

Inclusive Career Development Project Evaluation Report 2023

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Overview

Evaluation Team and Roles

Dr. Angela Page

- School of Education, University of Newcastle
- Senior Lecturer in Special and Inclusive Education
- Ethics and co-design of research method. Supervision of participant selection and interviews. Data analysis and reporting.
- Evaluation.

Dr Joanne Mosen

- Disability Inclusion advocate and consultant and Adjunct Senior Lecturer, School of Education, University of Newcastle.
- Co-design of research method. Supervision of participant selection and interviews. Data analysis and reporting. Development of an Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool,
- Evaluation.

This project focused on supporting schools in transition to work for students with disability. The project is a partnership between the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL), the Australian Centre for Career Education (ACCE) and the University of Newcastle. This project is supported by Gandel Foundation.

Executive summary

The Inclusive Career Development project referred to in this report aims to support and build the capacity of schools to implement evidence-based and effective, school to work transition and career development for students with disability.

The project's aim was to support schools to identify and address gaps in practice, and to develop the skills, knowledge and tools to improve post-school outcomes for students with disability. In doing so, the project worked with three distinctly different schools to co-design disability inclusive career guidance resources to improve schools' capacity to support students with disability in their career development journey.

The outputs of this project have conceptualized an inclusive career development framework presented through the format of a benchmarking tool to support schools in their inclusion of students with disability in their career development journey.

Through the application of contemporary research and knowledge, resources were developed in association with all project partners and informed by the findings from a Literature Review.

Within this project resources have been co-designed, to support career practitioners guiding students with disability through the career development journey across all years of secondary schooling. The resources include an 'Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool' (the tool) document to guide career practitioners in supporting career development for students with disability.

The evaluation of the inclusive career development project used a qualitative approach investigating the experience of key stakeholders involved in the project, with a particular focus on the three pilot schools. Case studies of each school were developed as part of the evaluation process. A data analysis workshop was also held to support in the validation of findings within the evaluation.

Ultimately, this project has resulted in the co-development of evidenced-based resources and knowledge that support the development of career education, pathways planning, and transition support for students with disability. The materials developed to support schools have been informed by contemporary research and knowledge, specifically relevant to the Australian education context. The Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool has been designed to support the self-measurement of school career/transition specialists and leadership teams to assess themselves against international benchmarked policy and practice in Pathway planning for students with disability. This self-assessment tool incorporates the latest literature regarding predictors of post-school success for students with disability.

All resources and tools have been trialled in three different school settings: independent, disability specialist and state schools. This trial included training and mentoring sessions over a six-month period. The evaluation of findings included a qualitative investigation of project outcomes, including the development of case studies highlighting key themes and findings. The evaluation was conducted by the University of Newcastle through semi-structured one on one and small group interviews with teaching staff who were involved in the delivery of career development programs in secondary schools within the state of Victoria.

The findings revealed that the tool was very helpful for staff and schools. All staff who were interviewed reported that the tool assisted in guiding existing practices and aiding in the future development of additional practices. While to date, not providing a significant shift in teaching practices, staff noted that it promoted confidence in their perception that they were providing the core elements of evidence-based good career development practice.

Participants also considered that they were going to add a few aspects that were reported in the findings. These include adding structure to their practices and adding in additional Career Planning tools and sharing that plan with students. From the analysis of the findings, it is worth noting that participants however, were impacted on by the various affordances and constraints of the community in which they worked. These were realised in the time that was given to Career Development as well as access to resources. As a result, staff wanted to be able to 'cherry pick' aspects of the tool. The danger in 'cherry picking' the tool is that it was designed within an ecological framework. For that reason, with this consideration in mind we recommend that all features of the Career Development tool are practiced.

Background

This project has been informed by the understanding that young people with disability in Australia are more likely to struggle with the transition from secondary school to post school options. Unsuccessful transition from school is an indicator of long-term disadvantage. This project aims to address this risk through the co-design of the Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool to build the capacity of schools and career practitioners in supporting young people with disability, while still at school, with career planning and post school success.

Wakeford and Waugh (2014) have indicated that young people with disability:

- are more likely to drop out of school early
- are more likely to be excluded from the labour force
- have fewer educational qualifications
- experience poverty, hardship, and social isolation
- have poorer health (including mental health) outcomes
- are more likely to be targets of violence.

