Co-creating Careers provision:
how to successfully collaborate with individuals from underrepresented groups to enhance your practice

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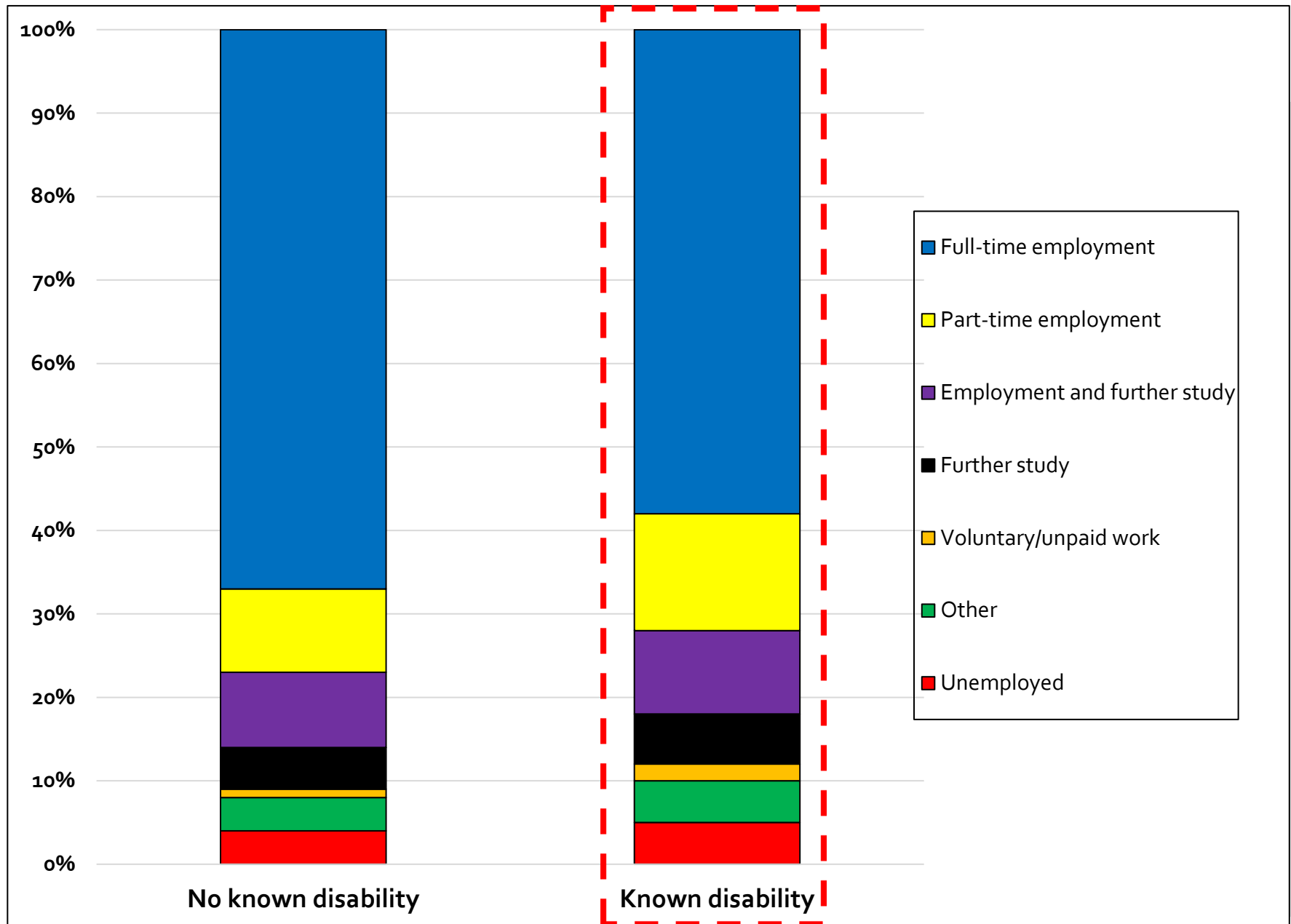
Overview

