



## Equity and employability: A study into the challenges faced by healthcare learners with a disability and/or learners pursuing part-time work

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### Abstract

An increasing amount of evidence suggests that learners within Higher Education (HE), and graduates, are struggling with their transition into the workplace. With the increased prominence of workplace learning requirements, these challenges are becoming more evident for learners during HE studies. This study aimed to identify the challenges faced by learners and graduates transitioning into the healthcare workforce, and the challenges experienced by key groups such as healthcare employers and other influencers within HE. The key focus was on disability, part-time work and transitions into the workplace. Thirty-two individuals participated in an online survey focused on equity and employability. Questions were both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Participants were learners, graduates, academics, career advisory staff, and employers. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data identified eight themes. Challenges identified by participants included work-life balance, stigma and stereotypes, organisational and individual empowerment, navigating additional administrative tasks, information and signposting, consistency in language and messaging, advocacy, and exemplars for guidance. The study highlights the responsibilities of all involved with HE provision, and the importance of collaboration with employers to inform, educate and advocate for all learners to maximize employability opportunities and enhance transitions into employment. Policy and practice in this area should quality assure the robustness of the support, aiming to meet individual needs, including education to empower and facilitate individual agency, as well as reviewing the visibility and accessibility of resources.

### Keywords

Equity, employability, student, part-time, university, stigma, disclosing, transitions

### Introduction

Employability is a lifelong and life-wide journey drawing upon experiences from every part of life that can impact on an individual's employability journey within the workplace (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Taylor, 2016) and therefore needs to be supported throughout a student's learning journey, including beyond the point of graduation (Dollinger et al., 2022). Despite employability playing a more significant role within the Higher Education (HE) sector, a lack of work readiness is repeatedly reported

by employers (Singh & Singh, 2021). Recent research reports an increased need for student agency and engagement in their own employability (Dalrymple et al., 2021).

Work-based learning experiences during studies are key to supporting employability (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2022; Thompson & Brewster, 2022), to build student confidence, to help people through the complex world of work (Bennett, 2019), and to develop a range of employability related capital (Tomlinson, 2017). Limited access to work-based learning experiences limits the development of employability during HE studies and can therefore further impact individuals' confidence and journey of transition into the workplace, where similar challenges are likely to exist across the higher education sector worldwide.

The introduction of apprenticeship educational pathways within higher education has resulted in the term learners being used as a term to encompass both students and apprentices. As the population of this current study included apprentices – the term learner will be used when referring to higher education students or apprentices for the remainder of this paper. The study reported in this article sought to identify the challenges faced by healthcare learners and graduates with a disability and those considering part-time positions (with or without a disability) when exploring and pursuing work opportunities. The study also sought to understand the challenges experienced by key stakeholders: prospective employees, employers, academics, and career advisory staff within HE. Therefore the results of this study are applicable to individuals with a disability, individuals with a disability and working part time and those individuals who do not have a disability but wish to pursue part time work.

## Literature Review

### Workforce statistics

When undertaking research it is important to recognise the proportion of individuals that the results can potentially be applied to. Of the total working population within the UK between 16 and 64 years of age 23% work part-time with the predominant proportion being females (United Kingdom Government, 2022). Of those individuals living with a disability, 57.7% are reported to be in work compared to 81% for those without a disability (Department for Work and Pensions, 2022). These statistics suggest that there is a significant proportion of working individuals who are potentially affected by working part-time or working with a disability within the United Kingdom alone. These statistics are reflected worldwide, in workforce statistics (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2023) and within the literature (Bonaccio et al., 2020), thereby offering applicability of the current study findings beyond the UK.

### Employability challenges with a disability

Previous literature consistently reports that graduates with a disability have lower rates of employment (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Heymann et al., 2013; Jakovljevic & Buckley, 2011), with inequalities within the workplace for those who are in employment (Paz-Maldonado & Silva-Peña, 2021). Individuals with an invisible disability have experienced more difficulties due to the lack of understanding from others of the impact of their disability (Deckoff-Jones & Duell, 2018). It is suggested that the post-Covid economic and labour market changes have resulted in those with a disability being presented with even more serious challenges to securing sustainable employment - common factors predisposing poor employment outcomes for those with disability are debt and housing uncertainty, which has been exacerbated post covid, and more likely to face marginalisation and vulnerability (Olney, 2021). In their recent systematic review, Moriña and Biagiotti (2022) listed the challenges that individuals who have a disability face within the workplace. Challenges included architectural, attitudinal, management and resources/processes (knowing how to ask for help, what to ask help with and how to cope with the challenges that are faced). Individualised services and

support are crucial to support employability for those with a disability (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017) but full disclosure is required to achieve this.

