

Employability and disability

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Project

'Employability and Disability' is a National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) funded project, led from the University of Worcester, which will run from February 2009 until January 2010. It offers a sector-wide initiative that aims to reduce discrimination and enhance disabled graduates' employability. It intends to achieve this by equipping disabled students with the skills to match employability competencies (Kubler et al, 2006), largely through enhancing academic and careers staff's knowledge and understanding about the potential challenges that disabled students may face in developing such skills. There are powerful ethical imperatives underpinning this initiative, as well as strong business, economic and legal cases for enhancing the employability of disabled students. This paper describes some of these key issues as well as the approaches that will be adopted to achieve the project's aims. For the purpose of this project, employability is understood as "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (Yorke, 2005, p. 8).

Background

Inevitably, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 features as a key driver for this project. Under the DDA a person is defined as disabled if he or she has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial, long-term and adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. The Act also covers impairment resulting from, or consisting of, mental illness, and includes long-term depression or anxiety. A 'substantial impairment' is one that is more than minor or trivial. Since December 2005 the effects of progressive conditions such as cancer, HIV infection and multiple sclerosis are regarded as substantial immediately on diagnosis for the purposes of the Act, although certain cancers that require only minor treatment may be excluded. A long-term impairment is one:

- that has lasted at least 12 months
- or is likely to last at least 12 months
- or is likely to last for the rest of the person's life.

It is likely that more than one in six students is covered by this broader definition (an estimate based on adults of working age who fell within the definition of the DDA, taken from a survey commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (Berthoud, 2006), and it is clear that this comprises a substantial number of higher education students whose legal entitlements need to be addressed.

Since October 2004, all employment has been brought within the scope of the DDA. All employers have duties which make it unlawful to discriminate, without justification, against employees or job applicants on the grounds of disability. Employers are legally responsible for ensuring that discrimination does not occur by making 'reasonable adjustments' to recruitment processes, work arrangements and the working environment in order to facilitate disabled people's right to work. Disabled students on work placement, undertaking Foundation Degrees, internships, or sandwich courses are also protected against unlawful discrimination under the Act. In 2006, the DDA introduced a 'disability equality duty' on all public bodies to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people; this means that higher education institutions (HEIs) must take account of the requirements of disabled people as an integral part of all their policies, practices and procedures. It is hoped that this NTFS project will make a significant contribution to institutional strategic priorities across the sector through allowing staff to meet their institutional and individual obligations under the Disability Equality Duty of the DDA, and to the national strategy of encouraging employers to employ more disabled people.

Despite the introduction of the DDA, discrimination has continued to occur; indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that one of the unanticipated – and unwelcome – outcomes of the Act is the deployment of more sophisticated and covert approaches to discrimination, particularly in employment; Bell and Heitmueller (2008) also highlight potential negative outcomes of the Act, identifying uncertainty around litigation costs, low levels of general awareness about the Act among disabled people and employers, and a lack of financial support as possible reasons for these. A report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission

(EHRC) (2007, p. 2) states that by 2010 the UK will see a distinctly more diverse workforce: 40% will be over the age of 45, and less than 20% of those working full-time will be made up of white, non-disabled men under 45. The report also reveals that of the 6.8 million disabled people of working age in Britain, only 50% are in employment compared with 81% of non-disabled people (EHRC, op cit, p. 4). It is interesting to note employers' continued concerns through the reassurances given to them by various agencies; for example, that employing a disabled person is no more of a risk than employing anyone else in terms of sickness absence, hours worked, reliability, efficiency or punctuality.

Research has shown that students from non-traditional backgrounds (Archer et al, 2003) can face obstacles in accessing higher education, in achieving successful progression, and in successful transition into the labour market and postgraduate education (Croucher et al, 2005). In general, the findings of Tunnah et al (2006) challenged some of the previous assumptions about disabled people in the labour market. He found that, overall, there was substantial parity between disabled and non-disabled graduates obtaining employment; however, disabled graduates as a whole continued to be more likely to be unemployed (9%) than non-disabled graduates (6.3%) and, in terms of employment, 54.9% of non-disabled graduates were recorded as working full-time as compared with only 48.9% of disabled graduates. Notably, disabled graduates (9.7%) were more likely than their non-disabled peers (8.2%) to be found in part-time and voluntary work. These trends were reported as a continuation of the pattern from the 2003 survey (Disabilities Task Group, 2004), so there is every indication that this tendency will continue unless active steps are taken to intercede and enhance disabled students' employability so that more equitable employment rates are achieved. This view is supported by the findings of Matosic (2008) who describes a range of obstacles faced by disabled students in gaining employment, including, for example:

- anxiety about disclosing disability to potential employers
- a lack of awareness about the workplace because of a lack of work experience which also increases their levels of anxiety

- negative views about employment (that it will be too demanding)
- lowered self-confidence due to unsuccessful job applications, coupled with concern that disability was a deciding factor in not receiving a job offer
- poor self-marketing.

Methodology

The project features collaboration between the Universities of Worcester (the lead institution), Gloucestershire and Plymouth. Drawing on the wide experience of three National Teaching Fellows with recognised expertise in the field of disability, the project will build explicitly on the knowledge acquired through the creation of the existing heavily used resource SCIPS (Strategies for Creating Inclusive Programmes of Study) (www.scips.worc.ac.uk). A new web-based resource, 'USEMYABILITY', will be a key development. Post Dearing (1997), higher education institutions have begun to take a more holistic approach to developing students' employability skills, competencies and attributes in line with the 'Understanding, Skilful Practices, Efficacy Beliefs, and Metacognition' (USEM) model propounded by Knight and Yorke (2004). A paradigm shift has occurred whereby employability is now regarded as an explicit and embedded part of academic learning for all students. The Student Employability Profiles (Kubler, op cit), produced by the Higher Education Academy with the Council for Industry in Higher Education (CIHE), offer a model that maps employability skills, competencies and attributes that CIHE employer members said they value against skills developed through the study of a particular discipline as described in Subject Benchmark Statements (QAA, 2004). This model will be adapted, using the SCIPS conceptual framework, to underpin the USEMYABILITY resource.

Using subjects' Skills and Attributes Maps developed by the Higher Education Academy Subject Centres, the new resource will identify potential challenges for disabled learners embedded in the 'Generic Employability Competencies' (Kubler, op cit, pp. 27-28). It will identify those learners who may experience difficulties in achieving and/or demonstrating the competencies, and will provide advice and guidance on making reasonable adjustments to practice/provision within the legal framework. This

information will be supplemented by subject-specific case studies of good practice collated through collaboration with employers, Subject Centres and other relevant bodies. It is intended that engagement with the web-based resource, USEMYABILITY, will result in more confident, better informed staff who are able to help disabled students to achieve and demonstrate their employability skills, thus leading to more disabled graduates gaining employment or better jobs. It is envisaged that disabled students will also make use of the resource and become better informed of the types of reasonable adjustments that are possible in a range of learning and employment contexts, thereby allowing them to become more effective self-advocates in accessing their entitlements.

Since this NTFS project is in its infancy, it is too early to draw any firm conclusions as yet; however, the key messages beginning to emerge from our initial work are that there is a lack of consensus about the concept of employability, that a degree no longer guarantees a job, that under-employment of graduates is as significant an issue as unemployment, and that graduates' poor self-marketing continues to disappoint employers. Watch this space!

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