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The Myth of Post-Graduate Employment: How Ableism and a Minority-Rights Approach to Equality Creates Barriers to Employment for University Graduates with Disability

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THE MYTH OF POST-GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT:

HOW ABLEISM AND A MINORITY-RIGHTS APPROACH TO EQUALITY CREATES BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR UNIVERSITY GRADUATES WITH DISABILITY

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Declaration of Authorship

Declaration

To the best of the candidate's knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published by another person, except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis is the candidate's own work and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any institution.

Human Ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, updated 2018). The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the University Of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00418), Approval Number 2020-154S.

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Abstract

Despite continued growth in the number of people with disability completing university studies in Australia, this has not been reflected with an increase in employment participation post-graduation. In comparison with non-disabled graduates, university graduates with disability have lower rates of employment participation and higher levels of underemployment. This research explores the reasons for this disadvantage from the perspective of the university graduates with disability, using a qualitative methodological approach to gain new insights and to prioritise their voice, their lived experience, and their expertise. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with university graduates with disability who had graduated from 2009 onwards. The findings were analysed using a combination of the following frameworks: ableism, a human rights approach, the social model of disability and the universal model of disability and equality. This research found that many participants experienced attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers to participation in employment and argues that these barriers persist due to everyday ableism reinforced in the neoliberal workplace. Ableist representations of disability as a deficit and negative experience, overshadowed participants' academic achievements and manifested as negative attitudes of colleagues and employers, preventing equitable participation. Some participants showed the effects of internalising ableism with increased levels of anxiety, stress, and worry. Many research participants attempted to emulate ableist normative expectations of an ideal worker through 'passing' as non-disabled or less disabled. For some graduates 'passing' resulted in internalised barriers to employment, preventing them from gaining meaningful employment and limiting their career aspirations. Ableist and segregationist planning resulted in graduates with physical impairments encountering structural barriers in the workplace.

Moreover, participants in this study reported limited access to reasonable adjustments, discrimination in interviews, difficulties when sharing information about impairments and non-inclusive recruitment processes. This research argues that the persistence of these structural barriers is due to a minority-rights approach to equality in employment, which is reinforced in Article 27 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Participants were forced to ‘other’ themselves in the workplace to participate on an equal basis, which put them in a precarious position in terms of potential discrimination, and future career progression. Further, this process simultaneously reinforced disability as an individual problem and an exception to the norm. This research shows that equal participation in employment is prevented because of the persistence of disability being framed as distinctive from the norm, as a deficit, and as an individual problem. This research argues that a universal model approach to disability and equality in employment is needed to reframe disability from an individual and deficit perspective to a valued part of human diversity and to facilitate a more inclusive labour market. This research demonstrates that attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers to participation in employment are not removed by the completion of university qualifications and that systemic change is required.

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACA	Australian Counselling Association
ACSES	Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success
ADHD	Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder
ADS	Australia’s Disability Strategy
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DEET	Department of Education, Employment and Training
DES	Disability Employment Service
DSS	Department of Social Services
GOS	Graduate Outcomes Survey
HILDA	Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia
NDS	National Disability Strategy
QILT	Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning
TAP	Targeted Action Plan
UN	United Nations
UNDA	The University of Notre Dame Australia

Chapter 1: Introduction

The number of people with disability in higher education in Australia has increased threefold since 2006, when 22605 students with a disability were enrolled in university programs, to 65444 in 2020 (Department of Education, Skills & Employment, 2022). Nevertheless, this has not been reflected with a similar increase in the levels of participation in employment, upon completion of university study (Brett, 2016). The Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) National Report 2023 reported that undergraduates with disability had a full-time employment rate of 71% which is almost 9% lower than non-disabled undergraduates at 79.9% (QILT, 2023). A lower level of employment participation for graduates with disability is not a new phenomenon. In 2010, 76.5% of non-disabled university graduates were in full time employment within 4 months of graduating, compared with 66.3% of graduates with a disability (Graduate Careers Australia, 2010) The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) documented a lower likelihood of employment for university graduates with disability, persistent underemployment and unsatisfactory outcomes for life satisfaction, mental and physical wellbeing (Tomaszewski et al., 2019). Specifically, university graduates with disability had an employment rate of 51.9% in comparison with 84.3% for non-disabled graduates and an unemployment rate of 9.9% compared with 4.7% of non-disabled graduates (Tomaszewski et al., 2019). A large proportion of university graduates with disability (38.2 %) were not in the labour force at all, which was a higher percentage than any other equity group in the report (Tomaszewski et al., 2019). Participation in employment for people with disability in Australia, whether tertiary education is completed or not, is consistently lower than non-disabled people. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) only 48% of people with disability of working age (15-64) are participating in employment compared with 80% of non-disabled people (AIHW, 2022).

Moreover, in neoliberal society paid employment is seen as an inherent part of being an active citizen, has many economic and social benefits, and contributes to positive identity development, feelings of satisfaction and purpose in life (Darcy et al., 2016). The persistence of lower levels of employment participation, for university graduates with disability in Australia, may have multiple significant impacts and therefore needs to be explored further.

Clearly, university graduates with disability do not participate in employment in the same way as their non-disabled peers, which is illustrated with persistent, inequitable levels of participation, post-graduation (Brett, 2016; Pitman et al., 2017; Tomaszewski et al., 2019). The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was ratified in Australia in 2008, outlines the human rights of people with disability in terms of equality of opportunity, and full and equal participation and inclusion in society, within Article 3 (UN, 2006). Article 27: Work and Employment lists employment rights specifically, with the overarching principle that people with disability must be able to “work on an equal basis with others” in a labour market that is “open, accessible and inclusive.” (UN, 2006, p. 19). The definition of disability used within the Convention states that disability arises from the interaction between people with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers, which negatively impacts upon full and effective participation in society (UN, 2006). This definition of disability, as being socially constructed and not the direct result of impairment, is adopted throughout the following thesis and is unpacked in more detail in Chapter 3. Ultimately, the lack of full inclusion and participation in the workplace for university graduates with disability in Australia is concerning from a human rights perspective and warrants further exploration.

There is limited scholarly research in Australia that examines the employment participation of university graduates with disability, from the graduates' perspective (Anderson, 2022; Punch et al., 2007). By using a qualitative approach, this research acknowledges that university graduates with disability are a group with specific experience of employment post-graduation and that this experience can be used to explore the issue further. This qualitative approach recognises the expertise, knowledge, and voice of this cohort, which will assist in gaining new insights and unpacking the reasons for persistent barriers to participation in the labour market. Recognising this group as active participants in this process makes a statement about their inclusion and participation as equals (Phillips, 2003) which aligns with the human rights framework. Using a qualitative approach ensures that the lived experience and expertise of people with disability is reframed from rejected knowledge (Newell, 2006) to valuable experiential knowledge, which will assist with the exploration of this issue. This knowledge will be analysed and used to identify barriers to participation as well as potential enablers to employment (Whitney & Purchase, 2018).

Policy context

Since 1990 the participation of people with disability in tertiary education in Australia has been promoted by successive Federal governments and policy makers, as a pathway to securing worthwhile employment and maximising economic independence (Department of Employment Education & Training (DEET), 1990). In 1990 the Hawke Labor government outlined its commitment to double the number of people with disability commencing enrolments in tertiary education by 1995, in the discussion paper 'A Fair Chance for All' (DEET, 1990). The government framed this as a matter of social justice and a way of ensuring access to education for disadvantaged equity groups. Contemporaneously, the government was pursuing increasingly conservative, economic rationalist policies that sought to individualise responsibility for economic security (Sellar & Gale, 2016). To facilitate the increase of students with disability, tertiary education institutions were expected to develop equity plans, allow more flexibility with instruction, provide materials in alternative formats and employ disability support staff to liaise between students and academics (DEET, 1990). The Disability Discrimination Act (1992) was passed to protect the rights of people with disability within education and wider society. To measure the success of these policy interventions the DEET incorporated questions about disability into enrolment declaration forms which every student enrolling into tertiary education needed to complete. These are known as the 'disability indicators' and facilitated a national data collection mechanism to monitor the levels of participation for people with disability in tertiary education (Brett, 2016).

From 1996-2007 the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government continued to promote tertiary education as a tool for people with disability to ensure economic security and social mobility, as part of a wider agenda to implement neoliberal social policy measures across all spheres of social life (Soldatic, 2019). For people with disability these measures entailed the restructuring and privatising of disability employment services, legitimising sheltered employment, and restricting social security benefits (Soldatic & Chapman, 2012). These policies were indicative of a clear shift in welfare policy, to neoliberal workfare, which was expressed in the Howard government's mutual obligation program (Soldatic & Chapman, 2012). According to Goodin (2002) workfare redefined citizenship rights and entitlements as obligations and responsibilities. Individuals no longer enjoyed rights without responsibilities and the right to receive unemployment benefits for all people, including those with disability, was no longer unconditional for all. Restructuring social security entitlements in Australia was key in terms of steering people with disability into the open labour market (Soldatic, 2019). In terms of higher education policy and relevant legislation the Additional Support for Students with Disabilities Program was introduced in 2002 (currently the Higher Education Disability Support Program) and partially reimbursed universities for disability related expenditure. This was in response to universities facing disproportionate costs if high numbers of students with more complex needs enrolled, as this would involve more costly support requirements, for example, Deaf students requiring Auslan interpreters (Brett, 2016). Moreover, the Disability Standards for Education (2005) were introduced and further clarified the legal obligations upon education providers, to ensure that people with disability could participate in education on the same basis as non-disabled people.

In 2008 the Rudd Labor government published the Bradley review of Australian Higher Education and a further report '*Transforming Australian Higher Education.'* which documented the adoption of a widening participation agenda in higher education (Hartley, 2015). Within this report, targets to increase the participation of Indigenous students and those from low socio-economic backgrounds were included, yet people with disability were not (Hartley, 2015). The main thrust of equity policy in higher education at this time was equal representation, in that the student body in universities should be reflective of the diversity in wider society and this principle has continued to underpin higher education equity policy (Gale & Tranter, 2011). Despite the increase in numbers of people with disability enrolling into university, they were still categorised as an under-represented group who made up 5% of the student population but comprised around 8% of the actual population in Australia (Hartley, 2015). This evidence suggests that although the numbers of students with disability in higher education had been rising, they were still an underrepresented equity group.

Concurrently with the implementation of a widening participation agenda in higher education, disability policy in Australia was in a state of unprecedented change as international, national and local momentum, to adopt a human-rights understanding of disability, coincided (Kayess et al., 2014). The Australian government ratified the UN CRPD in 2008 and it was suggested that this represented a paradigm shift in the way people with disability were viewed, from recipients of social welfare to active members of society with undeniable human rights (Kayess & French, 2008). This was the first time that disability was viewed within a human rights framework and not conceptualised as an individual problem and deficit (Kayess et al., 2014). The CRPD recognised that people with disability are rights bearers, that disability is socially constructed, and that impairment is a part of human diversity. The aim of the Convention was to promote, protect and ensure full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by all people with disability, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity (Kayess et al., 2014). The ratification of the CRPD had implications at a national and local policy level, and as a result the National Disability Strategy (NDS) was created.

The *National Disability Strategy 2010-2020* was a ten-year national policy framework, which aimed to ensure the coordinated implementation, fulfillment, and protection of the human rights of people with disability (COAG, 2011). The NDS was developed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) with the shared vision of promoting a more inclusive society in Australia that would enable people with disability to fulfil their potential as equal citizens (COAG, 2011). The Strategy covered six policy areas which were aligned to the Articles of the CRPD. The policy areas related to employment were - *3. Economic Security* and *5. Learning and Skills.* The purpose of the NDS was to establish,

> *a high-level policy framework to guide government activity across mainstream and disability specific areas of public policy, to give visibility to disability issues - ensuring they are included in the development and implementation of all public policy that impacts on people with disability, and to provide national leadership toward greater inclusion of people with disability.* (COAG, 2011, p. 9).

Implementation of the Strategy was monitored by biannual reports which outlined achievements in priority action areas.

This framework was superseded in 2021 by *Australia's Disability Strategy (ADS) 2021-2031* which reinforced the need for a whole of community response, including businesses, the non-government sector and service sectors, and individuals, in addition to federal, state and local governments, to implement the Strategy successfully (DSS, 2021a). *Employment and Financial Security* is the first outcome area listed in the Strategy and within this area three policy priorities are outlined: 1. Increasing the employment of people with disability; 2. Improving the transition of young people with disability from education into employment; and 3. Strengthening the financial independence of people with disability (DSS, 2021a). The guiding principles of the ADS are aligned to Article 3 of the CRPD and there is an increased focus on how to measure progress and outcomes in the second disability Strategy. This includes an outcomes framework to track progress and improvements in the lives of people with disability, and this progress being made public, so that people with disability can clearly see areas that require action (DSS, 2021a).

Specific Targeted Action Plans (TAPs) were created to underpin the Strategy. The *Employment Targeted Action Plan* sets out key actions to improve paid employment outcomes for people with disability, for 2021-2024 (DSS, 2021b). The Employment TAP lists specific action points for state and territory governments to implement and annual progress reports will be published. Further, the Disability Employment Strategy *'Employ my Ability'* was also published in 2021 and is a ten-year commitment to improving employment opportunities for people with disability (DSS, 2021c). The Disability Employment Strategy intends to guide governments, employers, and the community in fostering inclusive workplaces where people with disability can thrive (DSS, 2021c.).

Moreover, the global disability rights movement that emerged from the 1960s onwards (Soldatic & Chapman, 2012) influenced the number people with disability seeking meaningful employment and enrolling in further education to meet this end. Oliver (1992) argued that achieving full integration in employment was key to changing the organisation of society, so that people with disability would no longer be impoverished and economically marginalised. In the Australian context, the disability rights movement was constructed on a shared experience of difference and discrimination (Smith, 2003). Reflecting the global movement, disability was reframed as a human rights issue, as socially constructed and as additional social oppression on top of the existence of impairment (Barnes, 2012). Individual and medical models of disability were rejected, and disability was understood as cultural, economic, political and social oppression. The disability rights movement in Australia prioritised the right to work and economic redistribution (Soldatic & Chapman, 2012). As a result, the disability rights movement may have further motivated people with disability to enrol into universities, to exercise their right to further education, and to access meaningful employment, as a way of ensuring their full inclusion and participation in society.

Over the last thirty years, higher education equity policy and national policy frameworks have aimed to improve the employment participation of people with disability in Australia. Yet, university graduates with disability do not participate equally in the labour market. Neoliberal ideologies and social policies which promote individual responsibility for economic security have compelled people with disability to secure paid employment. Simultaneously, the disability rights movement demanded full inclusion and participation for people with disability, both in the labour market and wider society. The ratification of the CRPD in 2008 provided international motivation for changing the way disability is viewed and how people with disability should be treated, as holders of undeniable human rights, specifically with rights to education and employment. Despite these economic, legal, political and social imperatives, university graduates with disability are not participating in the labour market on the same basis as non-disabled graduates. This research seeks new insights from university graduates with disability which may be crucial to understanding and unpacking this issue. The qualitative methodological approach recognises university graduates with disability as a group with a collective experience of injustice, who should directly contribute to this discussion and debate. Phillips (2003) suggests that this acknowledgement and recognition of voice is the best way to unpack and address persistent injustices and to facilitate subordinated groups' claims for equality. As such, this research will engage with the voice, lived experience and expertise of university graduates with disability, to identify and explore the reasons for persistent barriers to participation in employment.

Researcher standpoint

Historically, research within the area of disability has been viewed as alienating to people with disability because it makes little or no contribution to the improvement of their lives (Oliver, 1992). Academic researchers have the power to decide what topics to research, which methodologies to employ and what to do with the results, without necessarily involving people with disability in this process. This resulted in an unequal power relationship and research being produced that people with disability viewed as irrelevant (Oliver, 1992). This unequal power relationship has the potential to become entrenched between the researcher and researched, within disability research (Stone & Priestley, 1996). To challenge and counteract this unequal relationship, a researcher who does not identify as a person with disability must commit to specific political and theoretical standpoints that support the empowerment of people with disability and must adopt a methodological approach that aligns with fighting the social oppression that people with disability experience (Stone & Priestley, 1996). The following section explores these issues further and explains the researcher's standpoint to address potential concerns about the production of this research.

For the reasons outlined above, it is necessary to discuss and highlight my ethical and political standpoint in terms of being a person who identifies as non-disabled conducting research in the field of disability. As Zarb (1992) suggests, to produce research that empowers people with disability it is necessary to state whose side you are on. In terms of personal experience, my mother is a profoundly Deaf sign language user. I witnessed many disabling societal barriers, to her full participation, both in employment and education, and wider society itself, from a young age. These experiences shaped my interest in disability studies and framed my political beliefs regarding disability. This may counter what Barnes and Mercer (1997) describe as the lack of authenticity, when research is carried out by non-disabled researchers with no understanding of the barriers that people with disability experience. In common with Gerard Goggin, a non-disabled scholar who has published in disability studies, researching in this area has made me fundamentally question my own ideas of normality in Western society and simultaneously question ableist privilege (Goggin & Newell, 2005).

More recent scholarship regarding the positionality of researchers in disability research extends the insider/ outsider researcher debate by discussing intersecting multiple identity categories and the fluidity of positionality which can result in researchers being ‘outsiders’ in some respects but ‘insiders’ in others (Bridges, 2016). Chhabra (2020) defines insider status as sharing common characteristics, such as impairment status, with the marginal group being studied and outsiders being positioned outside the marginalised group, at a distance. The traditional dichotomy of being an insider or outsider in terms of researching marginalised or minority groups may not be as relevant within a more fluid, dynamic, and intersectional understanding of identity categories and positionality (Mohler & Rudman, 2022). Furthermore, it may not always be obvious or easy to distinguish who is inside and outside the group (Bridges, 2016). For example, Chaudry (2018) and Chhabra (2020) found that despite being ‘insiders’ with lived experience of disability, they were still treated as ‘outsiders’ by research participants due to additional economic, social and political identity markers. This evidence illustrates that researcher positionality is more nuanced and complex than one identity marker. In fact, the third wave of disability studies acknowledges the diversity and intersectionality of disability experiences and shifts towards a multi-layered paradigm to more deeply understand disability within multiple cultural categories and power dynamics (Chaudhry, 2018).

Chhabra (2020) posits that it would be epistemologically valuable to discuss the ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ of the researcher rather than the simplistic inside/outside binary. Bridges (2016) elaborates further and argues that ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ are both present in some measure in any relationship between a person and a community. In terms of this research, the author would argue that growing up within the Deaf community has resulted in a level of ‘insiderness’ which is valuable in the production of disability research. Notwithstanding, the researcher simultaneously experienced ‘outsiderness’ in terms of not directly experiencing discrimination or barriers to employment participation on a personal basis. Thus, the researcher needed to continually and critically reflect on their own positionality during the research process, due to the impact of perspective and privilege on research and knowledge production (Mohler & Rudman, 2022).

Moreover, in my professional life, I have been working with students with disability in tertiary education institutions, for the last 18 years. As such, I feel a personal responsibility to report and highlight the inequalities that persist for university graduates with disability in the labour market. Finkelstein (1999) defined two types of professionals working with people with disability. Professionals allied to medicine (PAMs) such as allied health professionals, who perpetuate individualised, medicalised and ableist ideals of disability and normality, and professionals who are allied to the community (PACs) who challenge ableist ideologies of normality, within a social model framework. Goodley (2017) develops these ideas further and describes PACs as believing that people with disability are the experts, committing to ideological, systemic, and structural change. As such, I see myself as a PAC. I have a commitment to those students with disability that I work with, and an interest in contributing to the discussion about how to best facilitate a successful transition into the labour market and how to reduce barriers to equitable participation in employment. Advocating for students with disability within my current role as a disability practitioner may result in a feeling of solidarity or ‘insiderness’. Notwithstanding, I am employed by the university and must simultaneously retain a position aligning with university policies and objectives, which results in ‘outsiderness’. This demonstrates another layer of positionality within a multi-layered understanding, which could affect the research production and outcomes. Continued reflexivity whilst conducting this research (Bridges, 2016) was a method that the researcher employed to navigate any concerns about positionality and its impact on the production of this research.

Ide and Beddoe (2023) suggest that reflexivity can be implemented through self-focused activities such as reflection, observing one’s own emotions, thoughts, role boundaries and power dynamics, and exploring perceptions. In this context, the researcher regularly reflected upon their own experiences and how this influenced the interpretation of the data. The author questioned how their own experience of being a child of a person with a disability, their role as a disability practitioner and awareness of barriers to participation affected emotions, thoughts and understanding during the research process. Reflective notes were written during data collection and analysis stages which assisted in the researcher being able to take a step back from the data to identify assumptions and bias and how they influenced the creation of knowledge.

Furthermore, the position of the researcher in terms of notions of active citizenship needs to be clarified before discussions around the ideal citizen within neoliberal-ableism commence. The researcher rejects neoliberal-ableist ideas of citizenship, specifically that remunerated employment is required to be deemed an active citizen and to fully realise human rights. Rather, the researcher takes a human rights approach to citizenship which focuses on the inherent dignity of all human beings and views human dignity, not remunerated employment, as “the anchor norm of human rights” (Degener, 2016, p. 3). People with disability are holders of rights and neither impairment, nor lack of participation in employment, should be used as a reason to deny or curtail these rights (Degener, 2016). As emphasised in Article 27 of the UN CRPD, people with disability have the right to work on an equal basis with others in an inclusive labour market. Thus, participation in employment should not be used as a pre-requisite to the realisation of fundamental human rights.

Undertaking research which may be of practical use to people with disability is another way to ensure the research does not exploit or entrench existing power structures. As mentioned earlier, research within disability was historically inconsequential to the lives of people with disability and failed to improve their material circumstances and quality of life (Oliver, 1992). Conducting research which is of practical benefit for people with disability and is aimed at barrier reduction or removal is essential in redressing the power imbalance (Callus, 2019; Stone & Priestley, 1990). The lack of equal participation in employment is a human rights issue as defined by the CRPD. Hence, this is a matter of justice from the perspective of disabled people’s organisations which was reflected in the unprecedented input and participation in drafting the Convention. Thus, the aims of this research are to identify and unpack barriers to participation in employment which may assist in their reduction or removal and therefore should have a practical benefit for current and future university graduates with disability in Australia.

How disability is defined within this research will illustrate the researchers' positionality further. In alignment with the social model of disability and the human rights approach, this research views disability as being socially constructed. Disability is conceptualised as the societal barriers imposed upon people with impairments, which are created in addition to impairment, that result in isolation and exclusion from society (Oliver, 1996). The barriers that people with disability encounter may be cultural, socio-economic, structural, and psycho-emotional. As evidenced in this research, these barriers to participation may be attitudinal, internalised or structural. The starting point of this research is that these barriers exist because of an exclusionary and inaccessible society, not because of the existence of an impairment. This understanding of disability ensures that ableist and disablist society is problematised throughout this thesis. In this context, this research may be termed as critical social research as it positively allies itself with the oppressed group and the researcher's standpoint is clearly defined from the outset (Barnes, 2003).