Reports indicate that more than one in eight HE students in the UK declare a disability (Office for Students, 2020). Noteworthy, it has been found that up to 75% of students do not disclose their disabilities due to fears about how they would be perceived and stigmatised and a concern over the course policies and procedures involved in that process of declaration (Dollinger et al., 2022). Similar findings have been found across the literature (Gatto et al., 2021; Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022; Nolan et al., 2015).

Across the world, there are legal requirements for adjustments to be made within the workplace to make workplaces accessible to all individuals (Sing, 2012; Stevens, 2002), but these policies are limited if individuals are fearing the declaration process and impact (Dollinger et al., 2022). Evidence suggests that more needs to be done to provide a safe conversational space for students to be able to disclose their disabilities (Tai et al., 2022).

Despite the changes in the legal context of those with a disability and their workplace requiring reasonable adjustments – there also needs to be a social change towards those with a disability to fully understand and deliver the legal requirements. A study by Stevens (2002) found that most employers were aware of the legislation and have good intentions to meet their legal obligations, but government schemes developed to support employment of those with a disability were not used widely. Employer beliefs, attitudes and norms within organisations influence the experiences of those with a disability and their individual social capital which impacts on employability (Ebrahim et al., 2022).

Accessibility and discrimination are an ongoing issue with employability and individuals with a disability. This employability-disability divide is described as a bottleneck – a narrow space that people need to pass through in order to expose greater opportunities (Areheart & Stein, 2015). Addressing the bottleneck offers opportunities not only for the financial benefits of employment but also the wider benefits for reduction of stigma, being included socially and the positive impact on self-esteem, self-identity and career prospects (Areheart & Stein, 2015; Galer, 2018). There are examples where workplaces have encouraged a disability friendly environment through changes in attitudes, skills and knowledge, achieved using a mezzo-level programme intervention with the aim of then achieving macro-organisational culture change (Kwan, 2021). However, there is a paucity of published examples.

### **Part-time working**

Evidence across the world reports that those with a disability are more likely to work part-time (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2023; Department for Work & Pensions, 2022), compounding the challenges discussed in the previous section of this paper for those with a disability. Despite legal frameworks being in place to prevent part-time workers from being treated differently, part-time work is associated with stigma, limits on career prospects, lower pay and work uncertainties (Chung, 2020; Manning & Petrongolo, 2008; Nightingale, 2019; Stovell & Besamusca, 2022; Walsh, 2007). Part-time workers can be perceived as less committed and deserving of career development and reduced visibility within organisations can result in missing out on opportunities (van Osch & Schaveling, 2020). Discrimination, alongside job conditions, availability of training and networking, and perceptions of part-time workers having accrued less experience, have been cited as a potential cause of widening the gap between part-time and full-time employees (Nightingale, 2019). The culture of the organisation is key to reduce this impact and to mitigate against any potential bias towards individuals – this includes macro level changes at a policy level, and at a mezzo and micro level (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020).

Lyonette et al. (2010) conducted a large-scale project exploring the quality of part-time work provision and outlined some key findings; Training of employers is key to promoting part-time work options and to identifying senior part-time options within organisations. Lyonette et al. (2010) highlighted that any

part-time opportunities should be advertised widely rather than individuals needing to negotiate part-time hours when applying for positions. Benefits to employing part-time staff were stated as increased loyalty, commitment/retention, job satisfaction with the benefits outweighing the costs or at least a balance between costs and benefits to employing part-time workers.

There has been a growing recognition that there needs to be part-time opportunities for work to support a work life balance for employees whether or not they have disabilities (for example, Department of Health, 2001). Flexible working can help with work life balance (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). However, studies suggest that individuals who work part-time tend to have more responsibilities at home (Walsh, 2007), therefore, potentially impacting on work life balance aspirations. There is an increasing demand for flexible working with the current HE generation with a prediction that flexible working will become the norm in future years (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). Therefore, employers need to be prepared to mitigate any challenges there may be to ensure accessibility for current and future part-time workers for those individuals with or without a disability.

