 

**Disability & Employability Research Project.**

**Co-producing Progress: Enhancing the Support and Engagement of Disabled Students.**

Acknowledgements and Contributions

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Ethical Approval

This study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the University of Dundee’s Policy for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Participants. The project was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) , University of Dundee (reference UOD-UREC-Staff-2023-003). All subjects gave written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Executive Summary

This report outlines the findings of the University of Dundee Careers Service’s ‘Disability and Employability Research Project’, which took place between October 2023 and March 2024. First, this report introduces the scope of the research project, before providing background to disabled individuals’ employability within the United Kingdom to explain the rationale for its undertaking. The report then provides a summary of the research methods utilised, before analysing the findings. Finally, this report proposes a series of recommendations for how the Careers Service can better support disabled students and graduates.

Key findings**:**

* Across the UK, disabled graduates consistently face lower rates of employment and higher rates of unemployment than non-disabled individuals, and are disproportionately grouped within part-time, insecure, and voluntary work.
* Despite a focus within the HE careers sector to improve the employment outcomes of disabled graduates, a large discrepancy exists between the proportion of HE careers services reporting that they provide disability-specific support and the proportion of students reporting awareness and use of such services.
* Although 90% of surveyed disabled students reported that they have applied for or held a job, almost three-quarters (71%) of these individuals shared negative experiences.
* Disabled students exhibited a strong fear of discrimination and disclosed challenges finding suitable jobs, navigating recruitment, accessing in-work support, and opposing discriminatory perceptions about their capabilities.
* Disabled students highlighted that a lack of knowledge of the support available can also represent a barrier to job market success,
* Disabled students expressed strong preferences for the diversification of disability-specific careers support, and highlighted hopes to be provided advice on employment rights, access to disability-specific guidance and resources, and bespoke opportunities, such as mentoring, events, and accessible jobs.
* Disabled students also exhibited preferences for the organisation and promotion of disability-specific careers support and indicated that the advertisement and accessibility of support should be expanded through collaboration with Disability Services and Academic Schools.
* University Careers Services should seek to improve their disability-specific careers support through increasing advertisement, accessibility, diversity, and dialogue.

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# Introduction

Throughout the United Kingdom (UK), the employment rate of disabled individuals remains lower than that of non-disabled individuals, with the former facing higher rates of unemployment and economic inactivity (Coleman, Sykes, and Groom 2013: Powell 2023). Mirroring this trend, a gap persists in graduate employment outcomes, as disabled graduates continue to experience lower employment rates than their non-disabled counterparts (Allen and Coney 2019: Allen and Coney 2021: Drakeley 2022: Hector 2020: Toogood 2024). Consequently, there is increasing pressure from across the Higher Education (HE) sector to address the distinct employment challenges of disabled students and graduates, and better prepare them for employment through tailored careers support (Allen and Coney 2021: Disabled Students’ Commission 2021: Drakeley 2022: Hector 2020).

In response to these calls, the University of Dundee’s (UoD) Careers Service conducted its ‘Disability and Employability Research Project’ from October 2023 to March 2024. With the aim of better understanding disabled students’ experiences of employment and careers support, this research project pursued two central research questions (RQs): What challenges do disabled students face within the job market? and how can the Careers Service better support the employability of disabled students and graduates? A mixed methods research approach – comprised of website analysis, an online survey, and interviews – was utilised to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state and effectiveness of HE careers support.

Through this research, it was found that disabled students have had negative experiences of employment, and face distinct barriers compared to non-disabled students – including difficulty finding suitable jobs and navigating discrimination within recruitment and the workplace. Similarly, lack of awareness of support represented a barrier to many, as disabled students were found to be unfamiliar with the Careers Service. As such, disabled students noted their preference for the Careers Service to increase the advertisement, accessibility, and diversity of support, and make these improvements in dialogue with staff and students. These findings informed the production of 12 recommendations to aid the future development of disability-specific careers support.

This report details the scope and findings of this research project by firstly, surveying existing literature on disabled individuals’ employability within the UK; secondly, detailing the research methods utilised to collect data; thirdly, summarising the results of research; and fourthly, proposing recommendations based on the project’s findings. This report will conclude by outlining the impact of the Disability and Employability Research Project and its implications for University Careers Services going forward.

# Background

Stakeholders across the UK HE sector have published reports over recent years on the social mobility of traditionally marginalised communities. Such literature has confirmed disabled graduates to be especially disadvantaged within the job market, and detailed disabled students’ limited awareness of the careers support offered within HE Institutions. By outlining existing literature on the employment of disabled individuals and current disability specific HE careers provisions within the UK, this chapter highlights the rationale behind the Disability and Employability Research Project.

## Disability Employment Gap

While disabled individuals across the UK experience worse employment outcomes than non-disabled individuals, variation in disability employment rate has been observed. Within Scotland, for instance, the employment rate gap between disabled and non-disabled individuals is 31.9 percentage points – a figure higher than the UK average of 29 percentage points (Powell 2023: Scottish Government 2023). Further, young disabled individuals and individuals with specific disabilities are especially disadvantaged within the job market – as disabled 16- to 24-year-olds and individuals with mental health conditions, specific learning disabilities, and autism are the least likely to be in employment (Powell 2023: Scottish Government 2023). Moreover, although the disability employment gap had been narrowing in recent years, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic reversed this trend, and the employment rate gap only returned to pre-pandemic levels in mid-2022 (Department for Work and Pensions 2023: Toogood 2024).

