Transition to Work for Disabled Students: Careers Support in Higher Education

Report 2008
Equality Challenge Unit

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Executive summary

This is a report of an Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) investigation into the support available to disabled students who are making the transition to work via careers services in higher education institutions (HEIs). The equality issues raised and the practical advice offered are intended for careers advisers and other student service providers supporting disabled students and recent graduates making the transition to work. The following points summarise the main conclusions that emerged from this research.

= Continuing professional development programmes relating to disability awareness and resources for disabled students can help to counter any lack of confidence and expertise in supporting disabled students, and need to be made available to careers professionals.

= Staff development programmes could include the training events already provided by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) Disability Task Group, and could usefully draw in sector organisations such as Scope, Employment Opportunities, and local and national disability organisations.

= Greater integration of careers services into the wider support for disabled students could be provided in HEIs.

= Links between careers services, disability services and academic departments could be strengthened to create a more seamless pathway for disabled students through higher education and into employment.

= Development of existing links with local employers, and with the providers of Access to Work, will raise awareness of reasonable adjustments in the workplace and promote the availability of reasonable adjustments to students and graduates.

= Continued use of skills activities, and the promotion of work experience to disabled students, could help ensure that this group has parity of opportunity for self-development with non-disabled peers during higher education.

= As public sector employers, HEIs may want to consider providing work experience opportunities within their own organisations for disabled students to showcase the support available.

= The development of national resources for careers advisers and students,
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highlighting resources available and sharing case studies and personal experiences of disabled people at different stages of their careers, could be beneficial. This national resource would complement the programmes of information-sharing already in place for the alumni of many HEIs.

Continued work of AGCAS and other sector organisations with employers’ forums and federations of all sizes could help promote the inclusion of disabled people in employment in all sectors.
1. Introduction

This report has been produced to disseminate the findings of research investigating the support available through careers services in higher education institutions (HEIs) to disabled students making the transition to work. The equality issues raised and the practical advice offered are intended for careers advisers and other student service providers supporting disabled students and recent graduates in the transition from higher education into work.

As part of this research, discussions were held with a small number of professional careers advisory staff, who work with students, in order to learn from their experiences and identify effective practices. Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) worked closely with the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and other professional groups to produce this report. Data were collected during August and September 2007 by telephone interviews with a self-selected group of six AGCAS members. Interviews were also conducted with Scope, Skill and Employment Opportunities, and with representatives of the AGCAS Disability Task Group. Email data were collected from AGCAS members about the support provided to disabled students at their institutions, and further views were obtained at the AGCAS Biennial Conference in September 2007. Other background information relevant to the project was collected through desktop research.

Although the information gathered is limited by the small scale of the investigation and is heavily reliant on qualitative information derived from a few individuals’ experiences, this research identifies some key issues and practical solutions that might usefully form the basis for further exploration of this subject. From the information collected for this project, it appears that the majority of HEIs rely on their professional careers advisory staff to provide targeted support for disabled students and graduates. The perceptions of these professional staff, and their experience of supporting disabled students through the transition to work, are therefore important in understanding the issues faced and the services available.

In order to gain an insight into students’ perspectives on some of the issues raised in this report, ECU is intending to hold discussions with disabled students (postgraduate students and recent graduates) about their experiences of university careers services. This information will be disseminated to careers advisers to
provide them with additional information about students’ experiences of careers services, and of any changes or improvements that they would like to see.

As an outcome of this research, ECU also intends to investigate further, with both students and careers advisers, equality issues that can arise in connection with work placements. Work placements have been identified as an important supportive mechanism in the transition to work that can cause barriers for some students. ECU will also disseminate the findings from this research to assist career advisers in providing a service that promotes inclusive opportunities to all students in finding employment.
2. Background

Figures from AGCAS (2007) indicate that 188,775 first-degree graduates left UK HEIs in 2005 (the latest figures available). Of these students, 13,960 (7%) identified themselves as disabled.

