Vocational education and training (VET) career pathways for school students living with disability: Working with employers

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Abstract

Research has shown that employers and industry are key partners in work-based learning and can hinder or enhance access to vocational education training (VET). Our capabilities approach focus concerns increasing employer understanding of what is involved in engaging in the work-based component of school-based VET for students with disability. It seeks to identify enhancers and barriers to both employer and student participation in work-based learning in workplaces and strategies to address the barriers. Using a qualitative approach, this interpretive research aims to answer the following principal question: How can employers, students, teachers and other influencers of student education and career pathway choice work together to increase opportunities for successful participation of students with disability in the work-based component of school-based VET? Employers and staff at organisations that support/place school-based VET students with disabilities were interviewed and inductive content analysis was used to code interview transcripts. Findings indicate that while communication and relationships are key factors in ensuring successful work-based learning placements, lack of understanding related to the spectrum of disability can be a barrier. Interview participants also identified workplace and policy barriers. Addressing the implications of our research findings will assist in increasing the willingness of employers to engage in work-based learning for school VET students with disability. This shift in practise has the potential to develop the workforce of the region and create greater breadth of opportunities for work-based learning in the community for school VET students with disability, leading to improved employment outcomes for people with disability.

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, the Australian education system has seen an increase in the number of students participating in vocational education and training (VET) in schools programs (VETiS) (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2021). These programs, which are now an integral part of the Australian education system, began in the 1990s with a mandate from the 1999 Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century. They have the specific aim of enabling students to undertake nationally accredited VET programs (including part-time apprenticeships and traineeships) alongside programs that enable them to complete their secondary school certificates. VETiS programs, which are also called school-based VET, or VET for secondary school students, can

lead to accredited VET qualifications and are designed to provide a seamless pathway into skilled work or further education (Circelli & Siekmann, 2022). Over time, Tasmania, where our research was conducted, has had the highest proportion of students in Australia participating in VET in schools programs (Misko et al., 2017).

Research has shown that employers and industry are key partners in work-based or work integrated learning and further, are looking for work ready graduates from higher education and VET programs (Edwards et al., 2015; Atkinson, 2016). Employers can hinder or enhance access to VET (Atkinson, 2016) because VET placements require a nominated workplace supervisor and for students to be assessed for competencies demonstrated in the workplace, and employers can be uncertain of what is required of them in VET and higher education work-based learning placements (Jackson et al., 2017). This uncertainty is likely to be heightened when considering placements for students with disability and is well documented in the literature (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Eckstein, 2022; Kaye et al., 2011; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008; Stone & Colella, 1996).

In the context of growing regional workforce shortages, this research focuses on increasing employer and industry understanding of what is involved in engaging in one potentially challenging area of work placements: the work-based component of school-based VET for students with disability (Circelli & Siekmann, 2022). The site of the research is a Tasmanian regional city which, like much of regional Australia is experiencing high numbers of vacancies for occupations requiring VET qualifications (Regional Australia Institute, 2022a). The aims of this project were two-fold. First, it sought to identify barriers and enhancers to both employer and student participation in work-based learning in workplaces in a regional city in order to develop strategies to address the barriers. Second, it sought to increase the willingness of employers to engage in work-based learning for school VET students with disability by developing practical guidelines that answer common employer questions and provide easy access to a range of resources to support employers and students.

VET generally incorporates work placements, which are frequently part of an employment arrangement whereby the apprentice/trainee is expected to remain with the employer once qualified (Clarke, 2014, 2015). Work placements have been found to create positive employment outcomes for students with and without disability (Thoresen et al., 2021). Employers are therefore often considering a long-term relationship when hosting a student with disability on work placement. Many higher education degrees also have work placements, for example, engineering, health (Osborne, 2021). Research has found that work placements contribute to graduate capitals, attributes, and skills and thus, graduate employability (Tomlinson, 2017). Therefore, the results of this research are expected to be applicable to potential employers of higher education and VET graduates.

Context

As the Australia economy is shifting due to globalisation, changes in technology and more recently, COVID-19 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a, 2022b), there have been increasing calls to strengthen vocational pathways for senior secondary school students. Nationally, in 2019, the Joyce Review (Joyce, 2019) recommended strengthening the VET system to ensure it delivers the skills students, job seekers, and employers need to succeed in the shifting economy. Among the six key priorities identified, and specifically relevant to this research, are a better careers information, clearer secondary school pathways, and greater access for disadvantaged Australians. In 2020, the Shergold and Firth Reviews (Firth, 2020; Shergold et al., 2020) were released by the Australian and Victorian governments respectively. The Shergold Review focused on senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training and provided recommendations on how senior secondary students can be supported to choose pathways into work, further education or training that will best suit their needs while the Firth Review focused on VET pathways for senior secondary school students in Victoria. This review's recommendations aimed to ensure access to high-quality vocational and applied learning options and to improve transitions between school, post-secondary education and work. It is clear there is a mandate in Australia to improve VET pathways in order to best prepare students for their careers.