## Methods

### Context

A Faculty of Medicine and Health at a University in the UK was used as a single site with the research aim of identifying shared challenges faced by learners, graduates and other key groups when three specific groups of higher education learners (with a disability, with a disability wishing to pursue part-time work **or** without a disability but wanting to pursue part-time work) and their transition into the workplace. The Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences used for this study continually aspire to enhance the inclusiveness of their employability strategy to promote equitable employability. The rationale for focusing on the three separate groups was to explore if there were shared themes for all three groups as suggested in the literature (already presented in this paper) that could be addressed simultaneously within strategic initiatives to reduce challenges identified. The research design for this study needed to include the populations from the key stakeholders involved in higher education graduate employability and employment as well as the individuals within each of the three identified groups to provide a comprehensive data set from all perspectives, with both qualitative and demographic quantitative data. An online questionnaire survey was chosen as the best method to reach the study populations and achieve the research aims and data collection. This current study was used to identify challenges experienced when transitioning into the work place - to then respond as a faculty by developing a strategic approach with specific initiatives planned to address the challenges identified. The populations included in the study design has enabled identification of challenges for individuals within each of the three groups, but also the challenges experienced by those within HE who are working with learners during their studies and transitions into the work place, and also employing organisations of health care graduates.

### The Equity and Employability Project Group

This research was conducted by an Equity and Employability Project Group comprised of career advisory staff (three individuals), a learner representative, and academics who held roles specifically aligned to specific career development e.g., employability directors, or who hold roles aligning to learner support (nine individuals, at different career stages). Therefore, the project group was varied, allowing insider and outsider positions in relation to the study, creating opportunities for a wide and varied authentic discussion and project planning, based on valuable insight from those with an insider lived experience of the different perspectives being studied, along with those within the faculty with an outsider position with leadership and strategic responsibilities who would be responsible for planning the strategic response to the findings (the project lead also holds the post of Faculty Associate Dean of Employability).

## Participants and recruitment

Eligible participants were people who self-identified as either having lived experience of the challenges of working with a disability, working with a disability and working part-time, or working part-time, or supporting individuals to overcome these challenges. As such, it is difficult to define the exact numbers of eligible participants as data sets on all of the characteristics are not available.

Ethical approval was obtained from the host university faculty Ethics Committee (ETH2122-1509). After ethical approval was granted, gatekeeper consent was confirmed with the Pro Vice Chancellor for the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences to access learner and academic participation. Recruitment methods for current faculty learners included an announcement email communicated through the Virtual Learning Environment, BlackBoard, newsletters within the faculty and other learner online groups i.e., learner societies. Graduates were approached via relevant societies and links with course directors, careers advisors and the alumni office. Healthcare employers, i.e., placement providers, and academic staff at the university were approached to participate via email. Careers advisory staff were contacted via the Head of Careers emailing an invitation to their team. All recruitment methods included an invitation to take part in the study, and a link to further information e.g., a participation information sheet and the consent processes. All participants provided online informed consent.

The population included current learners and graduates from the faculty, and university employees (academic and career advisory staff at the host university) including:

1. Learners - all learners have statutory work-based learning placements as part of their courses so would potentially already have lived experience or ideas of potential challenges. Learners were defined as people who identified as current undergraduates studying either Medicine or Health Sciences courses, and apprenticeships at the host institution. All learners were pre-registration (courses undertaken to become a qualified, registered health professional).
2. Academics
3. Careers advisory staff
4. Recent host university graduates (within 18 months of graduating) or
5. Healthcare employers

Responses (n=32) were received from all five of the key participant groups (Table 1). There was no accurate way of measuring response rate as the denominator of self-identified participants was not ascertainable, and the number of invited people was not ascertainable using the selected recruitment methods. Participants self-selected into the various participant groups – the participants who selected 'other' were those who had experience of working part time or with a disability but not within 18 months of graduation.

