Can finding a job help people with learning disabilities become included in society? Between 2007 and 2010 while studying at the Open University, I asked people of all ages with learning disabilities, teachers and others who supported them what they thought.

When Valuing Employment Now and Valuing People Now were published in 2009, both argued that employment was central to social inclusion. Valuing Employment Now was the first policy document in the history of learning disabilities to suggest that having paid work was both possible and important – for individuals and society.

It was essential that the research was based on what people with learning disabilities knew and thought about work and what it might offer. It was also important to get a spread of opinions across the ages: the youngest person interviewed was 19 and the oldest 74. This produced information and reflections on working during every decade since the end of World War Two, as well as thoughts on what work might be like from people who had not yet had a job.

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During a pilot stage of the study I worked with a small group of students with learning disabilities to develop questions to use during the main phase of research. Examples of the questions research participants were asked included: What do you understand by the word work? Why do people go to work? What would be your dream job?

Capturing what people felt about work and employment was central to trying to understand whether employment could be considered a way of including people in society generally. The research explored whether getting a job automatically meant individuals became “included and accepted” more broadly (Buckley et al, 2000).

Full inclusion in society has been a central element of Government learning disability policy for some years, and employment could help to achieve this.

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The University of Manchester offers a three-year full-time or six years part-time BA (Hons) Learning Disability Studies degree. For more information go to www.manchester.ac.uk/undergraduate/courses/search2012/atoz/course?code=00099. Also, from September, an MA programme will be available. For more information go to www.manchester.ac.uk/postgraduate/taughtdegrees/courses/parttime/course?cod=09005.

It was also important to develop an idea of the history of how work had been made available in the borough.
To do this, service providers that had worked in the borough through the years were interviewed, as well as older people with learning disabilities. Service providers gave insight into how they perceived their role in an inclusion process.

This data needed to be considered since the actions and attitudes of service providers help contextualise the ways in which people with learning disabilities experience the world. It was also important to analyse service provider contributions primarily as insight into their own experiences, rather than as insight into the lives of the people with learning disabilities they often discussed.

What employment means
But what did people with learning disabilities think employment meant? The vast majority of participants were familiar with the “brute facts” (Rose, 1999) of work: that it puts demands on your time, that it is ‘hard’, that it means going to specific work areas or spaces and so on.

Participants also reflected more deeply on what they considered the meaning of work to be. The key finding was that they considered employment as a way of showing their social value.

For instance, being paid for a job was one way of measuring social value. Jane (interview 11) felt the fact that she worked on an unpaid voluntary basis meant “she wasn’t really needed.” No participants considered voluntary or work placement roles they’d had ‘real’ work, largely because of the lack of payment. Seth (interview 35) talked disparagingly of a voluntary kitchen job he had, while Len (interview 31) was dismissive of his voluntary work in a charity shop.

Wages, on the other hand, were perceived as a measure of worth and as one element of inclusion, potentially providing the possibility of foreign travel (Robert, interview 61), leaving the parental home (Namita, interview 22) or supporting a family (Harshall, interview 9). Wages were seen as a measure of how highly an employer valued you and gave access to the things non-disabled people enjoy.

At a more profound level, people with learning disabilities considered employment as a means of addressing an ideological burden they continue to carry: the idea that they are in some way morally deficient. This theme emerged repeatedly in interviews, most strikingly with Celia (interview 57). Celia was 66 and had spent many years in a long-stay institution. She told of the work she had done there caring for other patients and of how she had been disciplined – branded morally ‘in disgrace’ – if her work had been considered not good enough.

‘In disgrace’ has a long history of being used as moral condemnation, first appearing in the learning disability context in Sandlebridge Colony from 1902 (Jackson, 2000) and from the beginning of the 19th century in a poverty context more broadly (Thompson, 1963).

Other research participants talked of how employment gave them the chance to “be peaceful… and work really hard” (James, interview 13), and to show their worth to their communities (Davita, interview 5; Adam, interview 1; Ethan, interview 6 and numerous others) in an attempt to atone for what they perceived to be the low moral values society ascribed them.

Finding employment
The vast majority of participants wanted work – all of those drawn from day centres and all but one of the student group. However, employment rates remain very low with only 6.4% of people with learning disabilities in the UK working for 16 hours a week or more. Nearly 95% are unemployed not because they cannot or do not want to work, but because others assume they can’t because they have learning disabilities.