Yet, despite this variation, disabled workers remain disproportionately grouped within part-time work, contractually insecure work, underemployment, and self-employment (Allen and Coney 2018: Coleman, Sykes, and Groom 2013: Department for Work and Pensions 2023), suggesting that they are limited in the work that they can obtain and undertake – differences that have contributed to the median hourly pay of disabled workers in Scotland being £2.05 less than that of non-disabled workers (Scottish Government 2023).

## Disabled Graduates’ Employment Outcomes

Although HE qualifications are shown to positively impact the disability employment gap (Coleman, Sykes, and Groom 2013: Scottish Government 2023) – as 74% of disabled individuals with a degree are in employment compared to only 19% of those without formal qualifications (Powell 2023) – disabled graduates similarly face difficulty within the job market. Like the wider disabled population, the employment rate of disabled graduates is lower than that of non-disabled graduates – as graduate outcomes survey data revealed that an average of 86% of UoD disabled graduates are in employment or further study 15 months after finishing their course, compared to 90% of non-disabled graduates (UoD 2022). Disabled graduates throughout the UK are also disproportionately grouped within part-time, voluntary, and insecure employment, with autistic and blind graduates the least likely to be in secure work (Allen and Coney 2018: Allen and Coney 2019: Allen and Coney 2021: Drakeley 2022: Toogood 2024). Moreover, disabled students and graduates exhibit a strong fear of discrimination, with disabled students reluctant to request reasonable adjustments, while the overall proportion of graduates disclosing a disability remains minimal (Allen and Coney 2021: Disabled Students UK 2023: Drakeley 2022: Hector 2020: Toogood 2024).

However, despite these barriers, disabled graduates have been found to select jobs based on their personal preferences and long-term career plans (Allen and Coney 2019) – confirming that they possess strong career ambitions.

## Disability-specific HE Careers Support

In response to these trends, “over three-quarters of AGCAS member careers services [have] developed targeted initiatives for students with a disability” (Allen and Coney 2021, p.42). Diverse forms of support have been implemented across the sector, and institutions have worked to increase the accessibility of provisions and collaborate with employers, university staff, and third sector organisations to provide bespoke opportunities (Hector 2020: Ramaiah 2022: Williams et al. 2019). Examples of good practice have included the University of Sheffield and Loughborough University – the former of which has liaised with Disability Services and provided Open Day talks about support, while the latter has offered workshops on disclosure (Hector 2020). The University of Dundee has a Careers Adviser who is part of a group of Disability Support Officers who liaise with Disability Services regularly to inform disability specific support. However, with only 8% of disabled students surveyed by the Disabled Students’ Commission (2021) reporting that they have received disability-specific advice or support, there remains limited awareness of such provisions.

Consequently, reports have debated how disabled students’ engagement with HE careers services can be improved, resulting in two main recommendations: to “provide specific employability, career and enterprise guidance to disabled [students and] graduates” (Disabled Students’ Commission 2021, p.4) and “undertake more research to know what is effective in improving the outcomes of disabled [students and] graduates” (Allen and Coney 2021, p.6). Through the former, HE careers services have been encouraged to offer a range of support to disabled students and graduates, including bespoke internship and mentoring opportunities, and advice on adjustments, disclosure, and in-work support resources (Disabled Students’ Commission 2021: Disabled Students’ Commission 2023: Hector 2020: Ramaiah 2022: Shaw Trust 2024: Williams et al. 2019). Whereas, through the latter, HE careers services have been called on to explore disabled students’ and graduates’ employment experiences and co-plan tailored careers provisions with them to enhance the benefit of support (Disabled Students’ Commission 2021: Disabled Students’ Commission 2023: Drakeley 2022: Ramaiah 2022: Shaw Trust 2024). Together, this suggest that disability-specific careers support must be diverse and student-led.

## Implications

As such, while reports on disabled individuals’ employability confirm the impact of distinct employment barriers, they also provide a foundation from which careers service development can springboard. For instance, as reports revealed that disabled individuals hold high levels of fear about discrimination, support could be developed to help disabled students access disability-friendly employers and advocate for their employment rights. Similarly, with few disabled students reporting awareness and use of HE careers provisions, more could be done to advertise support. Further, as good practice within the HE sector has involved collaboration, exploration of student perspectives on this could prove helpful.

Consequently, the Disability and Employability Research Project was highly important as it responded directly to recommendations of the literature. By researching the experiences of disabled students and working with them to co-produce effective support, this project offered a way to develop disability-specific careers support at the UoD and contribute to current debates on disabled employability within the Institution and wider HE sector.

# Methods

To capture ranging perspectives on disabled employment and careers support, the Disability and Employability Research Project employed a mixed methods approach – using quantitative website analysis, a mixed methods survey, and qualitative interviews. This chapter details the methods and potential limitations of this research design.

