Editorial

Recognising and Reconceptualising Ability: Reflections on Disability and Employability

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Globally, students with disabilities are one of the fastest growing student equity cohorts. In Australia, for example, recent data indicates that 9% of all university students enrolled in the higher education sector indicated one or more disabilities (Department of Education, 2023a). Relatively high participation rates of students with disabilities are similarly reported across the globe, from the Global South to North America and European countries (Fichten et al., 2020; Mutanga, 2017; Yusof et al., 2020). Likely, those estimates are still far from representative, as research further continues to evidence how many students prefer not to disclose (Grimes et al., 2019) and therefore are not captured in data. In fact, if the university student population mirrored the general population, there could be as many in 1 in 6 students with disabilities, compromising almost 20% of the entire student population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

Yet despite growing recognition of the significant number of students at university who identify as 'with disabilities' (or in identity-first language as being 'disabled'), research findings suggest that their experiences are marred by inadequate support, potential stigmatisation, and unique barriers to success and completion (Dollinger, Finneran, et al., 2023; Kilpatrick et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021; Pitman, 2022). Particularly concerning are also findings that highlight the significant barriers students with disabilities face in developing their employability while at university, including barriers to participation in internships and placements (Dollinger, Ajjawi, et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2023; O'Shea et al., 2023), and a lack of nuanced disability-specific career development learning supports (O'Shea et al. 2022). Inadequate career development learning throughout university culminates when students with disabilities enter the graduate employment market; with research evidencing further barriers often relating to a lack of work experience or perceived employability (Eckstein, 2022; Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2020).

In this special issue we sought to bring attention to this critical intersection between disability and employability in the higher education sector. This is a particularly timely endeavour here in Australia with the development of a new Universities Accord underway. Funded by the Australian government, and led by university sector leaders, the interim Accord report states an aim to raise participation and completion rates in higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds and equity groups, including students with disabilities (Department of Education, 2023b). Yet as the report acknowledges, parity of student enrolment and completion is complex tasks. Limitations in the current student equity data, including the very 'blunt' and one-dimensional indicators used to map the

progress of students with disabilities hinders longitudinal, robust data that would drive practices. Further, as we have discussed previously, the very definitions of disability itself as a medical category is flawed, as increasingly disability is understood as a condition that spans biological, psychological, and social factors (Dollinger, Corcoran, et al., 2023). The papers in this special issue are designed to consider the complexity of graduate employment but have situated this understanding within the field of disability, in recognition of the unique and complicated settings that students with disabilities encounter.

As highlighted through the seven articles in this special issue, there are five main themes at the intersection of disability and employability research. All of the themes emphasise the ecological nature that connects disability and employability, or the ways in which contexts, practices, and peoples interact and relate to one another. Employability is not the responsibility of only the (disabled) student, nor does a 'lack' of employability represent any deficits within the (disabled) student. Rather, disability, either disclosed, partially disclosed, or withheld, interacts, weaves, and reverberates against the socially constructed background in which it is positioned. This view underscores the responsibility that all stakeholders have, from the university, to industry, to society to support inclusive employability that enables everyone to develop and enact relevant skills within the labour market. The themes foregrounded in this special issue also span theoretical and practical applications, accentuating the need for both dimensions of dialogue to progress a better understanding of how inclusion can be supported. Themes include:

1) Nuanced investigations and/or case studies of specific disabilities and work integrated learning contexts (e.g., Coffey & Lovegrove, 2023; Coney, 2023)
2) Conceptualisations of university practices or interventions to support inclusive employability (e.g., Szucs & Harpur, 2023; Taylor, 2023)
3) Practice and/or policy-based enablers and barriers towards inclusive employability (e.g., Tai, 2023),
4) Exploration of transition in and transition out pathways (e.g., Fischer & Kilpatrick, 2023)
5) Social constructions of inclusive employability (e.g., including influence of carers, industry supervisors) and the development of students' professional identities (e.g., Edwards & Sudlow-Haylett, 2023)

Each of these articles uniquely presents insights into key developments in the disability and employability space. This includes Coffey and Lovegrove's (2023) investigation into how career development learning programs and interventions can be designed to support the nuances within the spectrum of disabilities – and how the designs of these programs can/should incorporate student voices. Coney (2023) also provides an example from UK where a careers practitioner engages students through a participatory action research project to unpack how universities can best foster students' employability. In both of these studies, the findings discuss the sociocultural factors that influence students' outcomes and the ways in which holistically designed programs can facilitate safe environments for students to engage with peers in similar situations and as a result, form powerful connections and sources of ongoing support.