At this point, it is important to acknowledge the tension between this understanding of disability as being socially constructed, and the argument for a universal model of disability, which is embedded throughout the thesis and critiques the abled/disabled binary approach, particularly in the workplace. The social construction of disability is based on a comparison with ability by necessity. As Goodley (2014) suggests ability needs disability by its side, to speak about what it is not. This binary perspective is unhelpful because it does not consider the spectrum and variety of impairment, which a universal model of disability would address, and this leads the exclusion of people with disability from employment. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that disability is an identity position, negatively marked and stigmatised, and that the origins of disablement are evidenced in the exclusion within or from employment (Goodley, 2014). Hence, in the following thesis, university graduates with disability are referred to as a distinct group with a collective experience of navigating the workplace post-graduation. This is due to the practical and political need to address and investigate their lived experience of disability within the ableist structures of the labour market and to identify barriers to participation in employment. However, the position of the researcher and overall argument of the thesis is that a universal model of disability is a more appropriate way to discuss and value diversity, and to facilitate an inclusive workplace.

The researcher standpoint and positionality has been outlined to allay potential concerns about the production of this research. The standpoint of the researcher, who is clearly allied to people with disability, and the potential practical impacts of this research, should mitigate concerns further. Uncertainties regarding the researcher having such a strong commitment to the disabled community and the extent of their objectivity, could be considered a limitation of the methodological approach adopted in this research. Notwithstanding, traditional notions of researcher objectivity within disability research, have been questioned and dismissed on the basis that all knowledge is socially constructed and culturally relative (Barnes & Mercer, 1997). For example, research that is based on medical model understandings of disability is not free from underpinning assumptions and bias about disability but is in fact based on a profoundly distorted and discriminatory understanding of disability and impairment (Oliver, 1992). Shakespeare (1996) suggests that instead of arguing for researcher objectivity, it is more appropriate to ensure notional independence and balance of the researcher which is crucial to academic endeavour. Moreover Rinaldi (2013) posits that standpoint theory has shifted epistemic values by acknowledging that there is no objective standard in research and that the neutral vantage point is an illusion. Recognition of this illusion legitimises voices that have previously been ignored, overlooked, and silenced, and this privileging of marginalised knowledge sheds light on problematic power relations in society (Rinaldi, 2013). Still, any concerns can be countered by the consistent use of a human rights framework throughout the research which demonstrates that the full participation and inclusion of people with disability in employment is a matter of justice for all people and not simply a concern of interest group politics. The human rights framework in this context acts as an objective yardstick which mitigates potential issues around researcher objectivity.

Methodological approach

The methodological approach of this research prioritises the lived experience and expertise of people with disability which is fundamental to overturn traditional hierarchies of voice (Callus, 2019). Traditional hierarchies of voice have prioritised non-disabled people and simultaneously excluded people with disability from the discussion. As Newell (2006) suggests the lived experience of people with disability has often been “rejected as emotional or anecdotal.” (p. 270). A qualitative methodological approach was deemed the most appropriate because it provided the opportunity for university graduates with disability to articulate the issue and describe their experiences in their own words (Buettgen et al., 2012). The prioritisation of lived experience in this research, recognises that people with disability are the experts in this area which aligns with the social model and human rights approach, and the mantra of nothing about us without us (Charlton, 1998). Placing the social model understanding of disability and a human rights approach at the centre of the research, ensures that disability is not viewed as an individual issue. Instead, the focus is on societal barriers. Using an ableism lens to interpret the research data also ensures that it is ableist society that is being examined and problematised, not people with disability (Oliver, 1992; Zarb, 1992).

To further shift the power relationship between the researcher and research participants, the interview transcripts and discussion chapters (chapters 4 and 5) were sent to the research participants for comments and review. Research participants had the opportunity to read in detail and offer feedback, which would be incorporated into the final thesis. This process enhanced the validity of the research and the accountability of the researcher, by opening it to scrutiny from research participants with lived experience of disability (Stone & Priestley, 1990; Zarb, 1992). As Barnes (1992) suggests, giving the research participants the opportunity to comment on the research findings, and the potential incorporation of this feedback into the thesis, assists in shifting the balance of power in the traditional researcher and researched relationship. Furthermore, it establishes a working dialogue between the research community and people with disability which can facilitate their empowerment (Barnes, 2003). Moreover, the focus on the expertise of university graduates with disability resets the relationship between the researcher and researched, and the participants' insights and knowledge are essential to unpacking and understanding this issue. This recognition of the value of lived experience aligns with the human rights approach to disability and the social model. Recognition of the voices of university graduates with disability values their collective experience and demonstrates the importance of being included as equal participants in this process.

Notwithstanding, a more collaborative and inclusive approach to undertaking research in disability studies and simultaneously redressing power imbalances in academia is co-produced research. Co-production in disability research refers to research that is carried out by academics in collaboration with representatives from the disability community. The process of *phronesis* – the sharing and negotiating of the research aims, values and power relations is essential to co-production (Purcal et al., 2019). Armstrong et al. (2019) suggest that co-produced research is different from participatory or inclusive research because everyone’s skills, talents and experience is valued equally. They produced a toolkit for self-advocacy groups and the research group consisted of two academics and two self-advocates, who had lived experience of disability. The academics did not lead the research and the self-advocates had the final say on research decisions and output. One of the many positives of this approach was that the research was more accessible and inclusive because it was written in plain English (Armstrong et al., 2019).

Producing research in collaboration with the disabled community has many benefits which include helping to change the negative experience of stigma and exclusion into a more positive experience of inclusion and feeling valued (Gray & Kerridge, 2023). Moreover, increased involvement in the production of research may increase the capabilities of the disabled community in terms of building skills of self-determination and improving social identity (Purcal et al., 2019). Engaging with voices from the margins in this way challenges rather than reproduces marginalised positions in society and disrupts the status quo (Holt et al., 2019). Co-produced research challenges power imbalances in academia whilst enabling the disability community to have the most authentic and meaningful voice (Curran et al., 2021). The author acknowledges the value in co-produced research and hopes that insights from this exploratory study may be used in future research, including co-produced research.

Thesis structure

The thesis begins with a literature review of current scholarship regarding university graduates with disability and their participation in employment post-graduation. The literature review clearly identifies a gap in Australian research, as there are limited qualitative studies in this area. A qualitative approach that prioritises the voice, lived experience and expertise of university graduates with disability is required to fully understand and explore the reasons for persistently lower levels of employment participation. Moreover, the full involvement of university graduates with disability will ensure that experiences are unpacked and barriers to participation are identified. Due to the lack of scholarship in this area, literature that explores the employment participation of people with disability that are not necessarily university graduates is included. In addition to lower levels of participation in employment, several other themes are identified such as underemployment, attitudinal barriers perpetuated by employers, systemic barriers, sharing information about impairments, and how universities can assist with the transition into employment.

Following this, Chapter 3 outlines the methods used to answer the research question comprehensively. Namely a qualitative approach that prioritises the lived experience of people with disability, in order to identify barriers to employment and to unpack the reasons for these persistent barriers. Further, the chapter outlines the methodologies used to analyse and interpret the findings from this research. This methodological framework synthesises elements of the following: the social model of disability; a human rights approach; a universal model of disability; and ableism. This synthesised approach allows for a sophisticated analysis of the data collected and ensures that society is viewed as the problem, not the university graduates with disability themselves.

Chapter 4 demonstrates the impact of everyday ableism, which is entrenched in the neoliberal workplace, and manifests as attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers to participation in employment. Participants described the negative attitudes of colleagues and employers in the workplace, which were shaped by ableist concepts such as disability being a deficit, an exception to the norm, an individual problem, and an inherently negative experience. Internalising ableism led to psychological and emotional disablism, leading to lower self-confidence and self-esteem, higher levels of anxiety and worry, and negative impacts on career progression. Most participants engaged in passing as an individualised participation strategy in the labour market which had harmful effects, including further internalisation of ableism. Graduates reported structural barriers to participation in the workplace due to ableist segregationist planning of the physical environment. Notwithstanding, some participants reported neurodivergent affirming attitudes in more inclusive workplaces and some graduates were able to resist the internalisation of ableism. This chapter shows that ableism reinforced within the neoliberal labour market creates attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers to employment participation for university graduates with disability in many cases, but not every participant experienced this in the same way.

Similar themes emerged in Chapter 5, in terms of disability being viewed as a deficit, an exception to the norm and an individual problem. The evidence confirms that university graduates with disability encounter structural barriers to participation in the labour market. This includes limited access to reasonable adjustments, challenges when sharing information about their impairments, discrimination in interviews, and non-inclusive recruitment processes. This chapter argues that the minority-rights approach to equality, enshrined within Article 27 of the CRPD allows these barriers to remain unchallenged. The focus on university graduates with disability having to ‘other’ themselves and identify as disabled to request adjustments from employers does not facilitate equitable access to employment. This process reinforces disability as an exception to the norm and an individual problem, leaving the participants in a precarious position in terms of potential discrimination and future career progression. The completion of a university degree does not remove these structural barriers to participation in employment and does not reset the way disability is conceptualised, in the workplace. This chapter suggests that moving towards a universal model of disability may assist in reducing these barriers to participation.

The conclusion summarises the main findings and fundamental argument of the thesis. Namely that although the completion of university studies should lead to increased participation in employment, nevertheless university graduates with disability still encounter attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers to employment. The reasons for this are everyday ableism and the persistence of disability being conceptualised and internalised as a deficit, an individual issue, and an exception to the norm, which is reinforced in the neoliberal-ableist labour market and within the minority-rights approach to equality embedded in Article 27 in the CRPD. This research suggests that embracing a universal model understanding of disability in the labour market may assist in the reduction or removal of these barriers to participation. This would re-frame disability from a deficit perspective to a valued part of human diversity and may result in a more inclusive workplace.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Scholarly research that explores employment participation, specifically regarding university graduates with disability in Australia, is limited. Yet, recent studies by Eckstein (2022) and Anderson, et al. (2022) have added knowledge to this emerging field. Due to limited Australian scholarship, this review includes Australian literature that focuses on all people with disability, whether they are university graduates or not. Inclusion of this literature gives a broad picture of the general issues and themes in Australia regarding participation in employment for people with disability but is not specific enough to explore the issues that university graduates with disability may face in the labour market. In the international context, scholarship from North America and Europe is more substantial and directly related to the experiences of university graduates with disability. Hence, many themes emerged from this literature including lower levels of participation and a higher chance of underemployment for university graduates with disability.

The following literature review documented several themes regarding university graduates with disability and their employment participation post-graduation. Firstly, persistently lower levels of participation in employment and a higher likelihood of being underemployed for university graduates with disability was evidenced. This was reflected in both the Australian and international context. Numerous factors influenced employment participation post-graduation including discipline choice, type of impairment and access to careers counsellors. The nature of impairment, including whether this was visible to employers, affected employment participation and sharing information about impairments was identified by university graduates with disability as an area of concern. Attitudinal barriers to employment participation were documented, incorporating employer attitudes and the negative attitudes of staff working within disability employment services. Evidence of structural barriers such as inaccessible recruitment processes and mainstream conditions of employment emerged from the literature. The final section of the literature review focused on enablers to employment including access to work experience before graduation, training for employers to become more disability confident, and contact theory. The lack of qualitative research in the Australian context means that continual barriers to equitable employment evidenced in the literature review are not explored or unpacked. Undertaking qualitative research in this area will make a valuable contribution to this field and will facilitate increased understanding of the reasons for barriers to full inclusion.

Considering the limited scholarship within the Australian context, a narrative literature review was preferred to a systematic review. The parameters of the literature review emerged through the research process itself. This was the most logical method of undertaking the literature review within an emerging field of study. Pre-coding and conducting a systematic literature review would be more appropriate for reviewing a large amount of scholarship within an established field. Further, whilst reviewing the literature it was important to consider that labour markets are by their very nature dynamic, and that levels of graduate employment can be varied and shifting, both within local, national, and international contexts. It was essential to bear this in mind when comparing statistics regarding graduate employment in different circumstances, locations and at different times. The limited scholarship in Australia results in a lack of detailed examination and analysis of the reasons behind persistent barriers to employment for university graduates in Australia. A qualitative study utilising the university graduates lived experience will assist in exploring this issue further.

At this juncture it is important to address the tension between this research adopting a socially constructed definition of disability, as mentioned in the introduction, and the literature review including scholarship that is based on medicalised and impairment-based categorisations of disability. Goldiner (2022) suggests that disability should be viewed as a cluster of models and a more nuanced understanding of where models converge, will result in a more fruitful and holistic analysis of disadvantage experienced by people with disability. Incorporating this framework, the social and medical model of disability are in conflict regarding the reason for limitations on the participation of people with impairments in society - societal barriers and impairment respectively. Nevertheless, in this literature review, I draw on research underpinned by medical model categorisations of disability because even while this research may identify impairment as the cause of the problem the literature still demonstrates ongoing barriers to participation in employment.

The literature review illustrates that limited research in this emerging field results in an inability to identify and unpack reasons for lower rates of participation and ongoing barriers to employment, in the Australian context. Using a qualitative methodology, this research will explore the issue from the perspective of the university graduates with disability and make a valuable contribution to an emerging field. Moreover, it will prioritise the voice of a marginalised group and unpack the reasons for persistent barriers to employment. As Phillips (2003) suggests the prioritisation of voice not only makes a statement about participating as equals but on a practical level will ensure that the problem is fully understood.

Participation in employment

Eckstein (2022) completed a national survey of university students with disability and university staff, undertook a desk review of existing university employment transition supports, ran focus groups with university staff including careers counsellors and disability support staff, and created a case study of best practice, all focused on the transition into employment for university graduates with disability. This research documented that graduates with disability continue to have a lower employment participation rate than non-disabled graduates, 78.5% in comparison to 85.6% (Eckstein, 2022). Further, graduates with disability are 7.1% more likely to be out of work. University graduates with disability are also under-represented in employer graduate programs, comprising 2% of the total number of students participating. Data collected since the COVID19 pandemic suggests that the pandemic exacerbated inequitable participation in the labour market, as employment outcomes deteriorated for graduates with disability at twice the rate of non-disabled graduates, 2.9% in comparison to 1.6% (Eckstein, 2022).

Earlier Australian research into participation in employment for university graduates with disability, identified barriers to equitable participation. Griffith University interviewed Deaf and hard of hearing graduates using a mixed methods approach and levels of participation in employment were assessed. Of the 52 participants only 8 were unemployed, which suggests a relatively high employment rate of 85% (Punch et al., 2007). Nevertheless, attitudinal, technological, and social barriers, which negatively affected employment participation, were identified and participants suggested solutions to minimise these barriers (Punch et al., 2007). More recent research has analysed national census data to illustrate the under representation of university graduates with disability in employment, with only 47% of graduates with disability in employment compared to 80% of non-disabled graduates (Brett, 2016). Employment outcomes appear to be more positive for vocational education training (VET) graduates with 87% of graduates in paid employment (Cocks et al., 2013).

Recent studies have highlighted that the massification of university education in Australia, has resulted in the labour market being flooded with graduates, without a simultaneous increase in graduate employment positions (Jackson & Li, 2022; Small et al.,2022). The massification of university education refers to the mass expansion of higher education to the wider population (Small et al., 2022) and has resulted in an increasing proportion of the population having a university degree (Jackson & Li, 2022). The rationale of government policy in facilitating this mass expansion included the university population reflecting the diversity in society and simultaneously encouraging individuals to secure economic independence and career advancement (Small et al., 2022). This has created an imbalance in terms of supply and demand in graduate employment and means that it takes longer for all graduates to secure employment, post-graduation, regardless of disability status.

Research from North America has documented the underrepresentation of university graduates with disability in employment, in recent years. Phillips et al. (2022) reported that university graduates with disability in the Unites States (US) had a slightly lower level of employment participation than non-disabled graduates, 89.9% in comparison with 92.5%. Further, in 2018 the National Organisation on Disability reported that 3 out of 5 university graduates with disability (1.4 million people) were not working (Baker et al., 2018). Quantitative research from the US in 2016, from a mid-size university, found lower levels of participation in employment with only 53% of graduates with disability securing employment in comparison to 84% of non-disabled graduates (Huber et al., 2016). Earlier research from the early 2000s and late 1990s reported from longitudinal surveys at specific universities and documented a relatively high percentage of undergraduates with disability participating in employment, but this was still lower than non-disabled undergraduates - 85% and 67% respectively (Schroeder & Geyer, 2000; Silver et al., 1997). In the early 1990s, qualitative research confirmed that higher levels of education coupled with participation in a targeted career development program had a positive impact on the employment participation of 89 university graduates (Adelman & Vogel, 1990). DeLoach (1992) found that the completion of a degree enhanced employability for research participants who had severe physical and sensory impairments. Canadian research confirmed a national employment rate for university graduates with disability of 73.8%, compared to non-disabled graduates at 83.6% (Gillies, 2012). Not only was the existence of a disability demonstrated to have a negative impact on employment status, but labour market inequalities were more likely to become entrenched over time (Zafira et al., 2015). For example, graduates with disability were twice as likely as their non-disabled peers to be unemployed two years after graduation.

The depth of North American research, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches resulted in participation levels being documented and other themes emerging such as the relationship between short-term and long-term employment outcomes and increasing disadvantage (Huber et al., 2016; Zafira et al., 2015) and effects of type of impairment upon participation (Fichten et al., 2012; Madaus, 2006). These themes will be mentioned in more depth below. Clearly, a qualitative approach within the Australian context, will facilitate the collection of new insights and rich data that will give a clearer picture of the barriers and challenges that university graduates with disability may face when participating in employment.

Underemployment

People with disability are more likely to be underemployed than the non-disabled population (Darcy et al., 2016; Eckstein, 2022; Milner et al., 2017). Underemployment can be defined as working at a level below full working capacity. This may include working part time when full time work is desired. Moreover, underemployment for university graduates may result in being employed in an unskilled profession which is not necessarily linked to university discipline. Eckstein (2022) reported that graduates with disability were 3.4% more likely to be in employment that does not use their skills or education fully. Jackson and Li (2022) reviewed longitudinal data from the Graduate Outcomes Surveys (2016-2020) for 41671 graduates in Australia. The data included employment participation up to three years post-graduation and found that graduates with disability were more likely to be underemployed than non-disabled peers (Jackson & Li, 2022). Furthermore, university graduates with disability in Australia are more likely to work on a part-time, casual or temporary basis, which results in lower wages (Pitman et al., 2017). Not only does this have financial implications (Mithen et al., 2015) but the combination of having a disability and being underemployed may also result in a greater decline in mental health (Milner et al., 2017). In addition, people with specific impairments may have a higher likelihood of being underemployed. For instance, people with Autism work less hours and receive lower than average wages which results in negative impacts upon mental health and overall quality of life (Scott et al., 2019). The impacts of underemployment are significant with regards to mental health and economic security and hence should be explored further, from the perspective of university graduates with disability.

International research reflects Australian trends in that university graduates with disability are more likely to be underemployed than non-disabled graduates (Dickinson & Verbeek, 2002; Kruse et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2022; Witte et al., 1998; Zafira et al., 2015). In the US, Phillips et al. (2022) reported that graduates with disability were less likely than non-disabled peers to be working in permanent jobs related to their area of study and more likely to be employed on a temporary basis. Canadian research documents the underemployment of university graduates with disability as they are less likely to secure meaningful employment within their area of study, are more likely to experience job insecurity and are over-represented in entry level and part time employment (Fichten et al., 2012; Gillies, 2012; Zafira et al., 2015). As a result, university graduates with disability in Canada earn 7% less than their non-disabled peers, which may further impact on their quality of life (Zafira et al., 2015). In the UK, the likelihood of being underemployed may increase for university graduates with certain types of impairment. For example, university graduates with Autism are highly likely to be overqualified and working in low-skilled or entry level jobs (Vincent & Fabri, 2020). Goodall et al. (2022) completed a systematic review of existing research regarding the barriers to and facilitators of the transition into employment for graduates with disability in Europe. They reported that research indicates graduates with disability work harder than non-disabled peers to “prove their competence and gain meaningful employment.” (p. 11). This research will explore whether underemployment is replicated for university graduates with disability in Australia and if there are any links between type of impairment and underemployment.

Discipline choice

Choice of discipline was found to have an impact on the transition into employment post-graduation. In Australia and New Zealand, Anderson et al. (2022) produced qualitative research based on the experiences of 11 university graduates with Autism and their transition into employment, post-graduation. Participants reported that studying for degrees with associated high demand for workers, assisted with the transition into employment (Anderson et al., 2022). For example, those participants who studied vocationally specific degrees such as allied health, information technology, and teaching, secured employment relatively easily. Those participants with arts or humanities-based degrees were unsure of what jobs they could apply for once they graduated and found it more difficult to secure employment post-graduation (Anderson et al., 2022).

In the US, a survey into the employment outcomes of 4659 disabled college graduates, found that disabled students were less likely to study business, science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (Phillips et al., 2022). Disabled students were more likely to be engaged in arts, liberal arts, psychology, and social sciences. These subject areas may offer less direct pathways into employment and therefore may negatively impact employment participation (Phillips et al., 2022). Nevertheless, European research found that picking vocationally based degrees such as nursing or allied health may increase barriers to participation in the workplace due to medicalised and ableist perceptions of disability within these disciplines (Goodall et al., 2022).

Attitudinal barriers – employer attitudes

Certainly, the evidence presented thus far suggests that university graduates with disability do not participate in employment on the same basis as their non-disabled peers. Attitudinal barriers, in particular the attitudes of employers, emerge as one of the main reasons for discrimination against people with disability seeking employment. Ironically, early Australian research into the attitudes of employers regarding the employment of people with disability, reported positive results for employers who had employed a person with a learning disability (Graffam et al., 2002). Employees with disability out-performed ‘average’ colleagues in attendance and punctuality, and additional costs for recruitment and workplace adjustments were minimal.

Later research evidenced increasingly negative employer attitudes, including negative assumptions about work capabilities and productivity, stigma, and discrimination (Darcy et al., 2016; Punch et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2018). Eckstein (2022) reports that while employers may be open to the idea of employing people with disability, they have low levels of confidence about doing so. Humpage (2007) suggests that employers are predominantly focused on productivity and profitability and as such are reluctant to be flexible enough with the working environment to be fully supportive of people with disability. Scott et al. (2018) documented perceived concerns about lower profits and productivity, which were underpinned by a lack of knowledge and misperceptions about impairments. Low expectations of university graduates with disability resulted in fewer interviews than non-disabled peers, despite having higher grades and relevant work experience (Harpur, 2014). Thus, the ‘soft bigotry of low expectations’ (Harpur, 2014; Stephenson, 2006) may continue to impact upon university graduates with disability, seeking employment post-graduation.

Perceived costs of workplace adjustments, lack of knowledge regarding government funding and anxieties regarding legal and safety costs, were all found to be contributory factors in employers’ reluctance to employ people with disability (Cocks et al., 2015; 2013; Murfitt et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2018). Size of the organisation was found to have an impact on the employment of people with disability. Larger organisations were more likely to employ people with disability as they had more resources and funding, as well as corporate social responsibility policies in place (Scott et al., 2018). Moreover, larger organisations were more likely to be aware of government subsidies that support people with disability in employment (Eckstein, 2022).

In contrast to recent Australian research, a study that surveyed 59 employers regarding their attitudes towards employees with Autism reported that most employers recommended employing people with this particular neurodivergence (Scott et al., 2017). The employees outperformed their peers regarding attention to detail, work ethic, and quality of work. There were no additional costs to employers and the levels of productivity were the same as non-disabled colleagues (Scott et al., 2017). Certainly, this study documents that employing people with disability can be a positive experience.

