



Achieving a 'sense of purpose': pathways to employment for NDIS participants with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum and/or with psychosocial disability

Research and Evaluation Branch – Policy, Advice and Research Division

August 2021

[ndis.gov.au](https://www.ndis.gov.au)

ndis

About the Research and Evaluation Branch

The Research and Evaluation Branch is responsible for ensuring that NDIA policies, practices and priorities are informed by trustworthy and robust evidence so that decisions can be based on an understanding of what works, what doesn't work, and the benefit to participants and the Agency.

This document

This report presents research findings from the Employment Research Project.

Disclaimer

The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) accepts no responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of any material contained in this report. Further, the National Disability Insurance Agency disclaims all liability to any person in respect of anything, and of the consequences of anything, done or omitted to be done by any such person in reliance, whether wholly or partly, upon any information presented in this report.

Material in this report is made available on the understanding that the National Disability Insurance Agency is not providing professional advice. Before relying on any of the material in this report, users should obtain appropriate professional advice.

Views and recommendations of third parties, which may also be included in this report, do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Disability Insurance Agency, or indicate a commitment to a particular course of action.

Acknowledgements

The NDIA acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians throughout Australia and their continuing connection to the many lands, seas and communities. The NDIA pays respect to Elders past and present, and extends this acknowledgement and respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be reading this Report.

The Research and Evaluation Branch would like to acknowledge the broader NDIA team who assisted in the development of this research project. Judith Drake, Gavin Burner and Katy Reid are warmly acknowledged for sharing their lived experience expertise with the team to support the development and design of this research, along with Roslyn Ryan for her work as part of her work experience.

The Branch gratefully acknowledges the NDIS participants, carers, family members and NDIS service delivery staff who participated and shared their experiences.

© The National Disability Insurance Agency

You may distribute, remix, and build upon this work. However, you must attribute The National Disability Insurance Agency as the copyright holder of the work.

Suggested citation

National Disability Insurance Agency 2021. Achieving a 'sense of purpose': pathways to employment for NDIS participants with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum and with psychosocial disability in Australia. Prepared by L Smith, A Ames, M Bennett, R Morello.

Enquiries about this publication should be addressed to:

National Disability Insurance Agency

Email: research@ndis.gov.au

Abbreviations

| Abbreviation | Term |
|--------------|--|
| ADE | Australian Disability Enterprise |
| CALD | Culturally and Linguistically Diverse |
| DES | Disability Employment Service |
| HSC | High School Certificate |
| LAC | Local Area Coordinator |
| LGBTIQA+ | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual and + to represent the many more identities and affirmed genders |
| NDIA | National Disability Insurance Agency |
| NDIS | National Disability Insurance Scheme |
| PitC | Partner in the Community |
| SLES | School Leavers Employment Support |
| SME | Subject Matter Experts |

Glossary

| Term | Definition |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Autism spectrum* | This term refers to a group of neurological disorders that are characterised by impairments in social interaction, communication, repetitive behaviours, and restrictive interests. Impairments can vary widely between people and may change over a lifetime. |
| Cognitive disability | A term used to describe disability caused by reduced cognitive and adaptive development. Often used to refer to disability related to autism, intellectual disability and acquired brain injury. |
| Employment ecosystem | Refers to a wide and complex network of systems such as government and non-government employment-related services and the market place, as well as where the participant fits within this. NDIS participants are required to navigate this system to get ready for, find and maintain employment. It includes services such as the Department of Social Services (DSS), Disability Employment Services (DES), and NDIS funded School Leaver Employment Support (SLES). |

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| Intellectual disability | Is a term used to describe a range of conditions that impair general mental abilities including intellectual functioning (such as learning), and adaptive functioning (such as communication and living independently). |
| NDIS participants | When referred to in the findings includes NDIS participants, family, carers and other supporters who spoke to the participant experience. |
| NDIS service delivery staff | Includes NDIS planners, delegates, Local Area Coordinators (LACs), Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), and Partners in the Community (PiTC). |
| Paid employment | Work that is paid, including at a subsidised rate. |
| Person-centred supports and services | Person-centred supports and services are based on putting the person at the center of the decision, resulting in supports that are individualised to the person. |
| Psychosocial disability | Psychosocial disability is a term used to describe a disability that may arise from mental health issues. |
| Open employment | Work that is paid at least minimum wage, that is located in mainstream settings where people with and without disability can work together. |
| Qualitative research | Qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, that allow researchers to hear people's unique stories and voices and then pull it together to look at common themes. |
| Quantitative research | Quantitative research seeks to answer questions such as how many people had the same experience or understanding. |
| Research participant | A research participant is a person who participates in the research. |
| Survey respondent | A survey respondent is someone who has filled in a survey. |

