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Mollie Dollinger

Tim Corcoran

Denise Jackson
Edith Cowan University

Sarah O'Shea

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Employability for inclusion: the urgent need for a biopsychosocial model perspective

Mollie Dollinger ^{a,b}, Tim Corcoran ^c, Denise Jackson ^d and Sarah O'Shea ^e

^aCentre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (CRADLE), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia; ^bDeakin Learning Futures, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia; ^cSchool of Education, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia; ^dSchool of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia; ^eOffice of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research), Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia

ABSTRACT

Definitions of disability are changing, shifting from a narrow medical diagnosis to a biopsychosocial model of disability, where disability is conceptualised as a series of relational conditions that can potentially disadvantage individuals within environments. Implications of this new understanding of disability will have significant effects in the higher education sector, where there is increasing participation of disabled students. In this paper, we discuss one aspect of these implications through the topic of graduate employability. In doing so, we generate a new concept 'Employability for Inclusion' that can be utilised as an equity-focused lens for universities to consider how employability initiatives are inclusive to disabled and/or diverse students. To unpack this concept, we further illustrate how a biopsychosocial model of disability would impact key employability activities (e.g., work-integrated learning) and provide valuable insights into how the higher education sector can adopt emerging conceptualisations of disability and inclusion.

KEYWORDS

Graduate employability; equity and inclusion; disability; work-integrated learning; inherent course requirements; career development learning

Introduction

The perennial pursuit of student equity in higher education is increasingly focused on disability, as reports from across the world highlight the growing participation of disabled students enrolled at universities (Kilpatrick et al., 2017; Moriña, 2019; Yusof et al., 2020). However, while participation rates are promising, student experiences and outcomes remain less so, with research evidencing the unique barriers that disabled students are likely to face during their studies (Jackson & Li, 2021; Lawlis et al., 2021). One particular area of growing interest in this space is graduate employability, as disabled students are not only less likely to participate in dedicated employability activities such as work-integrated learning (WIL) (ACEN, 2023; Gatto et al., 2021), but also may experience a range of challenges when they do, such as complexities relating to disability

CONTACT Mollie Dollinger  mollie@deakin.edu.au  Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (CRADLE), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

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disclosure, requests for reasonable adjustments, and even potential discrimination or stigma on their capabilities and potential contributions to the workplace (Dollinger et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2022).

To address these inequities, significant research is urgently needed across policy, curriculum, and pedagogy. Yet before this research takes place, it is also critical that the higher education sector recognise the changing definitions and conceptualisations of disability, which have long been discussed in the broader disability studies discourse (Barnes, 2000; Grotkamp et al., 2020). Importantly, this relates to the very definition of disability itself, which has developed from a historical and narrow model of medical diagnosis to a biopsychosocial model which spans various factors that place individuals at a disadvantage, often preventing them from full participation or full acceptance within an environment (e.g., Slee, 2011). In this way, disability can be both absolute and dynamic, as some disabilities may diminish or arise depending on the context or environment a person is situated in.

In this paper, we seek to consider how a biopsychosocial model of disability will impact the discourse and practices related to graduate employability in higher education. In doing so, we generate a new concept, 'Employability for Inclusion' as a mechanism to call for radical inclusive change. Our paper will first outline the existing and pervasive exclusion that is exhibited through current conceptualisations of employability. Our argument contends this work is implicitly currently supported by the promotion of ableism which Goodley (2017) suggests is:

the intersectional merging of society's ideals that are too often associated with being white, able-bodied, heteronormative, high-income, property-owning, WENA (Western, European and North American) and WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant). Ableism, then, might be conceptualised as the intersectional Same against which many (devalued) Others are judged. (p. 56–57)

We will then, through a series of steps, illustrate the shared commonalities of modern conceptualisations of employability and disability, including how the biopsychosocial model of disability tangibly impacts employability. Finally, we will introduce our definition of the concept of 'Employability for Inclusion' (Efi) as a guiding lens for future research and practice. To further illustrate the contribution of this concept, we will also discuss how key employability activities undertaken by universities could be modified through its lens, including inherent course requirements, career development learning (CDL), WIL and graduate attributes. Through our discussion, we seek to contribute key learnings for the sector to prepare and better understand the shifting perspectives of disability, and how to support more inclusive and equitable development of graduate employability. We note further that while we focus on the Australian context for the purposes of this paper, the implications of our work have much broader international relevancy.