In Tasmania, the Tasmanian Government's Premier's Disability Advisory Council (Department of Education, 2020) has highlighted the need to promote inclusive workplaces and increase opportunities for people with disability, noting that Tasmania has highest rate of disability in Australia at 26.8% (Premier's Disability Advisory Council, 2020). Parallel to these calls for action at the national and state level and high rate of disability, Tasmania is currently experiencing worker shortages for key industries. For example, the Southeast of Tasmania has shown the biggest annual jump in job vacancies nationwide at 42.7% in July 2022 (Regional Australia Institute, 2022b). Our research aimed to create solutions to address both this worker shortage and the need to increase opportunities for people with disability.

Finally, it should be noted that we have been guided by Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach. Expanding on Sen (1985), who proposed that capability is a function of well-being and agency, Nussbaum provides a list of ten central capabilities and argues that society should focus on what a person is capable of being and doing. While initial work was focused on women, the central list of capabilities can be adapted to fit other contexts; Nussbaum (2002) has also applied her theory to people living with disability and suggests that society should support people with disability to achieve their full potential. Indeed, Wynne Bannister and Venkatapuram (2020) argue that Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006), the right to live a community as an equal member, is grounded in Nussbaum's capabilities approach. Burchardt (2004) points out that the capabilities framework is also complimentary to the social model of disability, which emphasises the need to change society (e.g. systems, language, processes) to fit the individual, rather than focusing on disability as a personal, individual misfortune. With this logic, it follows that societal barriers can and should be dismantled and overcome. This philosophical underpinning allows us to assume that a person's capabilities should be valued, and society should seek to enhance pathways to employment for persons with disability.

Methods

Using a qualitative approach, this interpretive research sought to answer the following principal question: How can employers, industry groups, and schools, as influencers of student education and career pathway choice, work together to increase opportunities for successful participation of students with disability in the work-based component of school-based VET? The following sub-questions were also addressed:

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

A phased approach was used to implement our research (Figure 1). Nine interviews were conducted via Zoom with six employers and three school-based VET coordinators who support/place school-based VET students with disability in Tasmania, some of whom disclosed they were living with disability. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Inductive content analysis (Thomas, 2006) was used to code interview transcripts and identify emerging themes. Based on the interviews, a literature review and input from an advisory group, opportunities and barriers were identified. From these, draft guidelines were developed and validated with employers hosting or planning to host school-based VET students for work-based learning experiences. Further feedback from employers and the advisory group was incorporated into the guidelines.
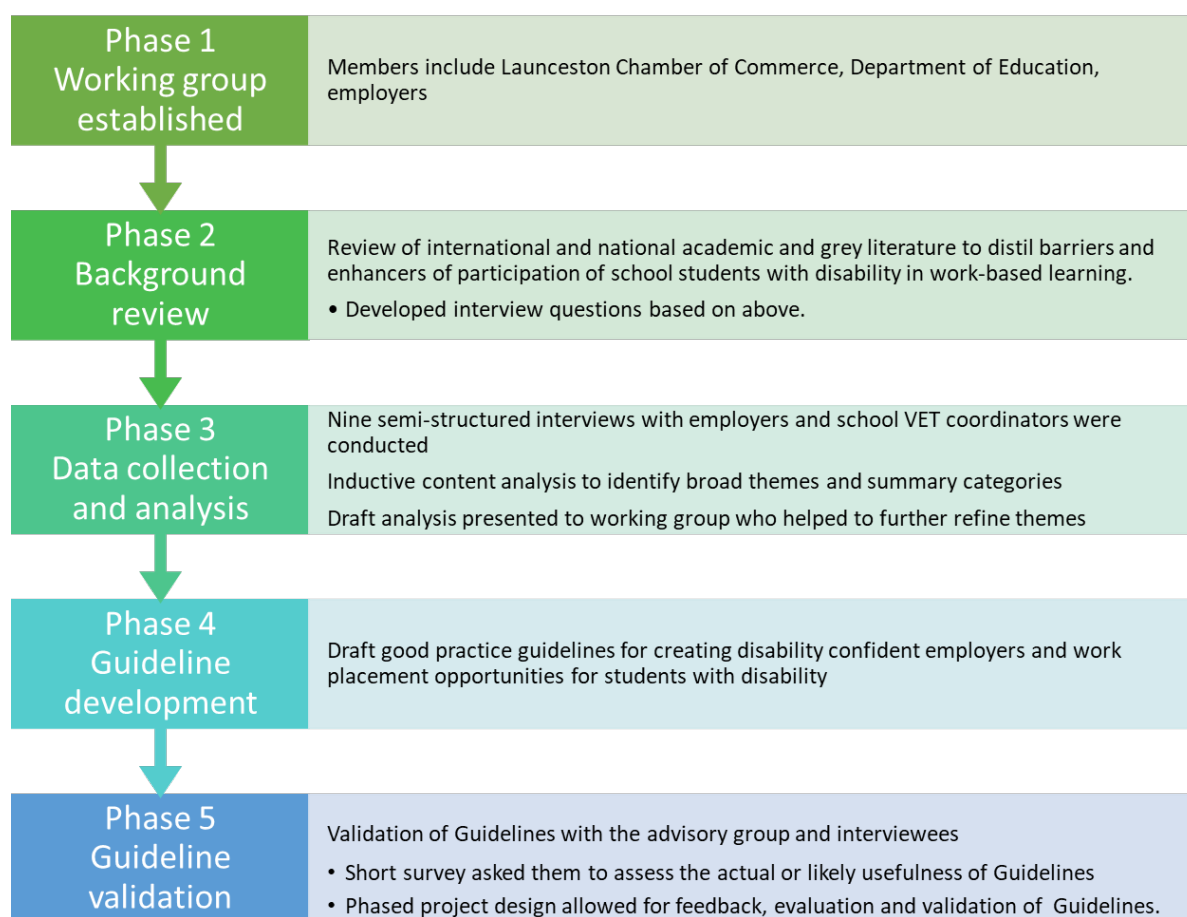
Phase 1 Working group established	Members include Launceston Chamber of Commerce, Department of Education, employers
Phase 2 Background review	Review of international and national academic and grey literature to distil barriers and enhancers of participation of school students with disability in work-based learning. • Developed interview questions based on above.
Phase 3 Data collection and analysis	Nine semi-structured interviews with employers and school VET coordinators were conducted Inductive content analysis to identify broad themes and summary categories Draft analysis presented to working group who helped to further refine themes
Phase 4 Guideline development	Draft good practice guidelines for creating disability confident employers and work placement opportunities for students with disability
Phase 5 Guideline validation	Validation of Guidelines with the advisory group and interviewees • Short survey asked them to assess the actual or likely usefulness of Guidelines • Phased project design allowed for feedback, evaluation and validation of Guidelines.

