



More Career Development Learning for Neurodivergent Tertiary Education Students: A Case Study

Jane Coffey¹ and Emma Lovegrove²

Corresponding author: Jane Coffey (Jane.Coffey@cbs.curtin.edu.au)

¹ School of Management and Marketing, Faculty of Business and Law at Curtin University

² Student Success team, Curtin University

Abstract

All adults, regardless of neurodivergent condition, should have the opportunity to engage in meaningful and sustainable work. However, there are a range of unique barriers facing those with neurodivergent conditions which are critical to understand to successfully facilitate the career development learning (CDL) strategies that will enable job market entry and success. In this paper, we will discuss a pilot CDL program, founded on the principles of social constructivism and Students as Partners (SaP), which was developed to provide neurodivergent tertiary students with the necessary skills and information to establish meaningful careers and employment options. Through our study, findings underscored the anxiety many neurodivergent students experience around career development and the need for specialised support to build confidence. Significantly, the most impactful outcomes from the program were the ability for neurodivergent students to hear authentic and relatable stories from their peers. The opportunity to discuss both successes and obstacles through the lens of neurodiversity was a powerful mechanism within which to build a learning environment as well as a sustainable community of practice. The experiences in both designing and conducting the Students as Partners driven CDL workshops for tertiary neurodivergent students adds significant value to the existing body of literature in not only how we define and label disability but also how employability is interpreted, both from academic and industry perspectives. The observations and findings of such an approach also challenge the existing narrative embodied in many university graduate capability programs for a changing future of work landscape.

Keywords

Neurodiversity; career development learning; employability; future of work; neurodivergent recruitment; equity

Introduction

The ability for adults with neurodivergent conditions to have the opportunity to engage in meaningful and sustainable work is non-negotiable: it is the right of every individual to be afforded equal opportunities to participate in the labour market. Neurodivergence is a term which recognises the alternative thinking styles and brain functions of individuals who have conditions which include (but are not limited to) ADHD, autism, dyspraxia and dyslexia (Szulc et al., 2021). The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) also makes it unlawful to discriminate in employment on the basis of disability (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). However, the range of unique, and at times seemingly insurmountable, barriers these individuals may face need further investigation to facilitate career development learning (CDL) strategies to enable such a successful transition to the labour

market. In 2018, it was reported that over 85% of college graduates in United States with Autism were either underemployed or unemployed as compared to the overall national unemployment rate of 4.5% (Pesce, 2019). In Australia, the unemployment rate for autistic people is three times the rate of those with disabilities, and six times of those without disability (Jones et al., 2019). A recent study also found that long-term unemployment was a key feature in the lives of those with Autism, even though their skill sets often exceeded the job requirements for the roles they were unsuccessful in securing (Jones et al., 2019). The same study identified the most significant barriers for students with Autism to finding employment was the perceived lack of support and information of needs and adjustments. Those neurodivergent individuals with conditions other than Autism also experience similar barriers to employment with research citing stereotyping and bias (Maroto and Pettinicchio, 2015). A recent report from the United Kingdom found that 90% of human resource professionals did not consider neurodivergence in the performance of their work, of which employment is a significant functionality (The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2018).

Whilst it is acknowledged that those with neurodivergent conditions are not unique in experiencing discrimination and inequity in accessing the labour market, they are part of a growing demographic of untapped and unrecognised talent (Bruyere & Colella, 2022). This coincides with the unprecedented labour shortages post COVID-19 globally, where the demand for skilled talent far exceeds supply and this will continue to be a problem in the future where it is estimated that by 2030 there will be a global talent shortage of more than 82 million people, resulting in approximately \$8.5 trillion in unrealised annual revenue (Korn, 2018). However, even with such a labour shortage, those with neurodivergent conditions continue to face significant obstacles in accessing recruitment and selection practices which continue to cater to an increasingly narrow 'neurotypical' sector of the community.

In response to both the increasing number of neurodivergent individuals enrolled in tertiary education (Dwyer et al, 2023), along with the well documented challenges facing this cohort in accessing and establishing meaningful and sustainable employment, a pilot program at an Australian public University was designed in 2022 to provide neurodivergent tertiary students with the necessary skills and information on establishing meaningful careers and employment options. The program focused on delivering two outcomes: workshops to assist neurodivergent tertiary students in navigating the labour market; and the creation of resources to assist career professionals, employers and neurodivergent students with a series of job search activities. A key point of differentiation for this program was to deliver the content through the lens of neurodiversity and to build a community of practice within a broad university student cohort.

