CDL HUB
Career Development Learning Hub

Building the capacity of career and accessibility practitioners to provide tailored career advice to students with disability

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

Project Team:

Dr Kylie Austin
Dr Jodi Lamanna
Nuala O'Donnell
Professor Julia Coyle

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Introduction

This case study explores the existing capabilities and experiences of career and accessibility practitioners in providing effective career development learning (CDL) to students with disability. The study took place during 2022 at a regional university in New South Wales, Australia. In 2019 the university, where this case study was undertaken, had 13.39% of students enrolled with a self-identified disability, compared with the remainder of the higher education sector having 7.67% of the student population with a self-identified disability (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2022).

The project was informed by the following Best Practice Principles, as identified in the broader research project, National Career Development Learning (CDL) Hub for Students with Disability:

- Principle 2: CDL co-designed with people with disability promotes the empowerment and agency of this group.
- Principle 7: Employers, teaching staff and career practitioners who are disability confident, aware of unconscious bias and with positive attitudes towards diversity and inclusion create respectful and equitable educational and employment contexts for students with disability.

The project invited currently enrolled students with disability to join the project team to share their lived experiences with CDL, in terms of what worked and had not previously worked, and then collaborated with these same students to design professional learning modules for career and accessibility practitioners. The project sought to understand how these professional learning modules may have impacted the confidence and capabilities of career and accessibility practitioners to provide effective career advice to students with disability.

Findings from this project identified a gap between formal career practitioner training and information about disability, with very few resources that apply knowledge about disability

in a career context. This was identified to be important knowledge and skills for career practitioners, as students often reported lacking confidence and not feeling valued to be considered for employment. The career and accessibility practitioners who took part in this study identified particular benefits of undertaking professional learning modules to better understand how they can support students with disability to engage in career education services, including increased confidence in acknowledging and disclosing disability, access to resources and changing their language and questioning techniques. While the modules that were developed as part of this study were broad in nature, modules that specifically supported neurodivergent students, as well as modules that addressed cumulative disadvantage, were key recommendations for the project.

Background

Disability is part of society's diversity and contributes to a broader world view. Workplace inclusion of individuals with disability is imperative, as unique skills and diversity enhance and benefit the workplace (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014; Lee et al., 2011). Legislation provides protection to ensure that individuals with disability are supported in the workplace. This includes the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014), which identifies both direct and indirect discrimination and includes legislative protection. This is paired with the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014), which is specific to the workplace and denies discrimination based on factors such as disability, race, age and religion.

Despite the protective legislations, students with disability may experience disadvantage when entering the labour market (Sheppard et al., 2017a). Statistics show that in 2018, only 28% of individuals with disability between the ages of 15 and 64 were employed full-time compared to 54.8% of individuals in the same age range without disability (ABS, 2020). Similarly, underemployment for individuals with disability was at 10%, and only 5% for individuals without disability (ABS, 2022).

Quality tailored CDL that is specific to individuals with disability is one way that such inequities can be addressed. CDL is defined as:

> *learning about the content and process of career development or life/career management. The content of CDL in essence represents learning about self and learning about the world of work.* (McMahon, Patton & Tatham, 2003, p. 6)

Quality CDL benefits young people as it can "impact on a young person's sense of direction and meaning in life" (Broadbent, Cacciattolo & Papadopoulos, 2012, p. 126). Within the school and higher education sector, CDL can help individuals build career confidence and manage transition to employment (Andrews & Hooley, 2017). However, there are multiple barriers for students with disability accessing CDL. Disability itself is not the barrier (Krause,

2018; The Image Project, n.d.-a) but the lack of accommodation when accessing CDL. The barriers for students with disability include:

