DISABLED GRADUATES

Higher education provides the opportunity to obtain qualifications and develop skills which open doors to professional occupations. However, gaining a degree is only one step in entering the labour market. This discussion paper examines two sources of data collected by the DEIP team - The DEIP Graduate survey and Employer case studies- to consider the other factors which impact on graduates' transition into employment and thus provides the wider context for understanding post-university experiences.

The paper begins by outlining some of the legislation against discrimination both in education and in the workplace . We then discuss: the role of HE in preparing disabled students for employment, attitudes towards disclosure, the implications of the employability agenda on disabled graduates, employment destinations, and the role of graduate professional organisations. Finally, we offer ✓ recommendations and ❓ questions for future research and debate.

DEIP: an introduction

This paper is one of a series of discussion papers produced by the Disability and Effective Inclusion Policies (DEIP) project that was funded by the European Social Fund. The DEIP project is a piece of collaborative research undertaken by Sussex and Lancaster Universities. The project aims to explore ways in which higher education institutions support disabled students through higher education and on into employment.

The research is shaped by four research questions (see **DP1**) which provided the opportunity for considering the influence of disability models with respect to: sector and institutional HE policy; practice as reported by disabled students and university staff at Sussex and Lancaster Universities; the experience of disabled graduates making the transition into employment and the views of employers.

DEIP Discussion Papers

The DEIP project contributes to an increasing body of institutional research surrounding the experiences of disabled students in higher education. For a list of current and future DEIP project Discussion Papers (**DP**) see: 🕸 http://www.sussex.ac.uk/equalities/1-2-9.html. For details of the thematic topics emerging from an analysis of institutional policy see **DP1**, methodology **DP2**, and an annotated bibliography of relevant research **DP12**.

Data Collection

This paper draws on two sources of information: graduate responses to the online graduate survey; and the views of employers and disabled graduate employees in the employer case studies.

The Graduate Survey was an online questionnaire including multiple-choice and open questions on the HE experience, transition into employment and current work experience. The survey was distributed via email discussion groups and posted on relevant websites and completed by 66 graduates. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS and is referred to in the paper as coming from the 'DEIP Survey'. Qualitative comments from the graduates were analysed for common themes and are referred to in the paper as 'DEIP Graduate'.

The Employer Case Studies consisted of interviews with Human Resource Managers and Disabled Graduate Employees. Face to face interviews were conducted in the workplace. Interviews were recorded on audiocassettes, transcribed and analysed using Atlas Ti. (See DP2) When referring to the two categories of staff in this paper we use the terms 'DEIP Employee' or 'DEIP Human Resource Manager'.

📂 Overview: Employment policy and practice

There are three main areas of legislation, which potentially influence the experiences of disabled graduates.

- Educational legislation affecting school, further and higher education influences who is in a position to apply to university. Legislation relating to higher education influences all phases of the student life cycle, which affects employment outcomes.

- Employment legislation is important because it offers the means to tackle existing discrimination and contributes to the overall equality of opportunity for disabled people within the work place.

- Finally, there is legislation that pertains to health, social services, transport, housing, and other aspects of daily life, which helps or hinders disabled people in achieving a suitable work life balance.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 and 2005

The DDA aims to protect disabled people against discrimination in all aspects of life. The Government implemented the legislation in three phases. In 1996 it became illegal to treat disabled people less favourably because of their disability. In 1999 businesses were obliged to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled staff, such as providing additional support or equipment. From October 2004 businesses had to make physical alterations to their premises to overcome barriers to access. From December 2006 the DDA (2005) regulations place a duty on public bodies to promote disability equality. This affects all public bodies - from local councils to government departments, from universities to hospitals. Under the DDA, it is unlawful for employers to discriminate against disabled people for a reason related to their disability, unless this can be justified. The Act covers all aspects of employment including application forms, interview arrangements, job offers, terms of employment, and dismissal or redundancy. The aim is to remove any substantial disadvantages in employment arrangements in the workplace.

Further details and advice about DDA

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) and Direct Government provide detailed guidance and advice for employees and employers about whether an adjustment is reasonable.