Contextual Background

To ensure the program delivered was appropriate and fit-for-purpose, it was critical that the research team possessed a sound understanding of the challenges faces by those with neurodivergent conditions as this provided a sound foundation on which to build the core elements of the program. In addition to this, existing research on the emergent structural and skill changes required to both compete in the work environment of the future as well as to sustain a meaningful career was also required. In this section, we will briefly outline the key contextual factors driving the development of such a program: 1) future of work, 2) career sustainability, and 3) potential challenges for neurodivergent people.

Future of Work

The workplace of the future, as we are already experiencing, will become increasingly complex and fast-paced and will generally be characterised by diversity in work roles, increasing workloads and demands (Inkson et al., 2014). It is also clear that the new work order is characterised by a technological revolution which will create massive structure and skill-based changes to the labour market (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016; Davis, 2020; The Foundation for Young Australians, 2017). A recent Deloitte report also suggests that the shift in the type of work to be performed will be 'From

hands to heads to hearts', with an emphasis on interpersonal and creative roles that will be the hardest of all to automate (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, 2019, p. ii).

Along with technological disruption, the future work of work will also be characterised by global economic instability and crowded graduate labour markets, resulting in increased underemployment and unemployment (Pennington & Stanford, 2019). What is becoming clear is that it is not necessarily the type of qualification that a graduate possesses but the suite of skills that will deem them to be employable. It has been predicted that by 2030, two thirds of Australian jobs will be focussed on soft skills such as complex problem solving, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, cognitive flexibility and creativity (Oxford University Press, 2020). This was supported by a recent Australian study which whilst acknowledging the increasing need for technological skills, suggested that the most significant demand will be for 'human skills', making them the most important and valuable commodity in the future (Cisco, 2019). The most recent Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Global Employer survey results mirror these findings, indicating that communication, teamwork, problem solving, and flexibility are deemed the most important skills required by employers (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2022, p. 9).

At the same time, there will also be a 'talent crunch' whereby the shortage of skilled labour to meet the future labour demands will reach unprecedented levels. The 2018 report released by the consulting firm Korn Ferry suggests that this shortage of highly skilled labour globally 'could ultimately shift the global balance of economic power by 2030 if left unaddressed' (Korn, 2018, p. 1). In Australia, the scenario is no less grim. A recent study suggests that structural and skill changes will result in the need for a more highly skilled and agile workforce, requiring an additional 700,000 workers by 2034 just to maintain the existing GDP growth rate (Faethm, 2020, p. 10). Interestingly, the strengths of those with neurodivergent conditions, such as loyalty, reliability, remaining calm and natural technical aptitude and thriving in routine and detail-oriented roles (Scott et al., 2021), would appear to make them an extremely valuable asset not only in the current labour market, but certainly in the future.

Career Sustainability

Career sustainability, which is defined as 'the sequence of an individual's different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterised by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual' (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 7), will be increasingly complex with the future of work. Transition from an educational setting to paid employment is a significant milestone in one's life and is often fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. In order to cope, graduates need to not only possess the required career employability skills, but also need to be adaptable, self-reliant, curious and confident in order to cope with such a massive life change (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Research also suggests that those who continue to reflect upon and build employability skills, as well as develop a fundamental understanding that careers are in a continual state of transition, will be able to take on the future of work challenges (Fu et al., 2022).

Careers have been significantly impacted by a complex myriad of changing economic, technological and societal influences. The Institute for Working Futures, in designing their human capability standards model suggest that the future of work will require organisations to

develop a workforce with the capability to solve complex problems, collaborate and join together in a culture that is ready to transform and address new challenges. It is about developing people beyond their behaviours and skills ... to emotionally engage with each other and the customer' (2020, p. 4).

De Vos et al. (2018) argue that career sustainability is heavily influenced by individual and contextual issues, and the person-career fit is critical in finding such sustainability. Careers are not solely about one's paid work components of an entire life cycle but are part of life. This means that in order for careers to be sustainable, they need to view as a 'whole-life' phenomenon whereby satisfaction and effectiveness are achieved across all facets of one's life (DiRenzo et al., 2015). For those with neurodivergent challenges, satisfying and sustainable career can present difficulties, commencing

from the initial job search and interview processes through to finding work aligned with their skills set and talents.