**Table 1: Participants Split by Participant Group**

Participant group	N
Learner on a BSc/MSc/MBBS course	14
Faculty Graduate (pre-registration) within 18 months of graduation	2
Faculty Academic teaching or advising on pre-registration courses	4
Host university Careers employee	5
An employer of faculty graduates	3
Other	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>

## Data collection

An anonymous online survey, hosted by Microsoft Forms, was developed by the Equity and Employability project group. An online survey was deemed appropriate to provide a 'wide-angle lens' on the topic of interest (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), capturing the views of a range of individuals (Braun et al., 2017), many of whom may be geographically dispersed, having graduated from the host institution. The survey was designed by all members of the group and developed through reflexive discussions from all perspectives represented in the project group to challenge individual belief and subjective judgments (Jamieson et al. 2023) to ensure data was collected in a manner that expressed the subjectivity of participants' understanding and experiences, while also acknowledging and embracing the reflexive influence of our interpretations as members of the project group. The survey gathered quantitative and open-ended qualitative questions to collect information on the following in relation to individuals with a disability, individuals with a disability working part time or individuals working part time with no disclosed disability:

- Host university full-time pre-registration learners – what support have they received, what information are they aware of that exists already, what challenges have they faced in thinking about employment, and what solutions could they suggest, to enhance their experience
- Host university full-time pre-registration faculty graduates within the last 18 months – what experiences have they had in the transition into the workplace, and how could this be improved
- Graduate employers – what support do employers provide, what information is already available and what challenges are there for them to provide this support
- Other key influencers (host university faculty academics, host university careers staff) – how are learners already supported through their process of thinking about employment, what information is already available, what challenges exist and what information/ support would be useful

The survey was disseminated to the population during May 2022 and was the same for all five participant groups.

## Data analysis

All survey responses were anonymised; no personal identifiers were collected within the survey. Simple descriptive statistics were generated from the quantitative data. This included collating frequency of responses at each stage of the Likert scale in relation to each included survey statement. Data was organised by subgroups of the sample investigated, learners, academics, career services, graduates, employers, and others. Quantitative data analysis was conducted by three members of the project team (Careers employee 1, Academic 1, Academic 2), each assuming responsibility for subsections of the survey data before meeting to discuss the analysis and to draw comparisons across the five participant groups.

Qualitative data from the survey was downloaded in Microsoft Excel and was initially thematically analysed independently by two members of the project group (Academic 3 and Academic 4). The iterative nature of the qualitative data analysis involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, initial theme generation, theme review, theme definition and name, and writing up (Braun et al., 2016). A predominantly inductive approach was employed, but codes were reviewed to ensure that they contributed to producing themes that were meaningful to the research question. Academic 3 and Academic 4 met after initial coding to discuss initial theme generation. One additional subsequent meeting was used to define and name themes. At this point of the analysis, a critical friend technique (Smith & McGannon, 2018) was used to soundboard ideas. Academic 3 and Academic 4 met online with the critical friend (Academic 5 - another member of the project group) to discuss initial codes,



the meaning of the codes and the generated themes. Based on the discussion with the critical friend, Academic 3 and Academic 4 refined the final themes.

## Results

Initially, analysis was planned to compare responses across the five participant groups. However, the data were consistent across all participant groups. Eight themes were generated from the data: 1) work life balance, 2) stigma and stereotypes, 3) organisational and individual empowerment, 4) navigating additional administration tasks, 5) information and signposting, 6) consistency in language and messaging, 7) advocacy, and 8) exemplars for guidance. Illustrative anonymised quotes typify the qualitative data. Due to the low sample size, the quantitative data will be used to support the themes generated by the qualitative data analysis. Despite a focus on healthcare, themes generated from results are transferable and aligned closely with findings from previous research across the HE sector.

### Work life balance

Part-time work was seen as a necessity to provide flexibility in the workplace for people with a disability. Part-time working allowed a greater degree of work-life balance whilst enabling people to manage their disability and energy levels in the recognition that every day is not the same when living with a disability. Those without a disability wishing to pursue part-time work cited family commitments, health needs and desire for work life balance as the motivating factors. Within all groups, work-life balance was a key driver in the prevention of burnout and management of stress, as exemplified by the following quote from Learner 4: 'Wanting work-life balance – prevent burnout'

Clear options need to be presented to applicants/employees to empower them to make choices that best fit their personal circumstances. This is not only time efficient but also limits the sense that these decisions may limit career development and opportunities.

### Stigma and stereotypes

Respondents across all groups reflected on the impact of stigma and stereotypes on initial disclosure, as well as the workplace experiences, for both those with a disability and/or those wishing to seek part-time roles. The terms 'stigma' and 'stereotypes' were directly used by participants across all groups.

