Inclusive higher education for young people with intellectual disability:

An overview of the literature and outcomes

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Introduction

In the last 40-50 years, there have been significant efforts throughout North America to enable people with intellectual disability to participate in higher education. Supporting this group of people who have long been excluded from merit-based systems enables them to gain the multiple benefits derived from tertiary education. Such benefits include the development of social skills, a range of other soft skills and of course, the obtaining of knowledge pertinent to entering the workforce. If the general population are eligible for these benefits, the question to be answered is 'why people with intellectual disability cannot be appropriately supported to participate as well?' Such thinking is based on the social model of disability, whereby appropriate support will facilitate access.

The aims of this review

The aim is to explore inclusive university programs for people with intellectual disability which originated in the US and Canada in the 1970s and 1980s. Internationally Government and Universities are shifting paradigms to open their doors to a broader cross section of the community including people with intellectual disabilities (O'Rourke, 2011). The rise in inclusive higher education has been dramatic in countries such as Canada, USA, Ireland, Finland and other European countries.

Ticket to Work has been researching and exploring effective school to work transition and supporting the implementation of evidenced based practice in communities. One of the key aims is to prepare young people with disability for the workplace and give them an employment pathway that is typical of other

young adults. For approximately 60% of Australian school leavers, university is their pathway post school (Productivity Commission, 2019).

Australia has not explored, promoted, or embraced inclusive higher education for students with intellectual disability. We have two examples in Australia which will be outlined. The final aim is to explore the literature on the outcomes of inclusive higher education and to apply these in the Australian context.

Overview of inclusive post-secondary education internationally

To provide some context for this review of inclusive post-secondary education programs, researchers have distinguished three distinct types of higher education models for students with intellectual disability. Neubert, Moon, Grigal, and Redd (2001) and again Hart, Mele-McCarthy, Pasternack, Zimbrich, and Parker (2004) outlined these three models:

(1) segregated, where students are taught in a separate program on the university grounds;

(2) hybrid, where students experience both a combination of inclusive and segregated teaching and activities; and

(3) fully inclusive, where students attend the same classes as their university peer group (O'Brien & Bonati 2018, p. 21).

Consequently, the implications of identifying these three models are that although researchers and other proponents of inclusive post-secondary education programs may refer to all programs as inclusive, this is not necessarily the case. Rillotta, Arthur, Hutchinson, and Raghavendra (2020, p.103) emphasise this point by claiming that:

> Despite the philosophy of inclusion, many inclusive post-secondary education programs are based on models that segregate or partially segregate students with intellectual disabilities (ID) from their peers (Uditsky and Hughson, 2012).

Canada is at the forefront of supporting inclusive post-secondary education opportunities, with Inclusion Alberta as a critical organisation facilitating these opportunities. Bruce Uditsky has been the CEO of Inclusion Alberta for the last 30 years and is an Adjunct Professor, Community Rehabilitation & Disability Studies, Community Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, University of Calgary. He wrote about the Inclusion Alberta's need for full inclusion in post-secondary education being '… informed by a moral perspective as well as an understanding of the "social model of disability"'. Such theories of disability, equity, and equality guided the early efforts (Frank & Uditsky, 1988; Uditsky & Kappel, 1988) and remain relevant as we shape such initiatives today (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012, p.299).

> These researchers also talk about "normative pathways" which are the life avenues ordinarily pursued by individuals without disabilities (Uditsky,

1993). For example, the development of a career identity, which directly contributes to future employment, is a process that begins in early childhood for individuals without disabilities. The development of a career identity is encouraged through the efforts of parents and grandparents, early educators and regular classroom teachers, and the business community. Being employed becomes a normative expectation, a given rather than an option. By deliberately and consciously embedding children with ID within these typical pathways, by facilitating their full inclusion over time, by holding high expectations, by pursuing inclusive post-secondary education programs and a career, good lives are more likely realised (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012, p.298).

According to the Think College (2021) website, there are currently 305 colleges offering post-secondary education opportunities for people with intellectual disability in the US. In 2019 an estimated 6,440 students with intellectual disability were enrolled in universities across the United States with numbers increasing each year (Grigal, Papay, Hart, & Weir, 2020 as cited by Domin, Taylor, Haines, Papay and Grigal (2020).