Little research has been undertaken with regard to the employment readiness and career sustainability for those with neurodivergent conditions, including autism (Nicholas et al., 2018). However, it has been posited that a number of elements do positively contribute to career sustainability for neurodivergent employees, including vocational, family and community support systems and services and supportive workplace environments (Nicholas et al., 2017). An integrated model providing these various support elements were canvassed in a Canadian study, with feedback suggesting greater linkage between skill development and onsite employment exposure (Nicholas et al., 2018, p. 270).

Neurodiversity Challenges

The term neurodiversity was originally coined by Judy Singer (1999), who radically changes the perspectives of many by explaining it as cognitive diversity in thinking, seeing and perceiving the world around you. Generally, neurodivergent conditions incorporate autism, high-functioning autism spectrum disorder, Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, bipolar disorder and developmental dyspraxia (Fenton & Krahn, 2007), with post-traumatic stress disorder also now being considered a precursor to neurodiversity. More recently, there is increasingly a narrative that we need to develop a social model of neurodiversity which recognises the fact that there is a vast array of variations in human cognition and functioning and that we need to realise that anyone who sits outside of the 'norm' is not a biological deficit or struggling with ill health (Doyle & McDowall, 2022). Recent data from Kirby (2021) suggests that one in six people are neurodivergent, and even with the increasing understanding and prevalence of neurodiversity within our global communities, it still marginalises those who identify as neurodivergent from the rest. Neurodivergent people have had to fit into a society designed by a culture that is foreign to them by virtue of living in a 'neuro-normative' world (Mitran, 2021).

Traditionally, career education in Australia, at both secondary and tertiary levels, has been centred on the needs of mainstream, middle class learners (Blustein, 2011). Add to this the research findings that also indicate that the impact of disadvantage persists far beyond post-secondary study and well into the career phase of an individual's life (Pitman et al., 2019), there are many cohorts of students who face significant challenges in securing meaningful and sustainable careers.

Previous research has found that negative responses or experiences with career search endeavours has significant and harmful effects on a person's affective, cognitive, and behavioural outcome (Praskova & McPeake, 2022). In their recent study, Praskova and McPeake found that young people, who when focussed on future career preparation and experienced negative career search feedback, were particularly vulnerable to distress and would downgrade their career goals (2022, p. 628). This makes it even more vital for university career advisors to adopt a strength-based approach to supporting and advising neurodivergent students.

It is also clear that university graduates with disabilities experience structural and societal challenges in achieving their desired employment outcomes than their peers (Li et al., 2016), and this is exacerbated by feelings of self-doubt or self-belief by those with neurodivergent conditions who are continuously faced with a deficit model approach promoting ableism as a norm (Priscott & Allen, 2021). Additionally, those who were able to obtain employment post schooling found themselves in work that was low paid, low skilled, less contracted hours and took longer to obtain than those who were 'neurotypical' (Anderson et al., 2020; Tomczak et al., 2021). Jones et al (2019) found that the most significant barriers to finding employment was the perceived lack of support and information on needs and adjustments. There is clearly a mismatch between the increasing understanding globally that neurodiverse individual just thinks differently, thus bringing unique strengths to the table, and the practice of employment.

Employability is also significantly impeded by the attitudes and decisions of employers. Barriers to employment can be linked to those involved in the recruitment process who have had limited experience and/or training in interpreting and managing disability issues (Ju et al., 2012). Previous literature suggests that employers value graduates who are adaptable, are a 'fit' to organisational culture and who can work in teams (Krahn & Bowlby, 1997). These attributes are at times difficult for neurodivergent graduates to both articulate and demonstrate. So, whilst diversity 'is no longer a compliance measure, or a tick-box exercise, but an integral part of any organisation's talent plan' (LinkedIn Talent Solutions, 2020, p. 6), there is still plenty of evidence to suggest we have a long way to go in terms of neurodiversity and removal of the barriers to securing meaningful and sustainable employment.

The changing nature of recruitment and selection processes present far more barriers than 'door openers' to the workplace. Virtual interviewing became essential during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, but a recent LinkedIn survey found that 78% of Asia Pacific's talent professionals agree that virtual recruiting will continue into the foreseeable future and 72% suggest it will become the new standard (LinkedIn Talent Solutions, 2020, p. 7). Such interview techniques, as well as the more traditional face-to-face interview, are increasingly complex, high pressure social situations, placing pressure on those with social-cognitive challenges who have difficulty with non-verbal cues (Willis et al., 2021).