## Website Analysis

To contextualise current and best practice within the HE sector for the provision of disability-specific careers support, the websites of 140 UK universities were analysed. Universities were selected using mixed sampling methods, with Russell Group universities and institutions highly regarded for their careers or disability support purposively sampled, while the remaining institutions were selected randomly. This produced a sample of 140 universities, which can be considered generally representative as Statistica (Clark 2023) reported there to be 288 UK HE Institutions in the academic year of 2021/22. Due to this, we can be 90% confident that the correct population value falls within a 5% margin of error of results – meaning that, as analysis found 51% of universities’ to advertise disability-specific careers support on their Careers Service’s website, we can be 90% confident that between 46% and 56% of all UK universities similarly do so.

Universities’ websites were assessed on the information available to individuals not affiliated with each institution – simulating the experience of a prospective student. Assessment criteria included the provision of advice on employment rights, tailored careers events, and collaboration between careers and disability support staff, and a full list can be found in Appendix A. The data collected was examined using statistical analysis.

## Survey

To understand disabled students’ experiences of employment and careers support, and recruit interview participants, a mixed methods survey was created on Jisc Online Surveys. Survey participants were recruited using non-purposive, voluntary response sampling, as the survey was advertised through the Careers Service’s social media, UoD newsletters, connections with Disability Services, Disability Support Officer network, relevant UoD Student Societies, Dundee University Student Association (DUSA) and academics. This produced a sample of 63 disabled students, which is less representative as the UoD reported there to be approximately 2300 disabled students in the academic year of 2022/23. Due to this, we can be 90% confident that the correct population value falls within a 10% margin of error of results – meaning that, as analysis found 63% of UoD disabled students to have had a negative experience of employment, we can be 90% confident that between 53% and 73% of all disabled students at the UoD would similarly report so. Despite this, the sample captured the perspectives of students from ranging types and levels of study, as is further detailed in Appendix B.

Participants were asked about their employment experiences, use of University support, and preferences for future support, and a full list of survey questions can be found in Appendix B. The data collected was examined using a combination of statistical and thematic analysis. Through a secondary survey, participants were able to register for a follow-up interview, and these survey questions can also be found in Appendix B.

## Interviews

To co-produce recommendations to improve Careers Service support, eight interviews were conducted with disabled students. Interview participants were selected using non-purposive, voluntary response sampling, as interviews were advertised through the survey. This produced a sample of 10 disabled students, with a combination of in-person, online, individual, and small group interviews having been held.

Participants were asked about their experiences of employment and their recommendations for Careers Service support, and a full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix C. The data collected was examined using thematic analysis.

## Evaluation

Despite the range of data gathered through this research design, there are limitations that must be highlighted:

* The focus of research – while data can be used to understand disabled students’ experiences and preferences, it cannot be used to make predictions about disabled graduates’ opinions or employment outcomes.
* Participant recruitment – ethical issues constrained survey promotion, as survey links could not be shared on social media and registration for interviews had to be conducted through a secondary survey, potentially limiting accessibility.
* Response rate – the data gathered through the survey and interviews represent the experiences of only a small proportion of the UoD’s disabled student population, so findings should be treated as initial insights that may not be applicable to all.

Nonetheless, as the methods utilised provided sufficient data to answer this project’s central RQs, this research design was suited to the scope of the Disability and Employability Research Project, and therefore represents the first step towards improving the tailored careers support available to disabled students and graduates at the UoD.

# Results

While UoD disabled students were found to encounter a number of distinct employment challenges and shared negative experiences of employment and support, they also highlighted strong preferences for how disabiity-specific careers support should be improved. This chapter summarises the findings of the Disability and Employability Research Project, spanning disabled students’ employment experiences, existing careers service support, and disabled students’ preferences for improvements.

## Disabled Students’ Employment Experiences

While disabled students were seen to have minimal issues engaging with the job market – as 90% of survey participants confirmed that they have applied for or held a job, with 52% having undertaken full-time, part-time, and voluntary work – a few distinct employment challenges were identified.

Firstly, disabled students were shown to have trouble finding suitable jobs. While 65% of survey participants stated that their disability impacts their experiences of employment, 40% of these individuals expressed specific worries about obtaining a job that reflects their qualifications, values, and preferences. Moreover, disabled students exhibited strong preferences, including the desire to obtain flexible, part-time, or non-manual roles, and interview participant 1 noted that they did not wish to “get a job for the sake of it”. This indicates career awareness and planning among disabled students, which aligns with Allen and Coney’s (2019) finding that disabled graduates tend to select roles based on personal preferences and career plans. However, disabled students expressed concerns about obtaining these preferences. Interview participants shared that they have faced difficulty determining their ability to perform different roles (interview participant 7), are worried about whether their desired career path will be accessible (interview participant 4), and have even felt forced into unsuitable jobs due to economic pressures (interview participants 1 and 7) – concerns which have likely been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which both the Department for Work and Pensions (2023) and a fifth (19%) of survey participants have noted as having made the job market more competitive. Consequently, despite many disabled students possessing work experience or career plans, there is a risk that they may be unable to find suitable opportunities that would allow them to meet their goals.