- Context
- Methodology
- The PhD Cycles
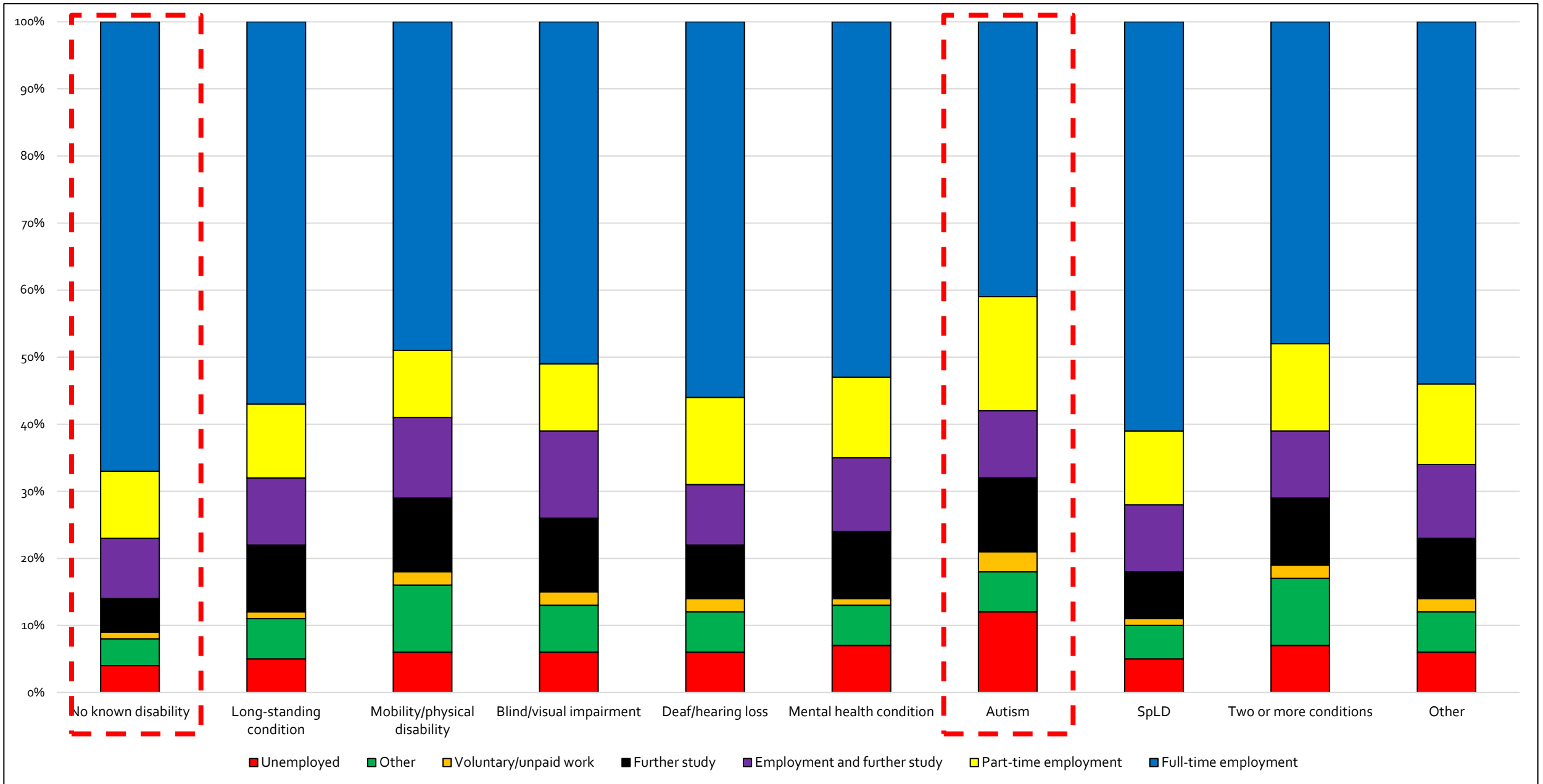- What Happened Next
- What has been learned

Context

- Universities have a key role in enabling individuals to successfully progress to employment after graduation (Department for Business, Industry and Skills, 2016).

- Black students are more likely to drop out of university, have lower attainment levels and have amongst the lowest median earnings after graduation.

- LGBTQ+ and care experienced students are more likely to have mental health issues whilst at university and have a reduced likelihood of progressing to employment or further study.

- Disabled graduates are less likely to obtain employment; where employed, they tend to have lower levels of job security.

What Happens Next? 2024

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IN CHALLENGING TIMES?

