

Literature Review Executive Summary - Decent Work for Graduates with Disabilities Strategies for Success and Areas for Improvement

Executive Summary

While it is encouraging that more people with disabilities (PWD) are attending post-secondary education (PSE), it is important to consider how PSE has impacted the lives and careers of graduates with disabilities (GWD). This review explores what decent work looks like for PWD, what the barriers to employment are, and what is being done to make decent work more inclusive and equitable. GWD still face higher rates of unemployment when compared to people without disabilities who have similar qualifications. Further, GWD are more likely to be underemployed, work in precarious and/or part-time employment (often without health benefits) and have difficulty finding employment in their chosen fields of study (Chatoor, 2021).

Our review found some very promising strategies for increasing access to decent work for GWD. One important step towards improving access is ensuring that PWD have their basic day-to-day needs met. This means supporting services that ensure accessible and affordable housing, access to nutritious and inexpensive food, and access to transportation (Lindsay et al., 2021; Sima et al., 2015; Lee & Carter, 2012; McCormick et al., 2021).

Once basic needs are met, GWD may need ongoing career support including career planning and aptitude counselling, opportunities for networking, and job shadowing (Kolne & Lindsay, 2020, Lindsay et al., 2019; Zammitti et al., 2020). It is also important that SWD have positive work while they are in school, as this is a strong predictor of future career success (Grigal et al., 2019; Lindstrom et al., 2011; Sutton, 2020).

While it is important that GWD are empowered in the job market, it is equally important that employers and workplaces are trained and prepared to provide safe and inclusive workplaces for PWD (McCormick et al., 2021). Further, it is imperative that employers collaborate with PSE administrators, service providers, and PWD to provide holistic solutions to reducing barriers in the workplace (Domin et al., 2020).

Our review also details some of the areas in need of improvement so PWD can have increased opportunities for obtaining accessible and inclusive work. One issue at the centre of the problem is discrimination and stigma in the workplace, which can negatively impact hiring practices and wages. Many PWD are also very aware of the discrimination they face, which can lead to issues with job searching and may force PWD to try and act “not disabled” in order to get hired and keep their job (Lindsay et al., 2021; Cunnah, 2015).

Fear of discrimination can also prevent PWD from telling their employer about their disability and therefore must work without any accommodations (Margin et al., 2019). Almost 1 in 5 workers with disabilities have experienced issues when trying to get accommodations in the workplace, which among other reasons, may be because PWD are more likely to work in precarious and/or part-time employment (Chatoor, 2021).

Our analysis found that while there are many promising strategies for increasing access to decent work, there are several areas requiring attention to create inclusive and welcoming workplaces for graduates with a variety of learning styles and abilities. These findings are drawn from research Eviance completed in collaboration with its partners at Toronto Metropolitan University, OCADU, St. Francis Xavier University, and ARCH Disability Law Centre.

Recommendations

- Enhanced career and support services that ensure basic needs are met and tailor services to the individual needs of each service user.

- Collaboration between service providers, PWD, PSE administration, employers, and others to create more seamless access to services as well as solutions that work for all stakeholders involved.
- More research on “decent work” from an intersectional and human rights-based perspective that analyzes the complexities and nuances of the lived experiences of PWD. We anticipate that in the future, research and policy will move beyond the focus on “decent” work and work towards meaningful employment as defined by PWD.
- Programs that help reduce or erase student debt for students with disabilities. As noted in the PSE Fact Sheet, student debt is an issue that can be especially problematic for SWD. These issues continue beyond school to graduation as GWD may have a harder time repaying loans due to issues finding decent work. Debt reduction or erasure can ease the transition for GWD and increase the time and support they require to search for decent employment (Chambers et al., 2011).
- Provide more entrepreneurship opportunities for GWD. While this will not work for all GWD, entrepreneurship provides some unique opportunities for profitable and self-directed work (Magrin et al., 2018; Schur et al., Dammeyer et al. 2019).

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Our partners for this project include:



Manitoba Head Office:
330 St. Mary Avenue, Suite 300
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3C 3Z5

Bureau principal au Manitoba:
330 avenue St. Mary, bureau 300
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3C 3Z5

Ottawa Office:
343 Preston Street, 11th Floor
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 1N4

Bureau d'Ottawa:
343 rue Preston, 11^e étage
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 1N4

Tel/Tél: (204) 809-5954
info@eviance.ca

[eviance.ca](https://www.eviance.ca)