International scholarship documented employer anxieties and misunderstandings around costs of reasonable adjustments. Research from the US showed employer stereotyping of university graduates with disability and highlighted concerns around the cost of workplace adjustments, when in fact most adjustments had minimal associated cost, such as reduced working hours (Perry et al., 2000). Perceived costs were more of a concern for small and mid-sized businesses than larger public organisations (Kim & Williams, 2012). Baker et al. (2018) examined the impact of employer misperception as a barrier to employment participation and found that the lack of available literature for employers regarding specific impairments and how to support people with disability, resulted in reduced awareness and guidance. Employers were uncertain and anxious about the perceived costs of employing someone with disability and concerns were raised regarding absenteeism. Negative employer assumptions about absenteeism, cost of reasonable adjustments, and levels of productivity resulted in university graduates with disability being paid less than non-disabled peers or being excluded from employment altogether (Kruse et al., 2018; Vincent & Fabri, 2020). Canadian research documented that employers had ongoing safety concerns around the employment of people with disability and extensive stigmatisation and discrimination were ongoing barriers to employment (Benoit et al., 2013; Shier et al., 2009). In the UK, perceived costs and assumptions were a contributing factor to discrimination and paternalistic attitudes to employees with disability were also detrimental to further career advancement (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008). The literature demonstrates that employer attitudes towards people with disability are clearly impeding their participation in employment and it is important to ascertain if this is the case for university graduates with disability, in Australia.

Systemic barriers – recruitment practices, conditions of employment

Recent research in Australia has focused on the effect of systemic barriers to employment, for people with disability seeking employment. This focus allows for the examination of barriers that originate outside the individual and instead stem from exclusionary practices involved within the structures of mainstream employment (Meltzer et al., 2020). Recruitment practices are based on ableist assumptions and designed with neurotypical candidates in mind, which can disadvantage and exclude people with certain impairments, such as Autism and other learning disabilities (Harpur, 2014; Vincent & Fabri, 2020). For instance, a face-to-face interview which relies on social interaction, communication, and a 'chemistry' of personalities, may be much more difficult for a person with Autism to navigate successfully (Anderson et al,. 2022). This does not mean that the person is unable to do the job but that the practice of undertaking these interviews may exclude this person from being able to effectively demonstrate their abilities, skills, and competencies.

Canadian qualitative research also identified barriers within recruitment processes including interviews and cognitive tests under timed conditions for university graduates with learning disabilities (Goodfellow, 2014). The interview process was disabling for graduates who were too scared to ask for adjustments, such as note-taking, as they feared discrimination and consequently felt they were disadvantaged for not performing in line with ableist expectations (Goodfellow, 2014). Participants felt that implicit workplace expectations of flexibility, speed and adaptability were potentially disabling for them (Goodfellow, 2014). Qualitative research from the UK (Vincent, 2020; Vincent & Fabri, 2020) reported that traditional recruitment processes were particularly inaccessible for university graduates with Autism. Participants reported a lack of clarity in job adverts and job interviews as especially problematic which resulted in barriers to participation in employment (Vincent, 2020).

Further, the spatial and material conditions of corporate employment such as open plan offices, hot desking and multi-site working may create issues for people with disability and may result in their exclusion from employment (Vincent & Fabri, 2020). This is supported by disability scholars who suggest that the social organisation of mainstream employment is a barrier to people with disability (Barnes, 2012) and that this needs to be addressed to facilitate equality of opportunity and participation.

Type of impairment

In Australia, Brazenor (2002) found that people with psychological impairments earn less than people with physical impairments. They also have a lower participation rate (Mithen et al.,

2015) due to stigma and discrimination by employers, who were less likely to employ a person with a psychological impairment (Darcy et al., 2016; Kavanagh et al., 2015). Anderson et al. (2022) reported a high instance of co-occuring poor mental health in their research participants who were university graduates with Autism. Poor mental health may negatively impact upon career planning and how graduates feel about their potential careers, further affecting their transition into employment.

In the US, employers were least likely to employ people with a psychological impairment, regardless of occupation which resulted in higher levels of unemployment and increased social isolation (Baker et al., 2018; Dalgin & Bellini, 2008; Dunn et al., 2008; Perry et al., 2000; Pettinicchio & Maroto, 2017). Sharing information about a psychological impairment was also met with misunderstanding and discrimination in the workplace (Stewart & Collins, 2014). Canadian research illustrates a similar trend with people with psychological impairments identifying more difficulty in securing employment than those with other impairments (Shier et al., 2009).

In the UK, psychological impairments were associated with the most significant stigma, discrimination, and disadvantage in employment (Boyce et al., 2008; Cage et al., 2022; Pilgrim & Tomasini, 2012). Cage et al. (2022) interviewed 44 final year undergraduate students with mental health conditions and compared their experiences of transitioning into employment with students without mental health conditions. They found that anxiety and depression symptoms affected job-seeking behaviours. For instance, students were worried and fearful of the transition, experiencing doubt and lower self-worth. University graduates with psychological impairments who were unemployed, were frustrated that the completion of their degree had not enabled them to progress within their field of study (Cockshott et al., 2018). Further research is required to establish whether this trend is reflected in Australia, specifically for university graduates with disability.

Early international research into employment participation of university graduates with learning disabilities found minimal impacts (Adelman & Vogel 1990; Madaus, 2006). Learning disabilities or neuro-diverse conditions such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are not detectable by sight and could be categorised as 'invisible' or 'hidden' impairments. The existence of these impairments may not be obvious to employers during the recruitment process which may positively affect employment outcomes. Canadian research into the transition of university graduates with learning disabilities showed that not sharing information about impairments assisted with securing employment. However, the graduates feared being perceived as lazy or incompetent, when in the workplace, as they would not be able to keep up with neurotypical peers (Goodfellow, 2014). Further, this study found that the impacts of stereotypes of stupidity and incompetence, resulted in feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem that undermined the participants' career potential (Goodfellow, 2014). Evidence from the US demonstrated that the graduation rate of undergraduate students with learning disabilities was lower than peers without a disability, 38% compared with 52% (Kredier et al., 2018) which should be considered. The lower graduation rates may be caused by an unwillingness to share information and communicate needs and the disparity between support at school and the equivalent support at university (Hadley, 2017). Conversely, Australian research regarding the retention and success of undergraduates with disabilities showed that students with learning disabilities have the highest retention rates of all students with disabilities (Kilpatrick et al., 2016).

University graduates with Autism in Australia have an employment rate of 42% in comparison with non-disabled graduates at 83% (Scott et al., 2019). Baldwin et al. (2014) reported that people with Autism were more likely than other people with disability to be overeducated and underemployed, with 86% completing post-secondary education successfully but educational outcomes not translating into successful employment participation. In the UK, employment participation for this cohort worsened after completion of a degree (Vincent & Fabri, 2020). Transition into employment for this group may be difficult due to the social demands of the workplace, particularly regarding interaction based on non-verbal cues, and the sensory overload experienced in corporate open plan environments (Vincent & Fabri, 2020). Further, the traditional recruitment process, including job applications and in-person interviews, may be particularly challenging to navigate. Clearly the type of impairment may affect employment participation which warrants further exploration, within the Australian context.

Invisible/visible impairments and sharing information.

Invisible impairments interfere with day-to-day functioning but may not be accompanied by a physical manifestation (Mullins & Preyde, 2013). These impairments may include neuro-diverse conditions such as dyslexia, ADHD or Autism, psychological impairments, and chronic medical conditions such as epilepsy or arthritis. Put simply, a person with an invisible impairment, may not be assumed to be impaired at first meeting (Kattari et al., 2018) which may have implications for being successful in a job interview and securing employment. The likelihood of a person with an invisible impairment disclosing their condition during the application process, or when employed, is highly unlikely. This is due to fears of discrimination and stigma, and of being labelled and viewed as incapable (Kattari et al., 2018; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Nolan & Gleeson 2016; Santuzzi et al., 2014).

Sharing information about an impairment was described by university graduates with learning disabilities as a ‘Catch 22’ situation, as the stigma of disclosure was weighed up against the perception of being incompetent (Damiani & Harbour, 2015; Goodfellow, 2014). Australian students with disability were asked if they felt able to share information about their impairments with employers (Eckstein, 2022). 51% of students with low vision felt able to do so, compared with 23.4% with psychological impairments and 33.6% with medical conditions. These statistics may indicate a link between the visibility of an impairment and associated willingness to share information with employers (Eckstein, 2022).

The decision to share information is complex, and fraught with personal and environmental considerations (von Schrader et al., 2014). Sharing information during an interview was viewed as problematic because it was perceived as giving the interviewer a reason to reject the candidate for the job (Duckett, 2000). Most university graduates with invisible impairments waited until they had proved their competence at work, before disclosing an impairment despite 72% of participants feeling that their impairment impacted upon their work performance (Stewart & Schwartz, 2018). When in employment, sharing information about an impairment can result in the perpetuation of low expectations which can impact upon promotion opportunities and career development (Lindsay, 2011; Perry et al., 2000; von Schrader et al., 2014). The process of ‘passing’ as non-impaired is not without its consequences as it can be exhausting, stressful and may have implications for work performance and mental health (Stewart & Schwartz, 2018; Vincent & Fabri, 2020).

University graduates with more visible impairments minimised the effects of their impairments, especially within the healthcare industry, as the stereotypical view of a healthcare professional is healthy, autonomous and a support provider, which is at odds with the stereotype of a person with disability, as being a recipient of support and potentially dependent (Bulk et al., 2019). People who share information about an impairment at interview have to simultaneously demystify their disability, demonstrate outstanding capabilities and attempt to change ableist attitudes within a very short timeframe (Harpur, 2014). Participants in a qualitative study in the US, emphasised the importance of developing a well thought out narrative with the focus on ability, capability and contribution (Jans et al., 2012). Within the Australian context it may be beneficial to establish if university graduates with invisible impairments experience more positive outcomes than those with more ‘visible’ impairments and to unpack reasons for this difference.

Variations within impairment categories may affect participation in employment. Within the spectrum of hearing impairments for instance a profoundly Deaf sign language user may experience more discrimination than someone with a moderate hearing loss, who communicates orally and uses technology to aid residual hearing. For example, sign language users in Australia are less likely to be employed in the private sector (Punch et al., 2007) which may be due to significant costs associated with using Auslan interpreters.

Furthermore, the perceived severity of impairment can negatively affect employment participation. People with vision impairments or high-level spinal cord injuries experience the highest levels of discrimination in employment in Australia (Darcy et al., 2016). According to

Harpur (2014) 69% of people with vision impairments are unemployed which is 14 times higher than the unemployment rate for non-disabled people. This is despite people with vision impairments being more likely to obtain tertiary education qualifications. In North America, college graduates with vision impairments were most likely to experience bias and discrimination from employers, had a low interview to application ratio and had issues accessing transport (Antonelli et al., 2018; Benoit et al., 2013). Yet, people with vision impairments are highly qualified, employable, and able to work in most environments provided they have access to assistive technology (Harpur, 2014). Moreover, only 26.1% of people with 'severe' disabilities in the US access paid employment (Russell, 2002). Clearly, employment outcomes for university graduates with disability may be affected by the perceived nature of their impairment and it will be helpful to gain clarification of this relationship within an Australian context.

Supporting the transition – university careers counselling and increased collaboration.

In Australia undergraduate students with disability do not engage with university careers services to the same extent as their non-disabled peers, which may affect participation in employment post-graduation (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Eckstein, 2022). Students with disability felt that careers staff at university were not able to help them gain employment and placed more importance on building industry links through academic staff (Eckstein, 2022). They also reported a reluctance to share information about their impairments with careers staff. Of the 11 participants in Anderson et al., (2022) none reported using the university careers services. University careers services may need to change their approach and target specific equity groups, tailor their support services as required, and improve external relationships between the university and employers (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). Worryingly, Eckstein (2022) suggests that not addressing the deficit in disability specific career planning may encourage career-limiting mindsets in graduates with disability whilst simultaneously reinforcing that disability is a barrier to a successful career.

Kirkpatrick et al. (2016) suggested that a student lifecycle model should be implemented, which considers the student's journey holistically including the transition into and out of university. This research also recommended providing jobs on campus and graduate internships to improve the employment outcomes for university graduates with disability (Kirkpatrick et al., 2016). Eckstein (2022) recommends a more collaborative approach to supporting the transition into employment which includes careers counselling and disability support staff working together and universities establishing closer links with disability-friendly employers, to improve disability confidence.

Research from the US reflected this trend as undergraduate students with disability did not access mainstream career counselling services at college, because the careers advisors were not disability aware and therefore had low expectations of these students (Conyers & Symaski, 1998; Kim & Williams, 2012). Consistent with the Australian context, a closer working relationship between disability support offices at universities and careers staff was also recommended to facilitate a successful transition into employment (Baker et al., 2018; Huber et al., 2016; Kim & Williams, 2012). Mentoring programs were successful in improving employment outcomes for university graduates with disability and minimised social isolation due to exclusion from employment (Antonelli et al., 2018). University staff may assist university graduates with disability in developing work related skills, coping mechanisms, and improving self-appraisal, social interaction, and negotiation skills (Georgiou et al., 2012). L'Ecuyer (2019) recommended closer collaboration between the disability support office, faculty, and clinical staff regarding legal rights, requesting reasonable adjustments and sharing information about impairment.

European research proposes an increased role for universities in the transition to the workplace for graduates with disability. Morina and Biagiotti (2022) advocate for university disability services to have an increased role in the employment transition of graduates with disability, providing internships and role models. Further, closer collaboration between universities and employers is also recommended (Morina & Biagotti, 2022). Goodall et al. (2022) suggest that careers and disability support staff should work together with employers and placement providers to ensure the transition is accessible and inclusive. In the UK, graduates with psychological impairments reported that careers' events triggered anxiety (Cage et al., 2022) Participants reported that careers staff at university did not demonstrate expertise in supporting students with disability or an awareness of how to support graduates with mental health concerns. This meant graduates were less likely access university careers counselling and to develop career plans (Cage et al., 2022). Graduates with Autism reported that careers staff did not understand their particular needs (Vincent, 2020). Research in Ireland recommended a more student-centred, tailored, and individualised approach to support university graduates with disability into employment which would ensure they were successful in gaining the same level of employment as non-disabled peers (Nolan & Gleeson, 2016). The authors also visualised the increased role of disability support offices in university, to facilitate a more seamless transition into employment. Identifying barriers to accessing university careers services, from the perspective of Australian graduates with disability may be useful when unpacking reasons for lower participation in the workplace.

Disability employment services

Disability Employment Services (DES) in Australia have been criticised for limitations on funding which prevent employment consultants working with undergraduates in their final year and for operating on a ‘funding for outcomes’ basis which prioritises any employment outcome rather than the most appropriate (Stafford et al., 2017). The definitions of disability used to qualify for DES support such as ‘significant’ or ‘severe’ may also exclude a large number of university graduates with disability (Murfitt et al., 2018; Stafford et al., 2017). Scott et al. (2019) reported that disability employment services treated people with Autism as a homogenous group and were not suitably qualified to offer adequate employment support. Specialist employment agencies were found to have narrow conceptualisations of job seeking which focused on locating relevant job adverts instead of building the broader skills of how to apply for jobs or to acquire more professional development (Meltzer et al., 2020). Attitudes of employment agencies were also found to be dismissive and discouraging with negative assumptions being made about peoples’ capabilities (Meltzer et al., 2020). The provision of services across different DES providers was inconsistent and in comparison, with vocational rehabilitation professionals who are allied health professionals, employment advisers were not adequately skilled or knowledgeable in disability support (Byrnes & Lawn, 2013). Students with disability demonstrated sceptical attitudes towards working with DES partnerships at university, due to previous negative experiences of working with DES providers (Eckstein, 2022). Nevertheless, Scott et al. (2018) conducted a literature review and found that a high number of people with Autism in employment (around half) used the services of DES to secure employment.

Issues with disability specific employment agencies are not confined to Australia. Canadian research documented problematic ableist attitudes, within disability employment agencies and a focus on a medical model of disability, which continually disempowered people with disability looking for work (Wallace & Fenwick, 2010). The medical model of disability conceptualises impairment as a deficit which needs to be cured or fixed and does not acknowledge the role of societal barriers to employment. Canadian research recommended tailored vocational coaching for university graduates with disability instead. The focus of this training would be to improve interpersonal skills, increase problem solving skills, training around requesting assistance, and support for accessing transport (Shaw et al., 2019).

In the UK, research participants with mental health conditions attempting to re-enter the job market with the assistance of employment support workers recommended that support workers be specifically trained in mental health awareness (Boyce et al., 2008). The employment support workers could assist with sharing information with employers and could schedule follow up meetings to review workplace adjustments, to ensure that the participants felt fully supported. Lewis et al. (2013) evaluated outcomes for the WORKSTEP programme in the UK and participants reported positive outcomes when using this employment service as it utilised an individualised approach to support. Examining the limitations of disability specific employment support services, from the perspective of university graduates with disability, could result in recommendations to improve the effectiveness of these services.

Enablers - work experience

Work experience in the final year of study, on a paid or voluntary basis, and its importance in securing employment for university graduates with disability was illustrated in Australian and international literature. Pitman et al. (2017) analysed data from Australian graduates 4-6 months after graduation and found that the single most important factor in predicting whether a university graduate would be working was undertaking paid work in the final year of study.

The positive relationship is reflected in international research. Internships in the final year of study and other work experience such as volunteering, allowed graduates with disability to focus positively on their competencies when applying for jobs (Fichten et al., 2012; Nolan, & Gleeson, 2016). Career related internships were linked with a higher chance of success in employment post-graduation in the US (Phillips et al., 2022). Work experience was found to improve self-confidence and assist in the acquisition of new skills (Georgiou et al., 2012). Establishing a positive link between work experience and employment participation for Australian university graduates with disability may be crucial in developing effective policy recommendations to increase employment participation.

Enablers – training for employers, contact theory

Murfitt et al. (2018) recommended a more focused, personalised approach to combat negative attitudes with ‘trusted brokers’ such as employment consultants providing information to employers, to assist the transition of people with disability into employment. This face-to-face approach could be more effective than providing an online bank of resources which employers may or may not utilise. Facilitating a positive experience for employers could be the catalyst for changing the work culture to be more inclusive and diverse and may lead to further opportunities for employees with disability (Murfitt et al., 2018).

Fisher and Purcal (2017) suggested that to improve attitudes towards people with disability in employment, three levels of policy intervention were required: personal, organisational and governmental. On the personal level, attitudes towards people with disability must be changed by the provision of information, training, positive portrayals of people with disability and supported opportunities between people with disability and non-disabled colleagues (Fisher & Purcal, 2017). Contact theory was suggested by Harpur (2014) as a way of improving attitudes towards people with disability in the workplace. Contact theory proposes that socially constructed stereotypes and hostility can be improved by close contact and was initially developed to reduce prejudice based on racial differences (Harpur, 2014). Positive interaction with people with disability in the workplace as a way of improving diversity and opportunities for employment was supported in scholarly research (Scott et al., 2017). It may also assist with the disconnect between perceptions and reality regarding the erroneous assumptions of employers who may think that all people with disability are low performance and high cost (Baker et al., 2018). At the organisational level, engaging with Job Access and the Australian Network on Disability to share best practice and networks for recruitment may result in more positive outcomes (Fisher & Purcal, 2017). Although workplaces may have anti-discrimination policies in place and formally support equality more substantive efforts were needed to ensure equal access to employment opportunity (Harpur, 2014). At the governmental level wage subsidies could be provided to offset the cost of reasonable adjustments (Stewart & Schwarttz, 2018).

The use of a strengths based, instead of deficit-based, approach by employers, employment agencies and universities in which the focus is on the talents, skills, and abilities of graduates instead of the impairment effects, may result in improved employment outcomes (Kilpatrick, et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2019). This approach would improve self-efficacy of both graduates and employers (Scott et al., 2018) and self- advocacy of graduates (Kreider et al., 2018).

Finally, research from the US recommended training for supervisors to improve the workplace culture regarding diversity, the commitment of employers to inclusion, through the naming of disability within diversity statements and the inclusion of people with disability in the recruitment materials (von Schrader et al., 2014).

Enablers – support for graduates

Research from the US showed how a targeted career program for college graduates with disability could facilitate a successful transition into the labour market (Conyers & Symanski, 1998). The program covered knowledge of legal rights, how to request reasonable adjustments and the benefits and risks of sharing information about an impairment. Madaus et al. (2008) recommended that university graduates with disability were trained in self-advocacy, self-efficacy and empowerment. In the UK, Vincent and Fabri (2020) recommended mock interviews, career exploration, internships, developing disclosure plans and soft skills training, such as business etiquette, teamwork and navigating the work environment. Moreover, civil society organisations such as disability specific charities may have a positive role to play in the employment of people with disability (William & Cunningham, 2018).

Conclusion

Based on the literature there are persistent attitudinal and systemic barriers to equitable participation in employment for university graduates with disability. These barriers result in inequitable participation in employment as illustrated by both lower participation and higher instances of underemployment. Participation in the labour market for university graduates with disability is impacted by choice of discipline, type and visibility of impairment, the quality of university careers counselling support and work experience. International scholarship that is based on qualitative methodologies sheds light on the reasons for continual barriers to participation and assists in understanding the problem to a greater extent. Yet, in Australia at least there is limited qualitative research exploring why barriers to equitable participation in employment persist, specifically for university graduates with disability. The most recent Australian qualitative research (Anderson, 2022) is focused on university graduates with Autism in Australia and New Zealand. Prior to this, the only other example of qualitative research in this area was Punch et al. (2007) which was focused on Deaf and hard of hearing graduates. Clearly, there is a lack of Australian scholarship in this area, and as a result, most of the insights in this literature review have emerged from the international context. The lack of scholarship examining the employment participation of university graduates with disability in Australia, results in the persistence of barriers to full participation and social inclusion. Undertaking qualitative research within the Australian context will result in the unpacking of reasons for barriers to participation in employment. Certainly, the research will make a valuable contribution to an emerging field of study.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

The literature review in the previous chapter clearly identifies a gap in Australian research that explores the participation of university graduates with disability in employment. This research uses a qualitative methodological approach and prioritises the lived experience of university graduates with disability for several reasons. Firstly, placing a high value on the lived experience of university graduates with disability aligns with the social model of disability and the human rights approach to disability. Secondly, the utilisation of their lived experience will ensure that the reasons for persistent barriers to employment participation are identified and unpacked. Finally, keeping the lived experience of graduates at the heart of this research makes a statement about their participation as equals and reframes their issues away from being a problem for 'others' to solve (Phillips, 2003). This chapter will outline the methodologies and methods of this research which aims to address a gap in scholarly research by exploring how university graduates with disability participate in employment, from their perspective.

Review of the research question and objectives

This research explores how university graduates with disability have experienced participation in the labour market, over the last 10 years, from the perspective of the graduates themselves. The research question is included below for reference:

> *How have university graduates with disability experienced participation in employment in the last decade?*

Underpinning the research question, the aims of the research are to identify barriers to participation in employment that university graduates with disability may experience, post-graduation, and to establish positive experiences and enablers to improve participation. This research aims to address the limitations of existing scholarship in this area by utilising a qualitative approach. This approach will enable a deep understanding of the reasons for continued challenges that university graduates with disability may encounter when participating in employment. This research will add knowledge to an emerging field and ensure that the voices of university graduates with disability are central to shaping the discussion around their participation.