The AGCAS (2007) report on the first destinations of 2005 first-degree graduates indicates only a slight disparity between disabled and non-disabled graduates, with 49.6% of disabled graduates reported to be in full-time work, compared with 54.6% of their non-disabled peers. This figure indicates an improvement on the rate of full-time employment of disabled graduates from both 2003 (48.4%) and 2004 (48.9%). The data show a slightly lower proportion of employed disabled graduates and non-disabled graduates entering some professional occupations, such as science, information and communication technologies, teaching, law, business and statistics, but overall 22.7% of disabled graduates compared with 25.7% of non-disabled graduates were reported as working in professional occupational areas.

The AGCAS report also found that graduates with different impairments had differential success in entering full-time employment compared with the 54.6% rate achieved by non-disabled graduates. Students with visual impairments and those with mental health difficulties showed the greatest differences, at 39.2 and 36.7%, respectively (AGCAS, 2007, pp. 20, 23). A longitudinal study of 130,000 entrants to higher education in 2006, Futuretrack, commissioned by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit, may indicate other differentials between disabled and non-disabled students as they progress through higher education and into employment. The Stage 2 Futuretrack report, which will include data about disabled students, is expected in early summer 2008.

Looking at the broader context of the employment of disabled people in the UK, the final report of the Equalities Review, commissioned by the Government, set out to provide an understanding of the long-term and underlying causes of disadvantage that need to be addressed by public policy (Cabinet Office, 2007, p. 64). This review indicates that ‘disabled people as a group have suffered from persistent employment disadvantage’, and cites the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report The Education and Employment of Disabled Young People (Burchardt, 2005), which revealed a greater disparity between the aspirations and occupational attainments of disabled people between the ages of 16 and 26
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than their non-disabled peers, regardless of their qualifications (Cabinet Office, 2007, p. 65). Overall, the review found that disabled people were more likely to be unemployed, to move out of full-time into part-time work, and to be paid less than their non-disabled peers (Cabinet Office, 2007, pp. 65–66).

A Department for Work and Pensions survey of over 4500 employers, undertaken in 2006/07, revealed some telling indications of knowledge and attitudes relating to the employment of disabled people. Only 37% of employers recognised Access to Work, as a service offered by JobCentre Plus, although larger employers (64%) were aware of this service. Size of employer therefore appeared to be a major influence on awareness of available government support. Also, while 79% of employers questioned stated that they ‘would consider in principle’ employing an individual with a disability or health condition, only 22% reported having actually recruited from this group within the preceding 12 months (Bunt et al., 2007). The number of applications received from disabled graduates by these employers is unknown.

In response to some of the issues raised above, and in recognition of the particular challenges experienced by disabled people and other equality groups entering the workplace, some HEIs operate specific careers projects that aim to provide additional support. A number of these projects are listed below.

≡ **FuSION: Equality and Diversity** at the University of Westminster. This website has been designed to provide confidence-building, self-marketing and job-seeking strategies, as well as information on other sources of support, to help develop careers more effectively. This site accompanies the University’s Careers and Student Employment (CaSE) website for general information on job-seeking, effective applications, vacancy sources, postgraduate study and other areas.

≡ **Impact**, operated collaboratively by the universities in Yorkshire. This is an enhanced programme designed to boost employment skills and increase employment opportunities. Participants can choose from, or are guided towards, the following activities, many of which are employer-led:

- specialist advice and confidential one-to-one support on job-searching strategies
- workshops on job-hunting issues, such as CV/letter-writing, competency-based applications, interview techniques, aptitude test practice, and preparation and assessment centres
- a mentoring scheme whereby students are matched to an appropriate employer
- access to, and assistance with, obtaining work experience, work shadowing and industrial/summer work placements
- competency-based workshops on skills such as team-building, networking, presentations and negotiating
- student support groups and personal development activities.

Equinex, offered by the University of Newport. This project has been developed to address innovatively some of the inequalities faced by disadvantaged people when they are trying to access employment, training and educational opportunities. It attempts to address difficulties in sustaining educational opportunities. It focuses particularly on people who have been unemployed for a considerable time and people with disabilities, including those with autistic spectrum disorders, sensory disabilities and learning disabilities. The project aims to address those difficulties by developing and piloting new initiatives. The outcomes are intended to be evaluated and used to influence policy and to be mainstreamed by service providers at local, national and European levels.