A report on the outcomes of disabled graduates during 2020 and 2021

AGCAS

Legend:
- Full-time employment
- Part-time employment
- Employment and further study
- Further study
- Voluntary/unpaid work
- Other
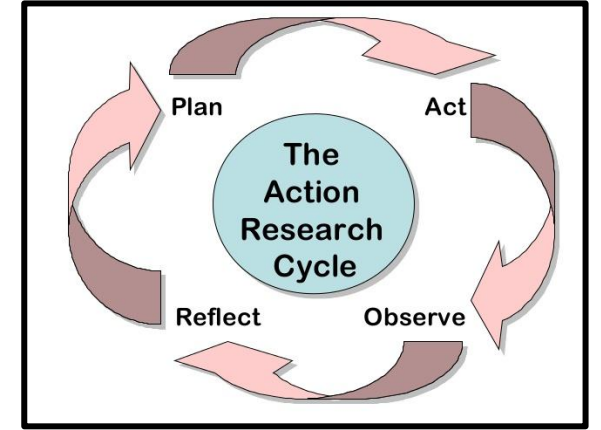- Unemployed

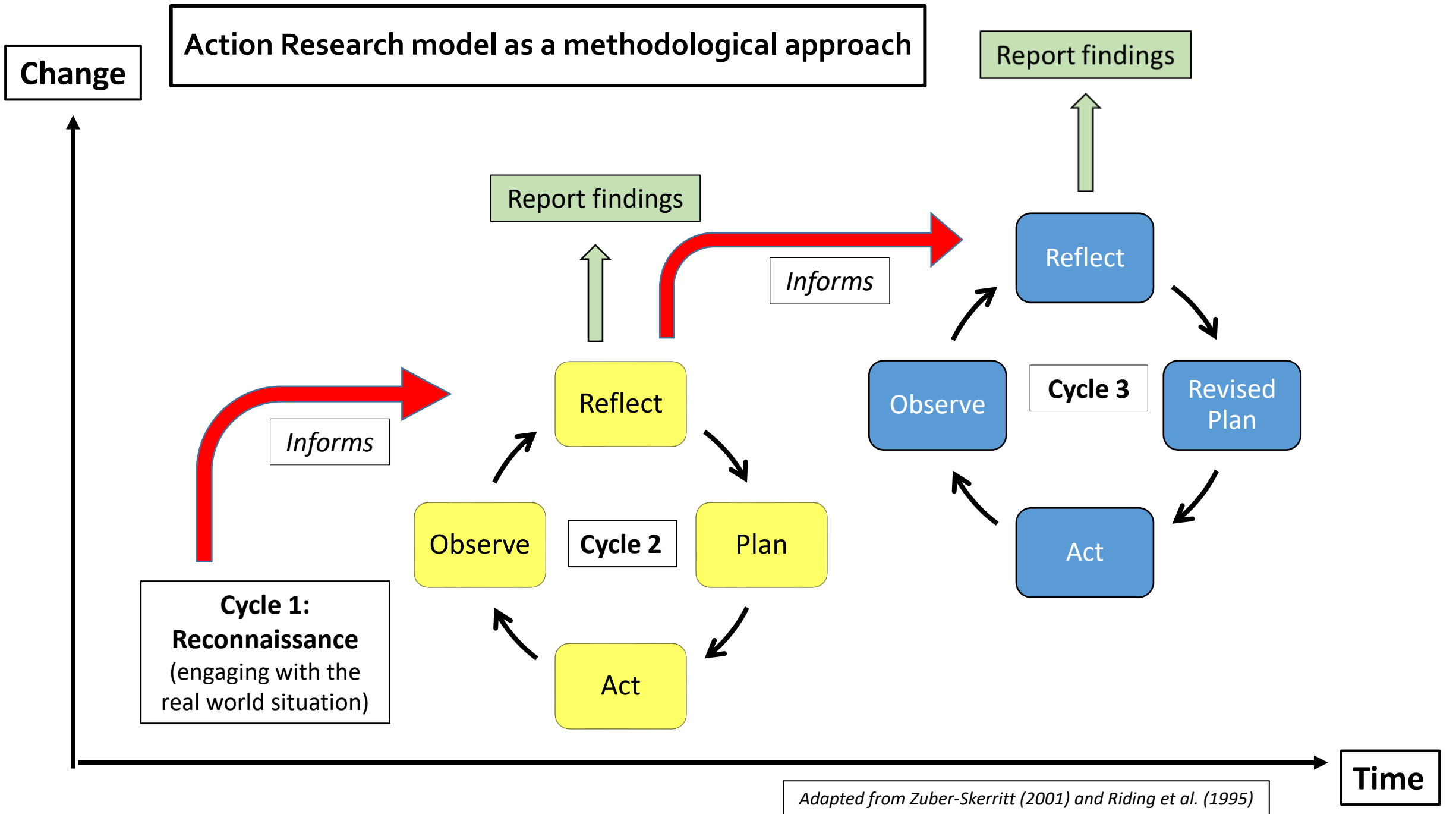No known disability | Known disability

Destinations by disability type (first degree)