The problem, as so succinctly stated by Krzeminska et al, is 'not with neurodiverse people, but with the hiring processes that define talent too narrowly' (2019, p. 453). Whilst a number of leading global firms such as Microsoft, JP Morgan Chase and EY are utilising new inclusive recruiting approaches (Krzeminska et al., 2019), many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) lack the knowledge, education, and skills to lead innovative and inclusive human resources (HR) processes in such a manner, with the vast majority adopting informal recruitment practices where the new workers must 'fit in' with existing relational contexts and cultural models (di Federico & Dorigatti, 2020). More generally, traditional recruitment practices across the board can cause 'distress, and workplace understanding and support for adults on the autism spectrum is often poor.' (Scott et al., 2021, p. ii). Silberman (2013) is a little more blunt, placing the blame of HR departments reluctant to employ those who 'look, act, or communicate in non-neurotypical ways.' For those on the autism spectrum, existing recruitment and selection practices can be extremely challenging, not only because of the diversity in the support needs of those diagnosed as such, but also because social interaction and communication, along with sensory sensitivities, are the most difficult aspects of everyday human interactions are difficult. Similar experiences exist amongst the broader neurodivergent population with the recruitment process focussing on impression management, the demonstration of social skills in interviews and limited opportunities for more practical methods such as work trials (Davies et al, 2023). Such conformity to standardised recruitment processes screen out people with neurodivergent conditions, completely removing them from the employment market (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

In order to deal with such stark realities of the labour market, as well as HR practices of those employing graduates, there is a growing understanding of the need for educational institutions to prepare their graduates not only by ensuring the development of graduate capabilities, but also the confidence and knowledge in how to navigate diverse, and often discriminatory recruitment practices. However, many academics are unaware of the specific challenges those with neurodivergent conditions face when commencing their job search endeavours and may need extra help and support even with managing internships and work placements (Lahdelma et al., 2022, p. 5).

Designing Pilot Program: Our Approach

The CDL program for neurodivergent tertiary students was developed after significant consultation with the neurodivergent tertiary student community on their issues, barriers, concerns regarding their future careers and what they want from a workshop. This Students as Partners (SaP) approach provided the researchers with a deeper understanding of not only understanding the core issues facing neurodivergent students but also allowed for the development of an authentic learning

experience. This is particularly important for marginalised and minority cohorts as it allows them to have a voice not as a customer but as a co-creator of learning curriculum and design (Gravett et al., 2020). Healey et al. provide one of the most poignant statements on the value of a SaP approach: 'Engaging students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the twenty-first century' (2014, p. 7).

SaP initiatives have been gaining traction over the past few years, with most educators who engage in such an approach praising the focus on collaboration, reciprocal and equitable learning (Steckley et al., 2022). It must also be acknowledged that student cohorts in higher education are becoming increasingly diverse and approaches to engaging students must evolve to understand, embrace, and meet the needs of the entire student cohort (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019). A recent UK investigation into the utilisation and impact of SaP programs found although there is an increasing use of SaP in student engagement, equity of access is still an issue as cited by the authors:

I spoke to a student when I was trying to recruit students for the scheme, and she was interested. I thought she might sign up, but she never did. She described herself as a 'Blue haired autistic wheelchair user'...She was asking about how it would work for her to participate given her accessibility issues. I said something along the lines of, 'Of course, we would really welcome your perspective and we would make it work' but then I realised I have no idea how to cater for her and make sure she did feel included. (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019, p. 2548).

SaP also aligns with and complements a Social Constructivist Pedagogy (SCP) to prepare students for the real problems they will face upon graduation (Chandler & Teckchandani, 2015). With its foundation in social constructivism, the use of such a framework emphasises the impact of social and cultural influences on student learning, the way they process information and interpret the world around them (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Social constructivism is founded in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning where it is characterised by being active, student focussed and guided by the students' own understanding of the sociocultural context around them (Umar et al, 2023). The SCP encourages students to co-construct knowledge and as a result encourages cognitive change (Salvador, 2019). This meant that rather than just provide resources and information, the workshops were designed to encourage the sharing of stories and experiences as well as to reflect upon self and think critically about how to approach employers through the lens of a neurodivergent graduate. Balfe and Bhroin (2022) have been the most recent advocates of such an approach, citing their experiences in adopting a social constructivist pedagogy in facilitating the learning of autistic students in Ireland. The SCP approach was also adopted in the design of the workshop to encourage participants to share their own experiences, challenges, and triumphs and to build a community of practice beyond the walls of the workshop facilitation space itself. In the words of Schreiber & Valle: 'The instructor serves as the 'guide on the side' instead of the 'sage on the stage'' (2019, p. 397).