**Definitions**

This report uses the definition of disability provided within the Disability Discrimination Act:

*A disabled person is someone who has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.*

For the purposes of this report, the term ‘disabled students’ refers to individuals who meet the above definition of disability, and who may be students or graduates of any UK HEI.

One-to-one work with students and graduates carried out by careers advisory staff in HEIs is commonly described by careers professionals as an ‘intervention’. Here this term is used synonymously with the more widely recognised term ‘interview’ to describe this face-to-face work with students or graduates in a careers advisory setting.
3. Equality issues for disabled students

The professional careers advisers and other sector representatives interviewed identified a number of issues that they felt presented disabled students with particular opportunities and challenges. These may be similar in many respects to those experienced by all students and graduates, but were felt by contributors to this project to have a greater impact on the job-seeking of disabled individuals.

Confidence
Advisers noted that many students may have difficulties in maintaining confidence in their own abilities when making the transition into work. They identified a couple of factors that suggested that disabled students in particular may be more challenged by this transition.

Several advisers mentioned that some disabled students had reported anxiety about disclosing their disability to potential employers. Concern about the potentially negative impact of disclosing a disability to an employer can affect disabled people at varying career stages, but disclosure may be more difficult in a first employment position, before general confidence in being able to do a job is built up. This said, there are also many confident disabled people, at all stages in their careers, who choose not to disclose their disability status. It needs to be recognised that a disabled person’s confidence in their own abilities and their willingness to disclose an impairment/condition to an employer are separate issues, which should not be confused.

Advisers also felt that a lack of awareness on the part of students about the realities of the workplace might increase the level of anxiety experienced. For example, they felt that a student’s own negative experiences of employment, or the negative experiences or views of their friends and family, could contribute to a pessimistic impression of work that could magnify their concerns about disclosing. This reflects similar findings from a study reported by Blind in Business (2007) and other advisers’ views that disabled students may be exposed to extreme over-caution from people around them.

A reduction in confidence was also felt by advisers to be caused by unsuccessful job applications, alongside the perception by some students that their impairment had been a deciding factor in not being made a job offer. It was claimed that this
view was held despite the fact that the Disability Discrimination Act provides a legal requirement on employers not to discriminate. Lack of confidence and increased frustration were considered to be exacerbated if the disabled graduate’s peers had been successful in obtaining high-status jobs.

It was proposed that helping disabled students to manage positive and negative expectations of employment, and supporting them emotionally through this difficult transition, might help them to recognise the resources and support available to them in the workplace, and that disclosure can be a positive experience. A positive note was sounded by one adviser, who felt that the Disability Discrimination Act provided a welcome reassurance to students that their needs would be met in the workplace, helping to bolster confidence. This would be substantiated only if the institution was thorough in implementing the Disability Discrimination Act.

Maintaining motivation and optimism in making the transition to work was also felt by advisers to be vital. This was regarded as particularly relevant to students whose impairment may necessitate a more gradual transition to work, for example graduates who need to work part-time, or to take breaks between higher education and employment.

**Skills and self-marketing**

Several advisers noted that it was crucial for disabled students to be able to reflect positively about their own experiences, and to use these experiences and achievements to demonstrate to potential employers qualities that would be regarded as desirable and distinctive.

If time spent away from studies for disability-related reasons needed to be explained, and/or reasonable adjustments in the workplace were required, then advisers recommended that this was anticipated by the student, thought through carefully, and articulated clearly to the employer in positive terms at interview or at the start of their employment. It was recognised by advisers that this process may require a high level of maturity and self-confidence on the part of the student to execute successfully.

This belief among advisers that disabled students, in particular, could benefit from an accurate and confident assessment of their own skills and attributes
Equality issues for disabled students

is supported by the findings of research undertaken by Tania Burchardt for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Burchardt found that ‘having a stronger belief in your ability to determine your own fate ... is even more important for disabled young people than it is for non-disabled youngsters in forming high occupational aspirations’ (Burchardt, 2005, p. 27). Recognition of the importance of self-awareness and skills is also seen in the operation of programmes such as the graduate Leadership Recruitment scheme operated by Scope. Advisers reported a variety of ways in which careers services could work to develop the self-awareness and self-presentation of disabled and other students and graduates.

