7 Steps to:
Enhancing the Employability of Students with Disabilities

Overview

The Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS 2016) stressed the importance of career readiness and positive employability outcomes. National data (e.g. HESA 2016-17) indicates that students with disabilities are less likely to progress to full-time work and more likely to be unemployed than graduates with no known disability, highlighting a key challenge for universities. Under the Equality Act (2010), universities are required to take reasonable steps to ensure that *all* students can fully participate in every aspect of university life, including accessing careers advice, work placements and employability support. This is an anticipatory duty; universities are required by law to respond to requests for reasonable adjustments and must proactively anticipate the needs of students with disabilities as far as possible.

Work placements are considered beneficial for all students by helping them differentiate themselves from peers (Tomlinson 2008), enhancing key skills (Bullock *et al*. 2009) and attainment (Brooks and Youngson 2016). Placements may be especially beneficial for students with disabilities (ECU 2008) as they often lack confidence in their employability and job prospects and face numerous disability related anxieties (Madriaga 2007; Vickerman and Blundell 2010). They are often unprepared to handle the transition to the workplace and may lack direction and knowledge of the barriers they may face in the workplace (McEachern and Kenny 2007). Furthermore, inadequate placement documentation, the invisibility of many common disabilities (e.g. dyslexia) and a lack of support and advocacy during the transition from student to employee (Blankfield 2001) poses additional challenges.

The Equality Challenge Unit (2014) produced an insightful guide for universities outlining recommendations for supporting the transitions of students with disabilities into employment, some of which are outlined in this guide.

1. Encourage early careers engagement

The Equality Challenge Unit (2008) highlights the tendency for students with disabilities to leave planning their careers to the end of their studies or after their course has finished. For students with disabilities, national DLHE data (e.g. HESA 2016-17) highlights the importance of these particular students maximising skills and experience. Encourage students to think and reflect on their career plans at an early stage.

2. Promote the benefits of placements

Placements are evidenced to have a positive impact on student attainment (Brooks and Youngson 2016) and increase the likelihood of students being in a graduate job six months after graduation (Shepherd and Sumner 2019). Furthermore, over the last decade there has been a change in the purpose and aims of work placements, from helping students to decide which career sector they wanted to go into to becoming an integral part of the recruitment process for many organisations (High Fliers 2018). Given the concerning HESA data (2016-17) with regard to the outcomes of students with disabilities, it is of considerable importance that this student group undertake placements. Encourage students to consider undertaking a placement on courses where placements are optional.

3. Inform disabled students' expectations pre-placement

The social model of disability is a way of viewing the world (Oliver 1990). This model argues that barriers in society, not their impairment, disable people with disabilities. Barriers can be physical (e.g. lack of a ramp) or attitudinal, such as assuming people with disabilities are unable to do certain activities. When you support students with disabilities, it is important to remember the social model. You need to be thinking about the challenges a student may face in accessing a placement or employment and strategies for removing those barriers or challenges. Students may be worried about their ability to manage their disability on placement. There are a range of disability specific websites providing guidance and case studies outlining examples of reasonable adjustments. Mention this to your student if you know they have a disability. Disability Rights UK provide a useful guide.

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4. Discuss the issue of disclosure

Having a disability can raise a range of disability specific concerns and considerations and this may be a sensitive issue for some students. Many common disabilities (e.g. dyslexia, mental health conditions and chronic fatigue syndrome) are invisible and symptoms can fluctuate making it difficult for the placement provider or employer to understand a person's needs. Students may be unsure or anxious about whether they should disclose their disability to an employer or placement provider, at what stage in the recruitment process and how. Encourage students with disabilities to be upfront with their placement provider or workplace at the earliest opportunity possible. Many workplaces offer a guaranteed interview scheme for people with disabilities for example. Encourage students to practice articulating their disability in a positive tone (e.g. "having dyslexia has helped to develop my organisational skills").

5. Brief students about support and rights on placement

Students are likely to be unaware of their legal rights. When a person discloses a disability, workplaces and placement providers are legally required to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate their disability. This could include specialist software, flexible working and ergonomic equipment. If your student with a disability is going into the workplace (e.g. on placement), try to mention their rights to help. ASET (2016) provide an invaluable guide for staff about helping students with disabilities prepare for a placement.

6. Promote confidence through mentoring and alumni

Studies highlight the additional challenges students with disabilities can face in terms of lacking confidence in their own abilities when making the transition to work, anxieties about disclosing a disability, and pessimistic views of their career choices (Madriaga 2007; ECU 2008; Vickerman and Blundell 2010). The ECU (2014) recommends (2014) promoting role models such as those available on the My Plus website. Encourage students with disabilities to view these case studies. If you know one of your students has a disability, you can also encourage them to sign up for the University of Plymouth Widening Participation Mentoring Scheme, which is designed for students with disabilities, BME students and care leavers.

7. Encourage Dialogue

Lastly, it can be difficult for students to disclose a disability and talk about the impact it may have on them, placements and their future plans. People with disabilities often fear ridicule, of being judged and considered less capable due to their disability. Many disabilities are not visible which creates additional challenges. Key to effectively supporting students with disabilities and their employability is the need to be non-judgemental and sensitive to their needs through regular dialogue around the topic of careers and placements.