Szucs and Harpur's article (2023) extends the analysis of intentional design to the context of extracurricular programs in higher education, which are increasingly positioned as a mechanism to support students' employability. Yet as these authors point out, such programs often hold implicit assumptions about how students will choose to participate and may fail to incorporate adequate inclusion. Researching the healthcare sector specifically, Taylor also considers this inclusive/exclusive divide and evidences how work placement programs may unintentionally exclude due to limited flexibility and poor understanding of disability. The recommendations arising from this work include better awareness and education of both employers and staff as this relates to the lived experiences of those with disabilities.

Tai (2023) reflects on the need to move beyond reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities to instead incorporate inclusive assessment design. Given the rising rates of students with disabilities at universities, this article makes the case that it is now time for staff to reframe from reactive (i.e., making an adjustment) to proactively supporting inclusion. Fischer and Kilpatrick (2023) further contribute by incorporating the views of employers and industry, advocating that stronger industry-university partnerships are necessary to facilitate positive transitions and placements for students. Finally, a powerful piece from Edwards and Sudlow-Haylett (2023) introduces the concept of 'crip time' to consider disabled graduates' lived experiences of developing and enacting their employability. They suggest that ableism is still deeply embedded in the higher education sector and corresponding practices through conceptualisation of time, and the unhelpful assumption that time is universally experienced by all.

Through editing this special issue, we (the editorial team) reflected on principles which might support this research topic moving forward. To that end, we created a guidance note to support future research (please refer to the Appendix). In it, we outline the three key principles to support educational research in disability as being:

1) Importance of strengths-based framing of disability,

2) Supporting access and inclusion in publishing practices, and

3) Engaging in student partnership through various facets of the research process.

To illustrate how these principles arose, it was through the submission and review process of this special issue, that the editors and authors frequently engaged in dialogue about how to write up the experiences of and/or the conceptualisations of disability. As many articles shed a bright and enduring light on the stigmatisation and/or discrimination students experienced, how could authors accurately represent the views of participants without further disseminating these harmful perceptions? We further debated over how to appropriately problematise the intersection of disability and employability without inflating this intersection. For example, discussing the barriers that students with disabilities face in entering the labour market, while acknowledging that at least some of these barriers are experienced by all students. We equally contend that these issues may be more universal then is presupposed. Recognising the potential universality of these context, further troubles and exposes the inherent stratification that is embedded in employment practices and requirements.

The language of disability itself also emerged as a hotly contested topic, with some contributors preferring identity-first language (e.g., disabled student) and others preferring person-first (student with disabilities). As editors, we requested that all contributors refrain from any deficit lens of people with disabilities, for example language that placed all burden of navigating employability on the individual or indicated that students should 'overcome' their disabilities. We also communicated to authors to adhere to best practices for access and inclusion in their work. For example, including alt text for any graphs or visualisations. This was critical to ensure that the research, ideas, and discussion of this special issue could be available to all.

We also acknowledge the dynamism of discourses and practices around disability, and the individual preferences that accompany it, and invited authors to decide for themselves what language to use. Of course, in this vein, we also underscore to readers that many of the contributors in this special issue identify as disabled themselves. We welcomed this, and encouraged those with lived experiences to contribute, as we too believe that research should always include the voices of those who it matters most to and will most closely bear the impacts. We also warmly invited student partners to contribute, and we're fortunate enough to include the submission from Shona Kay Edwards and Alexandra Rose Sudlow-Haylett. As researchers who ourselves have partnered with students with lived experiences previously, we believe student-led insights and ideas as vital to advancing this field of research and working towards greater social justice.