But how well do employment support providers help people with learning disabilities to find work? The short answer is not very well, and nor have they ever. Since World War Two, employment training and support has been provided first by adult training centres (ATCs) and latterly by supported employment schemes run by private and voluntary sector agencies.

The ATCs were services based in buildings run by local authorities. At the beginning of the 1970s it looked like they were about to be greatly expanded following recommendations made in Better Services for the Mentally Handicapped (1971). But these plans were dropped when funding to local authorities was cut from the mid-1970s onwards. Slowly, over the 10 years to 1990, in its place the current supported employment model took shape.

Today, private and voluntary sector agencies compete for funds from the Department for Work and Pensions to run these schemes, with Shaw Trust currently the biggest provider. But in the just over 20 years that the schemes have run employment rates for people with learning disabilities have dropped from 7% in 1990 (Cambridge et al., 1994) to 6.4% today (National Indicator Set, 2011).

Preparation for work
So, there are problems with the ways employment is made available. There are also problems with the ways that people with learning disabilities are prepared for work by specialised education systems. The research looked at courses for students with learning disabilities at two further education colleges in the London borough – a voluntary sector-run special education facility and a specialised employment
advice service run by another voluntary sector agency. The research found that courses largely became an end in themselves, with colleges in particular becoming a type of alternative social service to which students might be enrolled because they “didn’t have anywhere else to go” (FE college group, interview 39).

There were numerous examples of students repeating courses, moving from one course to another or from one college to another over many years. The most extreme example involved Harshall who spent 19 years moving from college to ‘job preparation’ and back to college. There was little sense of academic progression with curricula centred on ‘basic’ and ‘life’ skills.

College staff reflected on the fact that learning theory with regard to learning disabilities was poorly developed and that they were inadequately supported in developing it within the context of poor resources more generally (Anise, interview 37). It was felt that new demands to focus teaching on the possibility of work, including a requirement that colleges provide and support work placements for all students, had simply been ‘tacked on’ (Connexions, interview 42) with few extra resources having been made available.

In this context, the attitudes of teachers and support workers suffered. Some became narrowly protective of their students, in effect deepening a withdrawal from FE college life, especially where an inconsistent approach to including students with learning disabilities by college authorities meant that although included in college space, they were excluded from college society.

It also meant that almost all teachers interviewed expected little of their students in academic terms or in terms of their chances of finding work. Such attitudes do not challenge what Goodley and Rapley call “naturalised views” (2001), which have historically seen people with learning disabilities as largely incapable of intellectual progress. In effect, as Giddens argues (1990) the absence of challenge acts to confirm ways of behaving and attitudes that perpetuate stigma and social exclusion.

Another reason for poor employment rates centres on learning disability ‘identity types’ (Giddens, 1990). The research suggested that the identity types associated with people with learning disabilities, which have evolved since the late 19th century, mean they are not taken seriously as potential employees.

At a broad level, at best employers do not understand what people with learning disabilities need in work (Working Group, 2006). At worst employers perceive them as a troublesome burden (Employer 3, interview 74).

However, the full impact of identity types is most vividly seen through analysis of those few people in work. For example, Anna (interview 28) had worked for a local authority for seven years when interviewed. During that time she had made specific requests to her manager not to be treated in special ways. However, Anna’s manager continued to provide inappropriate levels of support based on her understanding of an abstract notion of learning disability identity types, rather than treating Anna as she would any other employee. This, in effect, perpetuated Anna’s social exclusion from workplace society and stopped her from negotiating and developing new workplace-relevant identities.

Conclusions
The research found that systemic failure, attitudinal problems and the assignment of abstract identity types combine to continue to constrain the extent to which people can find and keep work, despite the genuine desire of people with learning disabilities to do so.

It also found that the current emphasis on employment support provided by private and voluntary sector agencies on a case-by-case basis is unlikely to address these deep-seated and complex barriers.

The history of learning disabilities has been dominated by centralised, UK-wide provision, based around special and most often segregated services. As a result of this, attitudes and practices are deeply rooted in UK society. It is the contention of this research that it will take similarly concerted, centralised and universally available solutions to address this situation and move people beyond stigma to employment and social inclusion more broadly.