🕸 http://www.drc-gb.org/employment.aspx

🕸 http://www.direct.gov.uk/DisabledPeople/Employment/YourEmploymentRights/fs/en

🎓 Higher Education: a preparation for employment?

Educational qualifications can be particularly important for disabled people in overcoming barriers to employment. Shah (2005) observes that education experience influences the psychosocial, cognitive and academic experiences and development of the individual, and in turn can contribute to their economic future. Earlier work by Shah et. al. (2004) suggests that there is a dearth of information concerning the educational experiences of disabled people and the role education plays in their eventual careers. For the purposes of work exploring the Disability Effective Inclusive Policies it is important to remember that the presence and influence of psycho-emotional factors will vary not only between individuals but also across and throughout the different situations in which they operate.

Careers Advice

The Universities UK and Careers Service Unit's (CSU) report 'Enhancing employability, recognising diversity' (2002) observes that students who are encouraged and supported by their tutors, especially within the framework of the Personal Development Plan tend to show more commitment and make better progress.

The CSU maintain that staff have an important role to play in enabling students to recognise that their learning should contribute to career planning. Although many HE institutions now offer specific advice and guidance to disabled students who are job searching and such advice may be helpful in explaining the DDA, this practice runs the risk of labelling and isolating disabled students. But the absence of specialist advice services, could mean that students may not find out about the range of employment initiatives designed to enable disabled people to take their place in the world of work.

However, the careers advice available to students is not always appropriate to disabled students. One DEIP graduate wrote:

> *I found that the careers advisers had no idea about how to place disabled man of my age, offering me work with computers only; very depressing*

Another highlighted the complexity of challenge facing careers services trying to cater for different students, with different needs.

> *I found that the careers service rarely have specific facilities, advisors or resources aimed at students suffering or who have suffered from mental illness. It would be great to see more information and advice available for this group. Equally to be well-informed is to be well-armed. By this I mean I have sometimes been given false hope and would prefer to be given a more realistic picture. For example, whilst previous mental illness should not hinder job prospects, the reality is that a lot of discrimination still exists, if nothing else it often results in career gaps, which don't look good on CVs.*

Another DEIP graduate said that the careers service was excellent, but stressed that this was only when advised by someone who understood the implications of her range of disabilities. Students do not always have access to disability focused careers workshops or access to careers advisors who are familiar with their particular needs. From the DEIP survey we found that only 22% had accessed specialist advice and of those only half found the support useful.

In the same way that students find the transition into HE can be filled with uncertainty, so too the transition into employment. DEIP graduates reported that they felt they lost a source of support once they left HE. One DEIP graduate recommended a transition mechanism that would provide a '*mentor/tutor/advisor that you can refer to during university and for a while after graduation*'.

While HE institutions have systems in place that give support to students so that they can fulfil their aspirations, employers are less likely to have systems in place, and in the case of SMEs in particular, may be resistant to supporting disabled employees. The UUK and CSU report maintains that employers should recruit according to practices that are:

> *Compatible with the principle of equality of opportunity for all students, regardless of social or ethnic background, gender, age, or disability. In particular there should be general awareness of the needs of non-traditional students who may be disadvantaged in the labour market (2002)*

HE and the Employability of Disabled Graduates

Although there is a great emphasis on higher education's effectiveness in providing opportunities to develop students' employability, it is recognised that the purpose of HE is, or should be wider. The DEIP survey indicated that although 41% studied for their degree to help them get a job, there were 37% who studied for their degree out of personal interest.

Policies on widening participation in HE and on increasing the employability of graduates are very topical issues in contemporary debates about the role of HE. Unfortunately, disability is not always

included in these debates. For example, the Employment Research Unit (2002) report commissioned by HEFCE entitled 'Employers in the new graduate labour market: recruiting from a wider spectrum of graduates' makes no reference to disability.

Debates about what employability is and what it is not abound. Current debates are discussed in the Higher Education Academy's learning and employability series www.heacademy.ac.uk/learningandemployability.htm.

