective practice for students with disability in participation in the work-based learning component of VET in community workplaces in one regional context?
- How can an intervention based on good practice Guidelines for participation of school students with disability, in the work-based learning component of VET in workplaces, support positive outcomes for students with disability, employers and the local community?

Project steps and methods

The University of Tasmania, in partnership with the Launceston Chamber of Commerce (LCC) and the Tasmania Department of Education's Vocational Learning and Career Education (DoE VLCE) unit, sought to work with employers in order to develop the Guidelines for other employers either currently hosting or considering hosting school-based VET students with disability in work-based learning placements. This partnership relied on the LCC's vast network of regional employers and the DoE VLCE's coordinators who work to place students with employers for work-based learning placements. These coordinators act as a bridge between students and potential workplace learning hosts, giving them a unique perspective on what works well and potential barriers to participation.

The LCC and the DoE were each asked to:

- provide a representative for the project working party/reference group
- assist in recruiting employers who could provide input into the development of Guidelines
- assist in identifying employers who may be interested in employing a school-based trainee or apprentice with disability at some time in 2022.

Both the LCC and DoE VLCE unit provided connections and feedback for the project and will assist with dissemination of the Guidelines as well as the more detailed research results.

The LCC is a member of the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, providing a channel for statewide distribution of the Guidelines. It is anticipated the Guidelines will be used by DoE schools in all regions of Tasmania, adapted to local context as necessary. In addition, findings will be placed on the national project website, be presented at national and state academic, business and VET sector conferences and written up in academic publications. It is anticipated that the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET), National Disability Coordination Officers (NDCO) for Northern and Southern Tasmania, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) and LCC communication channels including websites, e-newsletters, webinars and networking events will be utilised to showcase findings.

This strength-based partnership approach, built on existing local activity and priorities of the Tasmanian DoE VLCE unit and the LCC, and was conducted across five phases as described below.

Phase 1: Established working group of representatives from LCC, DoE, employers including social enterprises that employ people with disability, and/or host work placements for students with disability.

Phase 2: Review of international and national academic and grey literature to distil barriers and enhancers of participation of school students with disability in work-based learning. This informed the development of interview questions for DoE staff and employers. This phase drew heavily on an existing review undertaken by the Tasmanian DoE and built on the literature review for the overall project.

Phase 3: Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with nine DoE staff, coordinators, and employers at organisations that support/place school-based VET students with disabilities in the Launceston area. The interviews aimed to ascertain the fit of factors identified in the literature with the local context and identify any other barriers and enhancers to participation of school students with disability in work-based learning. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Inductive content analysis (Flower, Hedley, Spoor, & Dissanayake, 2019; Thomas, 2006) was used to identify broad themes and summary categories. Draft analysis was presented to our working group who helped to identify emergent themes and further categories.

Phase 4: Draft good practice Guidelines for creating disability confident employers and work placement opportunities for students with disability were created based on the analysis conducted in Phase 3.

Phase 5: Validation of the Guidelines with the working group and with employers at organisations that support/place VET students with disabilities, DoE staff and coordinators. A short survey asked these participants to assess the actual or likely usefulness of the Guidelines. A phased project design allowed for feedback, evaluation and validation of the Guidelines produced.

Findings

Based on interviews with employers/workplace hosts and school coordinators, a literature review and input from the working group, Guidelines were developed. These Guidelines were designed for employers/workplace experience hosts of school-based VET students with disability; they were developed to facilitate successful work-based learning experiences for students with disability. For this reason, the Guidelines have been titled: *Messages from employers: Hosting students with disability in your workplace*.

Four main topics were covered in these Guidelines: communication, an open and welcoming workplace culture, understanding the spectrum of disability and your student, and match between workplace and student. The Guidelines contain several quotes from interview participants for each topic area to allow employers to hear from other employers. It should be noted that the topic areas are not mutually exclusive, but rather overlap with each other.

The Guidelines were made into an accessible PDF with graphic design features incorporated. Working group members and a small number of employers provided feedback on the draft, which was modified in response. The modified content is presented in text format below.