It has been identified that there is a pervasive culture of low expectation and lack of opportunities for Australian students with disability, particularly in relation to genuine sustainable employment; a view sometimes held by the young people themselves, parents, employers, educators, and government.

The strong relationship between the experience of work during secondary school and post-school employment for youth with disabilities is well-documented (Achola & Greene, 2016). Frequent exposure to real work environments throughout the secondary school years shapes a young person's image of themselves as a 'worker' and provides the skills, experience, and confidence to successfully take an employment pathway (Trainor, 2012). Adolescents and young adults with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to exclusionary processes. They are engaged in the transition to adulthood, marked in our society primarily by educational attainment, employment, family formation and having a voice in the community. Sitting on the margins of, or excluded from, reaching satisfying outcomes in these important domains of adulthood can further entrench the disadvantage experienced in childhood, multiplying the likelihood of socially excluded status in adulthood (Luecking & Luecking, 2015). This project aimed to not only improve employability but also support transition to adulthood.

An evaluation was conducted of an inclusive career development framework for schools that was developed with a focus towards addressing the career development needs of students with disability. The framework, specifically informed and guided the practices of the development of an Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool.

This research aimed to evaluate that framework in order to build the capacity of schools to support the implementation of evidence-based career development and school to work transition for students with disability. This framework has been developed by Dr Joanne Mosen and informed by the careers development literature for students with disability. The Inclusive Career Development for Schools framework seeks to address the need for evidence-based careers development resources, tools and practices for students with disability that systematically addresses the core skills for employment.

The project involved the following Project Phases

1. Production of a Literature Review that was developed to inform the development and design of an Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool
2. Learning and Development Material using evidenced-based resources and knowledge that support the development of career education, pathways planning, and work readiness for students with disability. The materials developed to support schools were a mix of e-learning activities, resources and tools and were co-designed and tested in schools. The resources were based on contemporary research and knowledge.
2. Career Development to ensure effective practice. The development of a tool for school career/transition specialists and leadership teams to assess themselves against international benchmarked policy and practice in Pathway planning. The developed assessment tool incorporated the latest literature regarding predictors of post-school success for students with disability.
3. Trial, mentor and improve. Trialling of the tool in 3 Schools and providing training and mentoring support to improve practice. Including a combination of special and mainstream schools.
4. Evaluation of findings – a qualitative investigation of the outcomes of the project, including the development of case studies highlighting key themes and findings. Findings are intended to be shared in journals and at relevant conferences.

To achieve this, the research questions that guided the project were:

1. How does the implementation of the Inclusive Career Development Framework impact on education staff perceptions and practices for students with disability?
 - a. In what ways was the *Inclusive Career Development for Schools* framework helpful for career, disability, and transition related staff in schools in guiding students with disability in the career development process?
 - b. To what extent did participation in the framework provide shifts in teaching practices and which specific elements of the framework are core predictors of positive impact?
 - c. To what extent did participation in the framework provide shifts in career development practices?

Limitations

The participating schools were distinctly different settings, both in their student cohort and geographically. This limits the generalisability of findings.

While it was regarded as very important to include students and other stakeholders in the project, restrictions from COVID19 were still in place in Victorian schools, making it difficult to include student voices. Additionally, we were faced with the limitation of the school year which placed constraints on the time that was made available to trial the tool. The co-design and trial of inclusive career development resources included training and mentoring sessions

over a six-month period. This limited opportunities for schools to implement the final tool which may have resulted in further recommendations for inclusive career development practices and approaches within the school sector.

This gap in the current project lends itself to future opportunities for testing, resources development and further research. For example, scaling up a trial across a greater number of schools Australia-wide over a full school year should result in more generalisable findings and further improvements to resources relevant to disability inclusive practices that can be shared nationally within all school settings.

Methodology

In order to respond to the research questions, the following methodology and methods were employed.

This study is positioned within a relativist ontology. This has allowed the researchers to investigate the phenomenon through the lens of reality as self-constructed, subjective and varying between individuals based on their own unique lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This perspective has directed the inquiry to seek out a diversity of experiences that all relate to the focus of this project.

