






## DISABLED STUDENTS AND EMPLOYABILITY


This paper is based on interviews with disabled students, student support advisers and a Jobcentre Plus Disability Employment Adviser. The focus is on the barriers to employment faced by disabled graduates. The paper begins by providing an overview of employment policy and practice, including the  employers' perspective and  the impact of legislation. We then discuss  individual barriers such as aspiration, disclosure and access to the careers service. Finally, we offer  recommendations and  questions for future research and debate.

### DEIP: an introduction

This paper is one of a series of discussion papers produced by the Disability and Effective Inclusion Policies (DEIP) project that was funded by the European Social Fund. The DEIP project is a piece of collaborative research undertaken by Sussex and Lancaster Universities. The research is shaped by four research questions (see **DP1**) and the project aims to explore ways in which higher education institutions support disabled students through higher education and on into employment.

The DEIP project explored the experiences and understanding of services with current disabled students and university staff including policy makers and practitioners from the two university case studies. The views of employers and UK disabled graduates have provided a wider context for understanding the post university experience. The inter-relationship between each of these stakeholders is complex and in a state of constant change, with each stakeholder's perspective influenced by their position as recipient or provider of services.

### DEIP Discussion Papers

The DEIP project contributes to an increasing body of institutional research surrounding the experiences of disabled students in higher education. For a list of current and future DEIP project Discussion Papers (**DP**) see:  <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/equalities/1-2-9.html>. For details of the thematic topics emerging from analysis of institutional policy see **DP1**, methodology **DP2**, an annotated bibliography of other relevant research **DP13** and further exploration of disabled graduates' experiences of transition into work **DP11**.

## Overview: Employment policy and practice

### Current profile of disabled people in employment

*'Institutional discrimination against disabled people is particularly evident in the British Labour market. Disabled people's participation in the workplace is severely limited by a range of factors both social and environmental.'* Barnes (1992:23)

In the UK there is a strong association between qualification levels and whether a disabled person is economically active. The economically inactive have, on average, left full-time education earlier and have obtained considerably fewer qualifications than the economically active (Meager et. al. 1998). Generally, disabled people are less likely to be employed in managerial, professional and higher skilled occupations. There is also a tendency for more severely disabled people to be concentrated in part-time work and lower level occupations. Disabled graduate employment mirrors this pattern of more part time than full time employment. Furthermore, according to the AGCAS (2005) report, they also seem to face obstacles in entering some professions in comparison with their non-disabled peers. They are

less likely to take employment as medical practitioners, psychologists, pharmacists/ pharmacologists, ophthalmic opticians, dental practitioners and veterinarians (3.4%) compared to non-disabled graduates (5.7%). Similarly, lower numbers of disabled graduates entered the teaching profession (6.2%) compared to non-disabled graduates (7.7%). A slightly higher percentage of disabled graduates, (24.8%) entered further study compared to non-disabled graduates (23.9%), but 48.4% of all disabled graduates were in full-time employment compared with 54.6% of non-disabled graduates and disabled graduates entered part-time employment (8.4%) in greater numbers than their non-disabled peers (7.6%). Graduates with dyslexia or an unseen disability who represent 75% of total disabled graduates, achieved the highest employment rates of any groups of disabled graduates and had the most consistently favourable employment outcomes overall. The AGCAS report states full-time employment rates for the remaining disabled groups would drop from the overall figure of 48.4% to 40.3%. The main barriers to work are the employers' views of disabled people, student awareness of their rights and the support services available, individual factors including personal aspiration, experience of disclosure and use of careers advice.

### **Employers' views of disabled people**

In a survey of small businesses, the Disability Rights Commission (DRC, 2005) identified three categories of employers: the Nearly There or "The Good Neighbours"; Potential Partners or "Thoughtless Neighbours" and; Naïve Discriminators or "Nuisance Neighbours". Nearly one third of small businesses are Naïve Discriminators who believe disabled employees are a financial drain or burden on colleagues. For further details see: [http://www.drc-gb.org/library/research/employment/small\\_employers\\_attitudes\\_to.aspx](http://www.drc-gb.org/library/research/employment/small_employers_attitudes_to.aspx). In Rowlingson and Berthoud's (1996) survey of disabled workers it emerged that disabled people felt their chance of employment was a result of a sympathetic employer, a strategy of deliberately hiding their impairment or undertaking a trial period in which to demonstrate they could do the work. One myth associated with the employment of disabled people is the prohibitive cost associated with making the workplace accessible. As Younes (2001) suggests, in most workplaces only minor modifications are needed to accommodate employees with impairments yet, according to the DRC 2005 survey, only 31% of businesses are open to financial persuasion to undertake these adaptations.

### **The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) – Awareness of rights**

The 1995 DDA gives disabled people certain rights in the UK in respect of employment. The Act makes it unlawful for an employer to discriminate against disabled people when applying for a job or when they are in employment. Employers have a duty to take any reasonable steps they can to reduce or remove any substantial disadvantage caused to a disabled employee or job applicant by any of the employment arrangements or physical features of the premises. This is the duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' (Disability Rights Commission, 2004). Students' awareness of the employment support available from the DDA 1995 is limited.

*I don't know about employment support, two ticks, jobcentre services – the main thing I know about is this new disability act that's been passed by the government and more access to business and things like that. (Katie)*

Paula, a sabbatical officer in one Students' Union did have an understanding of the policies relating to disability and employment, but even this was vague:

*...when it comes to the tick thing I know people are seeking to get to disabled employees. I also know that in the areas of employment that I'm interested in they are particularly going out of their way for disabled graduates, civil service, Channel 4, going out of their way. I know that under the DDA I can't be denied a job on the basis of my disability, also know I'm entitled to some benefits, but not sure what they are. (Paula)*

One Disability Employment Adviser (DEA) felt that some employers have a lack of awareness of their responsibilities and that the best employers tend to have some experience of disability.

