

# Enhancing construction sector employment opportunities for people with disability

## 1. Summary of impact

Australia's booming construction sector employs more than 1.1 million people and contributes 9 per cent to the national GDP. Despite this, it offers few work opportunities for people with disability. Through this cross-faculty collaboration, researchers from the UTS Disability Research Network sought to explore the barriers to employment for people with disability, and to identify the systems and strategies required to achieve more equitable outcomes.

The project team produced a scoping literature review and a data collection exercise conducted with postgraduate Project Management students in the UTS Business School. The research revealed that the most common barriers to construction sector employment for people with disability include:

- stigma and discrimination
- concerns around equality and fairness of workplaces and systems
- non-disclosure of a person's disability
- lack of overall awareness of disability in the public and private sectors.

It also identified a series of enablers that could increase employment opportunities, including:

- creating education and training frameworks to change attitudes towards disability
- developing targeted marketing campaigns for specific employers
- identifying alternative or different work options for people with disability

- adapting government programs, systems and legislation to overcome barriers to employment.

## 2. The problem

According to Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031, people with disability earn significantly less than able bodied people and are twice as likely to be unemployed. In part, this is the result of 'low disability awareness among employers, which leads to a lack of understanding of people's abilities.'

The Australian Constructors Association (ACA) has identified industry culture as a key challenge hampering efforts to increase diversity with the construction industry. Despite the establishment of an ACA-led Construction Industry Culture Taskforce to address this issue, little is being done to make the sector more inclusive for people with disability.

## 3. Beneficiaries

This project offers tangible benefits to people with disability. By identifying the barriers and enablers of construction sector employment, the research paints a clearer picture of the problem and delivers a starting point for the development of strategies that have the potential to solve it.

But people with disability are by no means the only beneficiaries of this work. The construction sector is currently facing a significant skills shortage; overcoming barriers to employment for people with disability would provide access to an untapped workforce for businesses struggling to recruit much-needed staff and would support sector-wide efforts to increase diversity within the construction labour market.

## 4. Approach to impact

There were two parts to this project. The first was a scoping literature review to identify barriers and enablers to construction industry employment for people with disability. The second was the collection of data from a rich picture exercise conducted as part of a postgraduate Project Management at the UTS Business School. Students were

asked to role play various stakeholders (government agencies, construction sector organisations, employment champions for people with disability) to analyse the barriers and enablers identified in the literature review and develop strategies to overcome them, thereby producing a more detailed understanding of the problem. The literature review will be published later this year. A journal article using 'rich pictures' as a means of capturing and discussing multiple stakeholder views in an educational environment is also being planned to demonstrate innovation in addressing social justice issues.

## **5. What has changed as a result of this work?**

Construction sector employment for people with disability is an under-researched area in Australia. This project has helped to establish an evidence base that will inform the development of future projects in this space. To date, the research findings captured in the project report clearly identify areas for future action for construction industry employers and government agencies. Staff from a NSW Government agency have indicated interest in using the research findings to review existing workplace development strategies.

The project has also increased awareness of employment issues for people with disability among university students and staff and has provided a clear pathway forward for the research team, who are currently pursuing funding for future work on this topic.

## **6. What has helped you accomplish this work?**

The researchers leading this project are part of the UTS Disability Research Network, an interdisciplinary collaboration that explores issues of education, employment, housing and community living, freedom of movement and freedom from abuse, among others, for people with disability. The researchers also share a particular passion for research as a tool to address social inequities; this project is a clear example of the power of academic collaboration to deliver better outcomes for marginalised groups.

## 7. Challenges

Originally, the project was designed to include face-to-face focus group discussions with construction industry professionals but COVID-19 restrictions hampered efforts in this area. As a result, the research team re-designed the project to incorporate the Rich Picture Exercise with UTS students.