Overview of Program

The core focus of the program was to design and deliver a series of workshops targeting tertiary students with neurodivergent conditions. The workshops conducted were designed to introduce and familiarise neurodivergent university students to their own strengths as well as how to apply them along with information on their rights regarding needs and adjustments in the career exploration process. A strengths-based approach, supported and emulated by the Integrated Employment Success Tool (IEST), an Australian Autism Cooperative Research Centre initiative, was vital to creating a positive environment that focussed on developing self-efficacy. This potential talent pool of neurodivergent graduates possesses many strengths due to their different ways of thinking and seeing the world (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Acknowledging the unique individuality of persons with neurodivergent conditions, these can commonly include (but not limited to):

- Strong attention to detail (may notice errors or information others may miss)
- Accuracy (this is often linked to feelings of personal integrity and a sense of duty to others)

- Rote memory and exceptional long-term recall
- High levels of concentration and focus
- Reliability and loyalty, with a keen sense of fairness
- Often able to remain calm in situations some non-autistic individuals may find distressing
- Great empathy and compassion for others, regardless of ability to personally relate
- Ability to think and process information 'outside the box,' often quite industrious
- May have a natural aptitude for learning languages
- May have a natural aptitude for computing or software applications; and
- Quite varied and often unexpected interests, certainly not always restrictive in genre (Scott et al., 2012, p. 4).

Workshop Content

Workshop content was designed to deliver content identified by both research as well as the feedback from the interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders. Initially, career advisors and students from a specialist neurodivergent mentoring program were invited to participate in Interviews in order to frame the workshop content. This both embodied the SaP approach to ensure a voice was given to those who formed part of the project's target group, but also to accurately identify the current obstacles and challenges to employment search activities from those currently working in this area, including university career advisors, specialist mentoring program volunteers and neurodivergent tertiary students. All aspects of data collection was in accordance with ethics approval gained for the project. A thematic analysis of the feedback was undertaken by the researchers. This then formed the basis of their workshop design. In summary, the following topics were included in the workshop content:

- The advantages and disadvantages of sharing neurodivergent needs with employers
- The types of adjustments that can be made to the recruitment process and how to request such adjustments
- How to structure a resume, taking into account a lack of work experience with an emphasis on celebrating skills and strengths
- Exploration of coping strategies for unsuccessful job search endeavours; and
- How and where to access further support for careers and employment advice.

Workshop Structure

The two workshops were structured to provide the participants with multiple means of engagement as recommended by the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Guidelines by optimising individual choice and autonomy in the way in which participants chose to engage, making them relevant and authentic to their needs and by providing a safe psychosocial environment, thus minimising threats, and distractions. The UDL framework, developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology shifts the focus of designing learning from a structured environment with potential barriers to one which view learning as an ecosystem where there is a constant interplay between the educators, students, the learning resources, and the environment (Nelson, 2013). As such, participants were invited to bring mentors and support people, were provided with quiet zones and spaces and the workshop structure provided for maximum utilisation of breaks and low stimuli opportunities throughout.

Workshop Information for Participants

It was also vital that participants, prior to workshop attendance, were provided with information on the actual research project and consent forms to participate. A few days prior to the workshop, participants were also sent a more informal information sheet outlining the venue (inclusive of

pictures of the building and access points); an overview of the topics covered; the timing of breaks and access to quiet zones. It was also reiterated that they could take their own additional breaks and leave at any time. The emphasis on well-spaced but regular emails informing participants of workshop structure, venue information, ability to bring along support people and voluntary nature of attendance and participation was vital to meeting the needs of neurodivergent individuals as well as to reduce anxiety and stress. Such levels of anxiety and stress needs to be considered when arranging workshops or events for neurodivergent students. The facilitators each spent time liaising with and encouraging prospective participants who were articulating how uncomfortable they were with such events. The level of anxiousness cannot be understated as highlighted in an email from a participant one day before the workshop:

I have been trying my absolute hardest to engage more with other people as well as activities at Curtin to better myself and improve my confidence. In short, I feel incredibly nervous to go along to this workshop. I still really want to do it and I don't want to give in and just lay on my bed and sleep, I want to do more and not waste my time. (Workshop 2 participant, male)

In the case above, the two facilitators spent considerable time to ensure the student felt comfortable, was empowered, and had someone to walk into the workshop with. This is an area that requires some deliberation when preparing for the forthcoming workshops.