Secondly, disabled students disclosed difficulties navigating recruitment processes. While 75% of survey participants expressed that they are worried about their job prospects following graduation, a third (34%) of these individuals detailed concerns that they would face discrimination within recruitment. Interview participants shared personal difficulties within recruitment processes, including mental exhaustion from applying to jobs (interview participant 1) and difficulty responding to social cues (interview participant 4), while survey participant 7 summarised concerns by questioning “why would an employer pick the disabled person who is at risk of needing support or time off”. Due to these worries, a majority of survey participants expressed discomfort disclosing their disability (65%) and requesting adjustments within recruitment (75%) – confirming the findings of external reports, which have similarly highlighted disabled students’ and graduates’ reluctance to exercise their employment rights (Allen and Coney 2021: Disabled Students UK 2023: Drakeley 2022: Hector 2020: Toogood 2024). Together, this suggests that disabled applicants face a heavy mental toll as they are aware that they may be viewed unfavourably by employers.

Finally, disabled students shared that they have felt limited by workplace discrimination. Although 90% of survey participants shared that they have had lived experiences of employment, almost three quarters of these individuals (71%) had negative experiences. Of these individuals with negative experiences, 58% shared experiences of discrimination, including poor treatment by colleagues and employers. Regarding the former, interview participants revealed difficulties developing constructive relationships with colleagues due to not fitting in socially (interview participant 9), having their disability scrutinised (interview participant 5), and needing to educate peers on their disability and principles of inclusion (interview participant 3) – all of which could lead to workplace isolation and exclusion. Furthermore, interview participants shared that they had been fired for being absent from work due to their disability (interview participant 1), faced frequent verbal criticism about their symptoms (interview participant 2), and were forced to leave jobs due to a lack of in-work support (interview participants 5 and 9) – indicating similar treatment from employers. Consequently, disabled students have reported feeling limited within the workplace due to pressures to “present [themselves] in a certain way” (interview participant 1) or assumptions that they cannot hold high-level positions (interview participant 5). These experiences reveal ongoing challenges for disabled individuals, not only as they are forced to advocate for themselves, but because discrimination compounds their employment anxiety – as survey participant 43 stated that facing workplace bullying has “heavily affected [them] psychologically, to the point that [they] are now very apprehensive when meeting and working with new people”. In contrast, while only 38% of survey participants have had positive employment experiences, half cited a supportive environment and acceptance from colleagues and employers – confirming that the workplace is central to disabled individuals’ experiences of and confidence within the job market.

## Existing Careers Service Support

To assist disabled students and graduates with these distinct employment experiences, HE Institutions were found to have already put an array of tailored careers support in place. However, across the 140 UK universities reviewed, only 78 universities’ websites (56%) outlined their provision of disability-specific careers support – with the vast majority of these institutions (92%) doing so through the Institution’s Careers Service. As such, current shortcomings of HE careers support were found to represent additional barriers to disabled students’ and graduates’ success within employment.

Throughout this research project, disabled students’ lack of awareness about available careers support emerged as a major concern. Despite a majority (54%) of survey participants having accessed Disability Services, only a quarter (27%) stated that they had accessed the Careers Service for support, while a third had accessed no UoD support at all. While survey participants predominantly stated that they had not accessed UoD resources because they had no need to (35%), a lack of awareness was the second largest reason (29%). Further, although only a fifth (19%) of survey participants indicated that they had attended a UoD careers appointment, this was the most frequently used form of Careers Service support – followed by careers events (16%) and JobShop (10%). Survey participants were also unfamiliar with many Careers Service provisions, and did not know about GoinGlobal (71%), bitesize sessions (51%), the internship module (40%), JobShop (40%), Quick Queries (40%), and EmployAbility (37%). Interview participants echoed this lack of awareness which has resulted in disabled students not knowing what support they are entitled to and the belief that the Careers Service is only for those with a pre-planned career path – rather than those exploring options or looking for student jobs (interview participants 2 and 7). Together, these findings indicate that disabled UoD students are therefore not engaging with available provisions. Similar trends were observed across the sector, as only 56% of sampled UK universities’ websites outlined their provision of disability-specific careers support – a finding that helps to explain why only 8% of disabled students report their receipt of disability-specific careers support despite three-quarters of careers services providing such support (Allen and Coney 2021: Disabled Students’ Commission 2021). However, as the promotion of UoD Careers Service support through this project was found to positively impact disabled students’ engagement – as survey participant 5 stated that they were “unaware that [they] could utilise university resources in order to discuss [their] condition and employment, but will try this now”, while survey participants indicated that they would likely access online guides (46%), careers events (38%), recordings of careers events (33%), practice interviews (33%) – increased outreach could prove essential to encouraging individuals’ willingness to seek support.

While disabled students generally noted the Careers Service website to be accessible, and highlighted positive experiences – including help creating a CV (survey participant 53), exploring career prospects (survey participant 17), and finding suitable part-time jobs (survey participant 19) – they also emphasised the need for improvement. Further, interview participant 1 on the generalised nature of existing careers support, stating that there are “gaps in knowledge for people that have disabilities” This suggests that, for careers support to benefit disabled students, advice needs to be tailored to the specific challenges that they face. As such, the range of disability-specific careers support offered across the HE sector, and summarised below, represents a welcomed improvement:

*Figure 1: Provider universities’ use of different disability-specific careers provisions*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Provision** | **Frequency** | **Percentage (%)** |
| Information on external organisations providing disability-specific resources and support | 54 | 69.2 |
| Advice on disability rights within employment, including adjustments and disclosure | 51 | 65.4 |
| Details of universal Careers Service support helpful to disabled students and graduates | 35 | 44.9 |
| Tailored Careers Service support designed for disabled students and graduates | 33 | 42.3 |
| Tailored careers events for disabled students and graduates | 11 | 14.1 |
| Collaboration between Careers Service and Disability Service staff | 7 | 9.0 |
| Careers support to disabled students prior to enrolment in their course | 2 | 2.6 |
| Support for disabled graduates’ transition to employment | 2 | 2.6 |