Exclusion in graduate employability

From the late 1980s and onwards, higher education policy, government funding and university strategies have been increasingly intertwined with the perspective that universities should prepare students for the world of work (Römgens et al., 2020). And while

some have argued that this perspective is a manifestation of neoliberalism, and the consumer-driven exchange of degrees (i.e., universities attempting to increase student enrolment), others have positioned it as a shift towards greater student equity (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Healey, 2023). That, in essence, universities increasing their vocational focus could help alleviate the existing biases, prejudices, and social capital that often determine employment success in the labour market. This perspective thus often culminates with the assumption that educators can instil students with appropriate skills and capabilities that would make them more employable, regardless of their background or level of disadvantage. As discussed by Hora (2020), this view adopts a human capital theory towards student employability, and has at least to date, been the most dominant understanding of employability in the sector.

Inherent, however, in the ‘cause (education) and effect (employability)’ philosophy is that every person’s potential resides solely within the individual. As scholars have reflected, this implies that individuals can express their employability independently, regardless of context or environment (Tomlinson & Nghia, 2020). Such conceptualisations of employability ignore the influence of uncontrollable factors of workplace environments, labour market conditions, and/or migration policies (to name a few) which heavily impact students’ perceptions of self, and their assessment or enactment of their ‘own’ employability (Tran et al., 2022). In recent studies conducted by Dollinger et al. (2022, 2023) which explored disabled students’ experiences in work-integrated learning placements, findings showcased the opposite. Namely, students’ supervisors, their specific contexts, and the sociocultural norms of their environment all played a significant role both in how students saw themselves and how they conceptualised their contributions in workplace settings.

The prevalent discussion of students’ performance of soft skills in regard to their employability also exemplifies a pattern of exclusion. Soft skills, often defined as personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people, are typically laden with ableist normative sociocultural influences and expectations. In this way, soft skills that are highly prioritised by graduate employers, such as communication and teamwork (e.g., Succi & Canovi, 2020), can be used as seemingly unbiased thresholds that employees must exhibit and, in turn, potentially disadvantage millions with a disability who may communicate outside of the normative expectations or have other non-communication based contributions to make. Accompanying terms such as ‘hard working’ and ‘grit’ (e.g., Reysen et al., 2019) further insidiously support ableism as they often imply a good employee is someone who is flexible, can work whenever necessary, and potentially put the organisation in front of their personal health management and/or responsibilities. In many contexts, the emphasis on soft skills therefore acts as an invisible barrier for individuals seeking employment and/or promotion, and disadvantages not only the disabled but those from different cultures and/or low socioeconomic backgrounds (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

Likely, part of the ableism that emerges in the discourse of employability relates to the issues of measurement. Jackson and Rowe (2023) write that despite well-known differences in the field between employability and employment, the proxy measure of a graduate’s employment post-completion is still dominant in the field. O’Shea (2023) also links to this, arguing that the ‘seemingly positive’ results of graduate outcomes in Australia, likely belie the significant discrepancies and nuances that would come with an

equity-focused investigation. Writing in the context of regional and rural students in Vietnam, Tran et al. (2022) stress the importance of more research to consider employability in context. As results from this study showed, students' employability hinged significantly on the context where they were seeking work and how they were perceived by employers and others in the area (Tran et al., 2022). Other sociological or critical theory scholars have also highlighted the significance of contextual factors, such as how the local labour market opportunities and life circumstances of a person will be tied to a person's ability to enact their employability (Arthur et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2021). As Tomlinson and Nghia (2020) reflect, 'Employability is clearly not a one-stop event but an ongoing negotiation over time and context ... engaging in an initial process of becoming ... [and] re-becoming as they move through different modes of self-identity' (p. 11).