Stereotypes surrounding those with a disability and/or those wishing to pursue working part-time impacted on initial recruitment and later career progression. Respondents recognised the challenges to recruitment for individuals and barriers to progression through limited opportunities and choice. There was a repeated experience from current learners that the automatic perception of others was that they were not 'good enough' for the graduate roles they would be applying for. Learner 9 expressed this sentiment by noting: 'People thinking you cannot do the job or do it as good as those without a condition.' This led to a fear of disclosing due to a perceived lack of understanding and support in the workplace. The need to 'disclos[e] without fear or discrimination; [the need for] support for days where someone's disability is impacting their ability to work; [and] understanding that not every day is the same for people with disabilities' is what learner 7 expressed was needed in the workplace.

The experience of stigma once in the workforce was strong within the narratives shared. The most significant source of perceived stigma was from co-workers – seemingly stemming from a lack of understanding of the impact of hidden disabilities. Stigma from colleagues was a concern for many and impacted upon their willingness to disclose a disability and/or ask for reasonable adjustments to be in place.

*Associations of disability with physical impairment/s that can be seen - illustrated by the image of the wheelchair user to denote disability - I think there is a lack of awareness of all the conditions*

*that can meet the criteria for hidden disability and disability under the Equality Act 2010 (Learner 8).*

Where a disability cannot be seen, this seemed to exacerbate the stereotypes surrounding what a disability 'looks like' and therefore the expectations from others in relation to how an individual 'should' work. Learner 8 reflected that in their experience there was a 'perception that I do not have a disability.' The perceptions and expectations of others were often coupled with an employer not enforcing reasonable adjustments and thereby reinforcing the stereotypes evident in the workplace, such as Learner 4's experience: 'Other co-workers not taking it seriously and the employer not applying/enforcing the reasonable adjustments' The impact of this was evident when graduate and learner respondents were asked to rate their confidence to ask for reasonable adjustments during the recruitment process. Sixty per cent of learner respondents reflected the lowest levels of confidence (scoring 1 or 2 on a 5-point Likert scale with 5 being 'confident'). Fifty per cent of learner respondents conveyed that this lack of confidence would continue into discussions once in post. Graduate responses exhibited slightly more confidence; with all graduates scoring 3 on the Likert scale.

The experiences of stigma and stereotypes were also a significant factor in the experiences of those wishing to pursue part-time work. Part-time work was seen as lazy and reflective of those with less ambition – learner 1 commented that those pursuing part-time work as seen as 'lazy, not pulling their weight, creating more work for others'. Respondents felt that others perceived them as a burden – lacking commitment to their role and career progression. Careers 1 reflected that 'PT- [part-time] work can be seen as less beneficial or less committed (often wrongly).'

Employer 2 and Employer 3 recognised that unconscious bias played a part in the perception of workers wishing to pursue part-time roles. This was reflected in the 69% of learners and graduate respondents who felt that negative perceptions exist toward part-time work opportunities upon graduation. The careers services expressed mixed opinions (50% agreed, 50% were uncertain). Academics and employers were less certain that negative perceptions existed.

### **Organisational and individual empowerment**

The employer participant group identified their understanding of the Equality Act (2010), and how this reflected their organisation's actions. For example, establishing employment based on fairness and equality of experience, and 'being non-discriminatory' within the recruitment process. Employers were able to list previously employed reasonable adjustments from within their workplace, which included: 'disabled parking and sorting disabled access to work', 'referring to Access to Work for assessment: dragon dictate', a 'flexible working policy', including flexible working patterns and 'IT support.' The employer group noted that resources such as Access to Work, the government employment support programme helping people with a disability (physical, or mental health condition or disability) to stay in work, was helpful in the provision of support to workers and employers.

While the employer participant group discussed several of their responsibilities in creating an inclusive workplace, they also stressed the importance of learner agency. Employers felt that it was learners' responsibility to know what is reasonable in terms of an adjustment, and that they need to know what their rights are. For example, Employer 1 stated that '[It is] ...important that the learners take ownership of how they can best manage their disability & what they need (they are the expert) and informs future employers of this so it can be considered and arranged.'

Career advisory staff felt that some of the challenges to engaging with the workplace for people wanting to commence work with a disability were that employers may not be aware of their responsibilities, or that employers may be 'put off' or hostile to requested adjustments. As such, careers advisory staff stressed the need for learners to take responsibility to make others aware of their needs. However, they did acknowledge that this takes confidence and comfortability in themselves.



Both employers and careers advisory staff did note the responsibility of the organisation to create an environment where learners with a disability considering employment felt confidence to disclose their disability (without fear), were providing the right situations to do this, and the appropriate knowledge e.g., what services may be available. Employers felt that learners struggle to declare especially invisible disability. This sentiment was echoed by other participant groups.