Messages from employers: Hosting students with disability in your workplace

Communication is key

Overarching all our Guidelines is the concept of clear and open communication. Workplace hosts are encouraged to communicate with the school, their student and their staff about the work experience placement. They should ask the school whether the student has disclosed any information about disabilities that they can share[1] and ask how they can best support the student. In addition, workplace learning hosts are encouraged to ask their student whether there is anything they would like them to know about them and how they think the host can best support them. Hosts should talk with their staff about supporting the student and their needs. When communication is flowing, it is easier to create a positive experience for all involved. Interview participants suggested the following:

> *[Ask your student] What does your best day look like and what does your worst day look like? What are some things about you that are different or what are some things about you that you'd like us to know?* (Employer)

And

> *We identify strengths and weaknesses and then we teach young people by example and directly how to talk about their needs and triggers and what will happen and then what other people can do to respond in that situation.* (Employer)

And

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[1] Disclosure is the choice of the student, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to which Australia is a signatory.

> *[Ask your student] what's a normal thing that can happen in your daily life and how do we respond around that, I think would be really key. And, I think, what's your worst-case scenario, and what do we do, I think is really helpful too. For instance, when I have a seizure, you don't call an ambulance because … And making sure that that information, if there is anything complex, is easy to find. And easy to note.* (Employer)

And

> *[A student might explain] these are some of the behaviours that I might exhibit that are a bit not what you would expect from a neurotypical person. So, for instance, my voice might get really flat. I might stare off into nothing. I might hunch up and start flinching. When that happens, this is what you should do, or what you can do, and what it means. I'm not mad at you. I just need a minute. And if you've got concerns, this is what you do to go around it. And then, things that you can do that help are X.* (Employer)

While communication is a key factor in ensuring successful work-based learning placements, relationships are also important. This first topic area of communication is linked to the next topic area, which focuses on workplace culture.

Ensure workplace culture is open and welcoming

This topic addresses the need to create an open and welcoming workplace culture. Employers explained that when an environment is created where students and employers feel comfortable and welcome to discuss their needs, it contributes to more successful work placements.

> *It's normal to have a need. It's normal to need an [adjustment] of some description. And it's normal to need help.* (Employer)

They also emphasised that focusing on both the social and physical/built environment aspects of the workplace is important. In terms of the social aspect, employers described the importance of relationship building. For example,

> *And then, we meet with the student and their caseworker prior to them coming here. And we go through all the expectations, so that we're setting the scene before they get here. So that, when they get here, they feel comfortable already.* (Employer)

And

> *If we have [a student] come in, they're really sort of designated to one person, with the support of another person. So, we want to make sure that they're okay when they come in, and we'll generally try and pick our more senior team that can work with that person, or someone that we think will relate quite well to them.* (Employer)

In terms of the physical aspects of the workplace, interview participants explained that familiarising the student with the actual workspace prior to starting can be helpful both to

help the student feel comfortable and relaxed, and to ensure safety. This also helps both the student and the host identify potential accommodation needs. Interview participants explained:

> *Make sure that [students are] introduced to the space prior to starting. You know, one of my big things when I started working here was they got me a walking stick holder for the wall, so that my walking stick has somewhere to live. We didn't really think about it until I came here and the day before I was set up in an office, they were like, I was like, where am I going to put my walking stick? And we were like, oh, okay, let's figure that out then. So, we had that introduction.* (Employer)

And

> *The other real element [is] around safety. You may have someone on the spectrum or someone that has OCD [obsessive compulsive disorder] type tendencies that might like to touch things. We've got a young man that we've had to do a lot of work with around him wanting to touch. He tracks. So, if he's going from one place to another, once he learns one way of doing it, that's the way he goes all the time. And he'll rub his hand along every shelf, every piece of linen, everything from point A to point B. And even if point A to B, the direct route might be five steps, but if he's actually been the other way and it's 50 steps, that's the way he'll go.* (Employer)

In parallel with opening communication channels and building relationships with your student, or even prior to the commencement of work-based learning, if possible, employers should make an effort to understand the student's disability, which is the focus of the third topic area. In addition to facilitating support for the specific student an employer is hosting, as staff begin to understand what comprises the broad spectrum of disability, this will also contribute to a welcoming and open workplace culture for future students.