Methodologies

The conceptual and theoretical framework guiding this research is synthesised using elements of the following models and concepts: the social model of disability, a human rights approach to disability, the universal model of disability and equality, and ableism. These models and concepts overlap, in part, to provide a solid theoretical framework for this research as well as providing specific lenses to analyse the data collected. Goldiner (2022) discusses the benefit of understanding disability as a ‘cluster’ of views linked to distinct and partially compatible disability models. Within this research, the conceptualisation of disability within the social model, the human rights approach and universal model of disability are compatible in that disability as social oppression, resulting from the interaction of impairment and the social environment, and being universally present are not opposing views. In contrast, the ableist conceptualisation of disability as a deficit and something that must be fixed is not compatible with these models. Nevertheless, comparing, and conceptualising understandings of disability within these models can lead to an improved holistic social response to the disadvantages associated with disability (Goldiner, 2022). For example, each model suggests addressing the disadvantages associated with disability in differing but compatible ways. The social model advocates for removing social barriers, as does the human rights framework whilst enshrining and protecting the human rights of people with disability. The universal model stipulates that planning the social environment and all sectors of society to be inclusive and accessible for all human diversity is critical and will remove barriers to participation. Using concepts within ableism allows for ableist norms within society to be problematised. All these models interact in a way that ensures that society is viewed as the reason for the disadvantage caused by disability and not the individuals with impairment themselves. The methodological framework will be discussed in more detail below, with reference to key concepts, how they relate to models of disability, and how they relate to this research.

Prioritisation of lived experience

Engaging with the lived experience of university graduates with disability, was critical to the thorough exploration of issues they encounter when participating in employment. The direct involvement of people with disability assists in identifying barriers and ensures a deep understanding of the construction of disability discrimination in employment (Darcy et al., 2016). Further, it may encourage the establishment of 'enablers' to increase levels of participation (Whitney & Purchase, 2018).   The social model takes the fundamental premise that the lived experience of people with disability is central to understanding the phenomenon of disability (Darcy et al., 2016). Moreover, the human rights approach to disability places a significant value on the lived experience of people with disability and acknowledges their expertise. This is evidenced with the development of the UN CRPD as people with disability had an active role in the formal negotiations process. The use of the lived experience of people with disability in this context challenged pre-conceived beliefs about who is the ‘expert’ on such matters (Moriarty & Dew, 2011) and facilitated the movement to a new rights-based paradigm, where people with disability are active citizens who are holders of rights. In fact, Article 21 of the CRPD enshrines the right of people with disability to impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others (UN, 2006). Ultimately, theoretical explanations within disability studies may attempt to unpack reasons for disadvantage and discrimination but any study of people with disability needs to come from the social and material reality of the lives of people with disability themselves (Hughes, 2007). A qualitative approach also aligns with the demand of ‘nothing about us without us’ (Charlton, 1998). The experiential knowledge that people with disability possess is key to exploring the challenges they experience and using this knowledge may lead to their empowerment and self-determination (Charlton, 1998). This clearly demonstrates the rationale for adopting a qualitative approach for this research, focusing on the analysis of lived experience.

Disability as a socially constructed phenomenon

Both the social model and human rights approach conceptualise disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. The social model emerged in the UK from a materialist perspective in the 1970s and 1980s and is fundamentally concerned with economic participation, exclusion, and justice. Disability is conceptualised within this framework as social oppression created in addition to existing impairment (Barnes, 2012). Thus, the social model of disability locates the ‘problem’ of disability squarely within society (Oliver, 1996). The human rights approach to disability is grounded in the social model of disability (Ollerton & Horsfall, 2013) but did not develop from a materialist perspective. A human rights approach views disability not as personal misfortune but as a socially constructed phenomenon, and suggests that societies are implicated in the creation, maintenance and intensification of impairments which translate into the experience of disablement (Baylies, 2002). Recognition that disablement is not a consequence of individual limitations but is due to societal oppression, ensured the analysis and interpretation of data collected was sensitive to power relationships and structures in society. This assisted in the identification of structural barriers to participation in employment.

Participation in employment as a human right and removal of barriers

The rights-based approach and social model of disability focus on the full participation of people with disability and the removal of barriers. The rights-based approach asserts that participation in employment, on an equal basis with non-disabled people is a human right. This is formalised in Article 27 of the CRPD which also identifies appropriate steps that state parties should take to remove barriers to participation (UN, 2006). The social model views the unemployment and underemployment of people with disability as a direct result of the social organisation of mainstream employment and the meaning of work in capitalist society (Barnes, 2012). To counteract and eradicate this discrimination in employment the social model seeks to overturn the material conditions of disablement (Goodley, 2013). This includes the removal of disabling barriers in the work environment, reshaping attitudes and the culture of work, reconfiguration of the meaning of work, and the re-evaluation and de-stigmatisation of welfare and social care provision (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). The identification of barriers to participation in employment and developing solutions to assist in their reduction or removal, is a key aim of this research and has been facilitated by this theoretical approach.

Furthermore, the data collected was examined using the CRPD as an internationally recognised benchmark, or lens for analysis. Specifically, the use of a minority-rights approach to equality within Article 27 of the CRPD was examined in relation to the data collected. Ollerton and Horsfall (2013) operationalised the CRPD in a disability research project and demonstrated how this can be employed as an effective analytical tool for disability researchers. Their research focused on accessible transport for participants with learning disabilities and the data collected was subsequently examined using the CRPD. For example, Article 3e – *Equality of opportunity* – was used to demonstrate that being unable to access public transport was in contravention of this legal obligation. Operationalisation of the CRPD in this research allowed for further careful analysis of the data, with reference to specifics such as the legal obligations upon employers and whether university graduates with disability were able to fully exercise their human rights in the workplace, in Australia.

Universal model of disability and equality

A universal model of disability posits that every person is impaired as no one's body works perfectly, consistently, and eternally (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002). Consequently, the universal model calls into question the validity of binary categorisations such as able and disabled. A universal approach to equality, in which impairment is recognised as a universal feature of the human condition, ensures that legislation, social policies, and environments expect the difference and diversity that exists in society (Kayess & French, 2008). The universal approach has been critiqued by some scholars for ignoring the impacts of ableism and discrimination in society, which may not be eradicated with a more inclusive and well-planned social environment (Hamraie, 2016). Furthermore, treating people with disability in the same way as everyone else may undermine the justification for requesting reasonable adjustments in the workplace and diminish civil rights. Despite these critiques, the universal model was employed in the creation of the CRPD and ensured a sensitivity to issues of structural power, which were not previously accounted for within formal equality measures (Megret, 2008). Formal equality can be defined as treating all people equally, an approach that does not result in equality for people with disability. Traditional human rights instruments such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948) were based upon principles of formal equality and had minimal impact for people with disability as the traditional human rights paradigm is based upon an able-bodied or able-minded rights bearer (Ollerton & Horsefull, 2013). Not only does this disregard the differences and complexities of the lived experience of people with disability, but it also fails to recognise discrimination within institutions and structures (Kayess, & French, 2008). Using the universal model of disability assisted when problematising societal responses to disability and acknowledged the role of society's structures in perpetuating oppression and disadvantage. Furthermore, it underpins the main argument of the thesis because it is the most appropriate way to reframe understandings of disability, from an individual deficit perspective to valued diversity, in a holistic and systemic way.

Ableism

Concepts within ableism will be used to facilitate a deeper understanding of discrimination whilst simultaneously questioning ableist privilege that is ingrained in Western society.

Chouinaird (1997) defines ableism as "the ideas, practices, institutions, and social relations that presume able-bodiedness and simultaneously construct people with disabilities as largely invisible 'others' who are marginalised and oppressed" (p. 380). Campbell (2009) elaborates further and defines ableism as "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human" (p. 153). Those who do not fit into this normative corporeal standard, such as people with disability, are viewed as inferior and less than human. Any variation from the ableist norm is viewed as unacceptable, negative, inferior, and deviant (Campbell, 2008). The widespread conceptualisation of disability as a deficit and an inherently negative experience (Campbell, 2012) in Western society assisted with unpacking reasons for discrimination, reported within this research. The internalisation of ableism and the psychological damage that this caused to university graduates with disability, in terms of internalised barriers to participation in employment, was also evidenced in this research. Using an ableism lens allowed for the unpacking of normative culture and ableist privilege in Western societies. This was done from the perspective of ableist culture and society being the most problematic. Furthermore, the problematisation of the normative, non-disabled other, assisted in exposing the invalidation at the heart of disabling culture (Hughes, 2007).

Methods

Research design

To meet the aims of the research and address the research question comprehensively, a qualitative research design, initially framed using phenomenology, was the most appropriate.

Phenomenology was initially considered the best fit for the research as lived experience is both the starting point and end point of phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1990). Moustakas (1994) describes empirical phenomenological research as determining what an experience means for the group who have experienced it and then providing a comprehensive description of the phenomena. This approach matches the aims of this research to examine the participation of university graduates with disability in employment through the exploration of their lived experience. Van Manen (1990) suggests that phenomenology is a philosophy that aims to facilitate deeper understanding of a phenomena. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the interpretation and analysis of experience to reveal what is hidden (Moustakas, 1994). A deeper understanding of the lived experience of university graduates and interpretation of this experience to analyse and unpack barriers to participation were the aims of this research and would be facilitated by a phenomenological design.

Further, a similar study was undertaken by Kim and Williams (2012) in which 8 college graduates with disability in the US were interviewed regarding their experience of employment post-graduation within a phenomenological study. The aim of the research was to understand the phenomena of disability and employment experience as perceived by the graduates themselves, (Kim & Williams, 2012). Therefore, a qualitative phenomenological approach was congruent with the aims of this research and the most appropriate methodology to influence the design of this research.

Moreover, a phenomenological design aligned within the methodological framework which prioritises the expertise of people with disability within a human rights-based approach (Moriarty & Dew, 2011). Phillips (2003) states that certain marginalised groups in society are deemed as less worthy than others of social respect or esteem which prevents them from participating as equals in social life. Applying this to people with disability, existing scholarly evidence suggests that they are prevented from participating in employment on an equal basis to non-disabled peers. According to Phillips (2003) subordinated groups must be recognised and engaged with as active participants and their political voice valued. This is the most effective way to fully understand the injustices that they may experience. Hence, a qualitative approach is the most pertinent to acknowledge and question existing power imbalances in society and to address the research question fully.

Qualitative interviews and a subsequent thematic analysis were undertaken, to explore the experiences of university graduates with disability. A thematic analysis was chosen as the preferred method because of its flexibility and theoretical freedom, which can potentially provide a rich, detailed and complex account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, thematic analysis is understood as belonging to the phenomenological research tradition which is centred on the sense-making of participants' subjective experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Finally, this method would be flexible enough to work effectively within the overarching methodological framework of this research project.

University graduates with disability volunteered to participate in semi structured, in depth interviews. In depth interviews enabled the researcher to address meaning with careful attention to complexity and were the most suitable for the analysis of lived experience (Travers, 2013). Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to shape the conversation themselves and discuss the issues that they felt were the most important. The data collected was analysed using a thematic analysis, with a view to identifying barriers to participation and establishing enablers of higher levels of participation. This research design facilitated a detailed exploration of the experiences of graduates with disability in employment, which addressed the limitations of existing scholarly research in Australia.

Research participants

University graduates with disability who had graduated from the University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) since 2009, were contacted to voluntarily participate in this study. A self-selecting sampling strategy was employed. Potential participants were contacted by the database administrator for the Office of University Relations (OUR). The administrator sent an email to 19,623 UNDA alumni who graduated in the last 10 years, requesting voluntary participants. Only alumni who consented to being contacted by UNDA on an ongoing basis were emailed. Personal email addresses were used, which alumni had registered on the UNDA alumni database themselves. The email contained links to the participation information sheet and consent form. If willing to participate, the participants signed and returned the consent forms directly to the researcher's email address.

14 participants agreed to take part in the research. The sample size was deemed appropriate as qualitative research is primarily concerned with using lived experience to understand and make sense of a particular issue. Hence, the focus is not on a large number of participants but is on the collection of high quality, in depth, rich data, and what is done to interpret this data (Travers, 2013). Similar qualitative research studies that examined the employment participation of university graduates with disability, used between 8 and 21 participants (Cockshott et al., 2018; Kim & Williams, 2012; Nolan & Gleeson, 2016). As Tranter (2013) suggests, the quality and

rigour of qualitative research is increased with a smaller number of participants, whose experiences are analysed in-depth, rather than a larger group with less detailed analysis. The collection of rich qualitative data and a comprehensive thematic analysis was required to address the research question.

Of the 14 research participants, 10 studied at Fremantle campus and 4 studied at Sydney. 10 of the participants identified as female and 4 identified as male. The sample included participants with a variety of impairments: 4 participants had sensory impairments (2 vision and 2 hearing); 5 participants had neurodiverse conditions including ADHD, ASD and dyslexia; 2 participants had mental health conditions; 2 participants were wheelchair users; 1 participant had a speech impairment, and 3 participants had a chronic medical condition. 7 of the participants disclosed more than 1 diagnosed condition. Regarding the degrees that had been completed, 2 of the participants had completed a PhD, 1 had completed a Master's degree, 1 had completed a Doctor of Medicine program, and 10 had completed undergraduate study only. Areas of study included: Business; Counselling; Communication and Media; Education; Health Promotion; Law; Medicine; Nursing; Occupational Therapy and Sociology. The ages of the participants varied from the youngest in their early 20s through to the oldest, who was in their 70s. 2 participants graduated in 2012 and the most recent graduate completed their studies in 2019. The variety of impairments, experiences and qualifications ensured the collection of rich and diverse data.

Data collection

Semi-structured, voice recorded interviews were undertaken with 14 university graduates with disability, who graduated from UNDA. The researcher negotiated the interview directly with the participants and sent the interview guide to the participant, before the interview. Sending the interview guide in advance allowed participants time to review the questions, to ask for clarification if required, and to think about what they would like to talk about and share. It was also hoped that this would minimise anxieties about the interview itself. Producing an interview guide was an important consideration in deciding to use a semi-structured format instead of an unstructured interview. Using semi-structured interviews would minimise participant anxieties, but it would also ensure that the specifics of the research question would be addressed. Further, semi-structured interviews were deemed flexible enough to enable in-depth discussions that could result in new themes emerging. The format allowed participants to shape the conversation and discuss what was important to them in terms of participation in employment.

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to 90 minutes. As well as qualitative data specifically regarding the experience of university graduates with disability in employment, demographic data including age and gender was collected. Type of impairment information was recorded to explore any impact upon employment participation. Program of study and year of graduation data were collected to examine relationships with employment participation.

Due to the onset of the COVID19 global pandemic and ongoing travel restrictions, participants located in Sydney were interviewed online using Zoom. For participants located in Fremantle, an in-person interview or Zoom interview was offered. In-person interviews were conducted in accessible rooms in the university library. Social distancing measures were followed, as required in the interview location such as 1.5 metres spacing between the researcher and participant, wiping down surfaces between interviews and the provision of hand sanitiser. Department of Health COVID19 guidelines for Western Australia (WA) were reviewed close to the interview date and followed carefully. A digital voice recorder was used to record the in-person interviews.

However, due to ongoing COVID 19 lockdowns and restrictions in WA, most interviews (8 out of 10) were undertaken online using Zoom. Video recordings of the Zoom interviews were destroyed once the meeting was concluded, and the audio recordings were kept for transcription.

Regarding the format of the interviews, main questions, follow-up questions and probes were used to initiate discussion. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005) main questions are defined as the scaffolding of the interview and cover the main themes to address the research puzzle, follow up questions seek explanations of themes, and probes seek clarification. The inclusion of these three types of questions resulted in the collection of detailed, in depth, nuanced, rich and vivid data (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The richness in this context refers to the depth of thematic material contained in the data. An interview guide was developed which included the main questions to be used during the interview. This ensured key areas were discussed to address the research question comprehensively (Travers, 2013). The main questions and some examples of follow up questions are included below for reference:

1. Please describe your experiences in employment since you graduated.
2. ‘People with disability have the right to work on an equal basis with others.’ What do you think about this statement?
    - Follow up – please tell me about any barriers that you may have experienced to employment since graduation.
3. Describe your feelings about your current or previous employment.
    - Follow up – what factors assisted you in securing employment?
    - Follow up - what would enable you to feel more satisfied with your job?
4. What experience do you have regarding sharing information about your impairment and requesting adjustments in your workplace?

5. What do you think about the careers services within university or external disability employment services?
6. What suggestions do you have to improve the participation of people with disability in employment?

Reflective memos containing a short reflection after each interview were compiled during the interviewing process. This assisted with heightening the awareness of the role of the researcher and improving interview techniques, whilst also contributing to the richness of the research (Willis, 2013).

Interviews were audio recorded and then electronically transcribed using Otter AI speech to text transcription software. The researcher reviewed each transcript and corrected obvious errors or issues with transcription accuracy. The transcript was forwarded to each participant for review and feedback. This ensured that participants continued to have an active and ongoing role in the research process. Furthermore, this had a positive impact in terms of the reliability and validity of this research. Bryman (2008) states that respondent validation is an effective process that may be used within qualitative research to ensure credibility, reliability, and validity of findings. As the researcher is the main instrument in this data collection process it was important to demonstrate reflexivity throughout the whole research cycle. Reflexivity can be defined as a self-conscious awareness by the researcher of the impact they have upon the research and research process (Willis, 2013). This includes acknowledgement and awareness of power relationships. Forwarding transcripts to participants for review is one way of demonstrating reflexive processes, as well as addressing any power imbalances perceived by the participants.

Data Analysis

The data collected was organised and analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allows for both inductive and deductive coding to develop and for both semantic (overt) and latent (implicit/underlying) interpretations of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This flexibility around coding and interpretation was important because several 'a priori' codes were established (see below) following the literature review. Still, it was crucial not to limit the potential of inductive coding to emerge from data and for new themes and knowledge to develop. At this point it is important to note the tension between establishing 'a priori' codes and the essential phenomenological method of bracketing, to remove all known assumptions and knowledge of the phenomena before the examination of lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, the phenomenological methodology that informed the initial design of the research would not influence the data analysis to the same degree, as a theoretical thematic analysis was undertaken which requires engagement with the literature prior to analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first step of data analysis involved researcher immersion in the data. The process of immersion involved multiple close readings of the transcripts, to engage fully with the research material (Willis, 2013). During the close reading stage, concepts and themes were recognised and clarified, before moving on to the process of coding (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Coding is the systematic process of labelling concepts and themes that emerge from the data to subsequently retrieve and examine themes across interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). A number of 'a priori' codes were determined prior to analysis to address themes apparent in the existing literature, such as employer attitudes, and inductive coding was used to organise new themes that emerged from the data (Willis, 2013). A list of thematic codes is included below and separated into two columns, those established before data analysis and those which emerged from the data.

A priori codes

1 Participation in employment
2.Underemployment
3 Requesting reasonable adjustments
4.Sharing information
5 Employer attitudes
6 Careers counselling
7 Recruitment processes
8. Discipline choice
9. Recommendations
10. Discrimination
11. DES providers

Emerged codes

1. Self esteem
2. Onset of impairment
3. Intersectionality
4. Structural barriers
5 Ableism
6. Internalising ableism
7 Colleague attitudes

In addition to manual coding, NVIVO software was employed to assist the researcher with organising coded data and themes. The coded data was collated, relationships between themes identified and an overarching description of the results created (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Throughout the analysis stage of the project, it was important to consistently check the researcher interpretations for accuracy and consistency with the original data collected (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This ensured that any claims or conclusions drawn were credible. Notes were carefully written to ensure that the entire process from data collection to interpretation and description of the results was both transparent and replicable. The researcher consistently reflected on their interpretations of the data and how the interpretation might be influenced by their own bias and positionality. Conducting a reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity throughout the entire process and encourages researchers to consistently reflect on their own assumptions and knowledge, and how this might shape and delimit their coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The final process of data analysis involved mapping the data collected to concepts within the methodological framework, for further analysis and identification of themes that could be discussed in the final thesis. For instance, evidence of experiencing ableism in the workplace was identified and coded, which led to the development of a theme around ableism and the impact this had upon the participants' ability to participate in the workplace. Moreover, the human rights framework was used to further draw out themes in the data and to assess whether participants were able to fully realise their human rights in the labour market. For example, when examining the right to access reasonable adjustments in the workplace. This demonstrates how the existing methodological framework anchors the analytical claims made throughout this thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The discussion chapters were emailed to each participant for review and feedback. Participants were given a period of one month to review the chapters and provide feedback. Participant feedback was incorporated into the concluding analysis which enhanced the reliability and validity of results (Bryman, 2008) and assisted in shifting the traditional balance of power between the researcher and researched (Barnes, 1992). This is in alignment with rights-based discourse and is highlighted within the CRPD, which promotes the rights of people with disability to participate in research and to be actively involved in policy making processes that directly affect them (UN, 2008).

Ethical considerations

Consistent with the universal model of disability all project resources were designed with universal design principles in mind. Fully accessible research documents such as participant consent forms, interview guides and transcripts were created. They could also be provided in alternative formats, if requested, and were written in plain English. The venues used for in-person interviews were fully accessible and communication support, such as Auslan interpreters, would be provided, if requested. Participants were permitted to bring a support person with them to the interview, if required.

The researcher ensured each online interview had a meeting password. At the beginning of the interview the researcher moved the camera around the room to demonstrate that she was alone. The student was asked to do the same, to ensure there were no third parties present to witness the conversation. The researcher wore a headset to demonstrate that the conversation was only being listened to by her. Participants were encouraged to wear headphones or a headset to ensure the conversation was confidential and private. The researcher reinforced the confidential nature of the interview and clarified that the content of the discussions should not be repeated outside of the interview.

The researcher identified that social stigmatisation may be more keenly felt during discussions. Accordingly, the researcher collected information about disability advocacy organisations, to be given to participants as required, so that further action could be discussed and acted upon. University counsellors were also available to meet with participants as required, following interviews. To minimise the economic burden of attending an in-person interview, participants were offered reimbursement of travel costs. The cost of this reimbursement was estimated to be $30 per person (as per the research proposal budget).

Electronic copies of the transcripts were securely stored as per the university data management policy and the data management plan for this project. A copy of this data was securely stored on the researcher's password protected computer, in two separate password protected folders. The consent forms and identifying data were saved in one password protected folder, separate to the audio recordings and transcripts, to ensure the ongoing confidentiality of the participants. All data collected was stored securely in alignment with the *Procedure: Data Storage and Retention in the School of Arts and Sciences (Sydney) for Staff Researchers, Postgraduates and HDRs – Version June 2020.* The audio recordings were deleted from the Otter AI website once transcription was completed and erased completely from their online storage.

Limitations

As discussed, the use of a qualitative study aligned itself with the aims of this research project and enabled an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of university graduates with disability, in Australia. Nonetheless, using a small sample size to collect the data places limitations on the conclusions that may be drawn. As Travers (2013) suggests, addressing the experience of a small group of people prevents generalisations about larger populations from being constructed. Further, the use of a self-selecting sampling strategy may also have some limitations with regards to sample bias. Tranter (2019) posits that self-selecting participants tend to have strong thoughts, opinions and ideas around a topic. As a result, they are more motivated to self-select and participate in research. This may mean that the views of the sample are not representative of the wider range of experiences related to the topic.

