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Bachelor of Disability Management degree graduates honoured at global virtual convocation ceremony



Pacific Coast University for Workplace Health Sciences (PCU-WHS), on October 19, welcomed its 2022 class of graduates, 10 new recipients who have earned a Bachelor of Disability Management (BDM) degree.

PCU-WHS – a leading edge University in education and research for excellence in the field of disability management and return to work – held an online convocation ceremony with faculty, government officials, and graduates from various time zones, ranging from North America to Europe, Africa and Australia.

In Canada, the degree recipients are now at the vanguard helping address some of society's most complicated challenges related to accessibility and inclusion for people with physical and mental health impairments. Timing is optimal given that under the *Accessible Canada Act*, the federal government is finalizing the framework to create a barrier-free Canada by 2040, including in the area of employment. Six provinces – so far – have also introduced Accessibility legislation.

The convocation's keynote speaker, Shane Simpson, former Minister, Social Development and Poverty Reduction for British Columbia, was a principal architect of the *Accessible B.C. Act*, which is now being implemented in 750 public sector workplaces across the province. Private sector workplaces will be tasked with compliance in the future.

Mr. Simpson advised the graduates of the issues they'll face: "We know that if people are off the job for a year or more, maybe less, their likelihood of returning falls to about one percent. Their lives are changed forever, and it is not for the better. . . In BC, about half a million people struggle in poverty everyday and a large percentage of those are people living with a disability."

He continued, "Through your educational efforts you've ensured that your workplaces are better equipped to support workers to return [to work] in a way that is appropriate and with every opportunity to succeed. . . I ask you to elevate that commitment and help those living with disabilities to have the opportunities that many of us enjoy."

He concluded, "Let's get on with the job of making the world a more accessible and inclusive place."



PCU-WHS Chancellor, the Honourable Wayne G. Wouters, past Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet, lauded the students for their resilience, focus, and determination. He also noted the timing of their graduation in relation to the new Accessibility standards.

“The disability rights movement in Canada has evolved over the years as new legislation has come into effect both federally in 2019 and provincially as new accessibility legislation received Royal assent in BC in 2021. Today 1.4 million Canadians with disabilities live in poverty with the vast majority having acquired their employment-limiting health impairments during their working lives. I am most hopeful that, over time, your skills and abilities will have a positive impact on lowering these terrible statistics.”

Mr. Wouters continued, “The contributions of disability management and return to work specialists like yourselves cannot be overstated. It is truly life-changing work.”

PCU-WHS Board of Governors Labour Co-Chair, Ken Neumann, former national director of the United Steelworkers, extended congratulations to the graduates on behalf of the PCU-WHS Board.

Mr. Neumann stressed that “No one goes to work to get killed or injured.” He cited current negative disability statistics, including that, in Canada, there are more than 251,000 occupational lost-time injury claims a year at a cost of \$16.5 billion or 2.4 percent of national payroll. He said, “This is such a crucial issue . . . I’m so glad that we have graduates such as yourselves who will take this to the next step to make sure that we improve and continue to improve the return to work protocol for people with disabilities.”

Gord Johns, MP, Courtenay-Alberni, congratulated the graduates from his Ottawa office and said, “This institution is a global leader when it comes to disability management.” He recognized the talented experts and individuals from around the globe who contribute to the University and acknowledged its president and disability advocate Wolfgang Zimmermann for his leadership and inspiration.

Mr. Johns further extended his ongoing support for funding for the University and its societal contributions: “When we talk about human rights, when we talk about tackling poverty and the high unemployment rates of people living with disabilities, this is an opportunity for us to address so many things at one time – especially given that we’re in a labour market crisis – unlocking the GDP and opportunities for people living with disabilities.

Josie Osborne, MLA, Mid Island-Pacific Rim, sent a congratulatory letter read during the ceremony. She stated, “We know that when people with disabilities are provided with suitable accommodations and are supported with policies that recognize the importance of those accommodations, they can thrive in the workplace.”

She added that “The importance of having trained professionals to develop proper policies and procedures to ensure equality in the workplace cannot be understated . . . [t]he work you do in this field will be life changing for so many people regardless of what industry you choose to enter.”

PCU-WHS Director, Academic Programs, Dr. Susan Patrick introduced each of the 2022 graduates congratulating them for their skill, knowledge, and dedication to completing the challenging degree program – the first of its kind in the world – while continuing to work and raise families. She noted that the courses they have completed are provided under the authority of the Degree Quality Assessment Board of the BC Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training.



Dr. Patrick introduced the 2022 valedictorian Josephine Valente, who had some fellow students in tears with her emotional speech. She told the story of how she almost abandoned her studies when her father was diagnosed with a terminal illness. He urged her to continue, saying, "Don't stop. Keep going."

A former first responder, she now has her degree and a new career at Queen's University responsible for health and safety, disability management and return to work. She emphasized that "A disability should never impede someone's ability to succeed."

PCU-WHS Adjunct Faculty Dr. Donal McAnaney made the closing remarks. Dr. McAnaney is a global disability management research consultant with the Work Research Centre in Dublin, Ireland. He congratulated the graduates on earning a degree from an institution that is "uniquely multidisciplinary."

Dr. McAnaney thanked the faculty and staff at PCU-WHS and said, "There's no way any other university in the world could offer this. I think PCU-WHS is the only place where you can get this broad range of knowledge."

About PCU-WHS

Pacific Coast University for Workplace Health Sciences (PCU-WHS) is a statutory, not-for-profit, post-secondary, degree granting education and research institution creating and disseminating knowledge in the fields of workplace safety, health promotion, return to work and disability management, comprehensive rehabilitation, and disability leadership studies.

In addition to the Bachelor of Disability Management, the University offers an Advanced Certificate in Return to Work as well as numerous continuing education certificate programs and courses for professionals who are already established in the field. All options are offered online attracting students from across Canada and around the world.

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