Figure 1: *The Phased Approach to Our Research*

This project, was part of a larger grant entitled *National Career Development Learning Hub for students with disability* (H0026449 (H-83707), funded by the National Careers Institute in 2021. The project outlined in this article was approved by the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee on 11 November 2021.

The next section presents the findings only and includes quotes from the employers reproduced unedited and in full. Each of the quotes are followed by a pseudo name of the participant and the role they occupy: employers (EMP) or school-based VET coordinators (SVC).

Findings

In general, our findings indicate that while communication and relationships are key factors in ensuring successful work-based learning placements, lack of understanding about the spectrum of disability can be a barrier. Interview participants also identified workplace barriers such as lack of time to train staff and students, internal organisation disconnects, and potentially unsafe physical spaces as additional barriers. Equally, policy barriers such as lack of funding, lack of awareness of policies and incentives regarding workplace training and policy impacts that are negligible or hinder efforts were also identified in interviews. In addition to the guidelines, interview participants made suggestions for best practices in terms of knowledge of disability and communication as well as for policy and system approaches. Most findings are not related specifically to the nature of VET courses, nor to the age of students so may be transferable to work integrated learning placements in higher education, and employment of graduates from VET and higher education courses. This section first focuses on findings related to what works, then on barriers and finally on themes that emerged around best practices and suggestions for the future.

What works

Relationships and connections

Participants agreed that relationships and connections were an important element in ensuring successful work-based learning experiences. As previous research (Kilpatrick et al., 2017) has found, individual champions often played a pivotal role in facilitating positive placement experiences. One participant explained,

> *If you've got people that are really prepared to and want to give these participants the best experience that they can, then that's what the outcome will be. But by and large, I don't necessarily think that most employers are particularly interested in that…it's not a broad-spectrum willingness from employers to do it. But individual champions and people with personal connections to disability sector, and then these organisations that are focused wholly with the disability sector that are trying to create new programs or grow their profile and make sure that everybody knows that this is what they're doing, and this is why they're doing it. When you get those people on board, then I think the outcomes are really good. (Thao, EMP)*

In addition, several participants explained that employers with personal connections to disability, such as an employee or the person coordinating the placement, were often a catalyst for a successful experience. Employers of small businesses must maintain business viability.