Despite current disability-specific careers support being skewed towards the provision of advice on external organisation, rights, and universal careers support, great diversity was observed in universities’ provision of tailored support and events. For example, of the 33 UK universities advertising tailored support, two-thirds provided accessibility adjustments such as variable appointment lengths and communication formats, while over a third (39.4%) provided bespoke career opportunities including internships, work experience schemes, or mentoring. Similarly, while only 11 UK universities advertised tailored events, approximately half offered events on disclosure (54.5%) and adjustments (45.5%), while a third (36.3%) offered talks with employers. Therefore, while HE Institutions are currently developing tailored support for disabled students and graduates, it is important that provisions become more diverse and widespread across the sector to ensure that disabled students and graduates are not disadvantaged by a lack of relevant advice and resources.

## Disabled Students’ Preferences

Despite facing these distinct employment barriers, disabled students expressed strong hopes for the improvement of disability-specific careers support and noted that “it felt amazing to be able to contribute to research” (interview participant 10) as they “want to try and help things change” (interview participant 5).

With views to improve existing provisions, disabled students expressed preferences for careers support to be made more visible and accessible. To combat limited awareness, disabled students desired more frequent and targeted advertisement of support, with three-quarters of survey participants indicating that support should be advertised repeatedly and through email – while approximately half (51%) also desired information prior to beginning their course and through staff announcements (43%). Survey participant 42 noted that, “if help is available, it shouldn’t be missed, so widespread action and reminders would be very helpful”. Additionally, interview participants highlighted that Careers Service support should be made more accessible by ensuring the availability of online content, including guides and recordings of events (participants 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 9), and providing adaptations to in-person support, such as through quiet hours or variable appointment lengths and communication methods (participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9) – with interview participant 2 summarising the importance of these actions by revealing that disabled individuals often feel like they are burdening others by asking for adjustments. Together, these preferences indicate that disabled students desire greater outreach from support providers, both to raise awareness of support and ease discomfort about accessing it.

Further, disabled students highlighted their desires for more diverse disability-specific careers advice to boost their confidence and opportunities. Survey participants stated the benefit of holding workshops to help disabled students advocate for themselves (participant 42) and highlight their positive skills (participants 49), or search for suitable jobs or employers (survey participants 45 and 55). Of the support options provided within the survey, participants exhibited the following preferences:

*Figure 2: Survey Participants’ Preferences for Disability-Specific Careers Support*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Intervention*** | ***Number of Students*** | ***Percentage (%)*** |
| *Rights Advice* | *53* | *84* |
| *External Resources* | *49* | *78* |
| *Collaboration* | *48* | *76* |
| *Rights Guide* | *44* | *70* |
| *Tailored Events* | *37* | *59* |
| *Transition Planning* | *34* | *54* |
| *Record Events* | *33* | *52* |
| *Mentoring* | *32* | *51* |
| *Quiet Hours* | *29* | *46* |
| *Longer Appointments* | *25* | *40* |

Interview participants echoed the importance of providing advice on disability-specific employment rights, and shared experiences of feeling unable to advocate for adjustments to be put in place (participants 5 and 8) or confidently disclose their disability (participant 7). However, interview participants also proposed new forms of support, such as the advertisement or provision of accessible job opportunities (participants 6, 7, and 8), access to a disabled careers community through networking events with fellow disabled students and graduates or opportunities to meet disabled professionals (participants 3, 4, 5, 9, and 10), and staff disability training to aid the support of individuals with different disabilities (participants 2, 4, 8, and 9). These diverse recommendations highlight the importance of providing a range of support options, including bespoke advice, opportunities, and events.

Finally, disabled students specified that a cross-departmental approach should be taken to make these improvements to disability-specific careers support at the UoD. Three-quarters of survey participants stated that the UoD’s Careers Service and Disability Services should work together to provide targeted interventions – while 41% also desired the involvement of academic schools. Interview participants highlighted distinct functions for this collaboration, and stated that Disability Services could assist with promotion and knowledge exchange through utilising a referral system (interview participant 6), highlighting the disabled student voice (interview participants 3 and 4) and providing insight into reasonable adjustments (interview participants 1, 5, and 7), while academic schools could advise on sector-specific access issues – such as adaptive lab coats for wheelchair users (interview participant 4) or those that require lightweight clothing (interview participant 7). These preferences again indicate that disabled students wish for greater outreach from UoD service providers to ensure that they can gain the greatest awareness of and benefit from resources.

## Implications

Together, these findings prove that disabled students possess distinct experiences of the job market and employment compared to their non-disabled peers. While disabled students reported limited concerns accessing the job market, a series of challenges were found to impact their experiences within it – namely difficulty finding suitable roles, trouble navigating recruitment and the workplace, a lack of awareness of support, and inefficient support. As such, while findings confirm that UK universities are working to provide disability-specific careers support, they also indicate that current HE careers support is lacking. However, with disabled students expressing preferences for the greater advertisement, accessibility, and diversity of disability-specific careers support – and for careers services to pursue collaboration in the pursuit of these improvements – the findings of the Disability and Employability Research Project can be of great help to the HE Careers Service development.