Yet while there is growing consensus on the contextual factors that shape employability, limited research has explored the complexities of how these numerous factors, from the individual, contextual (e.g., environmental, time), material and non-material, come together through performance – or a meeting of all factors in a specific time and place. This is particularly significant in the themes of disability and employability, where factors are already well known to entangle, weave, and echo one another. As the focus of employability expands across the higher education sector, as do the enrolments of disabled students, it is timely to ask, how do we conceptualise employability inclusively?

A biopsychosocial perspective towards 'employability for inclusion'

The conceptualisation of disability as a diagnosis by medical professionals and limited to embodied deficit(s) existing within or belonging to a person has long been recognised as flawed (Barnes, 2019). Disability, as increasingly recognised by scholars and advocates, is in fact a condition of human beings that spans biopsychosocial factors which place individuals at a disadvantage, linking not only a person's health status but also their environments, culture, history, politics, contexts, and temporality (Hughes et al., 2016). This biopsychosocial model of disability has significant, yet currently ill-defined implications for the higher education sector. Consider, for example, the current dominant process around reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities studying at universities, a process mandated by law. The process unduly assumes an ableist position assigning disability as possessive within a person's body/being, to be formally assessed by a medical professional, resulting in a set of predetermined reasonable adjustments that the student may need (i.e., disability is formulated). Recognition of the biopsychosocial model would however question such a process, as disability does not only affect personal performance, but also, and importantly, how that performance is understood, accepted, and supported in context. This acknowledges that the disability can, in certain situations, be mitigated or aggravated, and that educators have a responsibility to consider how to address removable barriers proactively (e.g., the resumption of ableism) rather than do so only through a reaction to a specific, context-free learning support request.

To date, the momentum for better inclusion in higher education has thus far often only been related to either participation or completion of higher education studies (e.g., widening participation) or assessment design. In particular, the term 'assessment for inclusion' emerging in the 2020s has captured the need for assessment to consider and incorporate the diversity across student cohorts (Tai et al., 2023) by fostering 'radical

inclusion [through the inclusion of] marginalised students (e.g., disabled students) as fully included and agentic members of higher education communities’ (Nieminen, 2022, p. 5). As Nieminen (2022) explains that key to achieving this radical inclusion is through greater recognition of the cultural, historical, and political positioning of marginalised students and intentionally disrupting such positioning to enhance student agency. As they continue, ‘AfI [Assessment for Inclusion] builds on a collective understanding of agency: it cannot be conducted *for* students but always *with* them [emphasis in the original]’ (Nieminen, 2022, p. 6)

Assessment for inclusion has already spawned significant research in challenging decades-old conceptualisations of the purpose and structure of assessment. Working with student partners, for example, Tai et al. (2023) unpack exclusion in assessment design, from format, to how time is experienced, to the emotional process of students’ requesting extension or considering disclosure. McArthur (2022) also expands on assessment for inclusion by posing how assessment design can not only be more inclusive to diverse learners but also, be designed to tackle topics and issues of social justice for a more equitable society. Jain (2023) applies the lens of critical disability theory towards assessment for inclusion with a series of provoking questions including ‘how would program requirements and associated assessment shift if we assumed disabled students can be successful learners and future professionals?’ (p.35).

However, while assessment is often a specific task, even if it is designed over a formative process, employability is far more complex. In fact, like disability itself, theories of employability are also positioned across multiple dimensions and paradigms. As discussed by Holmes (2013) there are three dominant perspectives of employability ranging from 1) employability as possession, or something the individual has or does not have, 2) employability as a position, related to status or class, and 3) employability as a process, for example as developing and dynamic. These dimensions of employability are further nuanced through the individual and societal economic nature of employability, with some scholars arguing the university experience itself is akin to an up-front loan, to be paid back through higher lifetime earnings.

Modern conceptualisations of employability (i.e., those that recognise it is different than employment) and disability actually share much in common, as captured in Table 1. Both are dynamic, evolving through time and in flux, and they are similarly situated in context, often outside of an individual’s control and dependent on other social actors and environments (e.g., positional, influenced by class, status, and economies of power).