Increasingly, HE students are encouraged to think about employment and plan for the future. The Dearing Report (1997) helped to raise the profile of employability within higher education and pointed to the need for enhanced opportunities for students to undertake work-related learning opportunities. The Higher Education Academy defines employability as:

> 'a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupations to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. www.heacademy.ac.uk/869.htm

Even though disabled students have the skills, knowledge and personal attributes their opportunities to gain employment may be hampered by disabling barriers. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are responsible for a range of benefits and services undertaken by the Disability and Carers' Directorate (DCD). The Disability Employment Advisory Committee (DEAC) supports in an advisory capacity the DWP in working towards its target:

> To increase the employment rate of people with disabilities, taking account of the economic cycle, and significantly reduce the difference between their employment rate and the overall rate. Work to improve the rights of disabled people and to remove the barriers to their participation in society. (DWP Target agreed 2003)

The reasons for differences in employment are complex and at the point of seeking employment immediate external barriers may not be the only obstacles a disabled student faces. The DEIP survey and disabled students in the case studies indicate a more complicated picture.

Disabled students may limit their ambitions and apply for jobs that are below their ability. This may because of the impact of the psycho-emotional dimensions of disability that Reeve (2004) believes affect what disabled people can **be**, rather than what they can **do.**   When searching for employment, graduates may feel that rather than getting the support they need to work in their chosen occupation, they should limit themselves to occupations where they possibly will not need support, as this DEIP graduate explained:

> I think that is another problem that disabled graduates face – that you are limited in your choice of work. You can't necessarily choose anything that will be too physical and in my case I don't drive so that bars me from any jobs when I would be out visiting and also with the lack of previous work experience as well, its almost as if you are starting from the bottom. It is hard enough to find any job without the additional burden of being disabled

While there is evidence that disabled graduates are gaining employment in all areas of work, the picture is mixed and open to interpretation, and it is clear from the DEIP survey that not all students enter their chosen field. While this may not be the case for all students, it must be assumed that the reasons in the case of disabled students may be connected to disabling barriers in the form of external factors and attitudinal factors which have led to internalised oppression.

Graduate destinations

There is still a tendency to equate disability with an inability to work, which the OECD (2003) believes needs to change. In the promotion of equal opportunities for disabled people, the European Social Dialogue Committee developed and adopted a joint declaration that emphasised the following points with respect to employment of disabled people:

- Highlight the ability not the disability
- Promote the employment of people with a disability as a positive factor for the undertaking

- Improve industrial relations by taking account of different forms of disability
- Have diversified approaches for tailor-made solutions
- Promote measures outside the workplace (school environment, transport, attitudes and prejudices etc) (European Commission 2004)

With respect to the employment of disabled graduates the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) monitor all graduate destinations including disabled graduates. The AGCAS 2006 report on Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education provides a comprehensive analysis of data collected on graduates leaving in 2004. It is the second report of its kind and provides a snapshot six months after graduation of employment, study and unemployment of disabled and non-disabled graduates. Within the AGCAS survey disabled graduates represent 7% of the overall student population.

🕸 **AGCAS (2006) What Happens Next?** *A Report on the First Destinations of 2004 Graduates with Disabilities*, National Task Group, March 2006
www.agcas.org.uk/publications/what_happens_next/docs/final_disability_report_april_2006.pdf

According to the AGCAS report (2006) on disabled graduates the survey of the destinations of leavers from HE challenges some of the assumptions about disabled people in the labour market and claims that there is considerable parity between disabled and non-disabled figures. However, comparing all disabled graduates with their non-disabled peers the data indicates that they are less likely to have full time employment, more likely to have part time or voluntary work or to be unemployed.

	Disabled - %	Non Disabled - %
Full Time Employment	48.9	54.9
PT / Voluntary work	9.7	8.2
Unemployment	9	6.3
Education	15.9	16.1

As with all disability related data further analysis reveals the complexity and considerable variation in levels of employment. For example, overall employment of wheelchair users drops to 32.4%, and unemployment rises to 15.9%. There is also considerable variation in the destinations to and within different employment sectors by graduates with different disabilities. For example, in the health sector that includes medicine, nursing, physiotherapy, and dentistry, graduates with an unseen disability have a 6.5% employment rate which is higher than the 5.5% of non-disabled graduates employed in this sector. However, only 1.2% of students with MHD or using a wheelchair are employed in the health sector. Further research into the reasons for these choices would give some guidance as to how and why these career choices are made and perhaps help to identify how disabled students might be encouraged to look more favourably on specific employment sectors. Research would also help to reveal if the discrepancy is a result of factors inherent within particular professional arenas.