# Recommendations

The outcomes of the Disability and Employability Research Project have several implications for the future of HE careers support. This chapter utilises findings to propose 12 key recommendations for how Careers Services can improve the disability-specific careers support offered – grouping recommendations by disabled students’ preferences for advertisement, accessibility, diversity, and dialogue, and providing examples for each recommendation.

## Increase advertisement of careers support

As disabled students reported a lack of awareness of UoD support resources, and only 56% of universities across the UK clearly advertised their provision of disability-specific resources on their website, increased advertisement of careers support is necessary. Further, disabled students themselves expressed desires for support to be advertised early, repeatedly, and through varied means to ensure that it cannot be overlooked.

**Recommendation 1: Advertise careers support early**

* Notify prospective students of disability-specific careers support prior to enrolment.
* Hold Open Day and Welcome Week events to introduce the range of UoD careers support.
* Collaborate with Disability Services to introduce disability-specific careers support during initial meetings.

**Recommendation 2: Advertise careers support repeatedly**

* Send frequent emails or a newsletter about available careers support.
* Collaborate with academic staff to have support reiterated in opening lectures.

**Recommendation 3: Advertise careers support through varied means**

* Send frequent emails or a newsletter about available careers support.
* Collaborate with Disability Services and academic staff to verbally inform students about disability-specific careers support (e.g., referral system, lecture shoutouts).
* Produce physical resources (e.g., posters, flyers).

## Enhance the accessibility of careers support

With interview participant 2 having highlighted that they feel burdened when requesting adjustments, it is essential that the Careers Service works to emphasise its accessibility. Disabled students highlighted a number of ways in which this could be ensured and, if implemented, such support would be in line with sector-wide trends – as two-thirds of UK universities providing tailored careers support offer accessibility adjustments.

**Recommendation 4: Improve online careers support**

* Create a targeted section on the Careers Service website about disability-specific careers support.
* Publish online guides on universal and disability-specific careers topics.
* Hold online events and provide captioned recordings of in-person events.

**Recommendation 5: Provide adjustments to in-person careers support**

* Clearly offer adjustments for appointments (e.g., variable appointment lengths, materials in alternative formats).
* Implement adjustments for in-person events (e.g., quiet hours, seating, breaks).

**Recommendation 6: Increase Careers Service staff disability awareness**

* Review available training and support resources (see Appendix D).
* Collaborate with Disability Services to gain insights into disability-specific careers considerations.
* Collaborate with Academic Schools to gain insights into sector-specific access issues.

## Diversify disability-specific careers support

As disabled individuals were found to face challenges at all stages of employment – spanning the job search, recruitment, and the workplace – it is important to implement comprehensive disability-specific careers support. Additionally, although disabled students agreed on the importance of certain types of support, a diverse approach should be pursued to benefit those with a wide range of disabilities.

**Recommendation 7: Help disabled students and graduates find suitable jobs**

* Highlight accessible job opportunities (e.g. part-time, flexible, remote).
* Build connections with disability-friendly employers and highlight them to disabled students and graduates (e.g. disability-friendly employer fair, employer spotlights).
* Work with disability-friendly employers to provide bespoke opportunities (e.g. internships, work experience).

**Recommendation 8: Educate disabled students and graduates on employment rights**

* Provide tailored advice or events on the topics of disclosure and adjustments.
* Collaborate with Disability Services and Academic Schools to help disabled students and graduates understand disability- or sector-specific adjustments.
* Hold workshops to prepare disabled students and graduate to advocate for their rights and strengths.

**Recommendation 9: Facilitate the formation of a disabled careers community**

* Highlight or provide mentoring opportunities with disabled professionals.
* Hold events with disabled professionals or disability-friendly employers.
* Hold networking events for disabled students, graduates, and professionals.

## Pursue ongoing dialogue about disability-specific careers support

Due to the complexity of implementing effective disability-specific careers support, the Careers Service should pursue ongoing collaboration in its planning, implementation, and evaluation – especially as this would honour disabled students’ preferences for strong cross-departmental collaboration. Further, with disabled students having highlighted their desire to help improve support for others, while reports recommended a student-led response, dialogue with disabled students and graduates should be maintained.

**Recommendation 10: Collaborate to organise, advertise, and implement support**

* Collaborate with Disability Services to gain insights into disability-specific careers considerations.
* Collaborate with Academic Schools to gain insights into sector-specific access issues.
* Collaborate with Disability Services and Academic Schools to promote disability-specific careers support early and frequently.

**Recommendation 11: Collaborate with disabled students and graduates to evaluate support**

* Regularly collect student and graduate feedback about current and potential disability-specific careers support.
* Collaborate with disabled student societies to understand the perspectives of disabled students.

**Recommendation 12: Collaborate across the HE sector to further develop disability-specific careers support**

* Regularly review best practice across the sector for disability-specific careers support.
* Communicate with the AGCAS Disability Task group for disability-specific careers support

# Conclusion

While the findings of this report confirm that disabled students face a range of challenges within the job market, they have also confirmed that disabled students have strong hopes and recommendations for how improvements to disability-specific careers support can be made. Engaging in this 6 month project demonstrates the commitment of the University of Dundee to enhancing their understanding of the employability challenges faced by their disabled students and graduates.