Researcher bias may be more difficult to address in a project being undertaken by a single researcher. In order to assist with minimising bias, the process of ‘bracketing’ or ‘Epoche’ which is central to phenomenological inquiry, was considered by the researcher. This entails looking at a topic with a fresh perspective by consciously putting aside all previous knowledge of the topic, including personal opinions, setting aside all presuppositions, and refraining from judgement (Moustakas, 1994). Undertaking this process aligns with researcher reflexivity and should assist with ensuring that researcher bias is minimised. Nevertheless, the use of a priori codes from existing research resulted in this process being limited.

Despite the outlined limitations to this research, a qualitative approach, focused on the lived experience of university graduates with disability, was the most appropriate to explore their participation in employment. This approach ensured that the research question was answered comprehensively. Further, it is in alignment with human rights discourse around the inclusion of people with disability, as active participants in the research process. The synthesised methodological framework outlined earlier in this chapter is the most appropriate to underpin this research. This framework enabled the detailed analysis and interpretation of data collected, which resulted in an in-depth exploration of the experiences of university graduates with disability.

Chapter 4:
'Business-as-usual' ableism and barriers to employment in the neoliberal workplace.

The promotion of participation in employment as the pathway to full citizenship has been a significant feature of Australian neoliberal social policy in recent years (Parker Harris, et al., 2014). Neoliberalism emerged in the 1980s as the dominant cultural and economic system in Australia (Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012). The ideological principles of neoliberalism such as individual autonomy, progress, self-determination, and self-government have become dominant and normalised in most Western societies (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Participating in the labour market and being economically productive are prerequisites or individual responsibilities that must be fulfilled to gain full citizenship and rights within neoliberal society (Soldatic, 2019). Inability to gain employment is blamed on the individual, which means that structural and systemic barriers remain hidden (Pieper & Mohammadi, 2014; Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012). Within this context, students with disability are the fastest growing equity group in universities in Australia, completing degrees in increasing numbers to improve their chances of participation in the labour market (Brett, 2016).

The university graduates within this study shared their experiences of participation in employment post-graduation and described attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers to participation. In this chapter, I suggest that these barriers are created due to business-as-usual forms of ableism (Campbell, 2009) which are entrenched within the neoliberal labour market and result in ableist attitudes of colleagues and employers, the internalisation of ableism, and ableist planning of the physical work environment. Still, not every participant reported experiencing barriers to employment, which reflects the nuanced experiences of university graduates with disability in the workplace. The experiences in this chapter are analysed through the lens of ableism, and neoliberal ableism to unpack the reasons for barriers to participation and to simultaneously problematise ableist norms within neoliberal employment.

Ableism

As outlined in the methodology chapter, ableism can be defined as a belief system or network of practices that privileges able-bodiedness and in contrast, casts disability as a negative experience and devalued state of being (Campbell, 2008). 'Business-as-usual' forms of ableism or everyday ableism refers to ableism so deeply embedded within Western culture that it is not problematised or even noticed because it is subliminally absorbed and accepted (Campbell, 2009). Campbell (2019) further suggests that ableism is "deeply seeded at the epistemological systems of life, personhood, power and liveability." (p. 146). As shown in the participants insights, everyday ableism in the workplace, results in persistent ableist attitudes towards disability, and university graduates with disability being erroneously labelled as deficient or lacking.

The internalisation of ableism or disabled self-hatred occurs when people with disability internalise the belief that disablement is a predominantly negative experience which can result in self-loathing and feelings of shame and inadequacy (Campell, 2008). In the case of many participants, internalising ableism resulted in a desire to emulate the normative ideal worker or 'passing' as non or less disabled (Campbell, 2009). Passing in this way was used as an individualised participation strategy in the workplace. This use of this strategy demonstrates that university graduates with disability are forced to re-create who they are in the neoliberal labour market, despite achieving academic success at university.

Neoliberal-ableism

Neoliberalism can be described as a system of governance and economic reordering that legitimises new forms of capital maldistribution from the poor to the rich, coupled with an ideological mapping that trumps the individual over collective concerns of the good, the just, inequality, poverty, and deprivation (Soldatic, 2019). Neoliberal strategies of rule in the workplace include the privileging of paid work as key for social inclusion, and that all people are individual, active subjects, responsible for enhancing their own wellbeing and working on themselves which may involve seeking education and training to develop skills and win employment (Larner, 2000a; 2000b).

The neoliberal fixation on individual responsibility and maximising economic productivity is underpinned and reinforced by key concepts of ableism. According to Goodley and Lawthorn "Ableism is a complementary ideology that fits perfectly with the contemporary globalised neoliberal capitalist epoch." (2019, p. 236). They elaborate further and suggest that Western societies are in a time of neoliberal-ableism which is characterised by an obsession with sameness, the privileging of able-bodied and able-minded individuals, and the concept of valued personhood specifically relating to work, wealth, and consumption (Goodley & Lawthorn, 2019). The valued citizen within neoliberal-ableism is able-bodied and able minded, autonomous, economically viable, normal, reasonable, self-sufficient, and self-governing (Goodley, 2014). In this context, people with disability are quintessential 'others,' in stark contrast to the neoliberal ableist imperatives of cultural, economic, embodied, and psychological self-sufficiency, who are rejected and discarded (Goodley, 2014; Goodley & Lawthorn, 2019). The participants in this study shared insights which demonstrate they continue to be ‘othered’ in the neoliberal-ableist workplace, despite their academic achievements.

Attitudinal barriers and ‘business as usual’ ableism

Many participants in this research experienced business-as-usual or everyday ableism in the workplace and described ableist attitudes of colleagues and employers which resulted in discrimination at times. Participant N, a registered nurse, spoke of the way that colleagues' attitudes towards her changed once she had been diagnosed with an impairment. “*The judgments I've had from friends have been awful. It's like, but you've known me for years. Nothing's changed*.” She described how the diagnosis changed people’s attitudes and perceptions of her capabilities,

> *I feel like people are going to think that I'm not a good nurse, and that I am likely to make a mistake, which it's almost the opposite I think..because I always knew my memory was bad and I am hyper vigilant with things. I'd double check everything all the time because I'm always so worried I'm going to forget or that I've made a mistake or that I've checked the numbers wrong.*

Likewise, participant K, a graduate with multiple degrees a spoke about ableist attitudes displayed by her colleagues within the counselling field, “*I found lots of people say it at a surface level, they say we're inclusive and all of that, but there's really a lot of ableism in terms* *of words that are used, in terms of how people are described in meetings, clients, things like that."* She elaborated further and described an incident where assumptions were made about a child with a disability,

> *I was working in a service and one person said, well, you know, that chap, is autistic. So, he doesn't seem to be affected by the fact that his mother's died so let's focus on the other children. And no awareness as to maybe he's the most highly impacted person there because he's struggling with the sense making around this situation. And for me, my anger comes in around those assumptions that workplaces make.*

Participant K explained how she would attempt to address these attitudes when ableist assumptions were made by colleagues, *"I would say hang on, I'm not comfortable with this dialogue. Can we? .... I wouldn't attack the person but I'd say, I need you to go back. You know, you've made an assumption that all people who are autistic are this way...."* This participant expressed a desire to call out ableism formally in these instances, *"You want almost want like a whistleblowing policy if you pick up discrimination. And then you also want the capacity, because people would obviously call out racism, but they don't necessarily call out ableism in that situation. That's an organisational culture thing."*

The experience of participant N demonstrates how deeply ableism is entrenched within the neoliberal labour market. Despite her colleagues knowing her personally before her diagnosis, the overarching ableist view of disability as an essentially negative experience and a deficit has superseded their knowledge of her capabilities. This understanding of disability is reinforced within the neoliberal workplace where the obsession with sameness and normative expectations of maximising productivity, result in this participant being viewed as less capable. Participant N describes her colleagues' dismissive reactions to her impairment as "awful"', demonstrating an impact to her emotional wellbeing. Similarly, participant K's experience demonstrates how people with disability are treated as less than human (Campbell, 2009) on an everyday basis. In this case, the child with Autism who lost his mother was not given the same support as other children because of the way he communicates. These insights illustrate that everyday ableism, reinforced in neoliberal employment, results in ableist attitudes which prevent people with disability from being viewed in a positive light in the workplace.

Participant C talked about being discriminated against and 'othered' due to age and disability whilst working as legal counsel for a large construction company. His relationship with his line manager deteriorated and resulted in him leaving mainstream employment to start his own business. *"It got to a stage where, you know, she would just ignore me. In my team, that I work with I was excluded and ostracised, and being left out with everything. I was an inconvenience."* He felt that his manager discriminated against him because of his age and disability, and the perceived negative impact upon his productivity,

> *My age, my disability, and her expectation, are three factors there. You know, my age is because she's young and all people she worked with on the team are young, and they get along well, I used to get along with everyone. We talked, but she just doesn't want to engage with me or anything. My disability - because I asked her to work from home in some instances because I have a lot of back pain or things like that. No. There is no reasonable adjustments. They don't understand what that is. You know, her expectation is*

> *she expected me to work 1000 miles an hour like her. Whereas I go okay well, that's not how I was trained.*

He explained the impact of this discrimination upon his physical and mental well-being,

> *25 years of working and this job has broken me. It got to a point where I just thought, I've had enough. I'm going to set up my own firm, I know what I want to do.. The relationship between this and my diabetes, the stress, it has caused my diabetes issues to increase… And now it just got to a point where there's been other factors I haven't eaten, it's just wrong. The only factors for this change in my health is stress. They want to use injections. And I said, that will impact on how I sit, how I will participate, how I work. And then you know, that's another barrier on top of the other barrier, on top of the other one.*

The neoliberal-ableist obsession with maximising economic productivity resulted in this participant being viewed as being less than capable or not fully productive for two reasons, his age, and his disability. Being a practicing lawyer did not prevent him from experiencing discrimination or everyday ableism in the workplace. These insights reflect Humpage (2007) who reported that employers were reluctant to be flexible in the work environment and were primarily focused on productivity. The participant was viewed as the problem as he could not perform in line with ableist norms and unrealistic productivity standards. The failure to meet up to the normative notion of the benchmark citizen who is the most productive and profitable citizen within society (Ervelles, 2012) has harmful results for people with disability. In this sense, people with disability become 'collateral damage' justifiably harmed and excluded because they do not meet the normative expectations demanded within neoliberal-ableist society and because they cannot survive the demands of everyday living, including participation in employment (Goodley & Lawthorn, 2019). To remain employed the participant is setting up his own law firm which is indicative of the level of autonomy, individual responsibility and self-sufficiency required to be seen as an active citizen within neoliberal society.

Other participants encountered ableist attitudes from employers in the labour market when their impairment was more visible. Participant E described employers' reluctance to employ her, as soon as they discovered she was a wheelchair user. *"Employers often... if you're writing a letter to look for employment, and you're in a wheelchair, often you have no choice but to disclose that you have a disability. So the minute they see the word wheelchair, or they see you in an interview in a wheelchair, they go running. That's my experience anyway."* Despite having a degree in business, this participant returned to further study due to being unsuccessful in securing meaningful employment post-graduation. She felt that employers were not inclusive or open and accepting of diversity. "*I guess it would be great to just see organisations a bit more open and accepting, because it does happen, but it's not the norm in my opinion."* Similarly, participant H described arriving to commence employment and using mobility aids due to an exacerbation of their chronic health condition. They experienced negativity in terms of the employer's attitude,

> *And if you go for some of these jobs, and you don't say you have a disability, and you rock up, using a walking aid, like clearly obvious disability aids. Then they get all huffy and puffy and like, oh, we wouldn't have hired you type thing. They wouldn't actually say it but it is very much the vibe and just the lack of inclusion. It kind of forces you out. So that's also why I've been doing self-employment stuff. Because I got sick of not getting*

> *hired, or being hired by people who don't respect people with disabilities, that don't have an inclusive workspace and you're ostracised because of what you need.*

Similar to participant C's experience, the lack of inclusivity and acceptance in the neoliberal labour market led this graduate to leave mainstream employment and to become self-employed. "*A mainstream agency was the last formal job that I had. Because that just kind of destroyed it for me. Since then I'm like, right, well I'm done trying to fit into a mould when I don't."* This insight demonstrates the graduate's own awareness that she does not fit into or meet neoliberal-ableist normative expectations of sameness and productivity in the workplace. This example also illustrates the increased focus on individual responsibility and meeting your own needs through employment participation in the neoliberal labour market (Parker Harris et al., 2014) as this graduate was also self-employed at the time of interview.

Likewise, participant M faced ableist attitudes and assumptions in the workplace. In some employment interviews she felt that her disability was a barrier to her securing the position, "*I think I've had a couple of job interviews where I sensed it but it would never be verbalised because this is a bit of a politically correct area. So they've never actually said that my deafness was a barrier but there have been situations where I've sensed that that was the case."* Moreover, she described the additional work that university graduates with disability need to undertake to try and prove to their colleagues and employers that they are just as capable as their non-disabled colleagues and peers.

> *Unfortunately, when you have a disability, in many respects, you need to be twice as good to be seen to be half as good. It's awful. And it's a very blunt way of putting it but I*

> *think it's actually true because people need to see beyond the disability, they can't do that until they see tangible outcomes. So when you nail them with a piece of work you've done or a presentation, or with a skill set that you have, or what have you they then immediately see the skill, rather than the disability. But up until then they're constantly seeing the disability, they're constantly being reminded of the disability.'*

This example shows the persistence of ableist attitudes towards disability in the workplace and the additional time and effort that people with disability need to expend to prove themselves to be just as capable as non-disabled colleagues. This experience reflects findings in Goodall (2022) who suggest that graduates with disability must work harder than non-disabled colleagues to prove their competence.

Participant B explained how she encountered unhelpful ableist attitudes when she met with DES staff, who were tasked with assisting her into employment. She described how the DES staff were not disability-aware and did not understand or appreciate diversity. As a result, they became frustrated when she had an exacerbation of her mental health condition, *"At times, if my anxiety has been high, I have heard from them... I can hear her frustration with me.. She is not an awful person but I understand and this isn't her area to understand, even though she's in it. So that can be hard and make me not to want to reach out."* She further explained how the DES employees demonstrated ableist attitudes in terms of viewing people with disability as the problem and not the inaccessible labour market, "*Even though they're there for you with a disability, when there was some anxiety or frustration... They see it as me having an issue, which I do, instead of going, she's actually frustrated with the system here and this person needs support. So you then become the target ...you become the scapegoat."*

These examples show persistent neoliberal-ableist attitudes in employment which frame the person with disability as being deficient because they do not match up to the unrealistic normative expectations of an ideal worker. The person with disability is viewed as having an individual problem and being deficient, rather than structural factors being taken into account. This is confirmed within the neoliberal-ableist workplace which identifies individual failure as the issue if people are unable to secure employment. If staff tasked to assist people with disability into employment view disability as a deficit, they may be less effective at facilitating a successful transition into meaningful employment. Further, this may affect the graduate's motivation to reach out to DES providers and engage with them to support the transition into employment. This reflects what Eckstein (2022) reported as the skeptical attitudes of graduates with disability towards DES providers due to previous negative experiences and Meltzer et al. (2020) who found that attitudes of disability employment agency staff were dismissive and discouraging.

Notwithstanding, some graduates did share positive experiences of working in neurodivergence affirming and inclusive workplaces. Participant K was working as a university academic at the time of interview and she reported that her colleagues displayed positive and neurodivergent affirming attitudes and practices, "*Very positive. So from my line manager's perspective, she's certainly very affirming. And yeah, also in terms of the tutor that I work with and my other colleagues or people that I worked with in some way."* Similarly, participant M worked for a university and was concerned that her impairment would impact upon her ability to be an effective tutor. Surprisingly, her direct line manager had a more positive attitude and saw less barriers than the graduate themselves,

> *I actually saw more barriers than positives, in terms of teaching the students because I thought being a tutor where there's a lot of class contact and individual student contact in a group setting, they might not get as much benefit from me because tutorials are far more interactive. So I highlighted and I said are we are going to be sure that this isn't going to impact on the students? And then we had a discussion around how would I present? What would be my strategies, and when I outlined them the unit coordinator couldn't see any barriers at all. In fact she saw it as a positive because this particular unit involved doing a viva and interviewing people with disabilities. So the students actually have a bit of a practice run, if you like all the way through the semester. So she actually saw more advantages than disadvantages in this particular situation.*

Participant I also reported positive employment experiences. She did not report directly experiencing ableism or attitudinal barriers and was employed predominantly in not-for-profit organisations and local government.

These final insights illustrate that some of the participants had affirming and positive experiences in post-graduate employment and were appreciated for their diversity in some sectors such as tertiary education and local government. Nevertheless, many participants (7 out of 14) encountered ableist attitudes towards disability within the labour market which presented as routine bias and continued discrimination towards people with disability. The difference in experiences illustrate the contradictory nature of the phenomenon of neoliberalism (Larner, 2000). Neoliberalism is dominant but not necessarily all encompassing and therefore does not define every aspect of lived experience. The differing experiences may also demonstrate the "covert and profoundly veiled" nature of ableism (Campbell, 2019, p. 159). Participants may not have experienced outwardly ableist attitudes, but this does not mean they do not exist. Further, these varied experiences highlight the nuanced nature and complexity of the lived experience of university graduates with disability in employment.

Emotional labour

Some participants took on an additional role of 'educator' to non-disabled people which involved trying to reset or reframe ableist attitudes toward disability. Participant C adopted this role in his first place of employment, post-graduation, when he educated his employer about the funding available to make adjustments in the workplace through the employment assistance fund (EAF).

> *I guess, I market myself as you've employed me and so you have access to these things to improve your building or whatever, plus all these things, as well. I've done my research. I went in there. And I provided all these things I said, look, I can make this happen. We need this thing. What do you need, and I need? One thing was there was the keypad door opening. And that's easy because the lock was down the bottom on the glass door. So, I initiated the contact, I filled in the forms got the medical they initiated it. The situation was they have to pay and it's a reimbursement scheme*.

Participant L recounted how she took on the role of educator when she was being interviewed by a disability employment service. The person interviewing her, who had a child with Autism referred to all people *"being a little bit on the spectrum."* She described how she corrected him on this point, *"Um, he said that to me when I had my first interview, and I was just like,* *uh..mmm... not quite (laughs). Yes, but not quite. I kind of took it upon myself as well to educate people. Around wording and all of that."* Likewise, participant K spoke about taking an active role in educating and consequently normalising views of neurodivergence. She was working within tertiary education as a lecturer and decided to share information about her diagnosis with her students to be neurodiverse affirming and to normalise the students' perceptions of this condition.

> *And it was a conscious decision too just, to actively just own it and say, this is where I'm coming from. And then I found what I did with the students as well, when we were doing the introductions and stuff. I put it right at the start, like in terms of the neurodiversity and a student said to me, in one of the first lectures, he said to me, thank you for doing that, because I've got ADHD. And I wondered if it was, you know, potentially a bit risky, in a sense, but again, it's this need to try and kind of normalise it and just to bring it into conversation.*

She felt that she was assisting in this way to break the stigma, "*And it's like an act or stand that I feel that I'm taking now in terms of trying to break the stigma around it you know."* Reeve (2006) defines this role as 'emotional labour' which involves addressing fear or prejudice through consistent reassurance which places an additional mental load onto people with disability. Moreover, taking on this additional role is further indication of the neoliberal compulsion towards individual responsibility in the workplace.

Internalising ableism

Participants showed varying degrees of internalising ableism which in some cases led to internalised barriers to employment. Participant G, a hard of hearing graduate, described completing an internship in their final year of university which was based at a community radio station. The internship entailed telephoning participants and interviewing them on live radio, "*They threw me in the deep end! There wasn't really much training. So I had to call people who were willing to be interviewed on air. I had to talk to them on air and because everything has to be perfect, you can't make any mistakes. I was really listening to what they were saying."*

Following the completion of the internship they felt positive about exceeding their own expectations, "*because you'll be surprised, you know, the sort of thing that you can do when you think you can't do it because of an impairment or disability."* Although this participant shared positive feelings about succeeding with the internship the experience simultaneously demonstrates they have internalised the view of disability being a deficit.

Participant E also demonstrated an understanding of their disabilty as a negative or deficit in the workplace, *"but it was just the fact that, you know, I think I had extra needs that were going to hold me back, perhaps in finding more easily finding work.*" This participant shows an understanding that people with disability are viewed as 'less than' within neoliberal-ableist employment. People with disability are overwhelmed with portrayals of disability as a an inherently negative experience, and the internalisation of these portrayals affects the way they view themselves and their own capabilities. This can have a negative impact on their participation in employment, as they compare themselves to the neoliberal-ableist essential self who has masculine attributes such as certainty, mastery and autonomy (Campbell, 2009).

Participant G continued to frame their impairment as an individual deficit they were determined to overcome in employment during the interview, "*I'm very determined though. I'm very determined not to have my disability deter me from doing things.*" Despite this determination, they later described how their hearing loss impacted upon their confidence and subsequent career progression, "*Um, I do feel like I'm kind of like below everyone else, not in like in a depressing way. But because of my hearing impairment, I do feel kind of little. Like, people might not see me as capable or anything...my hearing impairment has affected my confidence and my self-esteem to branch out and has affected me a lot in my professional life.*" Internalising ableism resulted in impacts to this graduate's psychological and emotional wellbeing as they feel less confident and capable than others and they have lower self-esteem.

Reeve (2002) suggests that the persistent internalisation of ableist beliefs coupled with negative interactions with non-disabled people results in psychological and emotional impacts such as feeling ashamed, invalidated, and vulnerable. The psychological and emotional dimensions of disability, or psycho-emotional disablism, refers to oppression that is experienced on the 'inside' as well as the 'outside' and results in adverse psychological and emotional impacts such as feeling of lesser value, feeling worthless and lower self-esteem (Thomas, 2004). This is clear in participant G's experience as they feel 'little' in comparison to non-disabled people and the internalisation of this oppression has resulted in a barrier to participation in employment.

In contrast, some participants in the research were able to view their impairments in a more positive and strengths-based way which enabled them to resist the internalisation of ableism. A common theme for these participants was later onset or diagnosis of their impairment. They viewed themselves and their impairments in a more balanced way which did not negatively affect their confidence and employment participation to the same degree. For instance, participant D was diagnosed with an impairment when he was a child but was unaware of this diagnosis until he was 16 years old.

> *That was a bit surprising. And at the time, I was a bit shocked, because I didn't really think there was anything wrong with me. Or that it was, I think a way to kind of put it in a nutshell was it made a lot of answers, it explained a lot of things about my personality type, of why I felt the same way, or certain kind of attributes, that seem bit odd. Especially when I've basically had quite a bit history of being quite unique or even being told being quite weird by friends and family or noticing my own personality has attributes that will not be considered, kind of normal.*

He explained that his family never really talked about his condition, but they accepted him for who he was without a diagnostic label. He reported high levels of self-confidence in his own abilities, and this was reflected in his work experiences post-graduation as he had worked consistently and recently secured a full-time permanent teaching position. Participant D did not identify himself as being someone with a disability and did not associate himself with the diagnosis, *"I've never seen it as a label, nor have I actually associated myself with the disorder... I never really seen disability myself as kind of impacting me that much."* Notwithstanding, referring to his diagnosis as being something 'wrong'' or not quite 'normal' and comparing himself to a normative standard demonstrates some degree of internalising ableism but not to the extent of manifesting into psychological and emotional impacts or an internalised barrier to employment participation.

