

A SUPPORTED BURSARY PROGRAMME -UNLOCKS POTENTIAL-



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There is much buzz in the business world surrounding the development of future skills to ensure that our talent pipeline aligns with the demands of business. Organisations are overtly committed to investing in building such future skills to remain competitive in their own right. In effect, what we need are specialised skills, innovative thinkers, problem solvers, adapters, and those that challenge the status quo in an organisation's approach to their business. What many organisations do not realise is that the solution is at hand in the form of persons with disabilities. For the most, and as a consequence of dealing with a society that excludes their needs as 'normal', persons with disabilities have had to be innovative problem solvers to overcome the barriers and challenges that exist. There is a mound of untapped talent in the employee pool of persons with a disability who, given a chance to compete equally, would add immense value to organisations.

Unfortunately, in South Africa, most Skills Development initiatives for persons with a disability tend to be for entry-level Learnerships. The reality is that there are little or no conversations that address the need for inclusion in higher education, or how to facilitate potential or long-term prospects of persons with a disability in higher-level roles. Consequently, there is and will continue to be, little conversion success to a long-term career without organisations opening their mind to considering persons with a disability as valuable entities in the economy. Supported Bursary Management Programmes present an opportunity for organisations to recognise and develop this valuable resource.

One sure way to secure a commitment from your organisation for this initiative is to utilise Skills Development tax incentives which support persons with a disability to complete their degree or diploma. Having a qualification under their belt will equip them to enter the job market at a more professional level and become gainfully employed in a meaningful career. Given the current barriers that exist in our society, however, a critical success factor would be expanding such a bursary programme to include support that considers each student's unique requirements. For example, facilitating reasonable accommodation more often than not depends on the level of inclusion the tertiary facility offers students with a disability. A degree of legislation supports inclusive education, yet it is often poorly executed in practice.

Work needs to be done to create an inclusive learning environment where students with a disability have an equal opportunity to succeed. Without a Supported Bursary Management Programme in place, a student with a disability does not have much clout to hold a tertiary institution accountable for not reasonably accommodating their disability, nor are they likely to access the assistive devices or technology they need to compete equally from an academic perspective. Adding to the stress and anxiety of a student with a disability is a lack of access to facilities, lecture rooms and ablution facilities on campus. These dynamics take tenacity, innovation and resilience to overcome.

A Supported Bursary Management Programme not only addresses the allocation of funds for tuition and study materials, but provides the students with direct personal access to a mentor who fully appreciates the rights and responsibilities of students with a disability. Mentorship assists students with a disability to focus on their academic success before any other issue. Supportive elements that should feature in a Supported Bursary Management Programme for students with a disability include:

- > Providing mentorship, it is the key to success. Depending on the individual student with a disability, the mentor should ideally have first-hand experience in the dynamics of disability, whilst being well versed on the rights and methods of driving inclusion. The character of the mentor should encourage confidence and provide the tools to overcome barriers with fervour. Their role is to strengthen the student's voice and further add encouragement when the going gets tough.
- > Understanding how to effectively tap into the pool of driven individuals with a disability, who are proactive in their ambitions and determined to succeed. Doing this does not mean only channelling resourcing efforts towards social welfare and NPO organisations that represent disability, but recognising that talent with a disability is out there and awaiting an opportunity. You just need to make it known in your communications and brand.
- > Promoting equal opportunity to include persons with disabilities beyond the bursary scheme. To add long-term value, collaborate with the student with a disability to determine their desired career path and goals.
- > Ascertaining any 'disabling' factors in their academic environment, then plot a way to overcome these.
- > Putting processes in place to ensure a fair selection and onboarding process that appreciates and recognises each bursar's specific requirements. Support the administrative process, then identify any logistical barriers that may emerge.
- > Aligning accommodation and travel, whether on campus or off, with the specific disability-related dynamics. A bursary must include allocated financial support to promote the independence of a student with a disability from an infrastructural and logistical perspective, based on the disability-related needs.
- > Collaborating with campus officials to adjust the environment towards being more accessible. Advocate on behalf of the student. Educate them about cost-effective solutions to overcome barriers. Importantly, provide the groundwork for lecturers and facilitators to create a welcoming, enabling and inclusive environment.
- > Consistently monitoring and encouraging the relationship between the student with a disability and all stakeholders.

- > Monitoring the progress and sharing challenges and successes with all stakeholders.
- > Earmarking the student with a disability for workplace experience programmes where the academic programme allows. Participating in the workplace builds confidence and will enable organisations to recognise the talent first hand and provide individuals with an opportunity to prime this talent over time; so there is a return on investment. Building a relationship during the bursary process builds trust, loyalty and accountability. A Supported Bursary Management Programme should incorporate the following three elements:
 - o Ensure that an organisation's Skills Development budget is allocated responsibly. It must equip persons with a disability to enter the workforce, adding educational value and employability confidence.
 - o Build change champions in the disability inclusion space. Supported Bursary recipients with a disability should emerge from the Programme as agents of change, mentored to fully appreciate their roles, rights and responsibilities in society.
 - o Work with tertiary education institutions towards adjusting and adapting their learning environment to be more inclusive of disability. Make them aware that disability is a form of diversity. Providing an equal opportunity for students with a disability is an inherent global right.

Today in South Africa less than 2% of persons with a disability make up our national workforce, a percentage that has not increased over the past decade. Of that 2%, the majority remain in entry-level positions as organisations tend to overlook their potential. Another sobering fact is that most people with a disability do not have the financial resources to develop their potential academically. The aim of a well thought through Support Bursary Management Programme is to increase the presence of persons with a disability to above the 2% mark in the national workforce, to recognise disability as a value-adding form of diversity within our economy, and to nurture and develop our future talent in an accessible future world.

Contact Lesa Bradshaw at lesa@bradshawleroux.co.za to find out more about Bradshaw LeRoux's Bursary Management Programme.