The methodology applied to this study is Stake's (1978) case study methodology. This has been selected as the most ideal way of collecting and representing individual stories alongside undertaking a thematic analysis in order to generate themes within and across all cases (Stake, 1978). This is especially relevant with a small sample size where an in-depth analysis is possible through multiple interactions with participants. As a result of this approach, the three participating schools are presented as cases for the purpose of the evaluation and report.

Method

Participant Sample

Schools within the state of Victoria who were delivering careers education were considered eligible to participate. Three schools were subsequently invited to participate in an evaluation of the project. These schools were independently approached by the University of Newcastle. The three schools represented a purposive sample of distinctly different education settings: one independent specialist school, one regional Catholic school and one outer suburban government school. This aimed to capture different opinions and experiences of career development and guidance from these three schools in the co-design of tools and resources as they related to different school settings. Two staff from each school participated in the evaluation, making a total of six participants.

All data collection was conducted by Dr Angela Page and Dr Joanne Mosen, who completed all of the necessary state regulation requirements as stipulated by the Research in Schools and Early Childhood Settings (RISEC) process of the Victorian government Department of Education and Training.

The inclusion criteria was:

- School staff over 18 years of age who are involved in the Inclusive Career Development for Schools project and employed in the three identified schools.

A literature review was first conducted and written (Page et al, 2022) to inform the development of an evidence-based school to work transition and career development tool and resources for students with disability.

Next, a Career Development tool was developed informed from the findings of the literature review, in association with a co-design workshop and input from all project partners.

Third, the tool was presented to participating schools, with the assistance of the project partners, by current school career/transition specialists to assess themselves against international benchmarked policy and practices. This pathway planning used a quantitative metric benchmark. Stakeholders in the schools were interviewed at this point to determine their existing career development practices.

School staff were coached by project partners as to how to use the tool.

Finally, post-interviews were conducted with each participating school to evaluate the outcomes of using the tool.

The method of one on one or small group semi structured interviews was used as the exclusive method of data collection. Interviews were conducted in person wherever possible with interviews conducted remotely via Zoom where participants were not able to meet face to face. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed following completion of the interview. Interview transcripts were used to develop three subsequent case studies.

The interview questions had been developed by the researchers who have brought their expertise in understanding of secondary school education and systems (Dr Angela Page) working with communities and career development for people with disability (Dr Mosen) and working with children with intellectual disability and their families (Dr Page and Dr Mosen).

The semi structured interviews were followed up by a focus group discussion.

The focus group discussion was implemented to strengthen our findings and share our data and results and implications for the future. This approach is known as a **Participatory Analysis of Data (PAD)**, or a 'data party' workshop.

Participatory Analysis of Data (The Data Party)

A data validation workshop was held on 5 December 2022 in the format of a 'Data Party'. The data party was designed to invigorate discussions based on the key research themes, deconstruct ideas that had surfaced throughout this project and confirm the relevance of findings among participants and key stakeholders. The process of conducting a 'data party' involved all participants engaging in a variety of activities that was designed to be fun and interactive, rather than the more traditional forms of presenting data from a lectern to passive audiences. Participants are required to actively participate in the discovery of the data. This approach allowed stakeholders to get to know and engage with the data:

- Stakeholders were then able to bring context to the data to help explain some of the results.
- When stakeholders participate in analysing the data, they are more likely to understand it and use it.

The questions that will be directed towards participants included:

- What does this data tell you?
- How does this align with your expectations?
- What do you think is occurring here and why?
- What other information do you need to make this actionable?

Findings

From the initial interview and subsequent interview, the following themes were elicited where there was a majority voice (over half of the six participants agreed to each statement) in the comments.

Themes

1. Overall perception of the Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool;
2. Issues meeting good practice guidelines, aspects relating to the content;
3. New additions for implementation in the future that were provided by the tool, and
4. Additions that would be helpful to include in the existing tool.

Overall perceptions of the Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool

Participants were consistent in their perception that the tool was *“fabulous. The ratings from 1 to 5 are very clear and accurately describe the categories”*. They considered the tool helpful in assisting staff to understand how career development was structured and reaffirmed what they were doing at school in terms of career development. Participants also found that the tool was *“great for setting staff goals for the school. It highlighted the gaps. The pilot has given us space to reflect.”*

Of note, all participants did not report that the tool shifted actual practice, stating that while *“The tool changed some structure but not significantly change teaching practice”*.