> *[An employer who engages] with this kind of thing may well have a personal connection to someone with a disability, or they know someone, or they've, you know, had a child or a friend that's had an acquired brain injury. And they have that personal connection to it. And so, I think that would be what would let them see enough value in employing a person with a disability, to then go and engage and do it. (Thao, EMP)*

The high rate of people living with disability in Tasmania meant there often was someone with a personal connection to disability on staff. While the high rate of disability in Tasmania is reported in government documents (Premier's Disability Advisory Council, 2020), interview participants described how this translated to increased consideration in the community. One participant explained: 'Tasmania has 27.5% of the population with a disability anyway, [so] most families have some exposure and really quite profound exposure around disability needs. So, on the ground, they're probably more willing and understanding and empathetic' (Pat, SVC).

Communication

Clear communication was a theme that cut across all areas of our findings. Interview participants described the importance of information flowing between all parties involved in a work-based learning experience, communication between students and their school, between school and employer and between student and employer. For example, communicating plans and clear instructions at the start of the day and a general debrief at the end of the day were especially beneficial.

> *Some of the things that worked well for us is definitely the repetition, of having the repetition in the days. And having a team meeting at the beginning of the day and letting anyone know what things were going to be different, approximately what time we were breaking for lunch, like, setting up structure for the day… and teams function well when we have team meetings. (Chris, EMP)*

> *…especially in open employment, is actually the ability for the employee or the work experience person to be able to debrief at the end of the day and reflect on what's actually happened and be reassured that they're doing a good job. (Santosh, EMP)*

Interview participants stressed the importance of ensuring realistic information is provided to students about workplace environment.

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

> We are also able to inculcate to the students through our training, what the workplace really looks like. So, we don't give them unrealistic expectations about what particular industry jobs are like. And if areas are going to be quite hard, that they actually have a good understanding of that… that's really important. (Pat, SVC)

Employers found that students who are clear on their barriers and able to communicate these are better placed for a successful experience.

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

Employers also explained that students should be aware of support options available.

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

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

Pat (SVC) echoed these sentiments by saying 'If they do need support, not just with us, but when they're out in the workplace …, what their rights are around access to support within employment, and how they can access that. So, ensuring students are aware.'

Workplace factors

Within the workplace, participants explained that employers should recognise that everyone is different and tailor plans to each individual.

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

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

In addition, one interview participant explained that individualised support/dedicated support staff onsite contributed to success.

If we have somebody come in, they're… designated to one person, with the support of another person. So, we want to make sure that they're okay when they come in, and we'll generally try and pick our more senior team that can work with that person, or someone that we think will relate quite well to them. So, there is a fair bit of thought put into who they will work with and what their position will look like when they're here and what they will do. (Charlie, EMP)

Policy and system

In terms of what works well from a policy or systemic perspective, interview participants again spoke about the importance of developing relationships and networks. One mechanism noted as useful was for school coordinators to develop a small group of safe employers where students can be placed.

We have a system that we follow, a workplace database that we know we can send particular kids to these workplaces…We've got about four or five definite businesses that will take on students from our college with a disability. They've done it for years and they're really supportive in doing that. Those businesses are rotated so most students, if they are capable, are able to get on a work placement, which is awesome. (Shannon, SVC)

Interview participants also described specific programs that worked well. One person described how short term work experience prior to longer placement experience can be beneficial.

We did facilitate work experience for students or what we called then Day in the Life. So we did days' worth of experience versus a set five-day work experience for students with disability. We also did a lot of exposure opportunities versus the official work placement or more vocational placement. (Shannon, SVC)

In addition to that, interview participants also described their own lack of awareness of policies and incentives regarding supporting people with disability in the workplace and training opportunities for how to do so. When asked about the impact of current policies and funding opportunities, either at the state or federal level, in supporting or hindering the outcomes of students with disability, most interview participants explained that they felt like they did not know enough about the various policies and incentives to answer the question or that the policies and programs in place did not have much impact. Ha (EMP) admitted: 'To be honest, I probably don't have enough knowledge to be able to answer that accurately. I'd be making up an answer. I'm not, I wouldn't know the answer to that.' Finally, Charlie (EMP) said 'So, again, I don't know. It's not really my area of expertise.'

But given those types of programs may only be, out in the community, may only be project based for a year, that would, it wouldn't be consistent that that happens every year. It would be based on what's happening. (Pat, SVC)

I hate to sound cynical, but speaking from the employer's standpoint, beyond some financial incentive, beyond a personal connection or just a genuine drive for it, there are not a lot of incentives. It can be difficult. It can be hard to manage. And it can definitely fail or not work as well as people might hope. (Thao, EMP)

Finally, while several participants found current government incentives to have a negligible, if any, impact, two participants described how funding programs would be beneficial.