Table 1. Mirrored principles of employability and disability.

Principle	Employability	Disability
Temporality	Changes over time, i.e., can be developed, stagnated, or even reduced across time	Can be chronic and also fluctuating in severity and consequence, spanning biopsychosocial factors
Contextuality	Subject to specific macro, meso, and micro political, labour, and workplace environments	Mitigated or aggravated depending on context, including stakeholders, physical and processual barriers, and culture
Positionality	Constructed through status and class	Constructed through status and class
Locus	Students instilled with appropriate skills and capabilities	Individuals possess biopsychological deficits compared to normative conditions

Table 2. Mapping the biopsychosocial model of disability to employability.

Dimension of Disability	Impact on Employability
Biological (e.g., physical health)	Employability spans a spectrum of diverse contributions to workplace environments that are mediated by the environment's ability to support such diverse contributions. This includes built environments, assistive technologies, flexible work conditions, etc.
Psychological (e.g., mental health, emotions)	Employability is promoted through a culture of psychological safety and respect, where all stakeholders resist stigmatising practices seeking to build trust, dialogue and effective inclusion.
Social (e.g., social support, environments)	Employability is a shared responsibility across society, the university, industry partners or supervisors, university staff and the student.

Given such shared commonalities, and the growing recognition of both terms' influence in the higher education sector, it is relevant to consider how the biopsychosocial model of disability impacts employability towards a conceptualisation of 'Employability for Inclusion'.

In [Table 2](#) the dimensions of the biopsychosocial model of disability are highlighted with corresponding impact for employability. As demonstrated below the implications of accepting a biopsychosocial model would in turn provide a catalyst for increasing inclusion in employability. For example, stressing that employability should accept a spectrum of diverse contributions by employees, and also recognising that these contributions are largely dependent on the pre-existing environment. Employability needs to be promoted through a culture of psychological safety, including responsible practices involving disclosure, and the recognition that disability will not be stigmatised or discriminated against (Lindsay et al., 2018; Pearson & Boscovich, 2019). Finally, the importance of understanding employability as a shared responsibility across stakeholders, not something that resides only within the individual.

Through this analysis of how employability and disability relate, and the impacts of the biopsychosocial model of disability on employability, we define the concept of 'Employability for Inclusion' (EfI) as:

The shared recognition that employability and disability are temporal, contextual, influenced by positions of status and class, and relational. Employability thus sits at the nexus of an individual's being and larger sociocultural and environmental factors, which can either serve to support or diminish opportunities for participation. Employability for inclusion further calls for intentional action and shared responsibility on the part of industry, universities, and nations to recognise employability as an indicator of the inclusiveness of our societies.

Theorising impact of 'employability for inclusion'

To unpack the concept of EfI, we will theorise the possibilities for its impact across several dimensions of the higher education employability discourse. Yet we also caution that while the current discussion of the implications for EfI is targeted to focus on existing practices, the impact of EfI may have much deeper more nuanced effects on the higher education sector. For example, as described by Holmes, the term could take on the role of an 'oppositional device' which seeks to disrupt norms and 'provoke public speech' (2007, p.37, also refer to Beckett & Campbell, 2015). In doing so, it would link to

Foucauldian concepts of power that support scholars to adopt resistance-practices, including refusal of existing forms of subjection (Foucault, 1996, as described by; Beckett & Campbell, 2015).

Inherent course requirements

The first dimension for the potential impact of Efl adoption relates to inherent requirements. In Australia, inherent requirements are commonly referred to as the abilities, knowledge and skills students must possess or perform to be considered for enrolment into a course of study; be able to successfully work towards qualification once enrolled; and in certain instances, like accredited professions (e.g., teaching, nursing), be able to register for future employment (Corcoran et al., 2023). Important to note are the differences in terminology across the globe. To illustrate, in the UK these are called ‘competency standards’ and in the USA ‘essential functions’. The application of inherent requirements, however, are not required by law, and therefore can vary across higher education. Some courses or institutions choose not to have any at all (Brett et al., 2016). Examples of inherent requirements may include the necessary fine motor skills for nursing students to administer an injection to a patient, to the assessment of moral and ethical reasoning for an undergraduate in a business analyst course. From an academic standpoint, therefore, they are invoked both to support the academic integrity of a course and practice proficiency of its future graduates.