- how or when to disclose disability, and access appropriate accommodations through disclosure (The Image Project, n.d.-a)
- discrimination from employers (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016; The Image Project, n.d.-a)
- difficulty accessing CDL events, such as career expos, due to physical limitations, or sensory difficulties (The Image Project, n.d.-a)
- low expectations from career advisers or employers (Sheppard, Harrington, & Howard, 2017b)
- low levels of self-understanding (Chen & Chan, 2014; Sheppard, Harrington, & Howard, 2017a)
- lack of appropriate CDL resources (Nicholas, Mitchell, Dudley, Clarke, & Zulla, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the barriers to successful careers for people living with disability as there is evidence that they have been further marginalised in the labour market (Brown, 2020). Brown (2020) advocates for national policy intervention to provide effective, evidence-informed disability employment services to ameliorate the impact of COVID-19 on this vulnerable group. Importantly, we need to work proactively to ensure that individuals reach their career goals, not only because of national economic benefit but also for personal and ethical reasons. Career Development Association Australia, the peak body, believes that quality CDL should be recognised as a basic human right (CDAA, 2012).

The fundamental nature of CDL is reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The 17 goals, adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, are "the world's best plan to build a better world for people and our planet by 2030" (United Nations, 2021). Specifically, the eighth goal (SDG8) aims to "promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" (United Nations, 2021), a goal that can be maximised by responding to SDG4, "inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2021). Quality CDL is a pathway to achieve these two important international goals.

There is limited literature and examples of good practice about how career and accessibility practitioners are provided with adequate training and professional development to design CDL in ways that meet the needs and increase access to CDL for students with disability. Through a systemic review of the literature, three practices that were identified as being effective in providing professional development to career and accessibility practitioners to increase their confidence and capability. These included (1) establishing communities of practice (Eckstein, 2002); (2) guiding practitioners in a strength-based, inclusive partnership model (Eckstein, 2002; The Image Project, n.d.-a); and (3) connecting practitioners with CDL resources and programs that specifically cater for students with disability (Chen & Chan, 2014; Eckstein, 2002).

Project aims

Through this project, we aimed to develop a suite of resources for staff to increase their capacity in providing career advice to students with disability. We also sought to understand how effective these resources were in supporting career conversations or the development of CDL programs for students with disability. To support the overarching aims of the research project, we asked the following research questions:

1. What is the capacity of career practitioners to provide tailored career advice to students with disability?
2. What strategies, activities or resources are the most impactful in increasing the capacity of non-specialist career practitioners in providing tailored conversations?
3. What are the experiences of students with disability in receiving tailored career advice?

Research methods

The study gained full ethical consent from the University of Wollongong's Human Research Ethics Committee (reference number: 2021/432). A multiphase methodology was used throughout the project as described in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of methodology

Phase	Activity	Description
1a	Literature review and desktop audit	Developed the context for the project with a review of key literature and desktop audit of current practice relating to the provision of CDL for students with disability.
1b	Establishment of a reference group	A reference group was established at University of Wollongong (UOW) to guide the project. The group consisted of practitioners (external to UOW and the participant group) and students and staff living with disability. The reference group provided advice and input into the professional development intervention and resources.
2a	Pre-intervention assessment of career and accessibility practitioner's existing capabilities	A survey was used to measure career and accessibility practitioners' existing capacity in the provision of CDL to students with disability. The survey was anonymous and was distributed to accessibility and career practitioners through their managers.

Phase	Activity	Description
2b	Intervention: professional development workshops and access to resource suite	Practitioners were invited to engage in workshops and were provided with access to a suite of online learning modules designed to enhance their practice in the provision of CDL to students with disability. The professional learning modules were led by a project manager and co-designed with students with disability.
2c	Post-intervention assessment of career and accessibility practitioner's capabilities	A follow-up email was sent to the practitioners inviting them to participate in a post-survey. The post-survey tool aimed to understand "what worked" and "what didn't work" in terms of providing professional development and resources to increase capabilities of practitioners in the provision of CDL to students with disability.
3a	Pre-assessment of students' experiences of CDL	Students with disability were invited (through an email sent to the university's disability database) to participate in the research. Students were invited to undertake a pre-survey to gain insights into their previous experiences of CDL and study/employment advice in the higher education context. They were also offered an opportunity to meet with a career practitioner to discuss their career goals.
3b	Student participation in CDL experiences with practitioners	Students with disability at UOW were invited to participate in career consultations and as appropriate, in small-group sessions.
3c	Post-assessment of students' experiences of CDL	Participants were then invited to undertake a post-survey to gain insights into their engagement with the tailored CDL offering.
4	Qualitative interviews and focus groups	Qualitative interviews/focus groups took place with career practitioners to further understand "what worked" and "what didn't work" and to determine how the intervention influenced their practice in the medium term. Students with disability were also invited to participate in a follow-up interview/focus group to best understand how careers advice shaped their behaviours and attitudes, including future decision-making and what actions were taken as a result of engaging in the career development process.
5	Data analysis	Qualitative interviews/focus groups were transcribed. Interviews/focus groups were analysed alongside survey