Methodology

- Action Research as a methodological approach

- An emancipatory paradigm

- Emancipatory perspective resonates with a social justice approach to career guidance (Hooley *et al.* 2021)

- Participatory Action Research

Action Research model as a methodological approach

Change

Report findings

Reflect

Informs

Observe   Cycle 3   Revised Plan

Act

Report findings

Reflect

Informs

Observe   Cycle 2   Plan

Act

Cycle 1:
Reconnaissance
(engaging with the
real world situation)

Time

Adapted from Zuber-Skerritt (2001) and Riding et al. (1995)

Cycle 1: Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance: *"Exploring with others the kinds of felt concerns experienced by different people and groups involved in and affected by a practice"*
(Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014)

Element 1. Exploration of the views of autistic graduates

Element 2. Exploration of current practice in UK universities

Emerging themes…

Element 1:
Graduate Consultants

- **The 'mystery' of the workplace**
  - "I don't understand jobs"
  - Lots of jargon, which is intimidating
  - Disconnect between what people say and what they mean
- **The challenge of being different in the workplace**
  - "where do I fit?"
  - Black and white approach not always being well received
  - Often unseen – people think they're coping
- **The prevalence of mental health issues**
  - Depression, anxiety
  - Work/prospect of work can exacerbate issues
- **Careers support: what helps?**
  - Someone to talk to
  - Regular contact to provide support and reassurance
  - Continuity matters

Emerging themes...

Element 2: Careers Practitioners

- **A person-centred approach**
  - Adaptive, flexible, reflective, invest more than usual
  - Learn to see success differently
- **The impact on careers practitioners**
  - The 'mystery' of the students
  - Usual techniques not working
  - Self-doubt, worry
  - Requiring resilience
- **Partnership with Disability Support services is key**
  - Promoting programmes
  - Co-delivery is most effective
- **Limiting factors**
  - Lack of resources
  - The challenges of engagement
  - Systemic issues

Cycle 2: Co-designing support with autistic students at LJMU

- Participatory action research project

- Initial survey of all autistic students

- Recruitment of Autistic Student Consultants

- Series of workshops:

  1. Disclosure and adjustments

  2. Learning from the experiences of autistic graduates

  3. Preparation for interviews

- Inclusive elements suggested by the Consultants

Positive feedback – before and after surveys

"That was a great webinar. The speakers were so interesting and had so much advice"

"It was really helpful hearing people talk about how they found work and disclosed their autism…a lot about what they said about their autism and how it affects them felt very similar to my own situation"

"I will make sure I try to include the tips they gave us in this session into looking for a job"

"I am going to make as many connections as possible"

Cycle 2: Co-designing support with autistic students at LJMU

Ongoing impact: the 'ripple' effect

- For some Autistic Student Consultants
- For my critical friend
- For me
- For the institution

Aims of participatory action research:

- To produce understanding
- To promote change
- to empower people through the process of constructing and using their knowledge

(Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018; O'Brien 2001; Reason 1994)

Cycle 3: Further collaboration and co-creation of resources with autistic students at LJMU

- Consultation with Consultants

- Multi-pronged approach:

  1. Webinars

  2. One-to-one appointments

  3. Webpages & online employability course

- Co-creation internships:

  1. Paid positions

  2. *They* chose what to focus on

  3. Development of resources for autistic students

What happened next?