The large rise in inclusive higher education activities in the USA have been driven in part by the 2008 the Higher Education Opportunity Act reauthorising the Higher Education Act of 1965 (PL 89-329). The Act defined the requirements of inclusive post-secondary education programs and emphasised inclusive academic access and competitive employment outcomes (Grigal, Papay, Smith, Hart, & Verbeck, 2019, p.17).

According to Grigal et al. (2019, p.17-18), in 2010 funds were made available to develop Transition and Post-Secondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) enabling post-secondary providers to expand or develop truly inclusive models of post-secondary education for students with intellectual disability. These authors highlight that although these programs were primarily aimed at support people with intellectual disability, many also supported those with autism and other developmental disabilities.

In their review, Becht, Blades, Agarwal, and Burke (2020, p. 5) identify two initiatives stemming from the Higher Education Opportunity Act (Section 760[1], 2008), the Comprehensive Transition and Post-Secondary (CTP) program approval, and funding of a National Coordination Center (NCC) initiatives. These provide direction in:

(1) defining core parameters of access to college courses for students with intellectual disability, alongside their peers without disabilities, and

(2) providing guidance and accountability for those parameters.

The Comprehensive Transition and Post-Secondary (CTP) program approval of inclusive post-secondary education programs enable students with intellectual disability to access Federal government funding to support their attendance. Consequently, the Higher Education Opportunity Act has supported the rapid growth of inclusive university programs in the US, (Grigal et al., 2019, p. 17), in 2004 there were only 25 (M. Grigal, Hart, D., Papay, C., & Smith, F., , 2018).

The National Coordinating Center supports and guides the development of quality inclusive university programs in the US. It is administered by Think College at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston. Its role is to provide technical assistance, coordination, evaluation of model demonstration programs and model accreditation standards.

These Model accreditation standards are being used to validate and strengthen programs and provide guidelines for colleges and universities considering establishing high-quality programs. Establishing accreditation standards creates benchmarks for quality assurance, ensuring the continual improvement of these programs. These standards are developed by a panel of experts, requiring post-secondary programs meet minimum expectations regarding their mission, curriculum, student achievement, faculty, fiscal capacity and other areas. (Think College National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup 2021).

Gadow and MacDonald (2018) list a range of benefits derived from inclusive post-secondary education programs for young people with intellectual disability outlined in the literature including,

> Increased learning, independence, self-determination, positive social experiences and increased social networks, as well as improved and promising employment outcomes among peers without disability are all attributed to participation within university settings among their peers (Hart et al., 2010; Hughson, Moodie, & Uditsky, 2006; Migliore, Butterworth, & Hart, 2009; Rivas et al., 2012; Udistky & Hughson, 2012.)

Most notable is the NCC evaluation of the Transition and Post-Secondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities projects indicates substantial gains in employment outcomes and these employment findings mark a significant departure from typically low employment outcomes for young people with intellectual disability (Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, & Weir, 2017).

Employment

A significant aspect of the Universities role is in supporting young people with intellectual disability to successfully transition to employment. Grigal et al. (2019) examined the federally funded Transition and Post-Secondary Program for Students with Intellectual Disabilities programs. These programs focus on '… academic enrichment, socialisation, independent living skills, and integrated work experiences that lead to gainful employment' (p.18). Their study focused on the predictors of employment for students in these projects.

> Similar to the Ticket to Work model, Grigal et al. (2019) stated in preparation for employment young people with intellectual disability require opportunities for work experience during post-secondary education and training, in real work settings followed by a combination of training, close supervision, and support from employers, coworkers, and job coaches once they enter the workforce (Lindstrom, Hirano, McCarthy, & Alverson, 2014). Early paid work experience has been shown repeatedly to be a strong predictor of postschool employment (Gold, Fabian, & Luecking, 2013; Test et al., 2009; Wehman et al., 2015). To prepare students to engage in gainful employment, the programs offered an array of career development and employment activities (p. 18).

The findings from the study showed that students gained a paid job at a rate comparable to other full-time undergraduate students without disability. Two factors had a statistically significant difference on obtaining work. The first was the number of years attended which had a positive influence, while the number of disability specific or segregated course enrolments had a negative influence. Such enrolments suggest staff had low expectations and believed students needed special instruction before being ready for paid employment. Greater focus in these segregated courses was placed on teaching skills rather than supporting students to find work (Grigal et al., 2019, p.24). Another critical factor was the type of qualification awarded to students upon completion of their courses. Those students enrolled in the inclusive university programs who were awarded certificates by higher education providers available to all students contributed to these successful employment outcomes (Grigal et al., 2019).