Overall, through this special issue, we sought to advance the discussion about disability and employability from acknowledging the intersection's existence, to nuancing and exploring what universities can do to address it. We consider the work presented here as the start of a very important conversation that needs to occur, rather than the presentation of conclusions or exact recommendations. The data and research included emphasises the continued discrimination students with disabilities face in their employment, and importance of tackling systemic inequality with rigorous and targeted research and theorisation. We hope that the contributions will provoke further discussion in this field, recognising that discussion without appropriate action does little to ameliorate inequity or discrepancies in graduate outcomes.

Appendix: Guidance for Authors

To support inclusive writing and publishing standards in the discourse of students with disabilities and employability, we have included here the guidance note for authors that we distributed to the contributors of this special issue. We hope that future authors can also benefit from these principles and examples.

Principle 1. Ensuring Strengths-Based Framing

It is important for all authors to review submissions to ensure language aligns to a strengths-based framing of disability. Please check the manuscript thoroughly to identify any areas where authors may have unintentionally made assumptions about people with disabilities or included ableist language. This can include phrases like 'see below', or language that positions people with disabilities through a deficit lens. Below are a few examples with suggestions on how phrases could be rewritten.

Example	Explanation	Suggestion
Students with disabilities face challenges in their university experiences.	All students face challenges during university, therefore, this language needlessly 'others' students with disabilities.	Students with disabilities face unique challenges, such as requests for reasonable adjustment and stigma around disclosure (note: it is also important to also cite to research findings to evidence claims)
Students with disabilities should equip themselves with knowledge and skills that make them more employable.	It is unreasonable to place the full burden of employability on the individual, rather than the environment or society	One aspect that may support disabled students' employability are navigational capabilities that enable them to know their legal rights in the workplace.
Quote from participant: 'People with disabilities don't really need additional income as they get benefits from the government.'	While this is a piece of data, it reproduces ableist perspectives and does not align to well-evidenced research that people with disabilities receiving support from Centrelink may have a close proximity to poverty	If authors chose to use, then the issues with these assumptions should be clearly discussed in the paper. Depending on the severity of quotes that represent stigma or discrimination, the editorial team may also recommend a statement of harmful language at the beginning of your article to potential readers.

We also note that related to this principle is the contested topic of language of disability. Authors may choose to use person-first or identity-first language to refer to people with disabilities (or disabled people). If you are an author with lived experience of disabilities, please use the term you prefer. If you are an author without lived experience of disability, we encourage you to read about the differences of language and make an informed decision to support your choice. As an example of where you can learn more, you can visit: https://www.vic.gov.au/state-disability-plan/our-language/person-first-and-identity-first-language

Principle 2. Supporting Access and Inclusion in Publishing Practices

Authors may want to use graphs or visualisation of models or frameworks in their work. If so, please remember to have details alt text, to ensure that all readers will be able to access the papers. To learn more about alt text please visit: https://www.w3.org/WAI/tutorials/images/tips/

We also encourage authorship teams with contributors who have disabilities to consider how collaboration in the research team can ensure inclusion. For example, supporting various channels of communication, flexible work periods, and valuing a range of contributions and expertise to the project. Media outlets, such as academic journals, also should consider how to support a range of submission types, including student provocations, personal narratives or editorials, and/or videos or blogs as not all expertise is best communicated through a traditional scholarly journal article.

Principle 3. Engaging in Student Partnership

Similar to other equity research areas, the disability research discourse is improved through incorporation of those with lived experiences. We encourage authors to consider how they can authentically integrate lived experiences into research practices, and importantly, how this expertise will be harnessed to ensure that findings are accurately represented (i.e., avoid invalid inferences), and that the research itself is inclusive to participants with disabilities. We encourage authors to also explicitly unpack how they have supported inclusion and/or partnership in their research through the discussion of the research design.

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