The adoption of inherent requirements within the university sector in Australia has been uncritically transposed from a very different context. Originally, the concept of inherent requirements arose from language and policy that was included in the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) of 1992. In this original context, the term was applied to clarify an employer’s privilege to discriminate against an individual (e.g., a disabled individual) if it was deemed reasonable that the person would not be able to adequately perform certain job tasks (Dickson & Duffy, 2019). Important to our discussion here, the DDA further adopted a medical model of disability that references normative comparison (i.e., ableism) and possession of pathology, illness, or disease (see Part 1, Section 4 of the DDA). It is also relevant to note that in 2007, Australia was an original signatory of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), which further promotes the rights of people with disabilities regarding education and employment. However, this convention does not provide a comprehensive definition of disability (refer to Article 1), and the Australian Government, therefore, currently defers to the original definition of disability outlined in the DDA (1992) (Australian Government, Attorney-General’s Department, n.d.).

The co-opting of the term inherent requirement in higher education is incongruent with Efl for several key reasons. The first is that inherent requirements in an educational context should be positioned not as gatekeepers to a course of study, but as a discursive opportunity for dialogue between the student, academic, and other available learning supports (e.g., disability liaison officer) to examine potential reasonable adjustments (Corcoran et al., 2019). Such action supports the purported relational and developmental nature of education itself, affirmatively serving the individual, a greater understanding of

a discipline and how work is conceived within it. In practice, this means moving away from a stagnate, arguably arbitrary list of what a student must innately possess or be able to perform, to reflective and collaborative discussions on how the student can navigate their learning and be enabled to qualify for future careers and career paths.

Moving towards Efl adoption and extending our concern for enabling opportunity, a second incongruity with current applications of inherent requirements is the focus on ‘inherency’ rather than coherency. As discussed previously by Corcoran et al. (2023), inherency here assumes that deficiency exists solely with(in) the individual. Efl however stresses a more coherent and shared practice which continuously manifests across individuals, contexts, and environments (refer to Whitburn & Corcoran, 2019). Rather than publishing a list of capabilities a person must possess, course requirements should instead be invoked as performative assurances that inclusive practice is taking place. Reorientation from inherency to coherency would also assist in decreasing dependency on student disclosure to showcase how universities can address normative ableist stereotypes in education and professional practice.

Career development learning

Another area ripe for disruption in the context of an updated definition of employability would be the growing area of career development learning (CDL). CDL is a broad framework that, at least initially, sought to clarify the breadth of careers-related guidance and activities that support an individual’s lifelong career learning (O’Shea & Groves, 2020; Watts, 2006). Taking a student-centred approach, CDL aims to open up enterprise and employment futures, rather than foreclosing possible careers by focusing only on current skills and attributes. Through this lens, CDL deliberately goes beyond simple management of employability and adopts a developmental approach that considers how individuals learn about the self and the world of work (McMahon et al., 2003).

However, as recently discussed by Healy (2023), CDL is predominantly discussed in literature as the development and deployment of career management skills, which often omit the psychosocial and processual theories of learning (e.g., Darce Pool & Sewell, 2007). The common operationalisation of CDL through the corresponding DOTS model further limits measurement of CDL to individual factors, such as (1) Decision-learning and motivations, (2) Opportunity awareness, e.g., career paths, (3) Transition learning and ability to identify and overcome obstacles, and (4) Self-awareness, and life planning (Watts, 2006; previously critiqued by; Healy, 2023; McIlveen et al., 2011). These factors, as stand-alone indicators, do not fully encapsulate the broader concept of Efl as they do not take into account the significant contextual, relational, and sociocultural factors that are outlined through a biopsychosocial model of disability. As Groves et al. (2022) recently discussed, ‘research is needed to examine how CDL interventions can support action against marginalisation, discrimination, exclusion, stigmatisation, stereotyping and psychosocial instability’ (p. 146).