Through research, disabled students were found to encounter barriers within both the job market and careers support – citing difficulties finding jobs and navigating recruitment and the workplace, as well as a lack of awareness of and access to beneficial support. As such, it is important that the Careers Service provides more comprehensive support to disabled students and graduates – in line with the distinct preferences of disabled students – to reflect the pervasive nature of disabled employment inequality.

Ultimately, the Disability and Employability Research Project culminated in the production of 12 key recommendations – developed around disabled students’ preferences to increase the advertisement, accessibility, and diversity of support, and to make these improvements in dialogue with staff and students – which can be used by Careers Services to aid their development of disability-specific careers support. While examples have been provided for each recommendation, again based on the ideas and preferences expressed by disabled students, these are not comprehensive, and so it is important that the Careers Service maintains its drive to continuously reflect and improve upon the support that it can offer to disabled students and graduates.

Through implementing these recommendations, support for disabled students and graduates will undoubtedly be improved, allowing disabled individuals to feel better supported and included within the Institution. Moreover, is hoped that through boosting engagement with careers resources, disabled students and graduates will become more knowledgeable and empowered within the job market – reducing anxiety about their graduate outcomes and allowing them to confidently access their desired career paths.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

This Appendix details the criteria on which UK universities’ websites were assessed during the quantitative website analysis, which took place in November 2023. The criteria are as follows:

* Resource page – the existence of a webpage detailing disability-specific support and resources offered by external organisations.
* Rights guidance – the provision of a webpage or tailored guidance on disability-specific employment rights, such as disclosure and adjustments.
* Universal careers support – the signposting of universal careers support that would be helpful to disabled students and graduates.
* Tailored careers support – the provision of tailored careers support for disabled students and graduates, such as accessible communication formats or bespoke opportunities.
* Tailored careers events – the provision of tailored careers events for disabled students and graduates, such as sessions on disclosure and adjustments or a disability-friendly employer fair.
* Collaboration – the use of collaboration between disability and careers staff to promote or deliver disability-specific careers support.
* Pre-enrolment support – the provision of tailored careers support for disabled students and graduates prior to enrolment, such as during Open Days, Welcome Week, or as a prospective student.
* Transition support – the provision of tailored support to aid disabled graduates transition into employment, such as a course or career planning event.

## Appendix B

This Appendix details the sample and questions of the online survey, which took place between December 2023 and January 2024. The sample had the following characteristics:

* Participants were predominantly full-time students, with 58 disabled students studying full-time while only 4 were studying part-time.
* Participants were predominantly undergraduates students, with 43 disabled students studying an undergraduate degree, 12 studying a taught postgraduate degree, 7 studying a research postgraduate degree, and 1 not disclosing.
* Participants were represented within most academic schools:
  + 30 disabled students reported studying within the School of Humanities, Social Science, and Law.
  + 10 disabled students reported studying within Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design.
  + 6 disabled students reported studying within the School of Life Sciences.
  + 5 disabled students reported studying within the School of Science and Engineering.
  + 4 disabled students reported studying within the School of Business, the School of Health Sciences, and the School of Medicine.
* Three participants reported that they do not consider themselves to be disabled.

The survey questions asked are as follows, grouped by survey and section:

**Disability and Employability Survey**

About You

1. Do you consider yourself to be a student with a disability or long-term health condition?
2. Which Academic School are you a student within?
3. What type of degree are you undertaking?
4. What course are you taking?
5. Are you studying full-time or part-time?
6. What year of study are you in?

The Job Market

1. What lived experience do you have within employment and the job market: full-time work, part-time work, internships, voluntary work, applying for work, none of the above?
2. Briefly summarise your lived experiences of the above.
3. Briefly summarise what has prevented you from gaining experience.
4. Have you noticed any changes to the job market and the opportunities available to you since the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. Do you feel that your disability impacts or has impacted your opportunities and/or experiences within the job market?
6. In what ways do you feel that your disability impacts or has impacted your opportunities and/or experiences within the job market?
7. Do you have any concerns about finding employment and developing your career following graduation?
8. How comfortable do you feel performing the following actions: disclosing your disability to recruiters or employers, exercising your right to request adjustments within recruitment, exercising your right to request adjustments within employment, seeking specialised employment advice and/or assistance?
9. Provide details about any factors that influence how comfortable you feel performing the above actions.

The Careers Service and Existing Resources

1. Which of the following have you accessed during your time at the University of Dundee for support or resources to benefit your employability: your Academic School, Disability Services, the Careers Service, other Student Services, external organisations, external organisations for disabled individuals, government support, other, none of the above?
2. Provide details about what ‘other’ support you have accessed.
3. Briefly summarise your lived experiences of the above.
4. Briefly summarise what has prevented you from accessing support or resources to benefit your employability.
5. How likely are you to access the following support and resources provided by the Careers Service: careers appointments, quick queries sessions, bitesize sesisons, careers events, recordings of careers events, online guides, practice interviews, JobShop, GoinGlobal, careers module, internship module, EmployAbility?

