



So you're thinking about doing a work-integrated learning placement? Five key steps for students to know

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As part of technical and further education (TAFE) or university studies, many students are encouraged to participate in a work-integrated learning (WIL) placement. These placements encourage students to engage in first-hand experience in their chosen fields and can lead to potential job opportunities down the road. For students with disability, however, these placements (which are often mandatory) can raise accessibility and accommodation issues. In this blog, I'll outline five steps to help ensure a successful placement for all students – one that's both enjoyable and supports your learning.

Step 1: Connect with your institution's disability service (if you haven't already)

Reaching out to these services may seem daunting, but they're there to help! While disability centres vary across TAFE colleges and universities, most will support you through a one-on-one consultation to help you determine what adjustments you may need for assessments and exams as well as any WIL placements you may participate in. They may even be able to act on your behalf to advocate for your accommodation needs should you need them to do so. It's important to remember that disability services offer assistance to students with a wide range of disabilities, including mental health conditions, so it's worth reaching out to your institution to determine whether you're eligible for support.

Step 2: Determine what a reasonable accommodation looks like *in the workplace*

One of the most frequent frustrations I've heard from fellow disabled students is that they don't know what accommodations are available outside of the brief list of examples given

by their institutions. This is especially applicable to WIL placements, which often have no examples of accommodations for disabled students as what's considered a "reasonable" accommodation may vary between workplaces and industry sectors.

Remember, your placement is an opportunity for you to see what working in the field is like. As such, you should take advantage of this moment to request any accommodations you need that will support your learning and ensure you feel comfortable and safe in the environment. If your industry hosts or supervisors are unable to accommodate you, discuss this with your disability centre and/or academic and see if this is common, as it may be a sign that you could pivot to a different role or environment. Also, know your rights; look up the legal rights of workers in your industry. There's a big difference between employers not being able to support accommodations in a work environment and them simply not wanting to!

Step 3: Determine what a reasonable accommodation looks like *to you*

As we've established, doing some research into what tasks are commonly associated with your field, as well as what adjustments already exist for workers, will help you to narrow down what accommodations could be available on a placement. Once you've done this, it's time to start determining what those accommodations might look like based on your own circumstances. Here's a small list of what potential accommodations could look like for varying needs:

- Visual, verbal or written prompts that can help you to maintain focus, such as clear lists and displays in order to minimise confusion
- Support from another person (such as a mentor) in how to structure work tasks, as well as regular check-ins
- Minimising potential distractions, which could be achieved through noise reduction or by being provided with a workstation that's quiet and away from others
- More frequent breaks
- Work area modifications, which could range from furniture with adjustable heights, to reducing the walking distance between workplace locations
- Sensory aids to alleviate overstimulation or under stimulation, such as noise-cancelling headphones, reduction in light levels, fidgets
- Workload adjustments, such as starting out with smaller responsibilities and building up as you begin to gain more confidence, or allowing more time to complete tasks
- Information, such as instructions and feedback, delivered in alternative formats (such as written instead of spoken or vice-versa); this could also include closed captions on videos or other auditory information, or alternative text on visual information
- A record of workplace discussions you take part in, whether this is through written agendas, meeting minutes or audio recordings, allowing you to recall information

- Flexible working hours, such as instead of completing a 20-day WIL placement in 4 weeks (e.g you spread those 20 days over 5 to 6 weeks, allowing yourself time to rest or otherwise manage your condition).

Accommodations will vary person to person as well as between disabilities, as we all experience our disabilities in different ways. For more examples on workplace accommodations, look through the examples provided [here](#) by JobAccess.

Step 4: Communicate your needs

Some workplaces will have different definitions of what is reasonable, so working directly with your institution's disability services will allow you to determine exactly what accommodations can be provided based on your specific circumstances. Being upfront about your accessibility needs will allow you to get the support you need as you complete a WIL placement. Of course, not everyone is comfortable with sharing information about their disability with their placement supervisors. If this is the case for you, your institution's disability service may be able to request some accommodations for you without disclosing the specifics of your disability. If you do decide to disclose to your placement supervisor, it's also recommended that you discuss with them how/who they can share this information with. It's perfectly fine to say that you don't want them sharing the specifics of your disability with others if you don't feel comfortable with that, or if you prefer to share it with colleagues as you see fit.

Step 5: Make the most of your WIL placement!

While placements can be nerve-wracking, they are also valuable experiences. As well as gaining industry experience, you'll be able to test which accommodations best work for you so that you're better prepared for when you enter the workforce. Use your time during WIL placement to practise new skills and share your own knowledge!