### **Navigating additional administrative tasks**

Ensuring that the required support was in place for employees with a disability, and/or options for part-time work, was seen to be accompanied by additional administrative processes. Although not a strong theme in the data, it is worthy of note as a consideration as part of the experiences of those trying to navigate these complex processes. As Other 1, noted, '[You] have to liaise with lots of people to organise and complete lots of forms etc.'

### **Information and signposting**

Information and signposting were described as a challenge as well as a way to enhance support in the consideration of part-time positions, and for people with a disability seeking employment. In the provision of support and advice, academics indicated that they advocate for learners/graduates to utilise the careers service at university, host careers fairs, peer to peer support, mentoring, to discuss their needs with potential employers, along with seeking out the policies and procedures relevant to that employer. However, they identified that signposting needs to be better. Employers stated that they provided information, that they signposted support from Human Resources and Occupational Health, shared where to find help, mentoring and support, encouraged early employer visits, discussion of adjustments, and provided preceptorship (additional supervision and continuing professional development) support at induction. It was believed that managing the transition through knowledge would allow students to feel informed and equipped to deal with challenges and onboarding from employer.

### **Consistency in language and messaging**

Clarity in the use of language and messaging surrounding the support for individuals to pursue part-time positions was recognised as a necessity to help enhance understanding by all. Consistency in messaging around the feasibility of available options was raised as an issue by participants as this was often accompanied by conflicting information. Transparency is needed in relation to whether part-time roles are first and foremost available - an issue recognised not only by those applying but also by the employers. Employer 3 suggested to 'maybe just encourage that any advert that states full-time will be open to those looking for part-time work.' There was certainty amongst employers that all posts would be considered for full-time, part-time and flexible working options although acknowledgement that inconsistency in messaging could represent a barrier to employees fulfilling their potential.

Inconsistencies in the recruitment process can also be problematic. As Employer 2 confessed: 'I have been informed in the past that we can't recruit below 11 hours per week, although I did and now they have chosen to work more hours later in their career.'

This inconsistency was felt by potential applicants and could result in hesitancy to broach the subject. Over half of the current learner respondents reported having the lowest level of confidence in knowing about the range of opportunities available for part-time employment upon graduation. Learner 9 stated: 'When I went for my first interview, it wasn't even a consideration to work part-time, it was just assumed everyone would be graduating into a full-time position.'

## Advocacy

Participants across the key groups identified the need for independent advocacy to support individuals to navigate not only their rights and responsibilities but also the necessary processes to support declaration and implementation of reasonable adjustments. When asked if they felt confident in their understanding of the adjustments they would need in the workplace, 64% (7/11) of learners and graduates reported a neutral response or that they disagreed/strongly disagreed.

Consistent data across the participant groups called for a 'named person' to support these transitions into the workplace and navigating the adjustments that might support this. Having a point of reference to explore individual needs and uncertainty was seen as protective factors for those entering the workforce. As Graduate 2 suggested, '[An] Informal adviser - someone you could contact anonymously to ask simple questions' would be a positive action.

This independent advocacy was seen as a source of support and advice – to explore what is available in respect of options and workplace adjustments but also to talk through the processes required to implement these. Having this support was seen as enabling individual agency – helping individuals to feel confident to open the conversation and to view the process as a positive approach to meeting personal needs. Employer 3 recognised that 1:1 coaching was an important element in managing this transition in their workplace and that the support provided had positive outcomes for all. The absence of this support was recognised to be a particular challenge, given that many individuals may struggle with the confidence to self-advocate. An example was provided by Careers 1, noting that 'I have had a manager want to control my time for mandatory hospital appointments, and someone less comfortable self-advocating might have struggled now.'

Without a named contact for independent support and advice, individuals can find themselves in situations that become increasingly difficult to manage. Without a sounding board, the need for a collaborative approach to workplace adjustments can be lost. The experience of Learner 8 was that [his/her/their] 'manager concerned made decisions without any consultation / any knowledge of my condition - perception was that I do not have a disability and that a random change applied to me constituted an adjustment.' Navigating the needs of the individual, the needs of the employer and the options available to support implementation of reasonable and feasible adjustments is required to avoid discrimination.