> *Businesses would probably be more open to it if there was some form of funding to support them going into. So, whether it's, like, a traineeship grant or whether, depending on the disability, whether it's someone that can work with them. I suppose that sort of depends on whether you need to remodel your office. Is there funding for that, , if you've got stairs and you need a lift, or whatever it might be... trainees coming out of school, there's the government funding for that kind of thing. And I think businesses are a lot more open to that. Because, obviously, you know, it comes with risk. None of us want any extra risk than we have to already have. So, if there's some funding and risk management programs available, I think they'd probably be a lot more open to that. (Charlie, EMP)*

> *I would like to see [time to train and support students in the workplace] being incentivised from the government…, employers being supported to reach out into this community. …the community having more visibility as an abled workforce, as a potential abled workforce… Not everyone's wanting full [time] employment, it'd be a great sector to pull from during summer holidays and labour shortages…, it was my understanding from the handful of participants I worked with that, most of their needs are met through Centrelink or whatever. And so, they don't necessarily need the income. They just want to feel included and a part of the community. And so… especially when you talk about food and hospitality [it] is beneficial for everybody. (Chris, EMP)*

Barriers

Knowledge of disability

One of the most frequently described barriers was the lack of understanding of the spectrum of types of disabilities. Interview participants described a common misunderstanding amongst employers in general that the term disability solely referred to a physical disability. Disabilities that are not visible were often not considered as the two quotes below explain.

> *When you said to your average person, what does it mean for an individual to have a disability? They'd probably, their associations probably jump all the way to that hard end of the spectrum, you know. Wheelchairs, autism, Downs Syndrome. …What constitutes a disability these days is a really broad spectrum. So, you go to someone and say, take on a student with a disability, they go, no way, too hard. (Thao, EMP)*

> *I think that there is a really easy trap to fall into around intellectual disability versus physical disability. It happens a lot. I was using a roller the other day. I'm a Mensa member. And I was using a roller the other day at the hospital, and someone leaned down to my level and said, do you know where you're going, pet? Because I had a roller. So clearly, I must be intellectually disabled. (Robin, EMP)*

Interview participants explained that another barrier to employers hosting students with disability was that people were afraid of saying the wrong thing and in turn, upsetting people. They also described a perception that hosting a student with disability was too hard.

> *I think people will probably view individuals with a disability as a bit delicate or they don't know how to handle them, or that they fear upsetting them or upsetting the broader community with some insensitive words or language or comments or handling or behaviour around people with a disability. All these kinds of things. If you've got no experience with someone with a disability*

and no understanding of what their behaviour might be and what your behaviour needs to be to make sure that they're, everybody's okay, then again, it falls just into that too hard, too difficult thing…the risk of upsetting the individual or the community or someone with some insensitive behaviour would be one of those barriers. (Thao, EMP)

As far as barriers for employers… it's actually things around what you can and can't do. You know, things like restrictive practices, as an example. Within the disability service industry, it's an absolute nightmare. So, yeah, just what can you do, what are you allowed to say, what are you, what shouldn't you say. Because as an example with the young man that was dangerous in the workplace, if he was put into an open employer out in the community, without the right support mechanisms in place, that employer could have found himself in jail. (Santosh, EMP)

Coupled with this, interview participants explained employers need more help understanding the needs of students with disability.

I think the big thing for us is to help understand the challenges that they have and how we can best support them. So, for them to be successful and for us to be successful, it's really about a frank and open conversation about how we can help support them. And we have examples of that at the moment, you know, where there are people going through some challenges or some issues and all that we ask is that they be open and transparent. So, we're an organisation that is definitely supportive. Everyone has challenges. There's no doubt about that. But I think, for us as an organisation, the next evolution is to become more aware of how we can help support that. So, really, we need a framework or we need guidance from whoever it may be to help lead us and help support us on that journey. (Ha, EMP)

In addition, interview participants explained that another barrier involved potential host employers being wary of taking on additional risk, both financial and legal.

[The employer] had a student with, and this is, again, some people won't say it's a disability, but I certainly class it as a disability when it comes to the extreme, a student with ADHD. That student got onto a forklift, after being instructed a dozen times not to get onto the forklift, and actually rolled the forklift and died. But that employer got taken to court and got fined several hundred thousand dollars, I believe. So, do you reckon that employer would every employ a person with a disability ever again? (Santosh, EMP)

Finally, in terms of the lack of understanding of disability as a barrier, interview participants spoke about how they have found online learning modules that aim to provide support by improving employers' understanding of disability not to be effective. They explained that any information provided must be easily accessible.

It's really about the support that can be provided to an employer. Now, let's be honest. If it's a small business that's a mum and dad business or whatever, having a manual or a range of online learning tools or whatever that's going to take several hours or days for the person to go through, they're not going to do it. It's as simple as that, because it's, they are, that's enough to maybe send a person broke in a small business. So, the information has to be provided in a format that's very easy. (Santosh, EMP)

There's been lots of these types of projects over the years…. But they don't tend to get past the report stage or the, you know, we've provided these pamphlets that they're going to give to employers. But they don't, it doesn't follow on... And it's like, oh, this is just another one of those programs. (Santosh, EMP)

Workplace factors

Building on the above, interview participants discussed factors specific to the workplace environment. One of these was employers not having enough time to train students or staff to support students as they do their tasks.