*People prefer different terms to describe autism. To acknowledge this, we use the terms autism spectrum and participant on the autism spectrum in this report. We have used person first language to be consistent with how we refer to the other target populations. However, we acknowledge the contested nature of 'person first' and 'identity' language.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| About the Research and Evaluation Branch | 2 |
| This document | 2 |
| Disclaimer | 2 |
| Acknowledgements | 2 |
| Abbreviations | 3 |
| Glossary | 3 |
| 1. Highlights | 7 |
| 2. Executive summary | 9 |
| 2.1 Background | 9 |
| 2.2 Research methods | 10 |
| 2.3 Findings | 11 |
| 2.4 Considerations | 14 |
| 3. Introduction | 16 |
| 3.1 Background | 16 |
| 3.2 The NDIS is part of a broader employment ecosystem | 18 |
| 3.3 The research | 20 |
| 4. Research methods | 22 |
| 4.1 Qualitative research design | 22 |
| 4.2 Data linkage to NDIA data | 23 |
| 4.3 Data analysis | 24 |
| 5. Findings | 25 |
| 5.1 Research participant characteristics | 25 |
| 5.1 Employment is important to participants | 30 |
| 5.2 Types of employment | 30 |
| 5.3 Avenues into employment | 32 |
| 5.4 Barriers and enablers to employment | 33 |
| 5.5 Key findings from NDIS service delivery staff survey | 57 |
| 6. Key insights and considerations | 59 |
| 7. Strengths and limitations of this research | 67 |
| 8. What's next? | 71 |
| 9. References | 72 |
| 10. Appendices | 74 |
| 10.1 Appendix 1: NDIS participant characteristics | 74 |

| | | |
|------|--|----|
| 10.1 | Appendix 2: NDIS service delivery staff survey results | 82 |
| 10.2 | Appendix 3: Interview schedules | 92 |

List of figures

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1: Employment ecosystem and the NDIS | 19 |
| Figure 2: NDIS participants' state of residence | 26 |
| Figure 3: NDIS service delivery staff, top three ranked barriers and enablers (n=129) | 58 |
| Figure 4: Employment synthesis diagram | 60 |
| Figure 5: Helpfulness of information resources in supporting participants to develop employment goals (n=112) | 90 |
| Figure 6: Helpfulness of information resources in supporting participants to implement and work towards their employment goals (n=129) | 91 |

List of tables

| | |
|---|----|
| Table 1: Participant characteristics | 27 |
| Table 2: NDIS service delivery staff | 28 |
| Table 3: Barriers and enablers – Person-centred planning and supports | 61 |
| Table 4: Barriers and enablers – participant empowerment | 63 |
| Table 5: Barriers and enablers – Participants' informal and own networks | 64 |
| Table 6: Barriers and enablers – School leaver and early intervention initiatives | 65 |
| Table 7: Barriers and enablers – Formal education and training post school | 66 |
| Table 8: Barriers and enablers – Inclusive flexible and adaptive workplaces | 67 |
| Table 9: NDIS participant characteristics | 74 |
| Table 10: NDIS service delivery staff respondent characteristics | 82 |
| Table 11: NDIS service delivery staff perception of the top ranked barriers for NDIS participants finding and maintaining open employment | 83 |
| Table 12: NDIS service delivery staff perception of the top three ranked enablers to finding open employment for participants | 85 |
| Table 13: Top three ranked barriers faced by NDIS service delivery staff when assisting participants to identify and work towards employment goals | 85 |
| Table 14: Accessing information for employment planning | 86 |
| Table 15: Most accessed information resources when supporting participants | 86 |
| Table 16: Are NDIS service delivery staff finding the information they need? | 86 |
| Table 17: Supporting participants develop employment goals - Helpfulness of information resources for NDIS service delivery staff | 87 |
| Table 18: Supporting participants to implement and work towards their employment goals - Helpfulness of information resources for NDIS service delivery staff | 88 |

1. Highlights

The research project

This research project was aimed at exploring the barriers and enablers to gaining and maintaining paid employment for NDIS participants with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum, and/or with psychosocial disability.