Adopting an Efl framing for CDL would stress how multiple forms of disadvantage overlap (intersectionality) to potentially compound barriers to educational and employment outcomes. This would shift the common application of CDL as simply an individual’s capacity to self-manage their careers, to a broader understanding of how specific

contexts impact how a person can/cannot enact their possible selves (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011). The capacity to enact a possible future self is informed both by individual factors, as well as factors that are outside of an individual's control including structural constraints and stratification. Taken this way, CDL interventions for students would have an increased focus to reinforce what students can do within specific environments or situations, including awareness of the possible access to 'social, cultural, and economic resources' (Sellar et al., 2009, p. 3) that students can leverage to gain entry into the labour force. CDL would further need to incorporate greater emphasis on the rights and the laws that relate to discrimination and disability, to embed a working knowledge for both disabled and non-disabled students on acceptable behaviours, reasonable adjustments in the workplace, and when discrimination is taking place (and how/when to report it, if so). This focus is echoed by findings in disability studies, which indicate that the training of future professionals in key social services, from social work to nursing and teaching, often fails to properly equip graduates on the rights and laws relating to disability, hindering how these professions can support disability, as well as include disabled individuals within their workforces (Berridge et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2022).

Work-integrated learning

Increasingly ubiquitous in both Australia and globally, WIL is another key activity undertaken by universities to support students' employability (Jackson & Rowe, 2023). WIL varies across types and can include projects, consultancy, entrepreneurial activities, and hackathons, as well as experiences that take place in a work setting (herein referred to as work-based WIL), such as internships, practicums, and placements (Kay et al., 2018). Through the human capital lens, WIL can enhance students' understanding of the meaning and importance of the skills prioritised by graduate employers, and help to develop them (Jackson, 2015).

Yet despite several calls for greater inclusion and equity (e.g., Sachs et al., 2016; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2015), WIL policies and practices continue to lag in reform. Recent research has validated concerns that fewer equity-deserving students, including disabled students, participate in work-based WIL (Jackson et al., 2023) and those that do often face additional challenges and burdens related to the disclosure of their disability and/or the unfair discrimination and stigmatisation while undertaking opportunities (Dollinger et al., 2022; Lawlis et al., 2021). As such, Efl has the potential to serve a much-needed purpose in rethinking WIL policies and practices.

To illustrate, through the adoption of Efl, WIL opportunities include greater co-creation of learning outcomes for students' WIL experiences, which could be flexibly revised to adhere to individual learning goals and different ways of working. For example, rather than have prescribed learning outcomes, informed only by academics or government/industry requests (Clarke, 2018), WIL learning outcomes could be positioned as a dialogue between students, academics, and industry (Jackson, 2018), to help challenge assumed idea contributions with a career or workplace. This further links to research that has stressed the shared responsibility towards supporting student employability in formal learning environments across students, academics and industry supervisors (Hill et al., 2016; Petruzzello et al., 2023). By allowing students to express agency in the attributes they choose to work towards, students can also better reflect on what they would like to

develop (i.e., in relation to what skills or goals they have) and how this is meaningful or personal for them. Critical in this co-construction would also be the purposeful aim to provide feedback to industry/government about what attributes students believe are important for themselves, and how the shared recognition of the importance of these attributes may help guide workplaces and societies towards greater inclusion.

Instrumentally, work-based WIL could also include greater preparation for students, potentially linking to the CDL discussion earlier. This would help build students' self-efficacy prior to placement, as well as help them decide whether they choose to disclose, and to what extent, to their industry supervisors. Preparation for work-based WIL could further help students reflect on assistive technologies and/or reasonable adjustments they may seek to request in their placement, to ensure they are best positioned to have a positive learning experience.