> *The main [barrier] is employers not being able to put enough time, to spend the appropriate amount of time to train the person and, bring them into their workplace, induct them effectively…And employers, even those with the absolute best intentions, need to be able to have a profit at the end of the day. And… that's going to be one of the biggest negatives. (Santosh, EMP)*

> *But as someone in small business, as someone who doesn't have any employees at the moment, who would love to employ someone, I would need the support and time to bring a person in to train them. And if the government or someone wanted to support me in that, I would be so happy to have a person with intellectual disability as a part of my team. …But as a small business, where the hell am I going to get that extra time and money, because it requires more training…. (Chris, EMP)*

Another possible workplace barrier in larger businesses is a disconnect between administrators, who want to access the available government incentives, and people on the ground working with students with disability.

> *In a bigger business where you've got a person who's making these decisions… let's go and take on half a dozen of these individuals with disabilities in our workplace, because look, there's this incentive for us to do so. That person who's made that decision and gets those employees on board is not the person that has to train them, work with them on the ground, interact with them, etc…. maybe a better connection between decision makers and the employees on the ground is necessary. (Thao, EMP)*

Interview participants explained that the physical workspace itself can be restrictive and serve as a barrier for employers considering whether to host a student with disability. This barrier applies to both physical and non-physical disabilities. For example, one participant noted that 'If you've got only a small employer, just even the physical space-wise, where you, if you've got too many people there it makes it difficult to actually undertake the task' (Santosh, EMP).

> *If he jumps on that machine over there, he'll probably end up in little pieces at the bottom of the machine... The other real element [is] around safety. You have someone, say, on the spectrum or someone that has OCD type tendencies that might like to touch things. So, we've got a young man that we've had to do a lot of work with around him wanting to touch… So, if he's going from one place to another, once he learns one way of doing it, that's the way he goes all the time. And he'll rub his hand along every shelf, every piece of linen, everything from point A to point B. And even if point A to B, the direct route might be five steps. But if he's actually been the other way and it's 50 steps, that's the way he'll go… Or we had another young guy that ended up not being suitable for our workplace. But he would want to run out the door into the traffic. Or he'd want to just charge through the workplace, I'm going down there, so then I'm just going to head off. And it didn't matter whether there was anything dangerous in his way. (Santosh, EMP)*

These quotes also demonstrate that workplace safety issues can be increased for a student with disability.

Policy and system

Within the realm of policy and systems, interview participants described policy that encouraged employers to take on VET students but did not include funding or resources they need to host students with disability.

> [Because of] the funding that's come through lately around apprenticeships and traineeships and school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, there's been a massive boom in students being able to attain an apprenticeship... none of that funding, really, supports students with disability… We've had a lot of students, hindered by that, because they have left school into an apprenticeship and they've returned three months later, because they weren't particularly ready for it or they took the first opportunity that was given to them. I don't think the employer really thought it through either. …I feel like the current policies around students with disability are probably too broad. They're just packaged in with everybody. And yes, inclusion is really important, equity is really important. But we do know that in order to be equitable, we do need to provide different resources to different scenarios, different people, different programs, in order for equity to be real... In actual fact, there's cohorts of students, students with disability being one of them, that can be disadvantaged. (Shannon, SVC)

Interview participants also described their own lack of awareness of policies, training opportunities and incentives regarding supporting people with disability in the workplace. When asked about the impact of current state or federal policies and funding opportunities, most interview participants explained that they did not know enough about that subject to answer. Chris (EMP) for example said: 'Yeah. Well, I guess, I don't know, I don't feel like I know enough to really answer that question, I'm so sorry.'

Those participants who were aware of current policies and funding opportunities suggested that policy impacts were negligible or even hindered efforts to support positive outcomes for students with disability.

> I hate to sound cynical, but speaking from the employer's standpoint, beyond some financial incentive, beyond a personal connection or just a genuine drive for it, there are not a lot of incentives. It can be difficult. It can be hard to manage. And it can definitely fail or not work as well as people might hope. (Thao, EMP)

Pat (SVC) highlighted that '… given those types of programs may only be out in the community, may only be project based for a year, that would, it wouldn't be consistent that that happens every year.'

Best-practice suggestions

Finally, interview participants were asked about what they would like to see implemented as best practice to create disability confident employers and employment opportunities for people with disability. Communication and information sharing was consistently highlighted as a priority. A pre-work placement communication mechanism and simple guidelines for employers were suggested.