Participant K was another graduate with disability who was diagnosed later in life, *"So this is interesting, too, because I only recently got the diagnosis. I was diagnosed last year, when I was 51."* Further, she was labelled as intellectually gifted whilst at school, "*when I was at school I was diagnosed as gifted. So from an intellectual point of view I know that my brain is creative or that it can hold a lot of ideas.*" She went on to achieve well academically and held multiple degrees at the time of interview. These experiences show that later diagnosis of impairment may equate with a reduced level of internalised ableism. This participant has not been overwhelmed with notions of disability as a deficit, and in fact experienced positive reinforcement with a diagnosis of being intellectually gifted at a young age instead. This resulted in high levels of academic achievement and being able to participate in employment with enough confidence to be open about her neurodivergence within her employment at university as a teaching academic.

These insights illustrate that the experiences of university graduates with disability are complex and varied. Moreover, the process of internalising ableism is not straightforward and predictable (Campbell, 2009). Still, internalising ableism can be harmful and may negatively impact upon the employment participation of university graduates with disability. Onset of impairment, diagnosis later in life, positive reinforcement, and personal identification with the identity marker of being disabled, all affected the level to which ableism was internalised and thus how it affected participation in employment, post-graduation.

Passing as an individualised participation strategy

The internalisation of ableism resulting in the desire to emulate normative expectations of an ideal worker in the workplace or to 'pass' as non-disabled, was reflected in the experiences of several graduates. Passing is defined as a cultural performance whereby one group masquerades as another to enjoy the privileges afforded to the dominant group (Leary, 1999). The adoption of a non-disabled identity to a state of near able-bodiedness or ‘passing’ (Campbell, 2008) was used as an individual employment participation strategy in the labour market. Many of the participants (9 out of 14) did not share information about their impairment with their employers and thus passing was a common strategy used to participate in employment.

Participant H had a fluctuating physical impairment and shared her experiences of concealing her hand splints which caused her pain, “*I wear different splints, for a while I wouldn't even wear them when I was working with kids. I'd take them off when I see the parents, and I put them on afterwards. It would cause me injury but yeah, I wanted to be normal for those few hours.”* The reason she did this was to adhere to ableist normative expectations of the ideal and most productive worker in the neoliberal workplace and to ensure her capabilities were not questioned. She described a second situation when she had not shared information about her medical condition and passed as non-disabled. Her employer found prescribed pain medication and mistakenly thought she was taking illegal drugs whilst working. The employer dismissed her from her position. *“Maybe I should have told them from the get-go but it doesn't actually affect how I care for the kids. The kids are not harmed. I don't use pain relief when I'm working with the kids. Like, even if I am in significant amounts of pain, the kids come first. But they'd already made their mind up. And fired me on the spot.”*

This example illustrates the harm that can occur from using passing as an individualised participation strategy in employment. Passing may be seen as an effective strategy to secure employment and to protect from perceived danger in disclosure but in reality it is detrimental, harmful, and may produce traumatic losses of its own (Leary, 1999). Moreover, passing as 'normal' can result in people with disability being further isolated as they neither identify with being disabled or non-disabled (Reeve, 2006). The ongoing desire to pass as a non-disabled person reinforces the idea that disability is an individual deficit which is subsequently absorbed and reinscribed, manifesting as internalised ableism which may cause further harm to the person in the marginalised group (Leary, 1999).

Similarly, participant G was open about their hearing impairment with most of their colleagues but did not share this information with clients that they worked with, "*Because of my hearing impairment…people might not see me as capable or anything…the majority of people I may work with do know, but the clients don't."* They were fearful of not being able to hear on the phone and as a result their impairment being discovered, *"It's my biggest fear that I can't hear on the phone. I know I can. But some people talk really soft. And especially older people, so I'm trying to understand what they're saying, without being so rude and asking them, you know, what did you say?"* Passing in this instance increased anxiety, stress and worry about being 'unmasked' as a person with a disability, which further impacts upon emotional wellbeing. As Thomas (1999; 2004) suggests, passing influences existential security as the fear of discovery of concealment manifests to produce further negative psycho-emotional impacts, such as fear and anxiety. Not knowing how the next person will react to their impairment compounds the diminished emotional wellbeing of people with disability, due to increased levels of anxiety and worry (Reeve, 2020).

During the online research interview, participant G used Bluetooth ear pods to assist with communication. Yet, they were reluctant to request similar assistive technology in the workplace as this would mean identifying as a person with a disability, "*But to be honest with you, I'm trying to, like avoid that. Because I know that will make you stand out."* They also described how they paid for speech lessons as they did not want people to be able to identify them as a deaf person, "*I'm actually a participant of NDIS and that is how I got my speech therapy and I'm so grateful for that because speech therapy is so expensive."* They explained that their motivation for seeking additional support with speech was so they could continue to mask or minimise the effects of their hearing impairment,

> *So my biggest concern was not trying to sound like a deaf person. I didn't want it. I didn't want that deaf tone. But that was my biggest fear, sounding like a deaf person. I have a lot of pride. And look, not to say there's anything wrong with being hearing impaired but for me personally, um, look, let's be honest, people are very judgmental. I know that. And I don't want to stand out. I just want to be like, within the norm that society projects*.

Participant G is engaging with what Campbell (2009) defines as defensive othering. Defensive othering occurs to deflect stigma and involves the emulation of the hegemonic norm and reiterating that the devalued disabled identity applies only to others. This graduate demonstrated consistent distancing from a disabled or 'deaf' identity coupled with an ongoing desire to be treated as 'normal.' "*I didn't want to be reduced to an impairment when I know I have so much more to give than to be labelled as someone oh they've got a hearing impairment, you know, they need this, they need that. I just want to be treated normally."* They reinforced this desire to be treated in the same way as non-disabled people several times, "*I know that there will be battles for me ahead purely because I wear hearing aids.. And it just, it's just another thing that I have* *to go through, like in the interviewing process. And I feel like it's so unnecessary. Just treat me like your abled bodied... other participants, you know?"* This participant's experiences illustrate the persistent internalisation of ableist beliefs that disability is something lacking which should not celebrated (Campbell, 2009). Defensive othering was also evidenced with the experience of Participant D whose sister questioned whether he was Autistic due to new diagnostic criteria and his continued ability to successfully participate in employment,

> *My sister actually works in speech pathology, and she deals with a lot of people - adults and children -with Autism spectrum and all that. She's looked into it and has actually shared some articles about Autism particularly the new definition of it, she's actually questioning if I would be defined under the new one mainly because I have been able to actually get quite a bit of work.*

According to Campbell (2008) people with disability are compelled to continually fabricate who they are because disability cannot be detached from its negative association. This is especially true in the neoliberal-ableist workplace, which is hyper focused and privileged towards autonomous, and highly productive citizens (Goodley, 2014). This fabrication is perceived as being necessary to succeed in the labour market.

Emulating the norm and compulsory sameness is a key ideology of neoliberal-ableism, which as Goodley (2014) suggests is the pursuit of hyper-normal. Normative, self-sufficient, able bodied and minded individuals are privileged within neoliberal-ableism and the labour market (Goodley & Lawthorn, 2019). The psychological and emotional impacts of conforming to ableist norms within employment were shared by participants, who displayed a lack of confidence in their own abilities. Despite completing a degree in law, participant C still had doubts around his capabilities, "*So not only your physical side is impacting on you, but it plays on your mind. It plays on how.. okay, that in the back of your mind, you always have a self-doubt that am I capable of doing this?"* He discussed the impact of having a disability upon his own mental health, "*being a person with disability, you have sort of like a shadow in your mind or your mental health, there's an issue there. That, um, you know, like every single person with disability I've known have an issue of how they have their mental health, to a certain extent."*

Likewise, Participant G displayed a lack of self-belief and confidence, "*I just need someone to believe in me even when I don't believe in myself. ... I just wish that there was someone out there that can tell me, you know, it's gonna be okay, you're gonna make mistakes, you're gonna get through it. You know, you're not defined by your hearing impairment, and stuff like that."* They shared the emotional impacts of diminished self-esteem, self-confidence, and frustration at being reduced to their impairment instead of being viewed in terms of accomplishments, "*I've cried in the past. And I know it sounds so silly, but yeah, I do feel like I have been reduced to my impairment."* Marks (1999) suggests that the emotional pain of rejection from society manifests in the internalisation of oppression in a complex way which may produce further anxiety and personal despair. In the case of participant G, they are frustrated and upset at society's reductive view of impairment. Nevertheless, by 'passing' as a hearing person they may be isolating themselves from other potential mentors or disabled colleagues who could support them in this regard. In this sense they are complicit in their own demise, reinforcing impairment as an undesirable state and unwittingly performing ableism (Campbell, 2009).

Negative feelings and emotions created an additional internalised barrier to seeking employment more aligned with participant G's area of study, "*Yeah. I'm actually working in childcare in the babies' room. I've been doing childcare for about nearly seven years. I've done a degree and I work in places where it's not hearing impairment friendly*." They explained that the reason they continued in this occupation was because they were worried about discrimination in other employment areas, *"..because I am really wary of my hearing impairment and discrimination in the workplace… Childcare is more my safe zone. Ah! But it just feels.. I just feel really trapped with my hearing impairment."* They explained that their ideal job would be working in policy, *"I love policy. Writing and designing policy. And just being in an office. I'm an office-y person. I just I love writing, I love researching, I love meeting people. That would be my ideal job. And I'm doing everything that is completely opposite to the ideal job."* The ongoing impacts of internalising ableism have resulted in this participant doubting their own capabilities and childcare remaining as their safe space within employment. They elaborated further by describing their fear of moving to another occupation,

> *Part of the reason why I am still in childcare, actually, to be honest with you, is because I am so scared to get another job. Because I'm worried that for example, a receptionist role, I'm worried that I can't hear on the phone. I know I can, but I just worry that I won't be able to hear as well. So I am very wary of my hearing impairment, because I know, it restricts me, on the phone. And a lot of places of course use phones now. So yeah, it's always on my mind.*

The notion of a safe space in terms of finding employment and then staying longer than would be expected due to the potential difficulty in finding employment elsewhere, was reflected in the experiences of participant M. "*I actually worked in one company for twenty years. I did a lot of different jobs with that company. But that was my safety net. I feel that I did not apply for jobs outside of that company, because of my disability."* Both participants did not have the confidence to face potentially negative reactions to their bodies (Thomas, 1999) and so stayed in the same job for a prolonged period.

The operation of disablism along psycho-emotional pathways impacts upon what the person with a disability feels they can 'be' as well as what they can and cannot do (Thomas, 2004). These effects sap the strength of people with disability and create internalised barriers that prevent them from being the people they have the potential to be (Reeve, 2002). These barriers are reinforced by the individualistic and productivity obsessed landscape of the neoliberal labour market, as university graduates with disability compare themselves (unfavourably) to unrealistic ableist notions of the most productive ideal worker who is an able-bodied entrepreneurial entity (Goodley, 2014). This comparison results in feelings of inadequacy dissonant to their academic success (Campbell, 2009) and prevents them from progressing in their careers with confidence. The accepted notion in neoliberal society that individual hard work will result in economic security and employment reasserts that lack of progression in employment is an individual problem and failing.

Participant C emulated normative expectations in the labour market to survive. In addition to working long hours in his profession, he felt pressure to demonstrate to his employers that he could work just as hard as his non-disabled colleagues. He described this as physically and mentally exhausting:

> *In the back of my mind when I go to work, I need to tell people that I'm the same as them. Not them adjusting to me and I've always been like that. Which is tiring. You know, that don't worry I can do it. I have this attitude that I portray to people when I work. You know what? Nothing's too hard for me. If you can do it I can do it, if you can jump up that brick wall, I will jump up that brick wall. That's the type of thing I portray in myself to them. But in reality, it is hard*.

Goodley et al. (2014) suggest that people with disability must embolden the 'ability' side to overcome disabling conditions in the labour market. This experience demonstrates the mental load of disavowing impairment, to fit in with the neoliberal-ableist view of the ideal productive worker and citizen. The compulsory sameness that is interwoven through neoliberal-ableist society compels people with disability to emulate the norm or be excluded from full participation in the labour market and society. Feeling compelled to emulate the norm resulted in a further mental toll and physical toll,

> *So you spend hours at a time in front of a computer. I don't get transferred to a special seat or anything like that. I'll just sit in my wheelchair. It's very restrictive. You know, I have issues with my back and lower body pain. But due to the nature of the work, you sort of have to deal with it. You spend 9 to 12 hours a day at work. And the expectation is there for you to produce.*

He described how participation within mainstream employment under these conditions, had negatively impacted on his mental wellbeing and his physical health to such a significant degree that he resigned from his position.

> *It got to a point where I just had to get out of there because it has impacted on my mental health, that place. You're there. Physically, there in a wheelchair and you're sitting there every day trying to do the work. All the drive and everything like that, you know, it tolls on you because being a person with disability. It got to a point where I just thought, I've had enough. I'm off.*

These insights demonstrate the negative impacts of passing such as increased stress and exhaustion, negatively affecting mental health and work performance (Stewart & Schwartz, 2018; Vincent & Fabri, 2020). As mentioned earlier, this graduate decided to set up his own business as a result, *"And I'm starting my own law firm now, that's what I'm doing."* Facilitating his own solution to being damaged by the mainstream organisation of employment is indicative of the neoliberal ableist imperatives of individual responsibility, and economic and psychological self-sufficiency (Goodley & Lawthorn, 2019). These experiences show the emotional and physical distress for those who cannot match up to the labour demands of the neoliberal-ableist workplace (Goodley, 2018).

Structural barriers

Some participants faced structural barriers when seeking and participating in employment due to inaccessible physical environments. Physical environments within neoliberal ableist society are designed based on ableist assumptions of normative citizens. Participant C described his frustration when arriving for job interviews or meetings where the buildings were not fully accessible, as well as issues with transportation and parking.

> *Another thing is when I go to employment, looking for jobs, you know, some buildings, they say they have accessible toilets and accessible ramps. Accessibility means different things to people who are not disabled. You know like the steepness of the ramp impacted in one of my workplaces. The toilet where there are little steps to access. So, you got to navigate all this. Those little things really impacted.*

These issues persisted when he was working as a lawyer.

> *It's not only the process of if I need to go to court, I need to prepare a certain amount of documents. How am I going to carry it? The logistics behind it how am I going to go into the court? Is the courtroom accessible? Yeah. You know, is it going to be like a criminal matter where hundreds of people coming in and out into that courtroom, it's a busy transaction that day? Or is it a trial? If it's a trial and I'm the junior lawyer, what do I need to assist my senior? Like, which box do I need to carry? Like the logistics behind that. It takes planning the day before you know, a few things to get things ready. You just can't pick it up.*

The lack of access in public buildings, including court rooms, highlights the inaccessible nature of public institutions, which reinforces the status of people with disability as 'other' or 'out of place' (Kitchin, 1998). This 'othering' of people with disability is compounded within neoliberal-ableist workplace as the valued ideal worker is able-bodied, autonomous, economically productive and judged in terms of worth in the market economy (Goodley, 2014). In this context people with disability are continually 'othered' as they cannot meet unrealistic expectations of productivity in the neoliberal labour market (Goodley, 2014). Participant C described the additional mental load of participating in employment in physical environments which are not designed with wheelchair users in mind.

> *And then also access, you know, if you park and kerbs. These are little things, but these are little things that impact on how I do my work and how I go about. Like curbs, you know, are there any slip ways? Are there things if I park along the street? How, what type of street it is and how far it is to get up? You know, those types of things. Um, pavements, Fremantle is horrendous! I've fallen down many times here when I was studying because of the uneven pavements, and things like that you know? So those are the things that are instead of rushing, I have to be very careful. And it takes a mental toll because you're looking at not people in the world, they look ahead, they just talk, that is a part of their normal behavior in the character. Whereas maybe I have to look about five feet away or a couple of meters in front to make sure that my wheel doesn't catch.*

Within the legal profession the additional mental load that this participant experienced when navigating an inaccessible environment was not really appreciated or considered, "*So I got to work through these issues, in my mind, and unfortunately, that's not what a lot of people - lawyers, young lawyers and employers want these days is that, you know, identify what are the barriers for me to participate? That goes on in my head all the time. What is the barrier for my participation?*" He also described his frustration with colleagues who picked inaccessible venues to conduct meetings, "*You know, how sometimes you go to do like, a last-minute meeting somewhere in a coffee shop? Yeah, there is no identifying question or checklist of is that coffee shop accessible? Can I get in there? If we go out to a team dinner, or work or do something together as work related? Do we have an accessible toilet?*" This experience reinforces that even structural barriers to employment become the individual’s responsibility to navigate in the neoliberal-ableist workplace. Neoliberal citizens will succeed in life through hard work and individual merit (Goodley, 2014) and failure to do so is the result of individual shortcomings. Further, this participant’s colleagues continually exhibit ableist attitudes which result in his exclusion from meetings and are seemingly unaware of how their ignorance and actions are impacting upon him. This is another example of the concealed nature of everyday forms of ableism that remain unchallenged and unquestioned in the workplace which reinforces their legitimacy.

Similarly, participant K, a graduate with a chronic medical condition resulting in fluctuating mobility, was frustrated about the lack of accessibility in the physical environment. She used crutches or a wheelchair, dependent on severity of symptoms. She was employed by a mainstream employment agency and was unable to navigate to the toilets in the building independently, as there were no accessible doors.

> *I was using crutches and I just waited at the door, and someone would open up it for you. I'm like ‘but what about my independence?’ Because you also had to get out those doors to go to the bathroom. Yeah, I was like, so you're saying that for me to go to the bathroom, to come in and out of the building if I want to go out for lunch or something that I have to go get somebody to let me in and out of that door because I can't swipe card access and hold the door because it's heavy but also they're on opposite sides, and I can't get out and use a crutch. Yeah, that's not inclusive.*

Likewise, participant E was concerned about the lack of accessibility when attending job interviews, *"I always worry about going to an interview, and them not knowing about your wheelchair because of the access to the bathrooms and I don't like to waste their time."* Segregationist planning and inaccessible physical environments send an ideological message to people with disability that they are 'out of place' and 'different' (Kitchin, 1998). This results in a landscape of exclusion, through which people with disability are taught to 'know their place' and subsequently believe in the logic of their oppression, feeling that they are unworthy and deserve to be where they are (Kitchin, 1998).

In the experiences of Participant C structural barriers in in the workplace both compound and reinforce psycho-emotional dimensions of disability, resulting in further harm and additional disabling barriers (Reeve, 2006). The psychological and emotional effects of disablism have a cumulative negative impact upon self-esteem, confidence, sense of self and the emotional wellbeing of people with disability (Reeve, 2020). This is reflected in the experiences of participant C, who when asked what he felt was the biggest barrier to participating in employment responded with the following.

> *My mental attitude and my mental…yeah, it's what happens to me physically translated into my own personal self-confidence and my own doubts.... So, whatever happens to me on a physical level, translates definitely to my mental health. And as a lawyer, there's issues already around mental health because of the matters we take up. So, this additional pressure. You know, it's just like, what's going on? And that's why I guess I've decided to go out on my own.*

This final insight demonstrates that the psycho-emotional effects of disablism can be just as disabling as structural barriers and in this participant's view are actually the most disabling when participating in employment (Reeve, 2002; 2006). The emotional reactions that people with disability have when excluded are reasonable and not an indication of a personal flaw or a failure to adjust but are instead a public issue caused by the ableism endemic in society (Reeve, 2002; 2020). These barriers are compounded within neoliberal ableist society because a failure to maintain employment and economic independence are painted as individual failures which results in structural barriers not being identified or addressed (Chouinard & Crooks, 2005). The neoliberal focus on individual responsibility and consistent working on oneself to succeed, results in structural barriers to employment being reframed as the person with disability's problem and issue. It is clear from these participants' experiences that structural barriers in employment do exist and that these external barriers impact participation, continue to 'other' people with disability and cause further psychological and emotional harm which manifest as internalised barriers.

In contrast, another research participant with physical access needs reported a more positive physical work environment and did not encounter structural barriers in the same way. Participant I was working for local government and had experienced a more universal design approach to the physical environment. The department was introducing a hot-desk system and ensured that all hot-desks were height adjustable sit/stand desks, *"We're all changing our work style, so we won't all have a set desk so we will be moving around with more stand-up desks and that will really suit me a lot"'* Installing desks with adjustable height for all employees displays a more inclusive and universal design approach in that diversity is expected and the physical office environment reflects this. The need to 'other' yourself as a person with disability to request reasonable adjustments is minimised, resulting in the graduate feeling more included and supported. Notwithstanding, the open plan office environment may not be inclusive for all graduates, as evidenced by Vincent and Fabri (2020) as some graduates with increased sensory sensitivity may not be comfortable hot-desking in an open plan, large busy office environment. Hence, other adjustments such as flexible work schedules and the option to work from home may still be required. This insight shows that some participants experienced more inclusive workplaces than others.

Conclusion

Many participants in this study experienced attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers to participation in employment that prevented them from participating equitably in the labour market. I have shown that the reason for these barriers is business-as-usual or everyday ableism which is deeply embedded and underpinned by neoliberal ideologies in the workplace. Everyday ableism resulted in negative attitudes of colleagues and employers who viewed disability as a deficit and were unable to see beyond this to focus on the graduates' academic achievements. This ableist understanding of disability was reinforced within the neoliberal workplace, which is fixated on compulsory sameness, maximising productivity and ensuring economic independence. This resulted in discrimination and barriers to employment. Most graduates used 'passing' as an individualised employment participation strategy. Yet, enacting passing reinforces that disability is a deficit and leads to further internalisation of ableism. In some cases, this internalisation resulted in psychological and emotional harm. Furthermore, this research evidenced the persistence of structural barriers to employment in the forms of inaccessible physical environments due to ableist planning in public buildings and workplaces. The result of attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers is an ‘othering’ of university graduates with disability in the labour market which impacts further on psychological and emotional wellbeing. As discussed in the next chapter, the ‘othering’ of people with disability in the workplace persists within a minority-rights approach to equality. Notwithstanding, some participants reported positive experiences in the workplace including neurodivergent affirming practices, universal design principles being adopted when planning office environments, and resistance of the internalisation of ableism. This demonstrates the nuanced and varied experience of university graduates in the labour market and the need to explore this further with more widescale research.

Chapter 5: A minority-rights approach to equality in employment and the UN CRPD

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was adopted by the United Nations (UN) on 13th December 2006 and was hailed as a landmark in terms of reframing the needs and concerns of people with disability (Kayess & French, 2008). The CRPD represented a paradigm shift by adopting a social model understanding of disability and embracing a new disability rights approach (Harpur, 2012). As a result, people with disability should no longer be viewed as objects of pity and welfare but instead should be recognised as subjects with legally enforceable human rights (Moriarity & Dew, 2011). The CRPD was the first human rights instrument to acknowledge all people with disability as rights holders and to outline that the existence of an impairment is not a justification for the denial of human rights (Degener, 2016). The participation of people with disability in the creation of the CRPD and the value placed on lived experience challenged beliefs about who is the ‘expert’ regarding disability (Moriarity & Dew, 2011). The UN claimed it heralded a new era for disabled people who would no longer have to endure the discriminatory practices and attitudes that have been permitted to prevail for so long (Kayess & French, 2008). Disability scholars suggested that the CRPD provided a new transformational concept of equality because it considers multiple forms of disability discrimination (individual, structural and intersectional) and it not only targets the removal of barriers but also contains positive measures to facilitate change (Degener, 2016).