Recommendations

1. Who would you prefer to highlight careers support designed specifically for students with disabilities and/or long-term health conditions?
2. How would you prefer to be informed of careers support designed specifically for students with disabilities and/or long-term health conditions?
3. When should support be highlighted: before the start of your course, at the start of your course, halfway through your course, in the penultimate year of your course, in the final year of your course, repeatedly, never, other?
4. Provide details about when you think support should be highlighted.
5. What interventions could the Careers Service implement to benefit the employability of yourself and other students with disabilities and/or long-term health conditions: advise on disability rights within the job market, provide an online guide about disclosure and adjustments, highlight disability-specific careers resources, offer longer Careers Appointments, arrange quiet hours at Fairs, record all in-person events, hold tailored skills sessions and events, arrange ongoing mentoring support, provide transition planning and support for the graduate job market, collaborate with Disability Services to organise tailored support?
6. Provide details of anything else that the Careers Service could do to benefit the employability of yourself and other students with disabilities and/or long-term health conditions.

Additional Research

1. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group or interview in Semester 2 to further discuss your lived experiences?

**Additional Research Survey**

1. Which of the following formats would you be comfortable participating in: Online Focus Group (5+ individuals), Online Group Interview (2-3 individuals),Online Individual Interview ,In-person Focus Group (5+ individuals),In-person Group Interview (2-3 individuals),In-person Individual Interview?
2. Do you have any access requirements or desired adjustments to facilitate your participation?
3. Please provide your University email address to be contacted through.

## Appendix C

This Appendix details the questions asked within online and in-person interviews, which took place during February 2024. The interview questions asked are as follows:

1. What made you want to participate in this interview?
2. Could you tell me about a time when your disability impacted your employment prospects or experiences, whether this was positively or negatively?
3. At this stage of university, how do you feel about your upcoming transition into the graduate job market?
4. What sort of support do you feel would help you with respect to your employment experiences, concerns, or ambitions?
5. How would you describe your knowledge and use of the Careers Service at the University of Dundee?
6. Given the experiences, concerns, and ambitions that you shared earlier, how helpfula and accessible do you think existing Careers Service provisions are?
7. Could you rank these forms of disability-specific careers support for me, from most to least important?
8. Thinking back to the beginning of university, what type of employment support do you wish that you were offered or made aware of?
9. To what extent do you think that Disability Services should be involved in the organisation, promotion, or delivery of disability-specific careers support?
10. Is there anything connected to the topic of disability and employment that you feel has not been mentioned, or that you feel is especially important for the Careers Service to know about?

## Appendix D

This Appendix details available training and support resources for UoD Careers Service staff, to improve their understanding of and approach to supporting disabled students and graduates. The resources are as follows:

* AGCAS:
  + “Supporting Disabled Students in Navigating Recruitment and Selection Processes for Graduate Employment.” AGCAS Webinar. <https://www.agcas.org.uk/Supporting-disabled-students-in-navigating-recruitment-and-selection-processes-for-graduate-employment-opportunities-webinar>. Free.
  + “How to approach 1-2-1 appointments with disabled students: mental health, neurodiversity, and other conditions.” AGCAS Webinar. <https://www.agcas.org.uk/Annual-Conference-2022/Parallel-sessions-A#A1>. Free.
  + “How to support disabled graduates.” AGCAS Disability Task Group Blog. <https://agcasdtg.wordpress.com/2021/08/03/how-to-support-disabled-graduates/>. Free.
  + “Working with disabled students and graduates - some frequently asked questions.” AGCAS Resource Pack. <https://www.agcas.org.uk/Knowledge-Centre/d8aadd50-cf52-4d04-9bc8-62ef0faa5d07>. Free.
* Ambitious about Autism
  + “Understanding Autism for Careers and Employability Professionals.” Ambitious about Autism course. <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/what-we-do/training-and-consultancy/our-training-courses/understanding-autism-for-careers-and-employability-professionals>. Free.
  + AGCAS Connect members have highlighted that, if there are enough interested people on the team, Ambitious about Autism may run the course specifically for the team if contacted.
* Diversity and Ability:
  + “Career beyond Higher Education.” Diversity and Ability Workshop. <https://diversityandability.com/services/workshop-explorer/>.
  + “From arriving to thriving: Embedding effective disabled student support.” Diversity and Ability Workshop. <https://diversityandability.com/services/workshop-explorer/>.
  + “Disability inclusion training.” Diversity and Ability Training. <https://diversityandability.com/service/disability-inclusion-training/>.
  + “Neurodiversity inclusion training.” Diversity and Ability Training. <https://diversityandability.com/service/disability-inclusion-training/>.
* The IMAGE Project
  + “Improving Employability of Autistic Graduates in Europe.” The IMAGE Project resources. <https://imageautism.com/resources>. Free.
* MyPlus Students’ Club
  + “The benefits of openness: empowering your students to confidently disclose their disability.” MyPlus Universities Webinar. <https://myplusuniversitiesclub.com/staff-events-calendar-united-kingdom/encouraging-openness-14th-may-2024/>. Free.
  + “Requesting adjustments: accessing disability support during the recruitment process.” MyPlus Universities Webinar. <https://myplusuniversitiesclub.com/staff-events-calendar-united-kingdom/requesting-adjustments/>. Free.
  + Resources and training packs on various disability-related topics available for purchase.

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