Phase	Activity	Description
		data using an inductive approach to coding to develop an exploratory framework. The data was then recoded against the exploratory framework.
6	Report and writing	A write-up of the project will be undertaken.

An overview of the participants who engaged in each specific phase of the study is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Participant engagement by phase

Participant	Pre-survey	Post-survey	Interviews/focus groups
Practitioner	17	9	6
Student	22	7	2

Students who participated in the research were between 18 years old and 58 years old. They were studying a wide range of degrees across the sciences, social sciences, business and engineering and ranged from being in their first year to eighth year of study. In addition to their identified disability, 29.41% of students identified as being from a low socioeconomic status (SES) background; 47.05% of students identified being from a regional, rural or remote area; and 23.53% of students were from a non-English speaking background. 40% of students identified as having a medical disability; 24% with a learning disability and 32% were cited as having another disability, including a mental-health difficulty.

Practitioners who participated in the research were employed in accessibility and inclusion roles (33.33%), CDL roles (53.33%) or other administrative roles (13.33%) at a university. The practitioners had been working in their respective vocations for 4 months to 30 years, with various experience and qualifications in career development and education, human resources, education, psychology and social sciences.

Findings

To present our findings, we have organised data relating to students and staff experiences of CDL and have identified the needs of students and staff in designing effective professional development programs for practitioners in supporting effective career conversations for students with disability. To conclude, we share students and staff insights into the benefits of increased professional development for career practitioners. The findings are presented in the following sections:

- CDL experiences and expectations of students with disability
- Practitioner experiences in providing CDL to students with disability
- Designing CDL professional development for practitioners
- Benefits of a professional development program

We indicate in the text if the data originated from survey responses and/or focus groups.

Career development learning experiences and expectations of students with disability

Students reported having limited access and experience with CDL activity. Of the 22 participants engaged in this study, only 11 (50%) of students had access to career support, with 8 students (36.36%) engaging in career support prior to commencing at university. This included high school career advisors and a transition program run by a disability employment agency. Six of the 11 students (54.54%) who had access to career support found this to be useful, specifically identifying skills such as resume development resulting in gaining of internships and employment.

Students identified that being connected with professionally trained career advisors that had knowledge and experience in working with people with disability would be beneficial, in the hope that CDL activity could focus on:

- guidance on how to disclose their disability to a potential employer
- navigating the workforce and work expectations as a person with disability
- understanding their rights in a workplace context
- exploring future career and study paths.

Practitioner experiences in providing career development learning to students with disability

Practitioners had varying levels of understanding about disability and CDL. 60% of the practitioners engaged in this research identified that they had a deep understanding of disability and how this shaped students' higher education and employment experiences, with 86.67% of practitioners advising that they had a deep understanding of CDL.

However, only 33.33% of practitioners felt somewhat confident in providing tailored career advice to students with disability. Practitioners were asked about how they currently provide advice.

Nina spends:

> *… time considering the specific disability so that I can clearly define potential obstacles as well as existing strengths that can be utilised in a study/work context.* (Nina, career practitioner)

Similarly, Emily advised:

> *I spend the time to build a rapport with the student. Connection over content is important. Active listening is also critical to ensure I can take the time to more deeply understand the needs and wants of the individual student. I am also conscious of the space we meet [in]. Is it accessible for the student? If not, can I change something to make it more comfortable?* (Emily, career practitioner)

Michelle uses a:

> *… person-centered approach, asking what their specific needs are and the support they feel they need, catering to these needs if it is within my professional realm, providing resources that are specific to their needs, referring as needed.* (Michelle, career practitioner)

However, many practitioners identified that they did not adjust their approaches; they managed their engagement with students with disability similarly to how they would engage with the broader student population. Others have never previously identified that they have provided career advice to a student with disability or have simply referred the student to a service that can provide the student with academic and wellbeing supports.