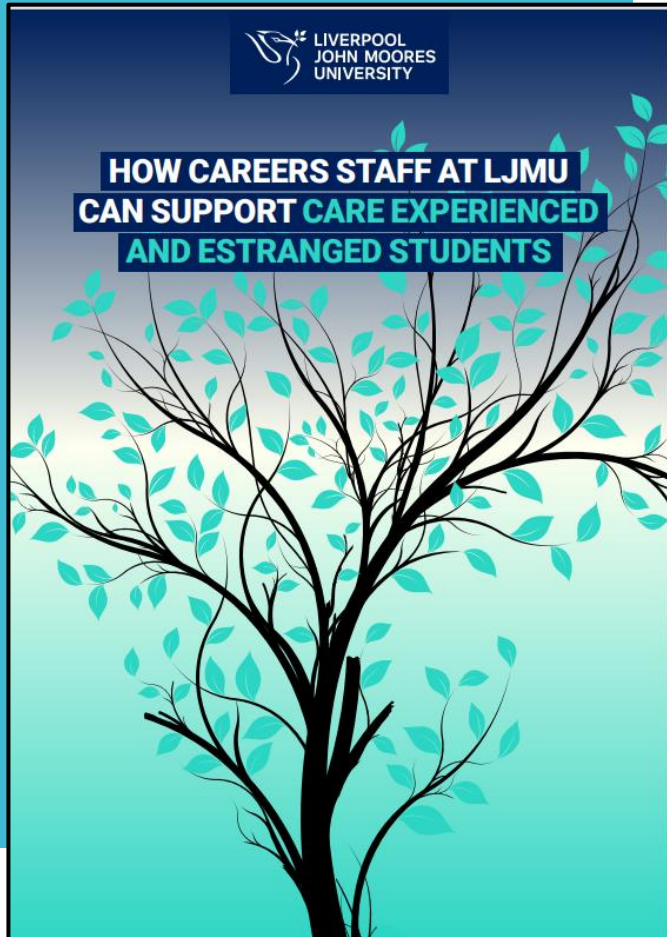**Broadened out to disabled & neurodivergent and LGBTQ+ students**

<u>Disabled & neurodivergent students</u>:

- Recruited four co-creation interns

- Enhanced new website pathways

- Developed employer miniguide

- Created social media content

<u>LGBTQ+ students</u>:

- Recruited three co-creation interns

- Ran focus groups

- Provided advice on improving provision

- Students shared lived experience at staff event

Developing the co-creation model for care experienced and black students

Care experienced students:

- Ran focus groups

- Students spoke at staff training event

- Created guidance document for careers staff

Black students:

- Ran focus groups

- Coordinated events to bring together black students and employers

Seeking Social Justice

Five signposts of socially just careers guidance:

1. Build critical consciousness
2. Name oppression
3. Question what is normal
4. Encourage people to work together
5. Work at a range of levels

Hooley et al. (2021)

Impact of the project

For us:

- Deeper understanding and appreciation

- Confidence in our practice

- Sharing learning with other practitioners

- Enjoyment!

For the University and beyond:

- Recognition of the value of co-creation

- Inclusion in Access & Participation Plan

- Collaboration across teams

- Recognition of our expertise

- Glimpses of a cultural shift

Impact of the project

For the interns:

- Their voices being heard

- Being seen as experts

- The opportunity to collaborate

- Enjoyment of working on an inclusive internship

- Networking opportunities

- Recognition of strengths

- Empowerment

CO-CREATION WORK
WITH STUDENTS FROM UNDERREPRESENTED BACKGROUNDS

This is a short guide to help you as you consider collaborating with students in order to gain understanding of their perspectives and to co-develop tailored careers & employability provision. The first part of this guide outlines our thinking on the approach, whilst the second section offers practical suggestions on recruitment and support of Co-Creation interns. We hope that this guidance will support you in your work as you partner with students.

1. APPROACHING CO-CREATION

Why Co-Create with students from underrepresented backgrounds?

- To gain in-depth understanding of their perspectives, fears, challenges and experiences
- To develop careers and employability provision that is aligned to their needs and wants
- To go beyond tokenism and to truly collaborate to develop tailored resources
- To provide opportunities for these students to recognise their expertise and to fully realise their potential
- To challenge current internal and external structural barriers which may exist and in doing so, to seek to empower disadvantaged students.

What should be included in a Co-Creation approach?

- It is important that students are paid for their time collaborating with you – this is a way that you can communicate the value of their perspectives and contributions
- Seek to be clear about the purpose of the Co-Creation role: unlike other roles within the university, this will require them to be honest about their perspectives and they will be involved with leading the work
- From the start, aim to remove (or at least, reduce) the power imbalance that exists (due to the nature of your different roles as university staff and students). This can be a challenge – but true collaboration does require a move away from the usual roles, to viewing each other as partners, each with different contributions to make
- The power imbalance can be lessened by approaching the collaboration with no set agenda. Instead, come with questions: What do they see as their needs, relating to career and employability development? What are their perceived challenges? What tailored support might

be helpful? Are there ways in which the careers and employability service could advocate on their behalf?

- Once there has been some in-depth consideration of the above questions, identify the next steps together; this is likely to involve further research (perhaps involving exploration of good practice, perhaps including focus groups of other disadvantaged students facilitated by the Co-Creation students, to obtain a broader understanding of challenges, needs and possible solutions)
- Seek opportunities to empower the Co-Creation students, for example by inviting them to share their perspectives at staff training days, to co-present with you at conferences or to join institutional action groups where their voices will be heard.