This research included:

- In-depth interviews with 85 NDIS participants (families, carers or informal or formal supporters) aged 14 to 44 years;
- Focus groups and interviews with 37 NDIS service delivery staff (NDIS planners or delegates, Local Area Coordinators (LACs), Partners in the Community (PiTC) and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs); and
- Responses from 142 NDIS service delivery staff to an online survey.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted via video online, telephone, or email.

Key insights

A lack of inclusive employment options was identified by participants as the greatest barrier to finding a job. This included the lack of flexibility or inclusivity of workplace environments and the stigma of psychosocial disability and autism spectrum.

Participants also identified issues with the support they received from the NDIS, such as a feeling of not being well understood by service delivery staff and the lack of clarity around the funding and supports available. This was supplemented by the complexity of the system.

Further barriers included:

- Lack of discourse about careers and focus of short term employment goals;
- Lack of post-school training and education options and clarity about what supports and services are available to support these; and
- Participants lack of self-confidence.

Person-centred employment planning was identified as a key enabler to supporting participants to achieve their career aspirations, as was starting employment and planning conversations early (e.g. while in school), and participant's own networks, informal supports and role models.

Six key areas of influence and opportunities for action emerged from the data:

1. Person-centred planning and supports
2. Participant empowerment and engagement
3. Informal and own networks
4. School level and early intervention initiatives
5. Formal education and training post school
6. Inclusive, flexible and adaptive workplaces

Person-centred planning and supports are fundamental to overcoming key barriers and enablers to disability employment that exist at the program, practice, and policy/system levels. Ensuring that participants have their base level needs met, such as housing and daily living, will make way for participants to better engage with employment opportunities and capacity building.

Participant empowerment and engagement is important. There is a need to raise participant and family expectations to see employment as an option. NDIS participants also need support to navigate the employment eco-system. The system can be confusing and overwhelming for some. Clear, consistent and accessible information, across the employment continuum, will help participants to better understand the remit and role of the different funding services and what evidence-based supports and services are available.

Informal and own networks need to be fostered as they play a critical role in the pathway to employment and building an individual's self-confidence and self-efficacy. Other activities and pathways to employment such as volunteering, work experience and community participation can help build participants' self-confidence.

School leaver and early intervention initiatives that target young people while still at school or in the transition from school to work (entry-level employment), and changing the conversation to 'careers', are important ways to foster an individual's employment aspirations. Schools play a key educational role in identifying employment options and participants' skills and interests. Government agencies should continue to work together to support these initiatives.

Formal education and (re)training post school was used to improve employment prospects and work that better matched a person's skills and interests. Having options that are appropriate for people with cognitive disability may play a key role to improve employment prospects for individuals that are better matched to their skills and interests. Retraining and further education, having individualised and person-centred support available while studying will help to enable participants to complete their studies.

More **inclusive, flexible and adaptive workplaces** are needed. Employers need to be confident and adaptive to enable more inclusive employment options for people with disability. This includes ensuring the hiring process (pre-employment tests, interviews and in the office environment) is also inclusive. A person's individual skills and needs should be accommodated, where possible, so they have positive work experiences and having appropriate and individualised workplace supports and inclusive and flexible workplace culture is important.

2. Executive summary

2.1 Background

People with disabilities have a right to access employment opportunities on an equal basis like the rest of the population (UN General Assembly 2006, Article 27). To ensure that National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants have the necessary support to enter and stay in employment the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) launched the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy (2019-2022).

The primary goal of the strategy is to have 30 per cent of NDIS participants of working age in paid work by 30 June 2023. This Strategy outlines a series of activities that the NDIS will undertake to help remove barriers to employment for people with disabilities and help NDIS participants to set and work toward employment goals. This research project will help inform the current review of the Employment Strategy's action plan.