The Convention came into force in Australia in 2008 (Harpur, 2012). University graduates with disability were sought from the last decade to participate in this research, to explore the impact of the human rights approach to disability, upon their participation in the labour market. The participants in this study reported encountering structural barriers to realising their human rights in employment, post-graduation. These barriers included limited access to reasonable adjustments, challenges when sharing information about their impairments, discrimination in interviews and non-inclusive recruitment processes. In the following chapter I will suggest that the reason for these barriers is the predominance of a minority-rights based approach to equality in employment, over a more universalist approach (Fredman, 2005). I will suggest that the minority-rights approach to equality is reinforced within Article 27 of the CRPD and that this results in structural barriers to employment remaining unchallenged.

Article 27: Work and Employment

Article 27: Work and Employment specifically addresses human rights within the labour market. This article outlines the right of people with disability to work freely and to be accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible (UN, 2006). Further, this article encompasses the right to be free from discrimination in all areas of employment, including recruitment processes, and the right to equal remuneration (UN, 2006). Article 27 i) specifically states that reasonable accommodation must be provided in the workplace (UN, 2006). The obligation to make reasonable accommodations or adjustments within employment is a crucial substantive equality measure (Kayess & French, 2008). According to Kayess and French (2008) substantive equality measures compensate for historical disadvantage and in employment this may include affirmative action policies to increase participation, such as quotas, and a requirement to make structural adjustments to accommodate impairments, such as flexible working hours. Substantive equality is reflected in contemporary disability non-discrimination law as a minority-rights approach to equality (Kayess & French, 2008).

A minority-rights approach to equality

A minority-rights approach to equality involves identifying a minority group who have suffered from discrimination, are relatively powerless and are socially excluded (Fredman, 2005). This group is then to be protected from discrimination through anti-discrimination legislation and compensated by special measures to compensate for disadvantage (Kayess & French, 2008). An example of special measures in employment would be access to reasonable adjustments. Reasonable adjustments have the potential to be transformative but if the obligation to provide them is “easily evaded” they may result in small or “marginal changes to an exclusionary norm” (Kayess & French, 2008, p. 9). A minority-rights approach to equality contains problematic implications because impairment remains as distinctive and an exception to the norm and is not viewed as a routine aspect of life and human diversity (Fredman, 2005). Moreover, it depends on disability being the identifying characteristic of a group when disability itself is not easy to define (Fredman, 2005). Viewing disability as a narrow identity category may exclude other vulnerable people from being included as protected class members and may contribute to the fragmentation of legal protection against discrimination (Satz, 2008).

A universalist approach to equality

In contrast, a universalist approach to equality views disability as a fluid and contextual concept, not a human attribute that demarks humans from one another but an infinitely various and universal feature of the human condition (Bickenbach et al., 1999). The universalist approach mirrors what Fineman (2008) outlines as a vulnerability analysis of equality. Vulnerability is seen as a universal constant, inevitable and inherent in the human condition, that arises from our embodiment, which carries with it the ever-present possibility of disease, harm, injury and misfortune. The focus on the universal and vulnerable nature of the human condition allows us to move towards a "post-identity enquiry, moving beyond the stifling confines of anti-discrimination-based models towards a more substantive vision of equality" (Fineman, 2008, p. 1). Further, recognising the universal existence of human vulnerability removes the stigma of needing assistance which improves protections for all (Satz, 2008). A universal model approach to disability and equality expects human diversity and as such there would be less need for reasonable adjustments. The universalist approach is mandated in the CRPD within Article 2: Definitions where universal design is defined as "the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design"' (UN, 2006, p. 4). Moreover, Article 3: General Principles point 4 includes respect for difference and the acceptance of people with disability as part of human diversity (UN, 2006). Valuing the diversity of people with disability is foundational to the universal model of disability. Degeners (2016) suggests that this demonstrates impairment is "not to be regarded as deficient or detrimental to human dignity or diversity" (p. 8).

Nevertheless, there is no mention of the universal model or approach within Article 27. Instead, the focus is on prohibiting discrimination, ensuring access to reasonable accommodation, and protecting and promoting human rights in employment. The anti-discrimination approach coupled with substantive equality measures establishes the minority-rights approach to equality in practice, in the labour market. The lived experiences shared by the participants in this study illustrate that despite the ratification of the CRPD structural barriers to fully realising human rights in the labour market persist. I will suggest that this is due to the continued adoption of a minority-rights approach to equality in employment that takes precedence over a more universal approach. This results in disability being viewed as an individual problem and the exception to the norm which means that structural barriers to realising human rights in employment remain unchallenged. The persistence of the minority-rights approach to equality in employment prevents the transformative aspects of the Convention from being realised in practice, in the workplace.

Access to reasonable adjustments

Several participants requested a variety of reasonable accommodations or adjustments from their employers. Participant C requested funding for a physical access adjustment from an employer using the Employment Assistance Fund through Job Access. He reported that the reimbursement process of accessing funding was an additional systemic barrier. To access EAF funds the employer must make the initial payment and they are reimbursed within 48 hours. In this instance, the employer stated they did not have the funds to make the payment and thus the graduate was not able to access the funding or adjustment. Participant M, who owned a small business also talked about the financial implications of access to reasonable adjustments for her employees,

> *Sometimes the person with a disability may not always understand what is or isn't reasonable, particularly from a small business perspective in terms of the extent of the environmental modifications or the extent of the support required because it's actually costing the business ..it could potentially cost the business money. So that's a frank discussion that needs to be had. I'm not saying it can't happen. That with those open*

> *conversations, it's a better level of understanding from both parties because it is not black and white.*

This insight reflects findings from Kim and Williams (2012) who demonstrated that the cost of reasonable adjustments was more of a concern for small and medium sized organisations. Likewise, participant J who was training as a doctor asked for a piece of equipment from her employer, a standing desk, to complete her administrative tasks as prolonged sitting was challenging, "*Sometimes I get a flare up with my condition and then sitting is really, really difficult. And often walking is difficult too but standing was better. And to write notes you sit down at a computer. Sitting was really hard. So, I asked them to get a stand-up desk, you know, the adjustable ones, where you can stand and do your notes."* The hospital advised that they would not supply the equipment and that she would need to source and fund this equipment herself. *"But they said, yeah, you'd have to pay for it. It was $1,000."*

Lack of access to reasonable adjustments and assistive equipment for these graduates is in contravention of Article 27 (i) ensure reasonable accommodation is provided in the workplace (UN, 2006, p. 17). At the domestic level, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (1992) Section 5 (2)a describes direct discrimination as "the discriminator does not make, or proposes not to make, reasonable adjustments for the person which results in the person being treated less favourably than a person without a disability" (p. 9). In the case of the medicine graduate, she was refused the reasonable adjustment and therefore was directly discriminated against. The obligation to be non-discriminatory towards people with disability is upon all employers in Australia, within the DDA legislation. Nevertheless, there is a lack of understanding from employers that people with disability are rights bearers who have the right to work (Darcy, 2016), as well as rights to access reasonable adjustments and assistive equipment within the labour market. Employers may need to be educated in terms of what they are legally required to provide to people with disability in the workplace. The inclusion of a disclaimer in terms of funding for reasonable adjustments within the CRPD itself may contribute to the lack of access. Article 2: Definitions, states that reasonable accommodations must not impose a disproportionate or undue burden (UN, 2006). The inclusion of this statement may give employers the impression that they are not economically obliged to provide adjustments in every instance. Moreover, these experiences reflect the negative implications of a minority-rights approach to equality in employment, in terms of limitations on economic resources. According to Kayess and French (2008) the minority-rights approach pits the protected class against the others in claims for scarce social resources and may be unable to overcome pre-existing power relationships. "The individually referenced and bilateral nature of the obligation to provide adjustments is particularly prone to being influenced by this dynamic and tends to result in downward pressure on the threshold of obligation" (Kayess & French, 2008, p. 10). This downward pressure may result in limited access to reasonable adjustments as shown in the participants' lived experience. The lack of access to reasonable adjustments becomes a barrier to university graduates with disability realising their human rights and participating equally in the labour market.

Participant J elaborated further about limited access to reasonable adjustments within the field of medicine, advising it was not possible to access adjustments due to nature of the work, "*You just you can't really do that in medicine, realistically. I think legally and formally, you could ask, but I think realistically it just wouldn't work."* She described how working long hours (70-80 hours per week) in an emergency department, particularly on night shifts meant that she was so busy and isolated that it was unrealistic to ask for and expect reasonable adjustments. As a result, she would manage adjustments herself, "*But I feel like you would have to make your own adjustments."* She suggested that doctors are discouraged from asking for any assistance or adjustments due to the nature of their roles.

> *I think you try your best to ask for as little as possible. Because of the fact that we're just conditioned to that as the medical workforce. The people that give us jobs are very stressed and that you can't put too much pressure on them. And you can't ask for too many things. And we are really conditioned to that as hospital doctors.*

Furthermore, participant J explained she was in the process of undertaking specialty training and was studying and working on placement for 7 years. She spoke about a recent period of illness and resulting hospitalisation, which lasted 8 weeks, but was marked down as a 3-month absence. This resulted in her being unable to take her exams and her training being delayed by a year.

> *In my first year of training, I had an acute episode because the bladder sometimes just does its own thing and it spasms. And that can happen anywhere. And when that happens, sometimes I need extended sick leave. And that happened in my first year of training... So I ended up not being at work for eight weeks, because I had a hospital admission myself. But you get quite punished, I'll be completely honest here…They didn't count three months of my training, that year, and, and if they didn't count it, that meant I wasn't able to sit my fellowship exam last year, for example, because you have to have a certain amount of training before you can sit your fellowship exams. And I wasn't able to do that, because I just missed out just because I had my hospital admission.*

She felt that she was discouraged from asking for any adjustments, even though her absence was legitimate and linked to an ongoing condition. “*And I did write to them. I wrote an email and asked whether I would have, considering that I had a hospital admission, would I be able to apply for a special consideration? And they said, I could always apply, but they said it was very unlikely that I would get it and I got really disheartened and didn't do it.”* Participant J explained that the specialty training was delivered through the relevant college and that their guidelines were so strict that reasonable adjustments were almost never granted,

> *People have even worse reasons, like doctors have got kids with cancers that just can't count their training. It's really ruthless. Our training is quite strict. So it's all run through a college. Every specialty has a college that's responsible for it. For example, you have a college of surgeons, you have a college of paediatricians, and the colleges are quite strict. You can apply for consideration, special consideration, but it very rarely gets granted. I don't know if anyone has been granted them.*

Specialty colleges are classed as education providers under the Disability Standards for Education (2005) and as such they are not meeting their legal obligations to provide reasonable adjustments for people with disability. This participant’s experiences highlight a lack of awareness on behalf of her employer regarding her right to reasonable adjustments as a person with a disability. This experience documents the persistence of the individualised model of disability within the field of medicine, as the person with the disability is viewed as having the problem, which they need to remedy and fund themselves. Moreover, this experience illustrates the lack of a universalist approach to education, particularly within in the medical profession training colleges. A universally designed program of study would incorporate flexibility in the curriculum design, course delivery and assessment, which could allow all students to experience legitimate medical absences without being penalised. Within the Convention, Article 24: Education, does not mention the incorporation of universal design principles, instead the focus is on providing individualised support and reasonable accommodation (UN, 2006). This example shows the minority-rights approach of requesting reasonable adjustments does not facilitate equal access to training in employment, particularly within the medical profession, and that structural barriers to equal participation in employment remain.

In his most recent employment, in a large corporate company working as in-house legal counsel, Participant C requested to work from home to assist with the physical impacts of his condition, "*I asked to work from home in some instances because I have a lot of back pain or things like that. No. There are no reasonable adjustments.*" His request for adjustment was not approved. The refusal of this adjustment contradicts the legally binding provisions within the CRPD and within the DDA (1992). This evidence suggests that employers in Australia may not be fully aware of their legal obligations and may not necessarily view employees with disabilities as rights bearers who are entitled to reasonable adjustments in the workplace. Ironically, this participant is employed as a lawyer but still finds it challenging to fully realise his human rights in the labour market. Further, this example evidences the continuation of the orthodox individualised view of disability, that disablement is a product of impairment and not society and, as such, legitimate requests for adjustments are deemed to be unrealistic or unnecessary (Barnes, 2000). The minority-rights approach in this instance is not helpful. The person with a disability must identify as not meeting ableist normative expectations in the workplace and must ask for additional considerations. Expecting difference and taking a more universalist approach in the workplace could produce a more inclusive labour market for people with disability. A universal approach could include implementing a flexible working policy, for all staff. This would enable people with disability, and other employees, to have in-built flexibility around their working schedule without needing to formally request adjustments. Another example would be ensuring that all desks in an office are physically accessible. For instance, Participant I reported that her current employer (local government) had recently installed height adjustable 'hot' desks for all staff. This ensured all desks were fully accessible for all staff and could be adjusted for people with physical access needs, without needing to request adjustments. In these examples, the universal approach removes the stigma of needing assistance and improves protection against discrimination for all (Saltz, 2008). If this approach could be more widely promoted, adopted, and implemented across the labour market, this would facilitate inclusion and the participation of university graduates with disability in employment. The continuance of a minority-rights approach to employment rights leads to challenges when accessing reasonable adjustments which become structural barriers to equal participation in employment.

Sharing information about impairments

Another negative impact resulting from a minority-rights approach to equality in employment and requesting reasonable adjustments, is that graduates must share information about their impairments with employers. This places them in a more precarious and vulnerable position, in terms of experiencing social isolation, discrimination and potential exclusion from the labour market (Darcy, 2016). Deciding when to share information about an impairment, whether to do this during initial stages of the recruitment process, to access adjustments for recruitment tests, or to disclose when in employment to access reasonable adjustments, was an additional consideration for university graduates in employment. In some cases, this consideration led to an increase in worry and stress. Darcy (2016) likens the process of sharing information about impairments to ‘coming out’ as the results are just as unpredictable in terms of being supported or victimised by employers and colleagues.

The participants diagnosed with psychological impairments appeared to be the most apprehensive about sharing information due to potential stigma and discrimination. Participant A described how he would be worried about the stigma of disclosing issues with mental health, “*Stigma! Ah, the fact that it would probably put them off employing me if they thought that I was a fruitcake.”* Likewise, participant B, who was seeking employment within the counselling profession, explained that sharing information about a psychological impairment was perceived as unwise, “*I heard an interview with a woman who runs Beyond Blue on ABC who said don't tell them. I have a mental health worker who says don't tell them… she's in the industry and she advises not to do it from her experience, she's got something like 30 years’ experience, don't declare if you have a mental health issue.”* The fear of disclosing a psychological impairment in the labour market is not unfounded. Darcy (2016) documented a higher level of disability discrimination complaints in employment for those with mental health issues, due to social stigma. This also aligns with what Osterud (2022) describes as a hierarchy of impairments. People with physical disabilities are seen as easier to accommodate than people with sensory or psychological impairments as they are viewed as needing more support and resources, and as such are viewed less favourably (Osterud, 2022).

Moreover, participant H discussed her concerns about sharing information regarding her impairments within the counselling profession. She explained she would not feel comfortable sharing information if she was applying for counselling work. This was due to a culture of inaccessibility within the counselling profession including the regulatory body, the Australian Counselling Association (ACA). "*I still wouldn't feel comfortable applying for a counsellor job disclosing that I have a disability. In fact, I'm not comfortable doing that full stop. Because of the lack of even with like with the ACA. I think they have had renovations since the last meeting I went to, but their venue was inaccessible."* Similarly, to the Royal Colleges of medical professionals, the ACA's inaccessibility shows that regulatory professional bodies in Australia may still be operating in a way that excludes people with disability from mainstream employment. If the peak professional bodies are not making efforts to lead by example and to reduce discrimination for people with lived experience of disability in their workforce, this may have a negative impact throughout each sector of the labour market.

These examples illustrate that the minority-rights approach to equality is failing university graduates with disability in the labour market. These graduates do not want to share information about their impairments because they fear potential discrimination and exclusion, which means they are unable to access reasonable adjustments and participate on an equal basis in employment. Discrimination based on disability is prohibited under the CRPD and DDA (1992) in Australia. Yet, in practice structural barriers to participation in employment still exist for these participants. This shows that the anti-discrimination pathway to equality may be limited as it provides a patchwork of protection from discrimination and does not coalesce to allow meaningful participation (Satz, 2008).

Several participants did share information about their impairments but not until interview stage for fear of being discriminated against and not being selected for interview. Participant C did not share information about his impairment until the interview as he feared assumptions would be made about his capabilities, "*Once I get through to the interview stage, that's when I disclose and then it's up to them, you know? But I don't want… it's a preconception. There's some subconscious thing I understand. But age, address and your ability, I don't disclose on my applications at all. Unless there's some statutory requirements."* Likewise, Participant G, explained that she would not share information on an application form but would wait for an interview so that she could gauge the reaction of potential employers.

> *I do not. No. Because I don't want people, I don't want employers to define me based on my hearing impairment. So, if I did get an interview, that's when I would mention it because I feel like that is something that you should say like face to face, if that makes sense. I think it's more professional in my opinion. I can hear their tone of voice. I can see how they react. Reaction is everything to me and response, so I never mention that in like my resumes and stuff like that, always face to face.*

Participant H clarified her reasoning for not sharing information about her impairments in the initial stages of the application process, "*You don't get a foot in the door. Unless the job says specifically that they're looking for someone with a disability you will not get a foot in the door. It is really rare that they will actually even give you the time of day."* Similarly, participant D, explained how he felt assumptions would be made about his capabilities if he shared information about his impairment.

> *I've always been a little bit nervous about pointing it out, even though I know there's discriminatory laws against you know, not letting people basically in jobs because of conditions and all that. But I always feel subconsciously it would always be in someone's back of their mind, especially someone who doesn't understand the spectrum, or might*

> *just read Autism on an application without meeting the person first and go, this might be a person who might not be able to handle pressure or these kinds of stereotypes.*

Similarly, participant L described how she would not share information about her impairments early in the application process because she was worried about stigma and stereotyping, *"because as soon as you say those words to anybody, they see you in a different way. Whether they intend on it or not, whether they're Autistic or not, they see you in a different way that they hadn't seen you before."*

Participant I explained that she would share information before arriving for her interview, "*Um, I'm probably a person who likes to disclose my disability prior to meeting people, particularly for a job interview. So, if I'm successful in gaining an interview I will email them to let them know about my mild speech impairment and just to give them a bit of a rundown before I get into a stressful situation."* However, when asked about sharing information earlier in the process she displayed similar worries to other participants regarding judgements being made by employers: "*Well that raises something really important. Yeah, it raises a little dilemma I'll often have because sometimes I think there might be a bit of judgment, if you put it on the cover letter. So, I do it depending upon the job I'm applying for."* She expanded further on this point, stating that if the employer already knew her as a person, she would be more inclined to share information earlier in the recruitment process, "*Okay, so for example, when I may disclose will be if I had previous employment through that company. And they already know me as a person. However, I may not disclose it if it is an organisation that I'm not really aware of."* The rationale for not disclosing to an unknown employer was potential discrimination. "*It's often quite hard to know* *that but I feel …and I could be wrong here that they may see that on a written application and think 'too hard box."*

Fear of discrimination was evident in most participants' experiences and resulted in the delayed sharing of information. These findings aligned with international research which documented that disclosure of information about an impairment early in the recruitment process is unlikely due to fears of discrimination, stigma, being labelled as incapable, and being denied employment (Kattari et al., 2018; Kiesel at al., 2019; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Nolan & Gleeson, 2016; Osterud, 2022; Santuzzi et al., 2014). The experiences of the participants in this study demonstrate the quandary felt by university graduates with disability, regarding how and when to share information about their impairment to employers. This further reflects international research in this area which suggest that sharing information about an impairment was a 'Catch 22' situation, as the stigma of disclosure was weighed up against the perception of being viewed as incapable or incompetent (Damiani & Harbour, 2015; Goodfellow, 2014) and that the decision about whether to share is complex and fraught with personal and environmental concerns (von Schrader et al., 2014). Participant M described the decision about whether to share information about her impairment as a complex and continual evaluation of the circumstances, the nature of people involved, and the associated level of risk, "*It's a judgement call that you continually have to make all your life. There's no recipe. It's definitely something that I either hold back, say from the outset, or share it along the way, depending on the situation, the types of people, and also, we have to look at the level of risk."*

Proactive implementation of the CRPD, specifically Article 8 1(c) promote awareness of the capabilities and contributions of persons with disabilities (UN, 2006) could be significant in changing the ableist views of employers in Australia, which may encourage more open sharing of information and acceptance of a more diverse workforce. A universalist approach in employment would mean that difference is expected, and that flexibility could be provided to all employees. This would minimise the need to share information about impairments to access adjustments, reduce discrimination and facilitate equal access to participation in employment. The minority-rights approach, in particular the need to identify as part of a group which is incorrectly labelled as 'less than' (Campbell, 2008) by ableist employers may lead to assumptions being made about capabilities and discrimination. The fear of identifying with this personal characteristic, and this leading to discrimination and exclusion, leads to structural barriers to equal participation in employment.

Furthermore, participant J, explained that she had never shared information about her disability, because the only option that doctors had to share this information was on application forms. The wording of the question that enquired about disabilities, discouraged her from disclosing: "*Because the question is, do you have a disability that might prevent you from doing the job? And I don't. It doesn't prevent me from doing the job. But that doesn't mean that I don't need some kind of a special adjustment. And there's never a question like that."* The continued use of such exclusionary language does not encourage university graduates with disability, to share information about their needs with their employers. It also documents a lack of understanding and the persistence of unhelpful binary classifications such as being able or unable to participate in employment. This does not consider the complexity of lived experience of university graduates with disability, as many are perfectly capable of successful careers especially if the workplace incorporates a more universal approach to disability, which would result in a more accessible and inclusive work environment. The experience of this graduate aligns with what

Goodley (2014) suggests that the medical profession is regularly associated with the maintenance and proliferation of the autonomous, rational and healthy citizen.

Moreover, this example illustrates the persistence of the medicalised approach to disability within recruitment processes used in the medical profession. Impairment is viewed as an individual problem that prevents people from having successful careers as doctors. This results in a reluctance to be inclusive for medical professionals with disability, across the sector. The requirement to disclose an impairment, within the minority-rights approach to equality, does not work in practice for this participant. If she disclosed her impairment, she would be prevented from being employed as a doctor. This example shows that the minority-rights approach to equality contributes to ongoing barriers to participation in employment.

Nevertheless, two participants explained that they would share information earlier in the recruitment process. Participant E, a wheelchair user, shared information at the application stage as she did not want to arrive for an interview at an inaccessible building; *"I always worry about going to an interview, and them not knowing about your wheelchair because of the access to the bathrooms and I don't like to waste their time."* She felt that because her impairment was visible that she had no choice but to share information as early as possible but that this was detrimental to her participation in employment, "*I think with regards to employment, employers often see, or if you're writing a letter to look for employment, and you're in a wheelchair, often you have no choice but to disclose that you have a disability. So the minute they see the word wheelchair, or they see you in an interview in a wheelchair, they go running. That's my experience anyway."* Participant F, a graduate with an Acquired Brain Injury shared information about his condition before he obtained employment. He was motivated to share information earlier in the process due to the visibility of his impairment as he walked with a limp, and he explained that he would do this in a positive way.