Issues meeting good practice guideline

Participants reported several issues that related to constraints that prevented them or would have prevented them from applying every aspect of the tool. Time allocation and resources were issues that prevented teaching staff scoring their performance in career development practices at a higher rate. Time constraints meant that schools had to focus on some areas of career development over others: *“There needs to be a balance of what realistically can be done and what is ideal”*.

Community engagement was at times a challenge: especially when it is driven by staff rather than an organization. Maintaining relationships was found to be difficult especially when there were few staff to do this. Other staff stated that *“sometimes parents and families are reluctant to engage”* in career development initiatives and at other times, there can be *“difficulty connecting with work experience/employment opportunities to enable better*

outcomes". It was generally considered that this was a result of perceptions of employing students with disability and a shift in community expectation was needed.

Content: The Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool

Overall, participants reported that the tool provided resources that were very useful to implement career development in schools. Others found, in relation to time constraints, that they wished to pick and choose parts of the tool that they found the most relevant: *"We want to use the tools in the toolbox as needed"*.

At other times, participants noted additional reasons for not engaging in the tool as a wholistic framework: *"There are valid reasons that we choose not to approach career development practices in the way that the tool suggests. Either it does not align or we do it differently"*.

Additions to existing career development

All participants considered that the tool provided them with additional information and ideas that were thought to be useful in improving their career development program delivery. Some of these examples included the Action Plan, which is a student-centered tool shared between the student, family, and staff for the planning of career development goals. A further example was the notion of including the *"career folders for students or a portfolio to take with them when they leave school"*. All staff reported that the inclusion of teaching information about students' rights would be an addition that they would implement in the future.

Staff also considered the development of more robust systems for community engagement would be beneficial. Stronger connections with services outside school would allow *"for engagement outside school so that school has a go-to person who works in disability support to contact for career development"*. Additionally, a stronger relationship with services would also strengthen career development practices within the school: *"We could have more of these opportunities to engage in the school, such as community people in to speak and engage with families"*.

Finally, all participants were very supportive of the opportunity to engage in future communities of practice that could connect and support staff who were working in the field of career development, and was considered particularly *"helpful to reflect and share different ideas"*.

Tool additions that would be helpful

The interviews also elicited suggestions where the tool could be improved on in the future. One participant reported that a *"guide for employers would be great, to assist in shifting perspectives"*. This was repeated by another who suggested a *"guideline or communication tool for employers to ensure that they are aware of what needs doing"*.

Guidelines were considered useful for not only employers, but parents and family as well, *"especially for those who do not participate in school events, to help them identify what are well-aligned career choices for their children and what support is out there"*.

Finally, participants reiterated the importance of future connections and professional learning for staff who are involved in career development stating that *“it would be good to keep communicating and connecting with each other”*, and *“a forum where we could share the successes and barriers across individual cases would be great”*.

Data party results

The themes outlined above were checked by the participants, discussed, and interrogated at the subsequent ‘data party’. No changes were made from the interview summary. The discussions informed a review of the initial Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool and guidelines as well as providing further suggestions for future practice that will be discussed in detail in the conclusion section.

Discussion

The findings were collated in response to the research questions:

- a. In what ways was the *Inclusive Career Development for Schools* framework helpful for career, disability, and transition related staff in schools in guiding students with disability in the career development process?
- b. To what extent did participation in the framework provide shifts in teaching practices and which specific elements of the framework are core predictors of positive impact?
- c. To what extent did participation in the framework provide shifts in career development practices?

The findings revealed that the Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool was very helpful for staff and schools. All staff who were interviewed reported that the tool assisted in guiding existing practices and aiding in the future development of additional practices. It provided a roadmap to ensure that they were on the right track. It was also noted that staff considered the tool to be useful in promoting career development within the school and to help new staff to move forward quickly in their knowledge and understanding around career development for students with disability.

Participation in the project did not appear to provide a significant shift in teaching practices. Staff noted that while it promoted confidence in their perception that they were providing the core elements of evidence-based good career development practice, they were implementing many of these activities already. While staff were implementing many of the activities in the guide, there was still room for improvement around establishing even better practices to support young people with disability in career development. We noted also, during the interviews that there was room for improving staff attitudes towards students with disability in terms of having higher expectations than staff reported of students. Ongoing access to professional learning among career development staff might address some of the persistent attitudes towards disability that appeared to be prevalent.