## Individual barriers to employment

### Aspirations

Not all students undertake a degree course in order to become employed. For example, Megan used her course to gain confidence in her ability to write, and while she intended to try and have her work published, she expressed a wish to travel after her degree rather than search for a job. One student support officer endorsed this attitude when she said that:

*Students shouldn't be prevented from doing a course even if they can't use it at the end for employment. It's about growth and self-development.*

Other students may have thought a great deal about the kind of jobs they would like and the kind of jobs they might be capable of doing, but their plans can be tinged with uncertainty. Martin was worried that his depression will prevent him from finishing his teacher training course; Maria, who was interested in working in local government, was worried that working five days a week would prove too demanding; and Dee felt that post-graduate study might be a safer option than work.

Aspirations can sometimes be restricted by external perception, and some students expressed fear of being stereotyped. Paula felt that her opportunities might be limited by her CV, which meant she could be pigeon holed and guided into disability related employment:

*I keep getting offered jobs, but I don't want them, they are all linked to disability ... I want to be respected for who I am and the skills that I have which are not to do with my disability. I don't want to get something on that basis. (Paula)*

### Disclosure

As university careers staff explained, disclosure is an individual choice. Overall students seemed comfortable about disclosing their impairments in an educational setting, but they were less certain about doing so when applying for jobs. As Katie's account demonstrates:

*They did ask if you had a disability, ... I said yes, there was no space to say what, but I'm not sure, because sometimes you 'hum and ah' about whether dyslexia is a disability, but then I have a disability loan and so I guess dyslexia is classed as a disability*

Delia claimed that her dyslexia would not be something she would mention in an interview, because she felt there was a lack of understanding about dyslexia. Although a Jobcentre Plus Disability Adviser claimed to always tell job applicants to disclose, he concurred with this view that mentioning a disability can cause some employers to put up barriers:

*What I say to any of my customers is to be up front because then there is nothing that can crop up and bite you later on. (Jobcentre Plus Disability Advisor)*

### Accessing Careers advice

Whilst some higher education careers services may have less experience in supporting disabled students and acknowledged a lack of disability specific employment knowledge, they felt their expertise lay in preparing for graduate employment. Some universities have specialist careers advisers, others do not, and information on how to help disabled students in these universities may be collected and disseminated in an ad hoc fashion. Careers advisers with experience of disabled students explained that in terms of career paths, they are often more determined, focused, and successful than non-disabled students.

When discussing disclosure or preparing a CV the advisor's aim was to encourage students to present positively the skills acquired from managing disability related issues, for example, employing a personal assistant, and developing additional time management and organisational skills to balance study and life at university.

One university has a policy of sending students to the Jobcentre Plus Disability Employment Adviser, rather than to student careers, and the value of this is that students can, for example, gain information about Access to Work funding for help with interviews. But in areas of the country where there are not many job opportunities for graduates, help from the Jobcentre may

be limited because it is not geared to offering advice about graduate jobs. While one Disability Employment Adviser was willing to run information sessions for whole groups of students, he also said when:

*looking for suitable graduate vacancies it is not going to be easy. Graduates claim benefits here and sometimes they do the job search here, but most graduates find their own work and move on or end up in admin positions that they don't want to be in.*

This may reflect the fact that specialist guidance at university is not always made full use of, or even available. The message is that all graduates have to be proactive in finding a job that will suit their longer-term goals.

## **Student Employment**

The opportunities to work part time were limited for some students who found they needed to spend more time on study than some of their non-disabled peers. For students who work part time their experience in the work place may influence plans regarding their decision to disclose or even future careers. Some expressed fears that disclosure may result in discrimination, or that the interview itself might be a problem, others felt their presence in the workplace had been positive for them and their employer. Stacey reported:

*I work in Tesco and they understand that I find telephones difficult. If we have meeting they do check that I can hear them but they don't look at it as too much of a disability. I think my attitude has rubbed off on them.*

Although Stacey had been offered management training, she felt her hearing impairment restricted the variety of tasks that she could undertake. Like many students she had limited awareness about how the Access to Work scheme might assist employers to acquire suitable equipment, or offer solutions to what might seem insurmountable problems.

## ✓ **Recommendations**

- To clarify the roles and relationship between university careers service and Jobcentre Plus
- To publicise the existence of services available to support disabled graduates in the workplace, see **DP11** 'Graduate Experiences of Transition into Employment'
- To challenge the myths associated with employing disabled graduates through positive case studies and raise employers' awareness of financial and practical support available
- To actively seek disabled graduates to include in alumni case studies, or to involve in mentoring projects providing interview and work experience for disabled students

## ? **Questions for future research and debate**

- What are the specific areas of concern for disabled graduates with different impairments?
- When and how should disabled students disclose their disability?
- How can HE career service work with professional bodies and employers to ease transition into employment?
- What are the barriers to raising employers' awareness about their rights and responsibilities under the DDA?

### **For further information about DEIP Project**

**Sussex University** – Pam Coare and Liz McDonnell

Centre for Continuing Education, The Sussex Institute, Essex House, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, East Sussex, BN1 9QQ Tel: 01273 877888 <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/equalities/1-2-9.html>

**Lancaster University** – Ann-Marie Houghton, Jo Armstrong and Linda Piggott

Dept of Educational Research, Community Access Programme, County South, Lancaster, LA1 4YD  
Tel: 01524 592907 <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/edres/cap/index.htm>