Equally, these same practitioners, who felt somewhat confident in providing tailored CDL to students with disability, acknowledged that they had access to networks and knew how to access support and resources to assist these conversations. While many practitioners identified generalist career professional development resources and networks, the Australian Network on Disability, University Specialist Employment Partnership and Disability Employment Services were routinely mentioned as key organisations that they reach out to for support and information to inform their CDL activities. Practitioners noted the importance of having:

> *… an understanding about what's available to students outside of [the university] … there's lots of other stuff that's out there but I just don't know … so I think a database of different kinds of providers … could be helpful as well.* (Emily, career practitioner)

Designing professional development programs

Increasing practitioners understanding of student disclosure was a key theme that arose in this research project. Practitioners in this study often spoke of undertaking a career consultation and not knowing whether or not someone had a disability or how they could support that student to confidently disclose their disability to a prospective employer. This was illustrated by Zara (career practitioner) who identified that "… many of them don't disclose or it just doesn't come up in the conversation, potentially". Similarly, Fiona echoed that:

> *… often disclosure isn't there for every single student that you see; sometimes you can have an inkling that they might be a students with a disability but it might not be discussed or brought up by that student, so you're not 100 per cent sure.* (Fiona, career practitioner)

After completing the professional development module on disclosure, career practitioners identified ways in which they could embed particular strategies into their career consultations. Abby said that, for her:

> *… there had been consultations where I had done activities with students around considering the pros and cons of disclosure, just to understand from their perspective their hesitations, and also what they see might be some successful adjustments for them to succeed in that workplace. So, even just that list of pros and cons – there was quite a few that I hadn't thought about before that we were like "Oh, I'll add that to my little tool belt so when I'm working with these students through activities …" – not that I'll say, "Well here's pro for you", but rather, "How do you see this? Do you see this as a pro?" You can start to understand whether they go, "Oh yeah, that's a really great idea" or "Oh, kind of".* (Abby, career practitioner)

Students discussed the role of the career advisor in disclosing disability and position their role in terms of guidance. Ashley surmises:

> *Well, I don't think it's the career adviser's placer to assert that they should disclose. All you can really do is guide, right? All you can really do is suggest. At the end of the day, if a person isn't ready to acknowledge that they're disabled, they're not ready. But all you can do is say, "Look, here's what I know, and from what you've expressed to me, from the little that you have given me, I've noticed this, this, and this, and here's what's available to help you". You can take it if you like. If you don't feel as if you're disabled enough to take it, that's up to you, but here's this option for you if you like". It's not saying, "You have to take this because you are disabled, did you know?" You know, the career adviser isn't there to mandate how disabled the person is or isn't – that's up to the individual.* (Ashley, third-year biomedical science student)

Benefits of professional development

After completing the professional development program, 100% of practitioners identified that they felt somewhat confident in providing CDL opportunities for students with disability.

When asked which aspects of the professional development program they found most beneficial, career practitioners cited the use of language and ways of framing their conversations with students with disability. Sam advised that she valued "… insights into how clients prefer to be addressed and into how best to make the environment both physically and emotionally safe". Equally, Trish found the professional development around person-centred language to be "… powerful, [and acknowledged] that individual experiences may differ". Vicky reflected that it resulted in her "… thinking about the language I use and approaching discussions from a strengths-based perspective".

Practitioners acknowledged that the professional development modules and access to supports increased their confidence and influenced their practice in engaging in career conversations with students with disability. Sam said that she "… already had two appointments with students with a disability and felt much more confident", and Michelle felt as though it "… definitely has influenced my thinking and approach and made me a bit more confident".

This was supported by student feedback, with 80% of students feeling that their career consultation (with a career practitioner, post professional development program), was a positive experience and was tailored to the strengths and attributes that they bring to education and future employment opportunities. Students such as Joel (fourth-year engineering student) specifically benefited from "… the way the career practitioner carefully listened to my experiences, providing some relevant suggestions based on my input". Carley (second-year social sciences student) valued the partnership approach taken by career practitioners, specifically stating that the career practitioner "worked with me to unpack some of qualities and beliefs and strengths".