The NCC evaluation of the Transition and Post-Secondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities projects indicate substantial gains in employment outcomes and trends over the FY 2011 through 2017. These findings mark a significant departure from typically low employment outcomes for students with intellectual disability.

The Transition and Post-Secondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities evaluation of employment data illustrate successful outcomes:

- Sixty-four percent of students who completed a post-secondary course in 2015-2016 through 2017-2018 had a paid job one year after exit (Grigal et al., 2019). In comparison, 18% of adults with developmental disabilities in the general population had a paid job in the community (National Core Indicators, 2019).

- Seventy-two percent of respondents to a two–year outcome survey had a paid job two years after completing a program (Grigal et al., 2019).
- Students who obtained a paid job while enrolled in TPSID program were 15 times more likely to have a paid job upon completion of the course compared to those who did not obtain a job while enrolled (Grigal et al., 2019).
- The percentage of those employed while in college is now higher than the percentage of full-time undergraduate students without disabilities.
- Data from 2016-17 indicate that 50% of students had a paid job while in post secondary education, and 52% of these students had NEVER held a paid job prior to enrolling in a TPSID program (Smith, Grigal, & Papay, 2018).

Sannicandro, Parish, Fournier, Mitra, and Paiewonsky (2018) identified all the people with intellectual disability who participated in post-secondary education during the 2008-2013 financial years. A comparison group were identified using statistical methods to counter selection bias. They found that those who participated had increased employment opportunities, higher incomes and were less reliant on social security.

> … employment and earnings for people with intellectual disability were markedly higher if they participated in post-secondary education (2018, p.419). After controlling for a range of individual and state characteristics, this study found significantly increased employment and income and significantly decreased Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments among individuals with intellectual disability who had participated in post-secondary education. This research supports policy and program changes that make post-secondary education more widely available to individuals with intellectual disability (2018, p. 423).

In the North American context, it has been shown that including young people with intellectual disability in higher education has significant potential to reduce poverty and increase employment for people with intellectual disabilities. It is an area worthy of investigation and investment in Australia.

Australian context

Two inclusive post-secondary education programs are currently operating in Australia; the first began operating at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia in 1997 and the second began at the University of Sydney in 2012 (Gadow & MacDonald, 2018). Both programs are inclusive, students audit university subjects they are interested in alongside other undergraduate students.

Auditing students attend lectures or tutorials on a chosen topic (also known as subject/unit/course/component/ module) of interest with other university students. However, auditing means that students do not participate in assessments or examinations that lead to formal qualifications (Hout, 2012; Swain and Hammond, 2011) (Rillotta et al., 2020, p. 113).

Up the Hill Project (UTHP) at Flinders University was piloted in 1997 and began officially operating in 1998, funded by the South Australian State Government. During 1999-2013 students enrolled were aged between 18-66 with a mean age of 32 years, coming from across a broad range of suburbs in Adelaide. Students who apply to attend Up the Hill Project need to express an independent desire to attend university and choose topics of interest to audit (Rillotta et al., 2020, p.158).
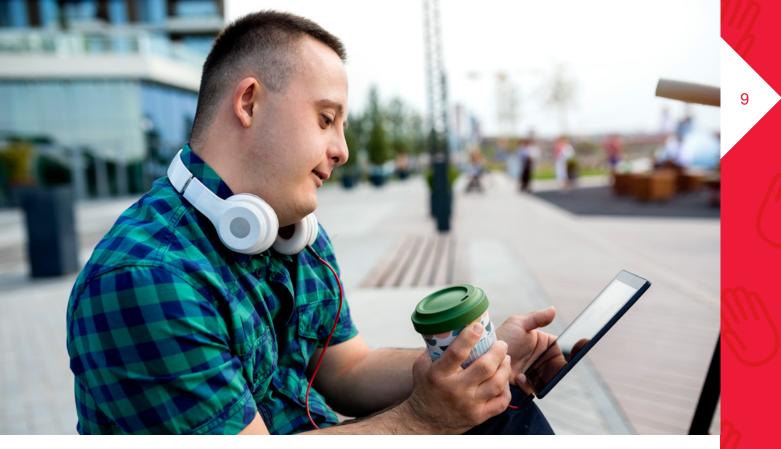
The Centre for Disability Studies (CDS) runs 'uni 2 beyond' at the University of Sydney. It is available to those with intellectual disability who are unable to follow an established pathway into university enrolment which generally consists of completing year 12 and obtaining an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank. O'Connor, Espiner, and O'Keeffe (2018) note that all Australian universities are required to comply with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQASA). Although these standards refer to diversity and equity requirements, '…formal enrolment into university for people with intellectual disabilities is mostly unattainable to date' (p. 22).