Some thoughts to consider...

- A potential issue is the discomfort people may feel as a result of seeking to remove the power imbalance and providing everyone with equal control. For the students, this can be unnerving and feel quite unstructured and 'vague'. For careers practitioners, this experience can feel nerve-wracking, as entering into a partnership with no defined plan is an unusual approach. However, this discomfort is usually a short-lived experience, because this freedom tends to allow the students to develop a confidence and enthusiasm that leads to a positive and successful co-creation project
- Being treated as equals may be a new experience for the students, so some may be daunted at first. You may find that they need regular reassurance, and reminders that you view their perspectives as valuable
- Whilst freedom to develop ideas and co-create resources is the essence of this approach, we have found that some structure is important, to avoid students working on ideas which are beyond the scope of what is possible to achieve within the project. Regular (e.g. weekly) check-ins are helpful in achieving this.

2. PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CO CREATION INTERNSHIP RECRUITMENT AND SUPPORT

Recruitment Process

- In your advertisement for the role, use clear language and highlight that lived experience and willingness to share their views on all matters related to careers and employability are the most important qualities. If possible, do not ask for other skills or experience (these students may have experienced barriers to employment and so you may unwittingly screen out ideal candidates if you add other requirements)
- Ensure all elements are clear from the beginning; including duration of the internship (if possible, allow flexibility in length of internship, as some Co-Creation students may only be able to work a certain number of hours per day/week). Similarly, offer clarity and detail about the stages of the recruitment process
- Anticipate possible challenges in the recruitment process and offer alternatives (e.g. ask for a statement of interest instead of a CV, or if your recruitment systems requires a CV offer support beforehand with this). Provide contact details in case an applicant wishes to discuss adjustments
- Consider ways you can promote your opportunity that will reach the students you are keen to recruit (e.g. promoting via your institution's care experienced students lead, the disability team, in addition to your usual promotion channels)
- When shortlisting candidates, use a scoring grid aligned to job description (*example of disability Co-Creation interns scoring grid*)
- If you are interviewing, provide full questions in writing beforehand (*example of disability Co-Creation interview questions*). We previously tried giving an overview of what the questions might entail, but this was too vague and made it more difficult for some candidates. To ensure accessibility, offer interviews in several formats (in-person and online)
- Recent Co-Creation students identified that it can often be overwhelming to attend unfamiliar buildings for interview and suggested that it would be useful to include a video link, to assist them in getting there; we have now created

these videos to use when inviting candidates to interview

- If possible, include a diverse panel of interviewers and seek to assess candidates not only for their current abilities but also for their potential for growth.

Onboarding and Support

- If not already covered during pre-start communications, it is important to remove any potential anxiety by dealing first with the practical elements: working days/times, what to do if ill, etc.
- As described overleaf, from the beginning seek genuine collaboration and ways to remove the power imbalance by coming with questions rather than a plan. After discussing ideas, jointly identify next steps.
- Encourage open communication and regular check-ins. You may want to offer a regular team meeting on the same day/time as well as individual meetings. Seek to build a supportive atmosphere where Co-Creation students feel comfortable seeking assistance and asking questions.
- Identify the best way to share information and resources (we created a new Teams channel for Co-Creation students to communicate and upload things they had been working on)
- If they feel comfortable, encourage the Co-Creation students to lead on projects, whilst you provide support if needed. This is something that is likely to occur in the later stages of the collaboration, once confidence has grown.

At the end of the project

- Arrange a final meeting to celebrate achievements and have a conversation about their next steps.
- See if they would like employability-related further support – e.g. we have found that Co-Creation students value support with articulating what they have done on their CVs.
- Ask if they would be willing to participate in any upcoming events, staff meetings or conferences to share their experiences and what has been achieved through the collaboration.
- Seek feedback from the Co-Creation students, so you can learn from their experiences of working with you.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us!
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What have I learned about working with students as partners?

- It is definitely worthwhile!

- It takes more time and effort

- Relationships with students are key

- Re-contract at every stage

- Considers ways to recognise and reward students' time

- Seek ways to diminish the power imbalance

- Be open to the 'ripple effect'

Summary

- Cocreation can be an effective tool
- Issues with bringing about change...
- Critical success factors:
  - Seek the student voice when planning support
  - Find like-minded colleagues to work with
  - Adopt a resilient and curious approach