School-student-employer communication mechanism

The need for a formalised communication mechanism for helping students to communicate about their disability and for schools to be able communicate with employers pre-work placements was highlighted. It should be noted that disclosure is the choice of the student, as enshrined in the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to which Australia is a signatory. However, there is not currently a formal system in place in Tasmania if a student does choose to disclose their disability. While a student may disclose their disability to their school, the school cannot in turn disclose that information to a host employer without the student's permission. The current situation relies on students to take the initiative to disclose and assumes that the student can effectively

communicate their needs and abilities. Both employers and coordinators explained that it would be helpful to have a system in place that supported information exchange should the student decide to disclose.

> *You need to say, okay, this is Anna. And she's got these things and she's coming to your workplace to do this, this and this. This is how you best need to handle that. She needs quiet places, she doesn't like tactile touch, she is best focused on repetitive tasks or tasks with very specific instructions. Whereas, you know, a different person with a different set is going to be handled differently to that. So, tailoring, I think, tailoring individuals to the workplace with good guidelines about how to manage their specific disabilities would be a great place to start…This kind of consideration about how to best accommodate, and that kind of process that's individualised [such as at a university], that's not happening in industry. Not to the best of my knowledge. (Thao, EMP)*

> *So, disclosure-wise, because they come to [senior secondary school] from a high school, we don't have that … data, where we've had a student for four years or we know that primary schools talk to high schools... So, quite often, we get presented with students that we don't know had a disability until they turned up on Day 1. (Shannon, SVC)*

> *When I'm organising work placement, it's simply just having the conversation with the work placement host confidentially and just explaining what the situation is and then working with that work placement host to kind of, how can we set up this work placement. This is what the student is required to do. But how can we set it up in such a way that they're being given opportunity to meet the assessment criteria as well. (Kim, SVC)*

Guidelines for employers

Employers and school-based VET coordinators alike highlighted the need for a real set of instructions or guidelines to help employers support students with disability they are hosting.

> *Guidelines would be fantastic. A program, a pilot program for something more long-term would be fantastic to see, on how, schools can support that connectedness to work. So, what we could be doing in schools to support business or employers. And then, how can employers be supported and educated best would be really good to see as well... it's one thing to have a guideline or something documented around how we can do this. It's another thing for that to be resourced and actually driven within a school or driven with workplaces. (Shannon, SVC)*

Interviewees suggested guidelines include a simple description of what disability can look like in the workplace, and how best to prepare for and respond to different manifestations of disability.

> *Awareness of whatever the disability is, in really simplistic terms. I think, making [guidelines] as user-friendly as we possibly can is probably my advice for that. So, don't make it too complex. But give us an idea of what their challenges may be, what the signs are as well… I think as a society, we're getting better at understanding the cues. But they're not always visible. So, what we may see as one thing could be actually something completely different. So, I think some really simplistic guidelines or cues as to what to look out for, depending on the concern would be really helpful. (Ha, EMP)*

> *A specific framework for workplaces to give to employers and saying this is why and this is how this is going to work, that'd be a great place to start... And number two, it could be that in that framework there needs to be some pretty specific or disability-specific guidelines for what will be most productive for that person with that disability. So, someone with a physical disability is*

going to have different needs to someone with a Downs Syndrome or with a hearing impairment or whatever it happens to be. So, some pretty specific guidelines for how each disability needs to be handled in the workplace. (Thao, EMP)

Another theme that emerged in the interviews related to the need for these guidelines to include employer perspectives about what worked well for them. This could be in the form of short case studies showing what others are doing in this space.

It would be wonderful to see case studies, to see what other registered training organisations might be doing in that space. Some… from the employers' perspective, some of those workplaces, perhaps larger organisations that are actively involved in this space... Because when I'm having those initial conversations, setting up the work placements, then I can take snippets from those best practice case studies and take that information to the work placement supervisor, the work placement host... That would give me better knowledge to have the conversation with the workplaces, the employers, to say, hey, this particular student is living with this particular disability. This is what we could do to help better support you so that we're supporting the student to achieve success while on work placement. (Kim, SVC)

A local support network

In terms of ongoing support, a number of the participants suggested a need for a network to assist employers, students and co-workers/staff.

I'd really like to see a support network there. For everyone, not just for the participant, but for the workplace and also the co-workers. If you have got somebody coming into your office with a disability, I think it's really important to give the existing team some coaching and mentoring around the person that's coming in and the disability that they're going to be faced with, and give them some supporting techniques and tools, that they can also cope with it. Because it's not just about the person coming in. You've also got to foster the team that you've got and develop that. (Charlie, EMP)