In the long-term, Efl could in fact open up critical reflections on how assessment of achieved outcomes in WIL occurs, particularly for prescribed competency standards in professionally accredited fields of study, to ensure a sufficiently broad application of demonstration in diverse ways. This links to aspects of inclusive assessment, as well as encourages greater industry partnership, through discussion of how competency standards could be more inclusive. Already, there has been significant discussion that highlights the complexities of effective measurements related to demonstrating learning (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). Also important for supporting Efl would be evaluating WIL opportunities to ensure they offer a meaningful learning experience, including providing an environment that fosters knowledge and skill development, career clarification and the building of networks for all students (see TEQSA, 2022).

The impact of Efl in the WIL space, however, goes beyond how we design or assess WIL on an individual basis to the core rationale and societal benefit of supporting WIL opportunities. Through work-based WIL, for example, universities could reframe WIL as an equity-driven activity that serves not only as a developmental experience for students, but for industry, to reflect on how inclusion and equity are supported in their workplace settings. As stated through the definition of Efl this would align to the conceptualisation of employability as a shared responsibility between students, universities, industry, and society.

Discussion

Through this paper we sought to draw attention to the complexities of how disability and employability are defined, applied (i.e., as a label or metric), and assessed in the higher education sector. Similar to scholars such as Gabel and Peters (2004) we encourage a shift from functional understandings of these complex terms, as 'objective, orderly and rational' states of being (p. 587) to products of sociopolitical and cultural systems that 'produce disablement through inequities and social injustice' (p. 587). This is not to encourage dramatisation of the challenges we face in pursuing equity or graduate employability, but rather to motivate staff to be both mindful and reflective of the paradoxes that exist in our human, social world. Through a biopsychosocial model of disability, we therefore expand from a simplified and inherently flawed medical model of disability as a category, to the emphasis of disability as a fluctuating state, influenced by

temporal, contextual, positioned (i.e., class and status) and loci factors, some of which can be tempered, and others that cannot. This emerging understanding of disability of course will influence many facets of higher education, but in particular, will have significant carry-on effects on the goal of graduate employability. As we have outlined this is due to the mirrored imprecise nature of conceptualising this term, which too can be made up of biological, psychological, and social factors that form a person's 'employability'.

To provide practical discussion of the impact of changing conceptualisations of disability, we chose in this article to highlight how inherent requirements, career development learning, and work-integrated learning may adapt as a response. However, we also recognise the growing higher education literature that discusses the employability exclusion of the academy itself, which alludes to the need for a greater cultural shift in how universities accept and support diverse individuals in their communities (e.g., Mellifont et al., 2019). As reflected by Rodgers et al. (2022), academia continues to uphold dominant and normative structures that perpetuate ableist practices, ideologies, and discourses. For example, through the uniform, inflexible concept of time or workload, which fails to acknowledge the different temporalities that (disabled) people live their lives (Kafer, 2013). Simply put, the available working hours in a day may fluctuate for disabled individuals, or the body may age faster, but this does not mean that disabled people always have less time (or less valuable time), rather they experience time differently. By addressing the inequities and exclusion of the academy, it is plausible to assume that this reflection will yield more insights into how we can be inclusive to our students, as well as other stakeholders such as industry partners, alumni, and wider community members.

While this article also provides a conceptual discussion of the impact of a biopsychosocial model of disability on graduate employability, future research is needed in the application of such understandings. This includes creating models, approaches, and instruments to explore how disability is being defined and supported across the university, and specifically how this change in disability definition will be translated to staff and students, and embedded within university policy and procedures (Corcoran et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant in the Australian university context, where recent policy discussions, such as in the negotiation of the Universities Accord (Australian Government, 2023), have reiterated the importance of student equity and inclusion, and prioritised disability as a key area for improvement (Australian Government, 2023). Yet until we acknowledge the complexities of the term itself, how can universities draft suitable policies, programmes, or interventions to support it?

Implications for policy and management

Summarising this article, there are several key implications for higher education policy and management, including:

- Modification and renewal of any current policies and practices that relate to disability should align with the increasingly accepted biopsychosocial model of disability. This would include policies and practices related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), as well as those related to inherent requirements, reasonable adjustments and student extensions.