However, practitioners identified ways in which the professional learning could be enhanced further in order to meet their needs. They specifically identified that the inclusion of case studies from employers would be beneficial in covering best practice on how students with disability can successfully navigate the workplace. Practitioners also commented on the format and content of modules, recognising the value of 'bite sized' learning opportunities and professional learning that included information on working with neurodivergent students.

The project manager who led a team of students with disability to design the professional development modules reviewed the outcomes of the research project and implemented a considerable amount of the feedback.

Recommendations for practice

This study recognises the need for career practitioners to have specific professional development to enhance access to and effectiveness of CDL for students with disability. The findings from this study, based on student and staff perspectives, highlight the potential benefits that a more systemic approach to tailoring CDL for students with disability could achieve. The recommendations of this study are to:

1. Embed specific knowledge and training for career practitioners within formal qualifications to support students with disability

The literature review and desktop audit identified the absence of formal training and professional development programs for practitioners to upskill them in providing tailored CDL to students with disability. The findings from this research identified the importance of providing practitioners with knowledge and skills to support students in disclosing their disability to prospective employers, as well as navigating and advocating within the workplace. However, the importance of such professional learning being designed in partnership with individuals living with disability is of critical importance.

2. Create communities of practice to help career practitioners access resources and networks that can support CDL with students with disability

Communities of practice were prevalent when investigating the types of supports that were available for career and accessibility practitioners to access knowledge about how to support students with disability. One such community of practice was discussed in Eckstein's (2022) Australian report on meaningful jobs for students with disability, where a disability CDL community of practice was founded. This community of practice provided a dedicated space for practitioners to learn from each other about disability, CDL and related matters.

As identified in this research project, the needs of students with disability are diverse, and while professional development modules can provide a base layer of knowledge, each student will have a unique set of needs to be supported within a career development context. Therefore, creating communities of practice whereby career and accessibility practitioners can connect to navigate these complexities together would greatly benefit both the practitioners and the students.

3. Complement practitioner-focused resources with student-facing resources

Practitioners engaged in this study highlighted the need to have a suite of resources that they could provide to students to support their career conversations. The desktop audit conducted as part of this study identified a number of student-facing resources available to students. However, the majority of these had been developed in the European context. A number of resources exist in the Australian context, such as GradWISE, Disability Awareness

and [Steps NDCO](#). Housing these resources within a hub or centralised resource would greatly benefit practitioners who could refer students for greater support.

In our analysis of the findings, we found that many of the students' and practitioners' suggestions and ideas aligned with Principles 2 and 7 of the Best Practice Principles for CDL for students with disability:

- Principle 2: CDL co-designed with people with disability promotes the empowerment and agency of this group.
- Principle 7: Employers, teaching staff and career practitioners who are disability confident, aware of unconscious bias and with positive attitudes towards diversity and inclusion, create respectful and equitable educational and employment contexts for students with disability.

Conclusion

After conducting the literature review and desktop audit, it became evident that there was a gap regarding professional development available to career practitioners providing CDL guidance to students with disability. Although this can be perceived as a deficit due to a lack of available professional development resources, it can also be viewed as an opportunity to fill this space.

It is important to base all resources and training on the Best Practice Principles developed as part of the wider research project (O'Shea et al., [2022](#)). The Principles focus on having CDL presented by professional career practitioners, and for resources to be part of a lifecycle approach to CDL. Other Principles include having CDL co-designed by people with disability, embedding Universal Design for Learning within the CDL, and focusing on individual strengths and capabilities. Lastly, the Principles reflect the need for CDL to be presented in inclusive partnerships by disability confident practitioners and to adhere to anti-discrimination laws and practices.

The initial University of Wollongong CDL resources include four modules that have been developed in collaboration with students with disability, an expert working party, and research and career staff:

- Communication
- Working rights of people with disability
- Disclosure
- Employability programs and funding

These modules are now [available online](#) for career and accessibility practitioners from across the sector to engage with.

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