Uni 2 Beyond Students participate in internships where they are placed in partner organisations for 6-8 weeks and receive payment for their work (Centre for Disability Studies, nd). They can access a careers advisor established to support current students and alumni with person-centred planning and goal setting, resume writing, skills checklists, career portfolios, mentoring and specific training in soft skills.

Rillotta et al. (2020) undertook a qualitative examination of the outcomes from students' perspectives and their mentors from the UTHP. These authors found:

> Students with ID participating in the UTHP developed academic knowledge and demonstrated intellectual growth because of their participation in university topics. Topic-specific knowledge and social skills gained from inclusion in higher education programmes such as the UTHP may provide individuals with ID a transition pathway to further education (e.g. enrol in a university degree of their choice and work towards a formal qualification) or desirable skills for future employment (2020, p.113).

Both programs utilise peer mentors to facilitate the students' inclusion. At the University of Sydney and internationally, the use of peer mentors is common to support undergraduate students, so their use to support the Uni 2 Beyond students is viewed as a natural extension of existing practices (Gadow & MacDonald, 2018, p.133). Mentors support students in class and assist them with their studies out of class. They also help students make social connections, join clubs and societies, and meet regularly to provide social support (Gadow & MacDonald, 2018p. 136).

Summary and conclusions

Since the first inclusive post-secondary education programs for students with intellectual disability were developed 40-50 years ago, there has been a significant amount of literature written about the structure and outcomes of these programs. The literature cited here is only a small snapshot, but it provides an overview of the critical issues related to such programs.

There are three distinct models of inclusive post-secondary education - truly inclusive; hybrid and segregated - which creates complexities for comparisons between programs. The Model Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability will assist researchers as well as provide people with disability and their families assurance that the post-secondary programs are meeting acceptable levels of quality.

An increasing range of studies from the US demonstrate inclusive university support students with intellectual disability to transition from tertiary education to work successfully. Those who participate in inclusive higher education have significantly better employment outcomes. The research demonstrates they are more likely to be employed, work more hours, earn more per hour, and be employed in a greater range of vocations (Cimera, Thoma, Whittenburg, & Ruhl, 2018). Most individuals in the USA completing these university programs (92 per cent) were also satisfied or very satisfied with their lives (M. Grigal, 2018).

A range of studies identify multiple benefits from attending inclusive post-secondary education programs for students with intellectual disability. These include '…academic enrichment, socialisation, independent living skills, and integrated work experiences that lead to gainful employment' (Grigal et al., 2019, p.18).

The studies reviewed here demonstrate improved employment outcomes and higher incomes for students who participate in inclusive university programs. The rationale for inclusive higher education is based on human rights principles. The positive outcomes derived for young adults with intellectual disability provided with opportunities for university inclusion, "offers a powerful context for embedding students in the normative pathways that can lead to positive lifelong outcomes" (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012).

Engagement in higher education for people with intellectual disability leads to a variety of personal and financial benefits. Young people with intellectual disability receive similar benefits from participation in higher education as other young people. These benefits include improved employment options, increase income, satisfaction of curiosity, gaining knowledge and skills, developing friendships, and increasing independence, maturity, and skills.

There are also broader public benefits from increasing taxation revenue to a broad range of other benefits graduates contribute to the community (Cimera et al., 2018). Likewise, university staff and students without disability also benefit from the inclusion of young people with disability (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012). Increasing the inclusion of young people with intellectual disability into Australian universities will bring significant benefits for both them and the broader communities in which they live (Rillotta et al., 2020).

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