- Design and implementation of graduate employability models and frameworks which recognise the controllable, and uncontrollable, factors that determine employability. As well as additional career development programmes and resources that support students to understand the legal rights in the workplace if they face discrimination or stigma, and guidance for students on how they may approach disclosure with a teacher or supervisor, if they wish to do so.
- A strategic reframing of partnerships with industry (e.g., in work-integrated learning placements, alumni mentoring programmes) as mutually beneficial experiences where both industry and students can reflect on current inclusion and equity practices, and learn about how to improve social cohesion and acceptance of diversity in our communities. Accompanying this would also be greater evaluation of how inclusion and equity are vetted, supported, and achieved in such programmes, to ensure students are in supportive learning environments to develop their graduate employability.

Conclusion

Contrary to equity-deserving students' stagnating, if not decreasing, participation rates in higher education, disabled student enrolments are globally on the rise. Estimates show that as many as 10–13% of all students identify as with disability (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], Australian Government, 2022; Office for Students [OfS], 2019); with other research cautioning that even these numbers may not represent the full cohort, as many students choose not to disclose (Dollinger et al., 2023). This is promising, yet with increased participation also comes the greater urgency to reflect on how universities support this cohort to achieve their goals. An area that requires urgent attention is how universities define disability and operationalise it in their various policies and practices, and shift to growing recognition that disability is not narrowly judged solely by a medical professional at a certain time and place. Rather, that disability is a confluence of biopsychosocial factors which can potentially disadvantage individuals within environments. This will have significant impacts across the student experience, including the area of graduate employability which, like disability itself, is susceptible to the societal failures of inclusion and equity that go far beyond an individual's responsibility or burden.

It is now pressing for universities to develop their disability literacy, or their ability to communicate effectively with disabled members of their communities and understand the changing contexts of disability in our societies. Crucially, this will not only enable greater inclusion and equity for disabled individuals in the academy, but for those from all equity backgrounds, who often have intersecting and/or similar conditions that lead to disadvantage. To address this need, in this paper we have introduced the concept of 'Employability for Inclusion' which invites staff to consider how employability initiatives support disabled students, as well as industry partners, to practice inclusion and enable us to think differently about the way we embed employability in our universities. Through this, we encourage future discussion and debate about the role of universities to embed inclusive, equitable employability for diverse students.

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ORCID

Mollie Dollinger  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1105-9051>

Tim Corcoran  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4567-8726>

Denise Jackson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7821-3394>

Sarah O'Shea  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8988-6674>

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Appendix

To support readers, we have included a glossary below of the key terms that are referred to in this article.

Ableism: Typically defined as discrimination in favour of able-bodied people. However, as we discuss, scholars such as Goodley (2017) have argued for greater nuancing of this term, including recognition of the many intersecting inequities, and how ableism often implicitly seeks to group people in ‘sameness’, while othering non-conformity.

Biopsychosocial Model of Disability: Disability as a condition of human beings that spans biopsychosocial factors which place individuals at a disadvantage, linking not only a person’s health status but also their environments, culture, history, politics, contexts, and temporality. In this way, disability can be both absolute and dynamic, as some disabilities may diminish or arise depending on the context or environment a person is situated in.

Disabled or with disabilities: We acknowledge language varies, and is contested, on how to appropriately refer to disability. Some authors of this paper have lived experience with disability and have chosen to adopt the term ‘disabled’ (i.e., identity-first language), however many prefer person-first language (e.g., person with disabilities). We stress for readers that usage varies from person to person, and those without lived experience should seek out a person’s preference.

Employability for Inclusion: The shared recognition that employability and disability are temporal, contextual, influenced by positions of status and class, and relational. Employability thus sits at the nexus of an individual’s being and larger sociocultural and environmental factors, which can either serve to support or diminish opportunities for participation. Employability for inclusion further calls for intentional action and shared responsibility on the part of industry, universities, and nations to recognise employability as an indicator of the inclusiveness of our societies.

Medical Model of Disability: Disability as a discrete category, that is objective, orderly and rational, judged by a medical professional at a certain time and place.