Understand the broad spectrum of disability and your student

The third topic of focus is the broad spectrum of disability. Understanding this spectrum of disability and the student's related needs will be helpful. Tasmania has the highest rate of disability in Australia at 26.8% (Premier's Disability Advisory Council, 2020). As such, there is a strong likelihood that there is already someone with disability in the workplace and/or workplace staff have some exposure around disability needs through their personal lives. Interview participants agreed that most employers did not fully understand the seven broad categories of disability as outlined by ADCET:

- Chronic medical conditions
- Mental health conditions
- Learning disabilities
- Intellectual disabilities
- Neurological conditions
- Physical disabilities
- Sensory disabilities

Interview participants agreed that workplace hosts should work towards understanding that not all disabilities are visible and that many Tasmanians, in particular, have experience with disability.

> *[In Tasmania] most families have some exposure and really quite profound exposure around disability needs.* (School VET Coordinator)

And

> *There's a difference between an intellectual disability and a physical disability. An opportunity for someone to go shadow a receptionist isn't usually something that someone with a disability is given. They're given more hands on, let's go to the op shop. Let's go wash clothes. Let's go do something physical. Even sweep hair. So, I think that not narrowing the scope on disability opportunities is really key.* (Employer)

And

> *Everybody is different. I have employees with disability that are highly intelligent but have barriers to employment through other areas, especially if you're talking someone that's, say, on the spectrum. We have other students with Downs [syndrome]. We have others that are sitting in the intellectual disability area. Others that are within mental health. So, it really does depend on the person. So, the supports need to be appropriate to the person.* (Employer)

The lack of understanding of the spectrum of disability can be a barrier to employers' willingness to host students with disability. Related to this, and cutting across the previous three topic areas, interview participants also identified workplace and policy barriers. School sector interviewees explained that not all students disclose their disability, and there can be policy barriers to sharing details of disability with a student's workplace host. This made understanding the student's needs difficult. The next topic area, closely linked with the previous three topic areas, addresses the importance of ensuring an appropriate match between the workplace and the student.

Ensure match between workplace and student is appropriate

The final topic addressed by the Guidelines is the match between workplace and student. Workplace hosts and students should co-design the work experience placement together if possible. Hosts found that meeting their students ahead of time, introducing the student to the workplace, and discussing goals and supports leads to successful experiences.

> *When [a] school…has someone suitable for us, it's a meeting with the school first between myself and whoever is essentially their caseworker on what the person needs, who they are, what they're looking for. And what area of the business they're interested in, whether it's the digital space or whether it's the admin space, or customer relations or whatever it might be. And then we see if we can make that work and how that looks. And then, we meet with the student and their caseworker prior to them coming here. And we go through all the expectations, so that we're setting the scene before*

> *they get here. So that, when they get here, they feel comfortable already.*
> (Employer)

It is important to make sure the student understands what the work environment is like and that workplace staff understand how they can support the student to do their best work. To ensure the match is successful, interview participants suggested the following:

The work experience placement should be co-designed by the student and the host.

> *Sitting down together and working out what the plan is for daily tasks and how they learn, how they're going to feel comfortable and then, obviously, those things like what your goals will be while you're here and what your needs are so that we can help meet them. Co-design really means working together. The employer and the student.* (Employer)

And

> *…focus on not so much what they can't do but what they can do. Capability is such a big thing.* (Employer)

The work-based learning host should communicate with the school. This is closely linked to the first topic, communication, described above. The host should work collaboratively with the school contact on the Contract/4-Way Communication Agreement or similar formal document of agreement between the school, student, parent/carer and workplace host that is put in place for each work placement. The host should also ask the school contact for any relevant information about disability disclosed by the student, and reach out for help on how best to support them, but also recognise that not all students have been diagnosed or have disclosed their conditions or all relevant information to the school. The host should ask all students if there is anything they should know about them, regardless of whether or not the student has disclosed a disability.

And in summary, the host should communicate with the student, asking questions such as the following:

- What does your best day look like? What does your worst day look like?
- What are some things about you that you'd like us to know?
- What are your goals while you are here? How can we help you to meet them?

Assessment of project delivery

It should be noted that during this project, students were abruptly and temporarily withdrawn from work placements by the Tasmanian Department of Education. As such, at time of writing, employers have not been able to host students to test the Guidelines, although some employer feedback has been received and incorporated.

