Two ACU National courses specialise in giving graduates knowledge and skills to empower people with disabilities to take their rightful place as full and participating members of society.

These courses are opening up career pathways for graduates in schools, communities, policy development, management and coordination, employment support, aged care, and more.

“The old focus was around caring and looking after people, but now it is about being alongside them, assisting without controlling, empowering them without taking over,” said Bachelor of Inclusive Education and Disability Studies and Associate Degree in Inclusive Education and Disability Studies course coordinator Ms Trudy van Dam, pictured left.

“Our students are attracted to these courses because they want to make a difference in people’s lives.” Some have a link with disability through family, friends or neighbours, while others are interested in social justice issues.

Empowerment is about changing everyone’s attitudes and behaviour; professionals, families, the wider community and people with disabilities. It is about realising that self determination and inclusion is possible, and ensuring it is achieved.

“Even while they are studying, our students are making a huge difference through their field work, changing people’s lives.”

The courses were introduced in 1990 as the Bachelor of Education (Habilitation) and Diploma in Education (Habilitation) and their reputation continues to strengthen.

“Schools, employment services, advocacy and community services are desperate for people with these skills. They recognise that our graduates are well prepared to go on to work in the field of inclusive education in a wide range of settings, and they are in demand.”

Positive changes

Ms Julie Massar, a single mum in her mid 30s, realised she wanted a more secure career and decided to build on skills she developed working in a range of roles supporting people with disabilities in community settings.

Now a full-time case worker with a major provider of disability support services, Julie will shortly complete her Bachelor of Inclusive Education and Disability Studies degree at ACU National’s Strathfield Campus.

Julie, pictured in red, is grateful the course has given her new skills and a new level of professionalism, with positive attitudes and the latest information to help support and empower people with disabilities.

“I started the degree because I wanted to formalise my experience and further my responsibilities in different roles,” Julie said. “I think it’s great for women to know that at any stage in their life they can study and achieve. It’s been great for me.”

Julie said her knowledge and skills are already allowing her to bring about real and positive changes in the lives of others. For example, she has developed a comprehensive positive behaviour support program for a young girl with autism.

“People with autism experience a lot of anxiety about their routine and environment. I recommended changes to the environment, staff practices and aids, including using a communication board which allows her to identify choice and understand her routine. The support organisation and her family were pleased with my proposals and decided to implement them.”

The girl now has improved routines and communication strategies to understand her world. “It made such an incredible difference that it contributed to her family being able to continue supporting her in the family environment.”

“Our students are attracted to these courses because they want to make a difference in people’s lives.”