## Exemplars for guidance

Being able to draw on the success stories of others and witness role modelling in the workplace instilled confidence in others to explore their own needs. Provision of exemplars was seen to facilitate confidence within commonly encountered situations. Many participant groups highlighted the desire to have 'exemplars of how to access the range of adjustments available' or 'case studies' of good practice, what adjustments had been asked for previously, for example '...having case studies from other disabled students about companies they've worked for (which were helpful or not, how they transitioned etc)' (Careers 3). Learner 9 also commented that 'advice from those with disabilities who are currently working, what helped them, what they wish they'd done sooner, etc.'

Having an insight into the reasonable adjustments already provided to existing staff enabled applicants to gain an insight into how accommodating the organisation was and therefore support informed decision making about pursuing available positions.

Opportunity and choice although welcomed could also be overwhelming - 'Sometimes this process is really open ended which can be quite difficult'(Learner 13).

Use of exemplars, FAQ sheets and guidance was seen to support applicants to be able to ask the right questions to get the support they need to thrive in the workplace. The same experience was recognised for those wishing to work part-time – the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others in similar situations was valued.

## Discussion

The data within the eight themes generated from this study identified the key challenges faced by those with a disability and those wanting to pursue part-time work. The challenges that have been identified replicate many of the key points raised in existing literature. The impact on an individual's employability has been shown to be consistent with the literature and also consistent across the different contexts within this study - whether working with a disability or wanting to pursue part-time work with or without a disability. Addressing these challenges early, within HE programmes, to support the increasing prevalence of work-based learning can offer a critical factor for learner employability (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2022; Thompson & Brewster 2022). These challenges need to be mitigated not only in the graduate transitions into work but accessibility to crucial work-based learning placements during studies too.

### Culture and attitudes

Cultural, physical and attitudinal challenges have been reported in the literature for those with a disability or those working part-time (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022). These range from a lack of understanding or appreciation of the impact of this on individuals, which was also reflected in the current study. This lack of understanding and appreciation results in individuals not receiving the required support and adjustments, and in some cases not feeling that they can ask for them. Invisible disability was raised in some of the responses as an increased challenge, where understanding can be limited when there is not a visible disability for people to see. Deckoff-Jones and Duell (2018) similarly reflect on this within their work.

Stigma and stereotyping was a strong theme that has been reflected widely within literature. Previous research reported that disclosure of disabilities was not made due to fears about how they would be perceived and stigmatised (Dollinger et al., 2022). Reported stigma and stereotypes extended into the data on working part-time – with people working part-time being perceived as less committed and not working as hard. Van Osch and Schaveling (2020) report similar findings to our current study. Despite the legal requirements for the support for individuals who have a disability and/or want to work part-time, there is a clear gap between the individual and the employers in what is required at an organisational, cultural, and individual level to authentically understand and support individuals accordingly. Despite the finding that many employers have good intentions to meet legal obligations (Stevens, 2002), it is clear from the findings of the current study that there is disparity in how needs are met, or not.

Individualised services and support are crucial to support employability for those with a disability (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017). This extends into the process of disclosing and process of exploring part-time work, highlighting the essential role of the HE institutes to support this. With work-based learning being such a crucial part of the HE employability journey, this becomes even more crucial. Evidence suggests that more needs to be done to provide a safe conversational space for students to be able to disclose their disabilities (Tai et al., 2022). It is also important for learners to feel safe talking about wanting to pursue part-time work without fear of judgement.

Without the knowledge and confidence to mitigate these challenges, and if work-based learning opportunities are missed because of these challenges, individual social capital will be restricted, impacting on employability (Ebrahim et al., 2022). Individuals who have the confidence and agency to deal with the challenges have been found to not only navigate the transition into the workplace, but also provide an example to organisations, impacting on reducing stigma and stereotypes (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).

## Work life balance

Work life balance is cited as one of the main reasons for individuals pursuing part-time work (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020) and is a strong theme within the data for this current study. However, the aspiration to have better work life balance by working part time may actually cause a worse work life balance which does need to be appreciated by the individuals pursuing part time work whether individuals have a disability or not.