The Careers Service at the University of Portsmouth uses the decision learning, opportunity awareness, transition learning and self-awareness (DOTS) model (Law and Watts, 1977) with all students to boost skills of self-awareness. This model, and more recently the new DOTS model (Law, 2001), is supported in the curriculum by modules on self-awareness. The Careers Service also makes use of established tools such as Myers Briggs personality types theory to help students develop their self-knowledge.

The University College for the Creative Arts at Canterbury, Epsom, Farnham, Maidstone and Rochester, five colleges based in Kent and Surrey, offers a Careers Coaching approach for disabled students. Instead of the limited number of careers guidance interventions offered to many undergraduates, Careers Coaching offers bite-sized guidance over an extended period, with disabled students attending the service perhaps once a week to focus on set tasks that contribute to their overall self-development.

Type of employment
The AGCAS First Destinations data relating to the level of employment taken by disabled and non-disabled graduates indicates near parity in the take-up of both full- and part-time graduate-level employment, with figures of 62.2% of disabled graduates compared with 62.9% of non-disabled graduates (AGCAS, 2007, p. 10). Despite these figures, advisers who spoke to ECU for this project indicated some concern about the level, location and type of employment available to disabled graduates.

Information from Scope and Employment Opportunities describes their work on matching disabled graduates with positions in high-profile companies, many of whom are actively recruiting disabled people as part of a drive to improve the
diversity of their workforce. However welcome such opportunities may be, it was also reported by advisers that there may be a geographical bias to this type of opportunity. Disabled students and graduates who are reluctant to relocate to London or the south-east of England may find it more difficult to find a position at the same level as those offered through these schemes.

One adviser spoke of the difficulties experienced by disabled graduates who did not achieve a high academic profile. For these students, it is suggested, a locally based, non-graduate-level job may be the first employment obtained, and competition for such jobs can be high. Other advisers agreed that disabled students may be taking jobs that are not at graduate level. It was also recognised that a graduate’s first job may be the most significant hurdle for that individual.

Advisers suggested that some academic disciplines, such as the arts, may have a greater proportion of graduates entering small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It was considered that these smaller organisations might present different challenges from those affecting graduates entering well resourced, larger or higher-profile organisations that may have greater knowledge about equality and diversity. One adviser thought that SMEs lacked experience in employing disabled people, and could be anxious about the application of the Disability Discrimination Act. In these circumstances, the SME may try to manage its anxiety by simply not employing a disabled graduate. This view may be substantiated by the finding that although there was no difference between SMEs and larger employers in their stated willingness to employ hard-to-place groups, there was a difference in whether or not they had done this (Bunt et al., 2007, pp. 76–79). It is also supported by other views expressed to ECU during this project, which suggested that some employers may be actively seeking ways to not employ a disabled graduate, no matter how qualified. While it is impossible to examine these claims objectively, their reporting indicates that there is an anxiety on the part of professionals and students about the opportunities and level of challenges facing this group of graduates.

**Impairment-related issues**

All advisers contacted for this project felt that students needed to begin to prepare for the transition to work as early as they feel ready to do so. For disabled students, the importance of maximising skills and experience also suggests that an early start would be valuable. However, advisers noted that some disabled students tended
to approach the careers service late in their studies, or even once their course had been completed. One adviser was concerned that this might indicate that disabled students may have less time than their non-disabled peers to consider their career, because of additional time needed to keep up with their course commitments due to their impairment, but this view was unsubstantiated.

Advisers reflected on difficulties that students with certain impairments may experience with different aspects of the job-seeking process. For example, one adviser suggested that some students with dyslexia/semantic pragmatic language disorder might have greater difficulties in communication, writing CVs and covering letters. But these views are not substantiated by the AGCAS research, which found that 52.1% of graduates with dyslexia entered full-time paid work, compared with the overall figure of 49.6% of disabled graduates (AGCAS, 2007, p. 18).

