

# Ditching Disability Disclosures: Interventions to improve inclusion in Internships

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## Introduction

The job vacancy fill rate has dropped from 73% to 65% over the past two years, highlighting a mismatch between employer needs and job seeker skills (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2023). Work Integrated Learning (WIL), including internships and placements, can bridge the gap between universities and industry, benefiting students, companies, and universities. However, aligning expectations remains a challenge (Ajjawi et al., 2019). Disabled and neurodiverse students are less likely to find placements and report lower satisfaction compared to their peers (Chatoor & Balata, 2023; Vincent, 2019). Early research at Monash University shows disabled students want more individualized support, while employers seek clearer support plans.

## Research questions

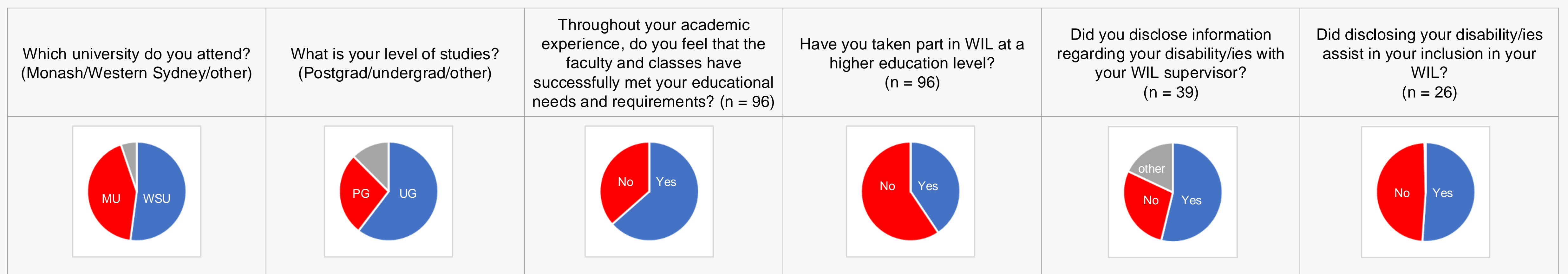
1. How does **student satisfaction** with WIL experiences at Australian universities vary among demographic groups, particularly for disabled and neurodiverse students?
2. What **supports** do disabled and neurodiverse students access during WIL experiences? What **additional support and resources** would disabled and neurodiverse students like to see to prepare for the workplace?
3. How can these supports **translate** into post-placement work contexts? What steps can universities take to **align the expectations** of neurodiverse and disabled students and their future employers?

## Methods

A survey was disseminated to Monash University and Western Sydney University students who were registered with the appropriate disability support service and snowballed to other institutions via staff and students. Previous WIL participation was not a requirement for participation. Questions asked about:

1. What support they received during their university studies
2. What supports (if any) they had from their university and industry hosts during their WIL experience
3. What worked and did not work about their WIL experiences,
4. What might have helped them be more successful in their WIL experience

## Results



**Disclosure is not the solution for inclusion!**

## Barriers

## Solutions

### Deciding to go on Placement

I have anxiety about the experience due to it being unknown and not feeling confident expressing my needs and accommodations.

Scared of not being able to complete a program or being seen as unreliable due to [my disability].

Ability to manage both [paid work and placement] without being burnt out and/or not meeting either study or working obligations.

Clearer expectations and seeing someone else succeed

I find that the statements saying [workplaces] encourage people with disabilities to apply usually makes me feel more included.

When you can see what another students have done and how they were supported you feel as if the unit is actually engaged in helping students with disabilities.

### Applying for Placements

The interview process is harder as someone with difficulties with social interaction. I also found just the process of seeking out an opportunity overwhelming.

Dedicated MSA support volunteers, video work through of application process.

### Preparing for Placement

The senses of judged, helpless, useless, make me scared to ask [for] help

A frank, forthright discussion and workshop on how to learn what neurotypical professional language means, how to understand HR talk and office double talk, and a workshop on professional vs. personal boundary setting and communication.

I would have Monash directly open the line of communication to state that I was a DSS student and my disabilities. I would feel more comfortable offering additional information when introducing myself to make the placement work. It gives the supervisor a chance to research this and learn, and I don't feel anxious about broaching the topic.

### Once on Placement

Gaining practical, real-world skills | internships led to employment opportunities or helped them contextualize their studies in relation to their future careers

Poor treatment during placements, with some feeling like they were treated as "inconveniences" or even "slaves" by supervisors. overworked, closely monitored, or undervalued.

A recurring theme was dissatisfaction with placements not aligning with the students' academic studies or career goals.

Just being able to have a very detailed plan of what will happen ahead of time, as being able to plan the rest of your life to ensure you'll have enough energy and time helps to feel more in control of your life

The option to choose a length of time I spend on placement based on my current capability

Choose what, where when and whom with I work, not having others assume they know what is best for me

### What else should we do?

One page summary doc of accommodations including strengths for EVERY student

Find more placements!

Explicit co-workshop for industry partner and students - boundary setting/charter/agreement

Payment for placements or providing financial support to reduce distress

61% of surveyed DSS-registered students feel supported during their academic studies at Monash/WSU, but **only 40% of them have undertaken WIL**. There are barriers at every step preventing students with disabilities from engaging with WIL. To bridge the gap between university studies and graduate careers, large-scale policy changes are ideal, but smaller, quickly implementable solutions can be applied without major stakeholder buy-in or disability disclosures.

## References

- Ajjawi, R., Tai, J., Huu Nghia, T. L., Boud, D., Johnson, L., & Patrick, C. J. (2020). Aligning assessment with the needs of work-integrated learning: The challenges of authentic assessment in a complex context. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(2), 304-316.
- Chatoor, K., & Balata, L. (2023). Student identity and work-integrated learning (WIL): Exploring student experiences of WIL by demographic. *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario*.
- Vincent, J. 2019. "It's the Fear of the Unknown: Transition from Higher Education for Young Autistic Adults." *Autism* 23 (6): 1575-1585. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318822498.

**Get involved!** →

WIL practitioners: Email Rose to access resources and involve your students	Students/graduates: Participate in our survey	Students/graduates: Sign up for focus group / interview