Opportunities and implications

One barrier encountered during this case study was a lack of willingness to talk about disability. Finding interview participants proved challenging. Participants interviewed were

open to considering hosting students with disability. However, they speculated that others may not want to host students due to a variety of fears: fears about safety in the workplace for the student and other staff, fears about not knowing what to expect, fears about the amount of time that could be required of staff to supervise students, fears of saying the wrong thing, and fears about not knowing what to do if something goes wrong.

That said, within this barrier lay an opportunity. Interviews opened the door to have conversations and to help employers understand the broad spectrum of disability. In addition, the Guidelines we developed help to address this. However, the diversity of workplaces and diversity of students with disability leads to a multiplicity of possible scenarios, not all of which can be addressed within the scope of this project. This means that employers' experiences are particularly valuable because they are all different. There need to be mechanisms and forums for employers to share their experiences with potential work placement hosts.

Towards this end, influencing organisations including business associations should work to raise awareness that not all disabilities are visible disabilities. Therefore, dissemination of the Guidelines, which are a piece of a larger communication campaign about disability in the workplace and students learning with disability, is important. There is a need to draw on employers who have experience, to share their experiences and knowledge with other employers. This will facilitate deeper conversations about students with disability and the workplace. We believe that the Guidelines are one mechanism to empower employers and start conversations.

Recommendations for practice

The Guidelines contain four overarching recommendations for practice. These were described in detail above and are summarised here:

- **Communication is key.** Communicate with the school, your student and your staff about the work placement.
- **Ensure workplace culture is open and welcoming.** An open and welcoming workplace culture contributes to successful work placements. Focus on both the social and physical/built aspects of your workplace.
- **Understand the spectrum of disability and your student.** Understanding the spectrum of disability and your student's needs helps. Tasmania has the highest rate of disability in Australia at 26.8%. It is very likely that there is already someone with disability on your staff and/or staff have some exposure around disability needs through their personal lives.
- **Make sure there is a good match between student and workplace.** You should talk with your student to design the work placement if possible. Try to meet your student ahead of time, introduce them to your workplace, and discuss goals and supports; this leads to successful experiences.

We recommend that the Guidelines be used by any employer looking to take on school-based VET students with disability early in the process and during the process of hosting.

Resources

The Guidelines from Employers for Employers developed through this pilot project and described in detail above are the main resource resulting from this case study. Looking beyond work placements for school-based students, there are several programs in place via ADCET to support employers who hire people with disability. In addition to information and training modules, the following programs offer financial support as well.

- *Disability Employment Australia*
  http://guide.disabilityemployment.org.au/resources/employer_incentives_and_financial_assistance
- *Australia Department of Social Services*
  https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/09_2014/emloyers_guide_to_employing_someone_with_disability_0.pdf AND
  https://www.jobaccess.gov.au/employers
- *Outlook Australia*
  https://www.outlookaust.org.au/outlook-incentives-and-schemes
- *Department of Employment and Workplace Relations*
  https://www.dese.gov.au/employment/financial-incentives-employers
- *Leap In*!
  https://www.leapin.com.au/resources/inclusive-employment-assistance-support/

Conclusion

This project sought to understand the overarching question of how employers, industry groups, students, teachers and other influencers of student education and career pathway choice can work together to increase opportunities for successful participation of students with disability in the work-based component of school-based VET. First, it is anticipated that the use of the Guidelines by employers and schools will increase willingness of employers to engage in work-based learning for school VET students with disability which, in turn, develops the workforce of the region. Second, we expect that the use of the Guidelines by schools will increase student and parent/carer understanding of what to expect and how to support students with disability to engage in work-based learning in community workplaces. Third, industry groups could use the Guidelines as part of an employer communication strategy to encourage hosting students with disability for work placements and subsequent employment of people with disability. Following on from these three points, we would expect a greater breadth of opportunities for work-based learning in the community for school VET students with disability that will lead to improved employment outcomes for people with disability in the region.

In times of work shortages, it is important not just for students but for employers to be able to access the full range of people who are available for work. School students with disability have a lifetime of potential workforce participation ahead of them, and it is therefore crucial that their first experiences of workplaces are positive and productive.

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