Organisers of the Scope graduate Leadership Recruitment scheme suggested that graduates with non-visible impairments or health conditions may be harder to place due to negative associations – for example, those with mental health issues, HIV status or epilepsy. One adviser was concerned that some students with impairments that may be adversely affected by stress (such as Crohn’s disease or myalgic encephalopathy/chronic fatigue syndrome) could experience greater difficulties in entering some highly stressful occupations – and, by extension, in managing the transition to employment. But again these views are unsubstantiated by the AGCAS report, which found that 50.8% of graduates with an unseen impairment were in full-time paid work, compared with 49.6% of disabled graduates overall (AGCAS, 2007, p. 19).
4. Issues for careers advisers

The information received described a number of issues that appeared to be relevant to careers professionals working with disabled students and graduates.

Targeted or mainstream support

The advisers contacted for this project reported that their careers service routinely provides additional or enhanced support for disabled students. Extended or additional interviews and one-to-one training were given as examples of services provided in recognition of the additional needs of some disabled students and graduates.

However, advisers were uncertain about the appropriateness of either targeting or mainstreaming support for disabled students. On the one hand, it was recognised that certain groups of students might benefit from tailored activities – for example, workshops on job-hunting for visually impaired students, who may share experiences of particular difficulties. On the other hand, a reluctance to pigeonhole students by impairment group was also reported, and this may discourage advisers from targeting activities.

Advisers reported a great deal of proactive work designed to bring the necessity of considering long-term career plans to the attention of all students. These activities included careers advisory staff, and the subject of careers planning itself, being incorporated into the teaching and curriculum of the HEI. This varied both within institutions, and from one institution to another.

At the University of East Anglia, input to the curriculum is at the behest of the academic department, but ranges from a quick ‘pop-up’ at the start of a lecture to a new project designed to mainstream careers planning into teaching programmes. Online training modules and support for academic staff delivering careers training were also noted by advisers as part of the range of activities undertaken. Interestingly, some of these mainstream activities do not mention any additional needs or additional support for disabled students, as it is assumed that this would be provided via separate one-to-one interventions.

Efforts were also under way in some institutions to mainstream the provision of information for disabled students, for example the University of Oxford duplicates
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Information on different areas of its website to maximise its availability to disabled students. Careers fairs have also been targeted at disabled students in some institutions, with participating employers prompted to provide information in advance about how disabled staff are supported in their organisations.

Some advisers suggested that the under-disclosure of disability among students reduced the argument for mainstreaming additional facilities available to disabled students. For example, it was found that some universities offer interviews of double the standard length for students with some impairments, but these have to be booked in advance and a disclosure of disability made. A more inclusive approach would be to offer double-length interviews to anyone who thought they might require this.

Other targeted activities reported by advisers included:

- Presentations from organisations such as Blind in Business or Employment Opportunities
- CV workshops
- Workshops on confidence
- Group workshops for students with, for example, dyslexia or visual impairments.

However, in many cases advisers reported that the take-up of targeted activities was low, suggesting that students dislike being grouped by impairment type. Advisers also noted that difficulties in sharing information within an HEI about disabled students could reduce the effectiveness of targeting activities. For example, a dearth of mechanisms to contact disabled students will make it harder to advertise services to these students.

Not knowing about a student's impairment at the time of an intervention can also reduce the effectiveness of the meeting, as advisers may not realise that targeted information about disability is useful. However, it was recognised by advisers that disclosure of disability could come after a series of interventions with a student once a bond of trust had been established.

Some mainstream activities of the careers services described to ECU were noted as being potentially advantageous to disabled students, and efforts were being made to advertise these activities to this group in particular. For example,
mentoring schemes or networks of alumni in place for all students, or for students from specific groups, were now being extended to provide additional support for disabled students.

Work placements were another method of support: it was felt that experience of work can provide important skills for all students, and that this might be particularly beneficial for disabled students. Skill suggests that it may be harder for disabled students to find work experience than for their non-disabled peers, with the voluntary and charities sectors particularly difficult to access due to funding constraints.

Advisers noted that work experience also assisted students to make an informed choice about their career. Not all careers services described to ECU appeared to be involved in the arrangement of work experience; in some HEIs these opportunities were arranged predominantly by students themselves, or by a student’s academic department, school or faculty.

By contrast, some careers services do provide support for students seeking work experience.