Because of these existing good practices, staff considered that they were not going to shift significantly in their career development approach, although they were going to add a few aspects that were reported in the findings. These include adding structure to their practices, and adding in an Action Plan and sharing that plan with students. Additions were suggested that would benefit the users of the tool in the future, such as the inclusion of information to

assist in the Career Development exercises. Guides for parents and employers were also highlighted to support the process of career development and were considered core predictors of future positive career development outcomes. In response to this need, resources for employers and parents have been placed on the Ticket to Work website. Participation in a Community of Practice for career practitioners with a focus on disability was considered valuable in that sharing of resources and ideas proved worthwhile and connected participants in a positive way.

From the analysis of the case studies in addition to the findings from the data party, it is worth noting that participants however, wished to 'cherry pick' aspects of the tool and because of time constraints, could not apply the tool in its entirety. Further, staff were also heavily influenced by the communities that they lived in, with their various affordances and constraints. Examples include that while one school community may exist within a strong network of parental and family involvement, another would not. In addition to some of these constraints and affordances, staff attitude did appear to influence career development practices, where if staff were reluctant or lacked confidence to engage with communities, then this affected their subsequent practices. In turn, student career development delivery was affected. The danger in 'cherry picking' the tool is that it was designed from a model that centred the tool within an ecological framework, where each part contributes to a successful whole.

The tool was also based on a human rights approach that human rights philosophy and is based on the concept of equity (recognizing that each person has different circumstances and different allocation of resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome).

Through a human rights lens, we view students with disability as equal, contributing members of society with goals, skills and interests and most importantly with the right to self-determination and access to further education and open employment. This remains the overarching goal and consideration in career development practice.

The current evaluation provided some support for the framework in guiding teaching staff towards practices that aligned with the rights of students with disabilities access to all opportunities. One example was that an Action Plan (forward career planning) was considered a worthwhile addition in two schools. This addition will enable each student to have a contribution into their career planning where they currently do not. Time constraints on the current evaluation meant that data could not be captured to reflect whether or not school practices were improved that impacted on student outcomes for career development.

While this outcome is encouraging, in other cases there was room for improvement. The evaluation of the application of the Career Development tool and guide found support in the existing literature where significant limitations remain for students with disabilities in their access to not only qualified career development in specialist education settings but also limited access to career development opportunities that seek to raise aspirations and expectations. Another limitation across all schools also included that school constraints meant that they could introduce career development at an early age (as recommended by the tool).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, the Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool was considered to be very helpful. Participants recommended the tool be made available to all schools, online and in printable versions. In addition participants recommended that the tool be a living document with scope for continual improvements. These improvements included core considerations to ensure positive change;

- a guide for employers to ensure that everyone involved understood their roles and expectations,
- a guide for parents and families especially for those who do not participate in school events, to help them identify what are well-aligned career choices for their children and what support is out there,
- continued connection through a Community of Practice for career practitioners with a focus on disability, which would create a forum for continual tool development as well as to assist in continual professional development.

In response to these project findings, ACCE has now developed a Community of Practice and Ticket to Work has developed and placed resources for employers and parents on their website.

Further, it is also recommended that in line with the framework's intention, that the tool is applied in its entirety and not segmented or sectioned allowing an ecological approach to its delivery, as well as to maximise its likelihood of successful and positive outcomes. While this is a recommendation, it is acknowledged that time constraints in schools are very real concerns. Additionally, schools might consider strategies to improve staff attitudes towards students with disability in terms of having higher expectations than staff reported of students.

Outputs developed within the Inclusive Career Development project

Finally, we wish to list the number of outputs that have been developed within this project. These comprise of

1. Literature review
2. Research Article – under review.
3. Inclusive Careers Benchmarking Tool

It is hoped that these outputs will ultimately benefit the young people for whom the tool has been designed for. These young people need the skills to navigate diverse and flexible study pathways to acquire these attributes and importantly, be supported to realise their goals. Good practices in career development, upon which this framework was built, are essential to achieving equitable and successful outcomes for young people with disability. It is hoped that the Inclusive Career Development framework can provide support as young people traverse this process of educational and career decision making and reach their full potential.

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