Discussion

Over time, there has been a shift from a medical model of disability to the social model of disability (Burchardt, 2004). Our findings are consistent with Ebuenyi et al. (2020) who recently identified both cultural and structural barriers for VET students with disability. They found the confusion over whether mental health conditions are considered a disability to be a key barrier to employers accepting people with disability. Contrary to the UNCRPD (Article 1) (United Nations, 2006), which includes both physical and mental impairments to be disabilities, many of their study participants did not consider mental health and intellectual impairments to be disabilities. Whilst understandings of disability are linked to cultural attitudes and beliefs (Kirmayer & Minas, 2000), studies from a variety of cultures (e.g. ours, Ebuenyi et al., 2020; Osorio & Barbazán, 2019) have found a similar confusion. These findings suggest the need to resolve possible misunderstandings with clear, concise communication. In addition to the cultural barriers, the current structural complexities of (a) policy (b) complexity of exiting supports (eg online modules and half/full day training sessions) and (c) lack of resources explicitly for disability in current VET policy incentives all present additional obstacles. All of these structural obstacles are inconsistent with the national jobs and training imperatives (Joyce, 2019) as well as society's moral obligation to be inclusive (Nussbaum, 2002).

Another area that needs more consideration is the topic of disclosure of disabilities. In his Dewey Lectures, Sen (1985) suggested that if information about A is equal to information about B then A and B should be treated the same. Using this logic, unless different information is provided, a student with disability who has not communicated this to their workplace learning host will likely be expected to

function in the same manner and with the same level of support as a student without disability, leading to suboptimal outcomes. The decision to disclose a known disability will likely depend on how an organisation is seen to treat those with disability (Nelissen et al., 2014). It follows that consideration should be given to organisational aspects of schools and workplaces that could be changed to facilitate disclosure in a non-threatening manner, which in turn will enable appropriate support and/or accommodation.

Disability awareness and the 'hidden' taboo of discussion of disability (Jolly-Ryan, 2010; Pitcher, 2020) are confounded by the problems of disclosure (fear of stigma, lack of a mechanism). While there was a clear lack of willingness by interview participants and potential interview participants to talk about disability likely due to a variety of fears, which in turn breeds discrimination and further stigma, there also lies opportunity within this situation. For example, the interviews conducted for this research provided an opportunity to have conversations about broad spectrum of disability. As the interviewer explained the variety of types of disability to employer interviewees, participants spoke more openly about their experiences and about the need to know more about the various types of disabilities.

Recommendations for Practice

To further facilitate the awareness raising discussed above, based on the findings above and a literature review, guidelines for employers were developed as a mechanism to empower employers to support students with disability in work placements (Kilpatrick & Fischer, 2023). These guidelines (Appendix A) contain four overarching recommendations for practice and are summarised here:

- Communication is key. Communicate with the school, your student, and your staff about the work placement.
- Ensure workplace culture is open and welcoming. An open and welcoming workplace culture contributes to successful work placements. Focus on both the social and physical/built aspects of your workplace.
- Understand the spectrum of disability and your student. Understanding the spectrum of disability and your student's needs helps. Tasmania has the highest rate of disability in Australia at 26.8% (Premier's Disability Advisory Council, 2020). It is very likely that there is already someone with disability already on your staff and/or staff have some exposure around disability needs through their personal lives.
- Make sure there is a good match between student and workplace. You should talk with your student to design the work placement if possible. Try to meet your student ahead of time, introduce them to your workplace, and discuss goals and supports; this leads to successful experiences.

We recommend that the guidelines be used by any employer looking to take on school-based VET students with disability early in the process and during the process of hosting these students. the use of the guidelines by employers and schools may assist in increasing the willingness of employers to engage in work-based learning for school VET students with disability. Such increased willingness will in turn develop the regional workforce. The use of the guidelines by schools will increase student and parent/carer understanding of what to expect and how to support students with disability to engage in work-based learning. This change will in turn, provide the opportunity for greater breath of opportunities for work-based learning in the community for school VET students with disability, again leading to possible improved employment outcomes for people with disability in the region. Skills shortages across the economy following the COVID 19 pandemic mean employers are looking for ways to access and train skilled workers. it is therefore timely to engage with business and industry groups to disseminate the guidelines to employers who are work placement hosts and employers of both VET and higher education students and graduates.

Conclusions and opportunities

An opportunity exists for influencing organisations to raise awareness about disability with a specific focus in two areas: first about the prevalence in Tasmania and second, about not all disabilities being visible. These two key messages may encourage potential employers to participate in hosting students with disability. Once potential employers recognise that they may already have staff living with disability or with personal connections to disability, they may feel more comfortable hosting a student with disability. Likewise, knowing that not all disabilities are physical disabilities, may lower the perceived level of risk associated with hosting a student with disability. There is also an opportunity to create forum and/or mechanisms for employers to share their experiences with other potential work placement hosts and each other through organisations including Chambers of Commerce. In terms of future research, incorporating the student perspective, including to investigate the burden on the student to disclose and facilitate effective communication in the workplace, would add more depth understanding.

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Appendix A: Guidelines for employers hosting students with disability in their workplace

https://www.adcet.edu.au/resource/11291/file/1