- The University of Portsmouth Careers Service runs an in-house recruitment agency called Purple Door, which is available for all students, both disabled and non-disabled.
- The University of Oxford works with Employment Opportunities, EmployAbility, Prospects recruitment service for graduates with Asperger’s syndrome, and Scope to provide work-experience placements and shadowing opportunities specifically for disabled students. Some of these disability-related organisations run sessions at the careers service for students and take part in CV drop-in sessions at events, such as the Summer Recruitment Fair.

**Concern over supporting disabled students**

A number of advisers reported general concerns about supporting disabled students. In some cases this appeared to reflect advisers’ lack of confidence in their own expertise and knowledge. Advisers repeatedly stated that the numbers of disabled students in their institutions were small, and that consequently the contact they had with disabled students was infrequent. They believed that this low level of contact resulted in a loss of knowledge and expertise over time, reducing the effectiveness of their work.
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However, some advisers reported a variety of ways in which they strove to maintain resources and links that could support them in their work with disabled students. All the advisers interviewed confirmed that their careers service maintained close links with their HEI’s disability service. Referrals between the two services were common, with the careers advisers asking advice from the disability service as appropriate, for example about reasonable adjustments. Where the careers service had a dedicated adviser for disabled students (although this person may not be the only adviser seen by disabled students), advisers noted that they were also likely to be the liaison person for the disability service. Other links reported between the two services included the invitation of a student support person to the interview with the student, where that was likely to boost the student’s confidence.

Advisers reported the establishment of a range of links with external organisations and services. These included national organisations that work with disabled people, such as Skill, Employment Opportunities, Shaw Trust and Blind in Business. Blind in Business and Employment Opportunities were mentioned as having been invited to speak to disabled students at HEIs. Scope’s graduate Leadership Recruitment scheme was also mentioned as a source of support that could be recommended to students, although it was recognised that this might be less appropriate to students hoping to join the creative industries or to remain in the regions.

Advisers were also aware of publicly funded support services for disabled people, including the support for Access to Work provided by JobCentre Plus. Where these and other services were used to support disabled students into work after graduation, it was reported that difficulties could be experienced where provision was patchy or restricted to certain geographical or local authority areas. More significantly, an adviser noted that some of the disability-specific organisations in their locality did not have a sufficient knowledge of employment to be of assistance to graduates. Knowledge of local groups was a point on which several interviewees lacked confidence; they would have welcomed further, centralised information to which they could refer.

Some advisers were concerned about the process of supporting students with certain impairments. Mental health issues and Asperger’s syndrome were particularly associated with potentially challenging behaviour. By contrast, other advisers spoke with commitment of the work they and colleagues were doing to increase disability awareness in their HEI, and mentioned key activities (such
as targeted workshops) that were directed at students who could benefit from tailored support.

**Limits of support**
In discussing their lack of confidence in supporting disabled students, and their keenness to forge links with external agencies, advisers were concerned that the support for disabled students and graduates currently provided by their careers services was too limited.

All the careers services described made themselves available to students after graduation. This was sometimes a free service, or one that attracted a small fee, or was limited to a certain number of years after the student had left the HEI. One interviewee felt that disabled students were more likely to remain in touch with the careers service for a longer period after graduating, in some cases up to five years. This was thought to be a reflection of continuing difficulties experienced by this group of graduates in their early careers, or a recognition of closer links with careers advisers after work to develop the graduate’s skills and self-awareness. A risk of greater dependency on the careers service, especially when a career was not going well, was noted by some advisers as being more likely from a disabled student, although this was not a universal perspective among the advisers contacted.

Where students thought they had not been given jobs for which they were otherwise well qualified, they sometimes suspected that their disability status had played a part in the decision made. However, advisers stated that it was part of their professional role to remain positive about the continued chances of the graduate finding appropriate work, while at the same time allowing students to develop their own strategies for managing their hopes and disappointments.

The transition to work can provoke anxiety for all students, and a lack of national and targeted information for disabled graduates was reported by advisers. It was suggested that a more centralised source of information, such as that provided through the Prospects service, or by magazines such as *Arberry Profile*, could improve confidence and support independent job-seeking among graduates.