Disclosure

As DP3 highlighted the decision about when to disclose is complex. The level of disclosure was lower in the workplace than in higher education. Of the graduates completing the DEIP survey 92% had disclosed to academic staff, however only 87% disclosed to their line manager, 78% disclosed to their colleagues and the numbers disclosing to senior managers dropped to 64%. The DEIP students also indicated a willingness to disclose in higher education but indicated that they did not intend to disclose their disability when they applied for jobs because they believed it might

be detrimental or because they saw no obvious benefits. For a further discussion of disabled students' views about disclosure see DP3.

Despite the legislative safeguards, the Disability Discrimination Act does not necessarily enable graduates to disclose with confidence. Job applications normally require applicants to disclose impairments. General advice from Skill and from the Disability Employment Advisor is that it is better to disclose than to be found out. For further information see the Skill leaflet on disclosing:

✦ http://www.skill.org.uk/info/infosheets/emp_disclose.doc

The experience of some graduates has been that disclosure prevented them from achieving their aspirations. One DEIP graduate wrote that Higher Education should:

> *Prepare them for the REAL world, not the politically correct one. I wish someone had told me NOT to disclose when applying for job, and to lie on the medical questionnaires. I worked my butt off and got a 1st in NeuroPharmacology, and an MSc in Neurology, but I still had enormous problems*

Regrettably for some disabled people the reality of disclosure in the workplace can be a negative experience. McLean (2003) states that for those in work or seeking work, the personal consequences of disclosure may be considerable and may damage career prospects, the way they are regarded by colleagues, and their ability to hold on to the job.

DEIP employees gave very strong advice against disclosure in the workplace. One DEIP graduate was very unequivocal:

> *I would advise any student to NEVER EVER disclose. The UK is not ready for doctoral students with mental disabilities. There is zero support, zero defence against discrimination, and zero understanding of bright mentally disabled people.*

The experience of another DEIP graduate was that she only got her job after not disclosing and "forgetting" to put her medical needs on the forms, while yet another observed that '*we under-estimate how badly employers understand / accept disabilities*'.

Continuing to have the debate about disclosure is important because it helps to raise awareness about disability issues, which can influence the attitudes of work colleagues and managers. Attitudinal barriers are arguably as challenging a barrier as environmental obstacles.

Attitudes of others in the workplace

There may be little support from colleagues. McLean (2003) indicates that although impairments did not necessarily affect an employees' ability to work, colleagues with little or no personal experience of disability often lacked insight into the effects of pain, the need for people with disabilities to take extra care when carrying out physical tasks, and the extent of disabling obstacles. The attitudes of colleagues who lack awareness can therefore result in additional challenges, which might be avoided. It is therefore important for employers to have a comprehensive, and some would argue compulsory, staff development programme to raise awareness and break down myths about disability. One DEIP graduate said:

> *Policies are ok, but you need to make sure staff are aware. I wrote to my MP about my problems at [place of study] she wrote to a senior manager, this meant disability issues were discussed at a very high level. When I returned staff were much more aware, disability and equality training is needed, it should be compulsory. Discrimination takes place in very subtle ways and must be addressed through staff training.*

Understanding and appreciating the differences between different impairments and health conditions covered by the DDA can be a challenge. Some disabled people fear that colleagues will think that they are not really disabled enough to receive special support. One DEIP employee expressed the feeling that mental health difficulties are often misunderstood when she said:

> *In my team there is someone with almost exactly the same condition as myself and when he was off I did feel that people felt extremely sceptical that mental health was a good reason to be off work*

Many people probably carry on without help rather than draw attention to themselves. One DEIP graduate graphically describes the difficulties faced by some disabled employees who feel unsupported and who do not wish to let their colleagues down:

> *It is a struggle because I am always in pain and that is tiring in itself, but I can't play on that in any way. I can't keep bringing up that I am in pain all the time to my managers and colleagues. I just have to throw myself into my work and get on with it and work as hard as anyone else but with more stress, effort and pain. I also have the worry of all the extra sick days and hospital appointments and physiotherapy days and all those other days that I have to take off and you feel as if you are letting the dept down and possible your other colleagues resenting you because you always seem to be off and they have to cover for you*

The fact that this individual feels she has to deal with her pain and treatment by herself rather than ask for support demonstrates the added difficulties that some disabled people face in pursuing a career and finding satisfaction in their work.

Evidence of the double burden of dealing with the impairment alone and worries about job security should alert us to the extent of hidden discrimination. Individuals with visible impairments can feel 'vulnerable and invalidated' (Reeve, 2002), while someone with a hidden impairment may fear being discovered, and others may develop an awareness of how they are seen by others and modify their behaviour through self-surveillance to make them more 'acceptable' (*ibid*). Unrecognised levels of disadvantage exist in the workplace despite the legislation and the likelihood that many disabled people will aspire to fulfilling careers.

Disabled Professional Organisations

The fact that that there are associations that specifically support disabled professionals bears witness to the existence of discrimination in the workplace and a belief that with support, disabled people can enter their chosen occupations without limiting themselves. The Association of Disabled Professionals' booklet on teaching as a disabled person draws attention to the support available from an organisation called 'Opportunities for People with Disabilities' which will top up salaries for those unable to work full time due to their impairments. One teacher explained how she has:

> *gone on to a supported employment scheme, where I do sixty per cent of my timetable and I'm sponsored by a charity 'Opportunities for People with Disabilities'. My salary is topped up by them to the same level I'd be on if I was full time. My employers were quite happy to do it. They employed someone part time to do the hours that I was giving up. My employers are supportive, and the college is adapted for disabled people (*Association of Disabled Professionals p4)

There are some who may view support as a source of charity and resist offers of help. Another source of support from the Association of Disabled Professionals' booklet is that of the Disability Law Service:

> *I am due to get some more equipment but it had to be as a result of an industrial tribunal. I had support from my professional union. I went to a specialist organisation called the Disability Law Service (*Association of Disabled Professionals p8)

Although these examples illustrate evidence of support for disabled graduates they also highlight the challenges and complexity of getting the right support.

The Disability Rights Commission – Code of Practice for employers

1. Treat disabled people as individuals, like you should treat everyone else; do not make assumptions about their needs
2. Be prepared to talk to each disabled employee about what help they need or what the real affects of their disability might be
3. Be ready to consider whether you as an employer need professional help to assess the disabled person's needs
4. Plan ahead – be aware of what new legislation might mean and be prepared to act in advance of its introduction
5. Make sure that you also consult with other employees – they also have a right to be aware / consulted about steps you are taking
6. Think about and specify job requirements very carefully
7. Be prepared to justify any health requirements – disability does not necessarily mean bad health
8. Plan all interviews with disabled people very carefully – check out any special needs in advance
9. Only ask about a disability if it is relevant – instead concentrate on the person's ability to do the job
10. Promote equal opportunities – try and make sure you have an equal opportunity policy

✓ Recommendations

- To encourage careers services to work with employers to develop work shadowing experiences and opportunities for disabled students to talk to disabled alumni
- To include practical as well as policy and legislative disability issues as part of training for staff involved in recruitment and induction processes
- To encourage academic staff to understand the nature of employment barriers and to support students in career planning
- To raise disabled graduates' awareness and where possible employers' awareness of schemes designed to support disabled employees.

❓ Questions for further research and debate

- What factors contribute to successful transition from HE into employment?
- How relevant are the DRC guidelines for employers and in what ways a need adapting to address the specific needs of disabled graduates?
- How can support be extended to the transition from HE into employment?
- What influences occupational choices by students with impairments?
- What are the conditions and features of a positive experience of work for disabled graduates?
- How does a disabled graduate's identity interact with other factors such as gender, sexuality, race, age and class?