> *I guess I do kind of use it as a strength, I'm actually very positive about that. And I'm showing people that it's...I'm showing them in the manner I tell them, that it's water under the bridge. I say this terrible thing happened to me, but you know, what, it's been and gone. And I feel much better now. And yeah, it's all a positive exchange. I think when I share that information, I show them that don't need to empathize or pity me, and I just tell them keep aware of this but don't go all good samaritan on me and, you know, think that I need this and this and this, because, yeah, I think I can handle it myself.*

This insight shows that Participant F was able to address the conversations in a positive way and at the time of interview, he felt that he had not experienced discrimination because of sharing information about his impairment.

Regardless of the nature of impairment, all participants were worried about sharing information with employers and it potentially leading to discrimination or exclusion from employment. Many participants within this study experienced additional emotional and psychological impacts such as worry and stress. The minority-rights approach to equality and the necessity to share information about impairments to facilitate equal access to the labour market, increases the psycho-emotional impacts of disability and simultaneously exposes the participants to further discrimination and potential exclusion. This approach contributes to the continuation of barriers to participation in employment, for graduates with disability.

Employment interviews and discrimination

At interview stage, participants reported encountering discrimination from interviewers and prospective employers, both in terms of physical access and attitudes to impairment. Participant E, described the discrimination she faced when she secured an interview, and asked about an accessible bathroom. "*You'll get to the interview, and they'll say, oh, well we can't really accommodate that, because we don't have a bathroom!"* This participant had returned for further study of a second undergraduate degree as she was unable to secure meaningful employment following the acquisition of her first degree. These insights align with research from the US in terms of the frustration felt by graduates with visible impairments, who have no choice but to share information about their impairment and are then excluded from employment as a result (Kiesel et al., 2019). These experiences demonstrate overt discrimination, by stating disability cannot be accommodated, which is also aligned with Australian research in this area (Darcy, 2016). Discrimination based on disability in employment is prohibited under the CRPD Article 27 (a) (UN, 2006). This experience further demonstrates the lack of awareness of employers with regards to their legal obligations under the CRPD and DDA (1992) and an absence of understanding of disability as a human rights and social justice issue (Darcy, 2016). Educating employers regarding universal design of physical spaces and their legal obligation under the CRPD to provide an accessible and inclusive work environment is essential to make progress in this area. This experience also highlights the inadequacy of relying on an anti-discrimination approach to equality (Satz, 2008).

In addition to physical barriers that prevented equal participation in employment, attitudinal barriers were also evidenced by graduates in this study. Participant M described encountering "*a* *block,"* during an interview. Typically, she shared information about her hearing impairment ahead of time but on one occasion she shared the information during an interview.

> *In one interview, in particular, I shared the information part way through, I thought I'm going to hold back for once. Let's just see what happens. I did notice a change in the language and in the type of question, and what was a bit more free flowing, became shorter, more succinct. And I don't know whether it was the interviewers' attempt to try and facilitate smoother conversation or whether it was a shutdown*?

She felt that the interviewers became less comfortable as the interview progressed, following her disclosure. Upon leaving the interview, she felt it was unlikely that she would be successful in terms of securing the position. Participant M did not feel that the interviewers saw her as "*a person with a disability and we don't want anything to do with her."* Instead, she felt that they had made some incorrect assumptions about how to communicate with her instead of asking her directly, "*I felt that they were not sure themselves on what to do or how to do it and made some assumptions instead of asking the question, how have we been going so far? Do we need to make any changes or anything like that. They just assumed they needed to. And it just all went sour after that as far as I'm concerned."*

As mentioned in the literature review, sharing information at the interview stage is difficult because the onus is on the person with disability to change potentially ableist attitudes of the interviewers in a short space of time and simultaneously demonstrate they are the most capable candidate for the job (Harpur, 2014). Osterud (2022) describes employers as the 'gatekeepers' to employment and found that they are less likely to employ people who disclose an impairment early in the recruitment process. Exclusion was based on both an assumption of lower productivity as well as social considerations about how well the person with a disability would fit into the team (Osterud, 2022). This experience illustrates the damaging impact of making assumptions about people with disability and how this can negatively affect participation in employment and lead to exclusion, which is evidenced in scholarly research both in Australia and internationally (Darcy et al., 2016; Kruse et al., 2018; Punch et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2018; Vincent & Fabri, 2020). It is worth noting that this participant had completed a PhD and yet the disclosure of an impairment overshadowed their significant academic achievements in this instance. This aligns with Darcy et al. (2016) who documented that employers disproportionately focused on the impairment of the individual rather than their capabilities and qualifications. The minority-rights approach to equality and identifying as having a personal characteristic that is viewed less favourably by employers, creates another barrier to employment for university graduates with disability, even for those who are highly qualified.

Recruitment processes

The minority-rights approach to equality within recruitment processes also hindered equal participation in employment. Participant H, who had a learning disability, discussed the barrier presented by the usage of online IQ tests that some recruitment agencies and employers incorporated into their recruitment processes.

> *Subsequent jobs I applied for after that, they wanted you to do those online IQ tests which are really not disability friendly. They can't be. They're not read by screen readers, you don't get the required time that you would need for disability. And that was a big*

> *culture shock going from uni where they were so accommodating and even TAFE, to the workforce and being like, oh, shoot!*

This participant's experience reflects Canadian research which identified cognitive tests under timed conditions as being a barrier to employment for university graduates with learning disabilities (Goodfellow, 2014). Graduates were too scared to ask for reasonable adjustments and then felt they were disadvantaged for not performing in line with ableist expectations (Goodfellow, 2014). Further, research in the US documented that the attitudes of human resources professionals in the provision of pre-employment test adjustments were shaped by stigmas and stereotypes (Styers & Shultz, 2009). This illustrates the disconnect between receiving adjustments in a supportive environment at university and the subsequent transition into employment, into a potentially more hostile environment. In both environments, people with disability are rights holders who are entitled to reasonable adjustments and are legally protected from discrimination. The minority-rights approach to equality, which requires identification with having an impairment and requesting reasonable adjustments, results in discrimination within recruitment processes and becomes a barrier to participation in employment.

Most traditional recruitment processes and practices within mainstream employment are modelled on neurotypical or normative applicants, which may result in barriers to participation in employment, for university graduates with disability. Recruitment practices are grounded in ableist assumptions about an ideal worker, which can disadvantage and exclude people with certain impairments (Harpur, 2014; Vincent & Fabri, 2020). Participant B, who had a psychological impairment, talked about her experiences with recruitment processes which exacerbated her symptoms of mental ill health. She described how symptoms of anxiety increased and worked against her when attempting to navigate the initial stages of seeking employment, such as completing application forms, "*Okay, so say, for example, just writing out job criteria, I get heightened anxiety. And so, I find it really hard to digest what I'm reading, and my sense of wanting to be perfect, which of course you can't attain, immobilizes me to start writing. And sometimes I need assistance with that because I'm actually not that great at it."* If she progressed to the interview stage, she would experience a further exacerbation of symptoms, "*If I'm in an interview, I become highly anxious.*" She explained that when she was in employment, her symptoms were much more reduced and manageable. These insights demonstrate that barriers within universally used recruitment processes may have prevented this participant from seeking and gaining meaningful employment post-graduation. It also demonstrates that traditional recruitment processes may not be inclusive for those with psychological impairments. As Barnes (2012) suggests in the 21st century an 'able mind' may be just as important to participating in mainstream employment as an able body, which may have implications for those with mental illness. In this participant's case, challenges with navigating the job application process have prevented her from accessing meaningful employment. This experience aligns with research in the US which found graduates with disability accepted employment below their level of training and competence because of job search challenges (Kiesel et al., 2019). In the experience of this participant, barriers within traditional recruitment processes exacerbated her mental health condition and contributed to her continued underemployment.

Likewise, participant N, a nursing graduate, noted her frustration with traditional recruitment processes. She described the application process as "*ridiculous" and "extremely difficult"* and viewed these processes as completely unrelated to competency, as a registered nurse.

> *You know, it's like trying to get someone to do an essay to see if they can paint your house. Like, he's a great painter, but he can't do an essay. So how does that reflect on their ability to do that job? I don't think they're inclusive. And I don't think that they actually look at a person until you get to an interview. And usually, if I get an interview, I usually get into something. But getting the interviews, is hard.*

She explained that in her view, "*most people with ADHD shine more in person than they do on paper"* and that completing selection criteria for job applications was also challenging,

> *Selection criteria, I find them so difficult and my inability to answer a question straight. And my need to want to explain myself, because I think people won't understand me, makes it really difficult to keep to word counts. But not only that, sitting down and filling in that stuff is not a nursing job. Like it's not, it's not my job.*

These insights demonstrate how recruitment practices, such as the completion of application forms with reference to specific selection criteria, present as systemic barriers to neurodiverse graduates which may exclude them from participating in employment on the same basis as neurotypical graduates. Moreover, these insights further align with Stannett (2006) who discusses his own frustrations as a disabled psychology graduate, describing mainstream application processes including the use of job selection criteria as being 'littered with obstacles' for university graduates with disability. Recent Australian research also suggests that traditional recruitment practices present ongoing and systemic barriers to employment for people with a variety of impairments including learning disabilities (Meltzer et al., 2020). A more flexible, inclusive, and universally designed approach to recruitment processes may assist in reducing barriers and recruiting a more diverse workforce. A universalist approach may include offering job applicants a choice of selection methods for employment. For instance, being offered an opportunity to demonstrate the competencies of the job in person or recording a video or audio submission talking about personal strengths and suitability for the role, may be less daunting and could allow university graduates with disability to play to their strengths and encourage a more positive outcome. The lack of a universalist approach to recruitment processes resulted in continued barriers to employment, including exclusion from meaningful employment for university graduates with disability.

Conclusion

According to Kayess and French (2008) the fundamental purpose of equality measures is to challenge the equation of difference with inferiority. Moreover, the goal of the CRPD was to provide human rights for people with disability on a par with the general population (Degener, 2016). Despite the Convention being ratified in Australia for over a decade, participants within this study still experienced negative attitudes towards impairment and outright discrimination, which manifested as structural barriers to equal participation in employment. The CRPD committee reported in 2019 that Australia was not yet fully compliant with the Convention and that there was a lack of progress in this area (McCallum, 2020). Participants in this study reported being denied access to reasonable adjustments, fearing discrimination when sharing information about impairments, experiencing discrimination in interviews, and navigating non-inclusive recruitment practices. The persistence of these barriers demonstrates that more proactive measures, beyond anti-discrimination legislation, are needed to ensure substantive equality in practice, in the labour market for people with disability (Flynn, 2013). Lang et al.

(2011) suggest that advocacy initiatives should be aligned with rights-based legislation and international treaties to facilitate the implementation of rights in practice. A state operated advocacy system would assist with rights enforcement for people with disability and could create a persuasive argument for systemic reform (Flynn, 2013).

Furthermore, these experiences show the limitations to the transformational impact of the CRPD within the labour market in Australia, because of the persistence of a minority-rights approach to equality. The minority-rights approach emphasises difference and deviance from the norm therefore does not reflect social diversity (Kayess & French, 2008). Ambiguity within the CRPD, which adopts both a minority-rights approach and a universalist approach in different parts of the Convention, may have contributed to the continuation of disability being viewed as an individual problem and not a human rights issue. The ambiguity within internationally recognised human rights conventions can result in a peculiar combination of bold intent and toothlessness (Lee, 1999). This may be addressed with a more proactive implementation of the Convention alongside advocacy initiatives.

Within the current minority-rights approach to equality, people with disability must put themselves in a potentially vulnerable position in the labour market, measure themselves next to a normative standard and request reasonable adjustments. Access to adjustments is by no means guaranteed and sharing information about impairments can result in discrimination, may hinder career progression, or worse, result in exclusion. This approach results in continued barriers to equal participation in employment. A stronger commitment to a universalist approach to equality in Article 27 of the CRPD could facilitate a labour market that is more inclusive and open to diversity. Further, the state and Federal government has an obligation to tackle social obstacles to inclusion and equal participation in employment (Degeners, 2016). In terms of the lived experience of the university graduates within this study, they continue to experience structural barriers to realising their human rights in employment which negatively impacts upon their participation in employment.

Conclusion

Through the exploration of the lived experience of university graduates with disability, this research has found evidence of attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers to participation in employment, which are not eradicated with the completion of university studies. Everyday ableism is entrenched in the neoliberal labour market and diminished the academic achievements of research participants, manifesting as attitudinal barriers in the workplace. For some graduates, the internalisation of ableism was evidenced and resulted in psycho-emotional impacts and internalised barriers to participation in employment. Many graduates with disability initiated ‘passing’ as an individualised participation strategy in the workplace, but this strategy negatively impacted upon emotional and psychological wellbeing. Participants encountered numerous structural barriers to realising their human rights in employment. Structural barriers existed because of ableist planning of the physical work environment and continued because of a minority-rights approach to equality, which is reinforced within Article 27 of the UN CRPD. This approach relies on people with disability ‘othering’ themselves in the workplace to access reasonable adjustments. This process results in an additional emotional and psychological toll that further impacts upon career progression and employment participation. The evidence in this research demonstrates that the completion of a university degree does not necessarily lead to equitable participation in employment, post-graduation, for university graduates with disability. The reasons for this are everyday ableism inherent in the neoliberal-ableist workplace and within the minority-rights approach to equality. This causes disability to be persistently viewed as a deficit, as distinctive from the norm and as an individual issue. These findings and the implications for policy and future research will be discussed in more detail below.

This research found that many university graduates with disability experienced everyday ableism in the workplace. Ableism inherent in the workplace resulted in attitudinal barriers to employment for some participants who were erroneously labelled as ‘less than’ or damaged others in the workplace, despite their academic achievements. Some participants in this study took on additional roles in the labour market to counteract ableist attitudes, becoming educators to non-disabled people, to allay fears and misconceptions about working with people with disability. The internalisation of ableism was evidenced and, in some cases, resulted in psychological and emotional impacts that hindered participation in employment. Moreover, many participants enacted a process of ‘passing’ and emulating the norm, to meet neoliberal-ableist normative expectations of the ideal worker. Ableist planning of the physical work environment resulted in structural barriers for some participants. Notwithstanding, some graduates reported positive interactions in more inclusive workplaces. The evidence illustrates that participation in employment for university graduates with disability is complex and varied, warranting further exploration in more widescale research.

This research established that university graduates with disability experience structural barriers to equal participation in employment, despite the successful completion of university programs. These barriers manifested as limited access to reasonable adjustments, disability discrimination, challenges when sharing information about impairments and inaccessible recruitment processes. University graduates with disability encountered barriers to fully realising their human rights in the labour market and this was due to the persistence of a minority-rights approach to equality in employment. A minority-rights approach to equality involves identifying as part of a marginalised and excluded group that is both distinctive and the exception to the norm. The participants in this study were fearful of 'othering’ themselves in this way and potentially experiencing discrimination or negative impacts upon their career progression, as a result. A minority-rights approach entrenches the view that disability is a deficit, an individual problem and the exception to the norm, which means that structural barriers are not challenged. This research argues that the minority-rights approach to equality is reinforced in Article 27 of the CRPD.

Similar themes emerged from the discussions in chapter 4 and 5. The persistence of disability being viewed as an individual problem and deficit, was reinforced within the neoliberal-ableist workplace and shaped ableist attitudes of colleagues and employers. Likewise, the minority-rights approach to equality in employment cements disability as an individual problem and deficit, which requires reasonable adjustments to reconcile. Correspondingly, both neoliberal-ableism and a minority-rights approach to equality maintain that disability is an exception to the norm and not a routine part of diversity. The continuation of disability being viewed as an exception to the norm further strengthens the privileging of able-bodiedness in the workplace and facilitates the recurrent ‘othering’ of university graduates with disability in employment. As evidenced in the research this results in graduates using ‘passing’ as a participation strategy which may lead to isolation and diminished wellbeing. Moreover, the repeated framing of disability as an individual deficit and problem results in disability not being viewed as a social justice or human rights issue. This affected the participants’ ability to fully realise their human rights in employment. A universal approach to disability would reset these notions of disability and could create a more inclusive workplace that expects and celebrates disability as diversity and does not privilege able-bodiedness.

The research did not establish enablers to improve participation in employment for graduates with disability in Australia, which was the second underpinning aim of the research. The most common themes that emerged from the data set were related to barriers to employment participation, but this may have been due to a relatively small sample size. Enablers to employment were suggested by participants and are listed below in more detail. More widescale research on a national scale, as recommended within this study, may be more successful in drawing out positive experiences in the workplace and establishing enablers to participation in the labour market.

The findings in this research demonstrate that attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers to participation in employment are not removed with the completion of university studies. From a policy perspective, this evidence highlights that incessant work on oneself, which is reinforced in neoliberal governance and policy, does not necessarily result in equal access to employment. This evidence indicates that systemic and societal change is required to change the landscape of the labour market. The workplace environment needs to adapt and change the way university graduates with disability are included, instead of the focus remaining on individuals with disability to adapt and change. Specifically, ableist representations of disability being a deficit and exception to the norm need to be systematically destabilised and discredited. Simultaneously, disability must be re-framed as a valued part of human diversity. Addressing both issues on a systemic level is the most appropriate way to tackle the entrenched ableism that created barriers to participation experienced by many participants in this study. The Federal government needs to lead by example and modify its approach from targeting individuals with disability to acknowledging the need for the work environment to change and be more responsive to diversity. The evidence collected in this study suggests that individualised policy responses to this issue will have limited success in tackling these barriers to participation. Moving towards a more universal approach to disability and equality in employment and more proactive implementation of measures within the CRPD, are ways that the government could begin to address this issue systemically.

Adopting a universal model of disability in the labour market may destabilise ableist understandings of disability, which underpin and create barriers to equal participation in employment, as evidenced in this research. The universal model has the potential to reframe disability from a deficit, individual problem and an exception to the norm, to a routine part of human diversity. The reframing of disability as diversity would mean that ‘passing’ would no longer be required as an individualised participation strategy, since diversity would be normalised. The psychological and emotional harm which impacted the participants in this research would also be reduced with this reconceptualisation of disability. A more universalist approach to equality in employment would result in difference and diversity being expected and valued, which would change the way that disability is viewed in the labour market. On a practical note, a more universally designed workplace would be more accommodating of difference and reasonable adjustments would not need to be requested. Not needing to request adjustments would reduce the psychological and emotional impacts of ‘othering’ experienced by university graduates with disability.

Engaging with the lived experience and voices of the university graduates with disability in this research resulted in new insights and knowledge in this emerging field. The reasons for persistent attitudinal, internalised, and structural barriers to participation have been examined and unpacked. This research has also revealed that barriers to participation are experienced in a variety of ways, dependent on several factors, which further demonstrates the complex nature of this issue and the importance of engaging with lived experience, on an ongoing basis, as a way of understanding in more depth. The graduates in this study recommended a wealth of strategies to facilitate more equitable participation in employment post-graduation. These included: specific mentoring programs at university with graduates with disability as mentors/ role models; training for students with disability regarding sharing information, reasonable adjustments, employment rights, funding awareness and using a strengths-based approach in the workplace; interview practice; 'disability as diversity' training module for all university students and staff ; training for employers regarding the positives of working with diverse employees; disability awareness training for careers counsellors; internships leading to direct employment with disability-friendly employers; disability training at university for students as part of work placement modules. Social media was suggested as a way of getting the message out to people to reframe disability as positive diversity in the workplace and demonstrates the innovative approaches that participants proposed to address barriers to employment. Participants suggested mostly individual approaches to addressing the barriers and whilst these will not eradicate systemic barriers, they may empower and build capacity in graduates with disability to navigate barriers to employment, and they may minimise attitudinal barriers in the workplace. Thus, moving towards more equitable participation in employment.

In terms of existing scholarship, the findings in this research have implications for the wider debate regarding employment transition support for future university graduates with disability. Existing scholarship outlines predominantly individualised approaches to supporting the transition into employment for university graduates with disability. For example, Andrewartha and Harvey (2017) recommend tailored careers support and improved external relationships between universities and employers. Likewise, Kirkpatrick et al. (2016) posit providing more graduate internships and jobs on campuses. Moreover, several studies advocate for increased collaboration between departments within universities and improved individualised mentoring programs (Antonelli et al., 2018; Eckstein, 2022; L'Ecuyer, 2019;Nolan & Gleeson, 2016). Findings in this research suggest that individualised approaches would not fully address the underlying causes of systemic barriers to participation. Still, individual solutions may assist university graduates with disability to navigate barriers to participation in the workplace. Nevertheless, the ableist misrepresentation of disability as a deficit and individual problem must be tackled at a systemic and societal level, to effect systemic and societal change.

Education providers may have a significant role to play in providing an improved transition into employment for graduates with disability. Universities have been tasked by the federal government with preparing graduates for employment and in the case of graduates with disability, more targeted support may be required for a successful transition into employment. Eckstein (2022) recommends exploring a national careers strategy, specifically for students with disability. This would be led by the higher education sector in collaboration with the National Careers Institute (NCI) and the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET). A national strategy would provide much needed information and guidance to universities across Australia. Further, establishing partnerships with employers to increase disability confidence may also improve employment participation (Eckstein, 2022). Universities could develop training modules that destabilise ableist ideas about disability, as suggested by the research participants, and ensure that all student support staff, including careers counsellors undertake the training. Finally, they could encourage increased collaboration between disability support offices and careers counsellors, to develop specific career-oriented support strategies and programs for students with disability in their final year before graduation.

It is recommended that further research in this area should be funded and undertaken across Australia, and internationally, with the aim of exploring if the evidence in this research is replicated, on a wider scale. In the Australian context, a mixed methods or staged approach may be particularly useful. Initial qualitative research to capture the lived experience of university graduates with disability across a range of contexts, for example rural and remote students, could capture further insights. These insights could inform the development of larger scale quantitative instruments that could be administered at a national level. Conducting further research would address the limitations of these findings in terms of sample size. If barriers to participation in employment are established on a larger, national scale, then additional research should be completed to assess the most appropriate and effective ways to tackle these persistent barriers to participation on a systemic level, both in the labour market and across wider society. The evidence in this research demonstrates that the reasons for persistent barriers to employment participation are complex and deeply entrenched within society. As such, any recommendations to mitigate these barriers must be carefully designed and implemented using an evidence-based approach.

The evidence collected in this research indicates that everyday ableism and a minority-rights approach to equality create barriers to participation in employment, for university graduates with disability, in Australia. These barriers to participation are not always removed with the completion of university programs. This research advocates for a universal model of disability, which is the most appropriate way forward. Adopting the universal model of disability in practice would change the environment of the labour market to be more inclusive and would ensure the focus is shifted away from the individuals with disability having to adapt. As participant K discussed, a re-framing of people's attitudes to disability is necessary and non-disabled people have a responsibility to change and adapt to a more diverse workforce, *"I think there's a big need, because the people with disabilities have already been adapting for so many years and adapting to environments. Whereas there should be a lot more responsibility placed on the neurotypical people to be, you know, I'm adapting and open and learning and changing from outside."* This research highlights the importance of using a qualitative approach and utilising the expertise of university graduates with disability to understand why these barriers continue to exist. Individual approaches may assist in improving the capacity for graduates with disability to navigate these barriers but would not succeed in eradicating them. As a result, a more systemic approach to removing barriers must be adopted.

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