**Work with employers**
Many advisers reported that they did a great deal of work with local and national employers, both in building links for all students and in encouraging specific
Issues for careers advisers

opportunities for disabled students and graduates. Although some psychometric testing and recruitment activities for high-profile organisations (the ‘milkround’) were still taking place at careers services around the country, advisers reported a range of more individualised activities that aim to maximise the benefits of links with employers for their students and graduates.

- The University of Warwick is part of a West Midlands consortium, Graduate Advantage, which links graduates from that region’s HEIs with local SMEs. The University also has a forum for local employers.
- In recognition of the high numbers of its graduates who start up their own business, The University College for the Creative Arts runs workshops on issues to consider when becoming self-employed.
- The University of East Anglia is trying to engage with SMEs and change their perceptions of employing disabled people.

Advisers reported that they thought employers needed guidance about employing disabled people, and stated that they routinely advised employers in a general way about disability legislation, reasonable adjustments, disclosure and its impact, and the Positive About Disabled People (‘Two Ticks’) scheme. Where more specialist advice was needed, the universities’ disability advisers might be asked to speak to employers. The Employers’ Forum on Disability provides a range of resources, including publications, events and information about the Disability Discrimination Act that could be useful for employers seeking to recruit and retain disabled employees and serve disabled customers.

One adviser expressed scepticism about disability-related initiatives undertaken by employers (such as the drive to recruit disabled staff), and wondered how embedded disability equality was in those organisations. This adviser thought this was a particularly limiting factor in the legal profession, where there appeared to be concern about how clients might view disabled professionals. A lack of knowledge about disability on the part of employers was also reported – for example about how the impact of dyslexia can vary between individuals. Another careers professional speculated about ‘triggers’ for acceptance or rejection of a disabled applicant, suggesting that this might be different for a disabled as opposed to a non-disabled person.

A more positive view of employers was given by another adviser, who spoke about
improvements in relations with employers, citing greater disability awareness, increasing willingness to make reasonable adjustments, and a growing number of professional bodies and organisations providing well informed advocacy for students. The Positive About Disabled People (‘Two Ticks’) scheme was also cited as being beneficial to disabled graduates making the transition to work.

The particular issues relating to disabled graduates entering SMEs were also acknowledged by advisers. For example, it was noted that employers’ organisations such as the Association of Graduate Recruiters may not have large numbers of SMEs as members, and this may reduce the capacity of professional careers advisers to influence this group. Again, SMEs were seen by advisers as being potentially more hostile to employing disabled graduates, especially where there might be a cost implication for reasonable adjustments.
5. Towards a more inclusive careers service for disabled students

In conclusion, from the information collected from careers professionals and other sector agencies, some key recommendations to managers of careers advisory services can be identified to assist colleagues in improving careers support to disabled students and graduates.

- Continuing professional development programmes relating to disability awareness and resources for disabled students can help to counter lack of confidence and expertise in supporting disabled students, and need to be made available to careers professionals.
- Staff development programmes could include the training events already provided by the AGCAS Disability Task Group, and could usefully draw in sector organisations such as Scope, Employment Opportunities, and both local and national disability organisations.
- Greater integration of careers services into the wider support for disabled students could be provided in HEIs.
- Links between careers services, disability services and academic departments could be strengthened to create a more seamless pathway for disabled students through higher education and into employment.
- Development of existing links with local employers, and with the providers of Access to Work, could be made to raise awareness of reasonable adjustments in the workplace, and to promote the availability of reasonable adjustments to students and graduates.
- Continued use of skills activities, and the promotion of work experience to disabled students, could help ensure that this group has parity of opportunity for self-development with non-disabled peers during higher education.
- As public sector employers, HEIs may want to consider providing work experience opportunities for disabled students within their own organisation, to showcase the support available.
- The development of national resources for careers advisers and students, which highlight resources available and share case studies and personal experiences of disabled people at different stages of their careers, could be beneficial. This national resource would complement the programmes of information-sharing
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already in place for the alumni of many HEIs.

Continued work of AGCAS or other sector organisations with employers’ forums and federations of all sizes could help promote the inclusion of disabled people in employment in all sectors.

Information about further ECU work to support careers professionals will be posted on the ECU website.
6. Bibliography


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