## Capital and agency

Organisational and individual empowerment identified within this study is supported by seminal employability models. Many of the well-known employability models highlight the importance of capital and agency. For example, Bennett (2019) highlights the importance of individuals taking an active role and agency in their employability through the Literacies for Life Model, detailing six literacies for life that facilitate employability and are developed through experiences such as work based learning placements. Bridgstock and Jackson (2019) focus on a connectedness learning model highlighting the importance of connections within employability. Five areas of capital are identified in Tomlinson's Graduate Capital Model (2017), including the development of social capital. This has been built on by Pham and Soltani (2021), exploring the concept of agentic capital – where learners are able to access and use different capital in ways that are best for them at different stages of their employability journeys. Opportunities for development in these areas of capital is needed and learner agency is needed to navigate through (Pham & Soltani, 2021) thereby highlighting the importance of these experiences for all throughout higher education to develop and support this. The Understanding Skilled Practice, Efficacy beliefs and Metacognition (USEM) model of employability (Knight & Yorke, 2002) reinforces the importance of learner agency in their employability, that needs to be supported within work-based learning experiences.

## Implications of findings for Higher Education

Having a disability or working part-time with or without a disability has a significant impact on individual capital and agency, which is crucial for employability and career development (Dalrymple et al., 2021). The findings in this study support organisations to recognise their responsibility and role in the advice and guidance to facilitate individual agency. Support can be provided by considering the working environment and culture towards accessibility with a broad lens and supporting education and empowerment within the HE and working environment. If individuals do not declare their disability, or do not have access to the relevant information to build understanding and confidence to declare their disability, their ability to take control of their employability journeys will be impacted. The reported stigma, both in the literature and reported in this project, impacts on confidence and self-efficacy and yet these are an important part of learning as they support individuals to be able to constructively judge their abilities and the route to achieve their aspirations and goals. This feeds directly into learner agency.

Work based learning experiences during studies are key to support employability (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2022; Thompson & Brewster, 2022) and are a statutory aspect of Medicine and Health programmes within this project. Work based-learning placements are important to build learner confidence to navigate themselves through the complex world of work (Bennett, 2019) and in maximising opportunities to develop a range of employability related capital (Tomlinson, 2017). However, if there are challenges for learners to access work related experience during their programmes or challenges experienced on any HE work related placement experiences, this will impact the development of individual learner's employability confidence and journey of transition into the workplace. This further highlights another crucial advocacy role within HE to support the learner and placement provider navigation.

## Strengths and limitations

The strengths of this study include the mixed methods design and the diverse recruitment of population groups. Limitations include the low response rate to the survey, and the lack of demographic information collected to make clear 'within-group voices' of potentially marginalised or participants who may be affected by intersectionality (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996). However, the results provide transferable insights to take forward in the development of a supportive programme for current learners and recent graduates who have a disability, have a disability and are considering part-time work, or who are considering part-time work. Due to the anonymisation of survey responses, the project group were unable to offer member-checking to participants both in their responses or from our analysis.

Given the project group lead's Faculty role within Employability, and their part-time hours of work, we acknowledge the potential influence this may have in the survey question designs and qualitative analysis. The project group has worked as a team throughout, offering ample opportunities to express multiple perspectives and balance the analysis where necessary.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

Combining the results from the current study with the wider literature on challenges facing learners and graduates with a disability and those considering part-time positions, the following recommendations have been identified for future research, or HE practice:

- Academics and career advisory staff to recognise the importance of fully understanding learner readiness to engage with employability. Understanding this will lead to greater support for learners during their HE studies, to develop understanding and confidence and therefore self-efficacy and agency to navigate themselves through any challenges that they may encounter.
- Creating a safe space to empower learners, applicants and employees to disclose and discuss their needs in a timely manner.
- Clear and transparent culture towards part-time work and recruitment processes to include options around part-time working/flexible working patterns being routinely included as part of job descriptions.
- Awareness and education of both employers and staff to broaden the perspective of the varied nature of living with a disability and the ways in which this may impact on someone's working life; particularly in relation to hidden disabilities.

## Future areas of work of the project team

Results from this study have identified important considerations for the transition of learners and graduates into the workplace. This includes information and support around the key themes identified to reduce these challenges and provide more equity employability for graduates. In response, the project team are developing an information and support programme, which will be housed by an online course provider. It will be evaluated for its impact and to inform future development of content.

## Conclusion

This study, coupled with the existing evidence base, provides a greater understanding of the challenges that those with a disability or those wanting to pursue part-time work may face not only upon graduation but also during their time in HE. The study highlights the responsibilities of all involved with HE provision, and the importance of collaboration with employers to inform, educate and advocate for all learners to maximize employability opportunities and transition into employment. Policy and practice in this area should quality assure the robustness of the support and structures



aiming to meet individual needs, including education to empower and facilitate individual agency, as well as reviewing the visibility and accessibility of resources.

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