Workshop Delivery

Two workshops were delivered; the first specifically catering to students who were members of a university specialist mentoring group for neurodivergent students; and the second to a wider cohort of students who self-diagnosed as neurodivergent. The first workshop was attended predominantly by students with autism and the second by students with a much broader range of neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD, PTSD and Dyslexia (voluntary disclosure by participants).. Although provided with the opportunity to have mentors and/or support people attend the workshops with them, none of the participants elected to do so.

At the conclusion of each of the workshop's participants were invited to provide feedback as a group. All participants were advised of this prior to the workshops, and it was emphasised that this was a voluntary experience. The focus group questions were also provided to the participants prior to their workshop attendance. Focus group sessions were recorded and then transcribed. The main themes emulating from the transcriptions were shared with the project team for feedback to facilitate further literature gathering and analysis and to inform the preparation of resources for neurodivergent tertiary students and career practitioners. The project lead was present at both workshops and observations were recorded. These observations focussed on the way in which participants engaged in the workshops, how this may have changed over the course of the workshop delivery and which topics garnered the most interest. The culmination of the data and observations then enabled an assessment of both the program content and delivery as well as opportunities for future program and resource development.

Participants also had the opportunity to provide post workshop feedback in a brief Qualtrics survey. QR codes were printed and placed in the centre of tables and participants were also reminded of the survey with a copy of the QR code link in the workshop materials.

Post Workshop Resource Development

A critical outcome of the pilot program was to build a set of CDL resources informed by the needs articulated by the neurodivergent workshop participants. A plethora of information exists already but most of it is overwhelming for neurodivergent students to navigate. There is a need for concise but informative one-page resources which are topic driven and contain concrete examples. In addition to these resources, a tool kit containing workshop facilitation materials, PowerPoint slides and an interactive participant workbook were also developed.

Observations and Findings

Three facilitators were present at the first workshop (the two project researchers and a career advisor from the specialist mentoring program) and two at the second (the two project researchers). Throughout the workshops, the facilitators made notes on observations and comments made by the workshop participants). A post workshop briefing was conducted after each workshop, at which time the notes were collated and themes extracted.

A critical observation was that participants needed more time to settle, become comfortable and to interact with each other. Although participants from the first workshop all knew each other well (unlike the second workshop where they had never met each other before), it still took time for them to become comfortable in a new space with facilitators they did not know. This is a difficult challenge: designing workshops accommodating concentration limitations of neurodivergent students whilst still allowing flexibility in the scheduling to accommodate an initial settling in period.

There was also some reluctance to make the final commitment to attend the session. Whilst there was an extremely high level of initial interest, and a rather long 'wait list' - due to a limit placed on numbers, the conversion rate from those registered to those attending was around one third. Whilst those registering indicated excitement about attending ('I am really excited about this? I have ADHD and this sounds like a fantastic, inclusive learning journey' (Female, Workshop 2 participant)), this did not translate into physical attendance. Whilst for some, the desire was to attend online only, and others a lack of flexibility on behalf of employers ('My boss questioned whether I like being employed or not so I have to work instead' (Male, Workshop 2 participant)).

What was extremely positive was the fact that the vast majority of those registering their interest in the workshops were proactively disclosing their conditions. The decision to allow participants to self-diagnose appeared to be a good decision with many indicating they were still on the very stressful and convoluted diagnosis journey. For example, Participant xxx said 'I identify as a self-diagnosed Autistic ... It has taken many years and several overwhelms/breakdowns to realise that I am Autistic and I have only recently begun the very hard process of unmasking and revealing my true self.'

Another observation made by the facilitators was that the participants wanted and needed 'more.' Career development was clearly an anxiety ridden concept for neurodivergent students on the cusp of graduating. The students requested details and examples for every employment scenario: how to ask for adjustments, how to prepare for an interview, how to answer interview questions, and what to say at industry networking events. Clearly stemming from our pilot program, was that preference for students to have specific and comprehensive support and information to build their job search skills.

Focus group feedback emerged around five key themes, as we will discuss in this paper:

1. The power of the group
2. Strength assessment through the lens of neurodiversity
3. Knowledge on needs and adjustments in the recruitment process
4. Access to interactive workshop resources
5. Alternative resume building platforms

1. Power of the Group

Attending group sessions, particularly with people they do not know, can be an extremely anxiety ridden experience for those with neurodivergent neurodiversity conditions. However, participants were unanimous in their feedback on how encouraging, enlightening, and enjoyable it was to hear stories from others. Words like 'authentic' and 'relatable' were used to explain what they found most useful in listening to job search experiences of others. As one participant noted – 'I also found just being able to talk to everybody, just hearing everybody's little stories also helped. I think it was quite

good, just to kind of get a sense of where everybody's at' (Workshop 2 participant, female). Others were surprised at how much they enjoyed being with 'people like them' and how important it was to learn from each other:

And just like I suppose it's more like, I suppose bonding, social support. Yeah. These are real stories of people that have been situations like me and all that kind of stuff, like, learn from it. And it's also I suppose, comforting. (Workshop 1 participant, male, autistic)

This statement supports the 'guide on the side' social constructivist learning approach outlined by Schrieber and Valle (2013).

2. Strength Assessment Through the Lens of Neurodiversity

A focus of the workshop was to build the self-efficacy of participants and to spend time facilitating an exercise on strengths assessment. This activity was derived from the IMAGE profile builder: an employability toolkit developed by the Autism Centre for Researcher on Employment (ACRE) to improve the employability of autistic graduates in Europe (Lahdelma et al., 2022).

In both workshops, this was a section where students were observed to start engaging with each other on their strengths and how to build those into their job search endeavours. Importantly, it was backed by research, and this was reflected on in the workshops.

For many, this was something that they had not reflected on in such an overt manner and listing their strengths was confidence building activity. According to a Workshop 1 participant, 'That section where we talked about strengths...I never thought about that. I feel like I had an example' (female, autistic).

However, this is certainly an area that participants still struggled with defining and applying. They would tend to be self-critical and analyse the areas where they would display their strengths, such as the following quote from a male participant in Workshop 2 - 'Like, I'm creative, but that's not a strength because I can be very creative in certain aspects. Other things I can struggle to be creative. It all depends on the day.'

In hindsight this is a section of the workshop where more time should be spent. Participants were particularly critical of their own strengths and needed to be able to process and apply them to examples in order to feel confident to state them either verbally or in writing as part of their job search endeavours.

3. Knowledge on needs and adjustments in the recruitment process

This was an area that generated the most questions from workshop participants. It was clear that they possess a solid understanding of their rights to request adjustments for the job once employed, they were less equipped with the knowledge on their rights in seeking adjustments to the recruitment process. The questions were then quite specific: what they could ask for, how to request adjustments and when in the process they could ask, as exemplified by the following - 'So, like a one-page sheet on where they should make reasonable adjustments where they can where they don't have to?' (Workshop 1 participant, female, autistic).

The level of anxiety that was evident around new situations and starting new jobs was significant. It was clear that this was an area for both universities and employer bodies to focus more attention on. The following narrative from a participant in one of the focus group sessions provides some insights into the angst experienced by these individuals in processing new work situations:

I've always just like, cried or panicked, anxiety, freak out, vomited, felt dizzy fainted on, like, the first day or so of the job. We all had job interviews before that. But a lot of it comes down to I don't know what their expectations are of me, and of what is going to happen. Okay, so my job I'm at now, I've been there for three years. And I think I've I mean; I don't have I didn't have a time to write this down. But I'm guessing that I think I spent about a year observing and being like what, like, you know, collecting the data. What is the social interaction so that like, why am I meant to slot in? What is happening? What am I meant to be doing? Like, how do I smoothly do this? And then

customers will ask questions, and then it's like, oh my gosh, I never asked that before. (Workshop 1 participant, female)

It became increasingly clear that a more collaborative approach in both educating and working with employers and neurodivergent individuals is required. This includes replacing the traditional interview with work trials, work experience placements and small projects to evaluate the potential employee.

4. Access to Interactive Workshop Resources

The utilisation of resources and toolkits as part of the workshops was integral to student engagement and consolidation of learning. These were included as they not only provided students with information but also to ground the workshops in a strength based approach through the interactive workbook as well as resources which empowered the students with guidance and essential information to navigate career exploration. The workbook itself was developed utilising existing information, including the work by the European IMAGE project: viewing Autism and neurodivergence through the lens of a strength based approach. The links to existing resources were based on the material already available to career advisors who work with neurodivergent students, ensuring they were contemporary, accurate and appropriate.

These resources were also extremely well received by participants, both as a guiding resource throughout the workshop session, but also as a document providing links to further resources. The workbook also validated concerns we had concerning the way in which extremely useful resources are generally not available in one space but can often only be located after a great deal of research and exploration on the web.

5. Alternative resume building platforms

The workshops were also used as an opportunity to not only provide participants with information on how to present their strengths and skills in a resume, but also to discuss the growth in job search platforms and alternative mediums, such as Studium. These platforms allow those seeking employment opportunities to highlight strengths and transferable skills in a much more contemporary and less restrictive manner. Studium was highlighted as it is a platform which allows students and employers to connect. The benefit is that offers of work include internships, vacation work and work experience and matches are made based on a profile which can readily be updated by students. Studium workshop participants indicated that this was a far less intimidating approach and several provided the opportunity to describe experiences and skills in a more dynamic manner.

Final Reflections

Significantly, the most impactful learning from these workshops was the ability for neurodivergent students to hear authentic and relatable stories from their peers. The opportunity to discuss both successes and obstacles through the lens of neurodiversity was a powerful mechanism within which to build a learning environment as well as a sustainable community of practice. The workshop participants themselves were also the drivers of the types of informational resources required: for both the neurodivergent tertiary student population as well as career practitioners. In accordance with the SaP approach, the feedback from the workshop participants has provided the researchers with a framework for development of further workshops, shifting the pedagogical approach so often adopted from one of 'frailty' toward a flexible and truly transformational learning and teaching experience (Bovill, 2017, p. 151).

The preparation of numerous, brief but concise resource guides has also meant that these can be disseminated across several existing career service, university, and employer resource hubs. These resources will support the implementation of best practice across not only the touch points in the recruitment and selection process, but also in helping educate potential employers and educators into the best ways to support neurodivergent students. The tips sheets also include examples and links to further resources to also support and educate neurodivergent students themselves.

These guides have been labelled ‘tip sheets’ and cover several topics including:

- Transitioning to Employment: Embracing Your Neurodivergence
- Tips for Career Practitioners: Supporting Students with Neurodivergent Conditions
- Tips for Careers Practitioners: Careers Fairs
- Tips for Employers: Quiet 60
- Tips for Employers: Hiring Practices
- Tips for Employers: Hiring Students with Neurodivergent Conditions
- Tips for Neurodivergent Tertiary Students: Resume Writing
- Tips for Neurodivergent Tertiary Students: Networking Reframed
- Tips for Neurodivergent Tertiary Students: Addressing Selection Criteria
- Tips for Neurodivergent Tertiary Students: Interviews
- Tips for How to Request Adjustments for Job Applications and at Work

Post workshop survey feedback also elicited further insights into the challenges these students face. One participant provided the following statement in response to a question on why they wanted to attend the workshop - ‘I have difficulties with communication, and I also feel a lack of self-confidence, but I am going to use these workshops to make a real change to my future’ (Male workshop participant with autism).

Feedback from workshop participants was overwhelmingly positive with all agreeing that they felt more confident in attending job interviews and were also more aware of their rights and the adjustments they could request.

Next Steps

‘In a world changing faster than ever, honouring and nurturing neurodiversity is civilization’s best chance to thrive in an uncertain future.’ (Silberman, 2013)

The experiences in both designing and conducting Student as Partners driven CDL workshops for tertiary neurodivergent students add significant value to the existing body of literature in not only how we define and label disability but also how employability is interpreted (both from academic and industry perspectives). The existing literature suggests there is still much to be done to shift the mindset of those involved in the recruitment of graduates from a deficit approach to neurodivergent applicants and to make the recruitment process more inclusive to incorporate the strengths and benefits that divergent thinking can bring to the organisation. The observations and findings of such an approach also challenge the existing narrative embodied in existing University graduate capability statements in a changing future of work landscape.

The adoption of a SaP approach to the development and delivery of the program also provides clear evidence of the importance of providing students with a voice for not just the outcomes of learning endeavours, but also in the development of curriculum. This is particularly important for those who are marginalised by both society and education. The needs of the learners were identified through every stage of the program, ensuring the delivery of resources that both added value and were utilised to deliver identifiable outcomes.

The resources developed, including the series of tip sheets and the interactive workbook, can be readily adapted for educators and employers, providing a portable set of valuable resources to enable access to sustainable and meaningful careers for neurodivergent graduates.

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