While the NDIA remains committed to the original participant focused vision, goals and focus areas of the Strategy and the NDIS Corporate Plan goals, they have developed some new priorities for 2021, which will strengthen some activities, re-think others, and promote new ideas to improve employment outcomes for participants.

2.1.1 Problem definition and research aims

Approximately two-thirds of NDIS participants have intellectual disability, are on the autism spectrum, and/or have psychosocial disability (NDIA 2020). The NDIA will not meet the employment goal of 30% of NDIS participants in paid employment if the employment outcomes of these participants are not lifted. Therefore understanding the unique barriers and enablers to paid employment for these cohorts will help to inform solutions to achieve improved employment outcomes.

This research project aimed to explore the barriers and enablers to gaining and maintaining paid employment for NDIS participants with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum, and/or psychosocial disability. Specifically it sought to:

- understand and explore participants' experiences and the pathways to paid employment;
- explore the barriers and enablers to finding and keeping a job, specific to these NDIS participants; and
- identify the information and supports required by participants (including families, carers or supporters) to help them develop employment goals and get ready for work.

While the focus of this research was to primarily take an NDIA lens, due to the interdependent nature of the supports funded by the Scheme and its role to influence the market place, the research also looked to understand the barriers and enablers to employment within the broader employment ecosystem.

Findings from this research project will be used to help inform the revision of the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy. They can also be used to inform the National Disability Strategy and other actors in this space to help bring greater coherence to the experience of participants in navigating employment supports.

2.2 Research methods

To ensure the research was relevant to our target audience we engaged three NDIS participants, one from each disability cohort and consulted with them on the methods, research tools, analysis, and this report, along with consultation with NDIA staff and providers.

This research included in-depth interviews with NDIS participants (families, carers or supporters) aged 14 to 44 years. We aimed to reach 80-100 participants to help reach data saturation on themes and topics (i.e. no new themes arises from the data).

Depending on the person's choice, interviews were conducted via video online, telephone, or email. Participants were recruited into the research via the NDIS Participant Engagement Group, NDIA website, peak bodies, social media and other organisations.

We conducted a mixture of online interviews and focus groups with NDIS service delivery staff which included planners or delegates, Local Area Coordinators (LACs), and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). We also invited staff to participate in an online survey.

2.2.1 Who took part

Interviews were held with a total of 85 NDIS participants or family, carers, and other supporters. More specifically this included:

- 39 NDIS participants
- 46 family, carers, and other supporters

This represented 86 NDIS participants aged between 7 and 44 years with a primary or secondary disability of:

- Autism spectrum (n=30)
- Intellectual disability or Down syndrome (n=35)
- Psychosocial disability (n=21)

The characteristics of participants covers a broad cross-section of age, gender, location, employment status and types of employment requiring different levels of skill and education. Of the 75 participants who consented to their NDIA data being accessed, 20 were employed, 29 wanted employment but were not employed, nine were not employed and did not want employment, and for the remaining 17 it was unknown. Furthermore, 33 participants had employment goals within their current plans.

Focus groups and interviews were held with LACs (n=21), planners (n=10) and other staff (n=6). Additionally, there were 142 responses to the online survey (71 LACs/PiTC, 62

planners or delegates and 9 employment SMEs). Respondents were well distributed across the states and territories and had various levels of experience.

2.3 Findings

Participants reported that having a job increased their social connections and gave them ‘a sense of purpose’. Participants noted a range of positive emotions associated with paid employment including feeling proud, challenged and enthusiastic. Work that was meaningful and not tokenistic was desired along with having welcoming and supportive colleagues.

NDIS participants and their families, carers and other supporters reported a variety of pathways to employment. The four most commonly identified avenues were through (not in any particular order): (a) Disability Employment Services (DES) (which are not-for-profit or for-profit organisations that support people with disability to find and maintain employment through support and workplace adjustments); (b) community participation such as volunteering; (c) gaining employment through informal networks comprising family and friends; and (d) work experience.

Themes that evolved from the data have been presented under the following five categories:

1. Common experiences across all levels of employment
2. School leaver and entry level employment
3. NDIS participants re-entering the workforce
4. Maintaining employment, career progress and changing jobs
5. System barriers and blockers to open employment

2.3.1 Common experiences across all levels of employment

- Participants often felt their disability was not well understood by staff, providers and employers, especially for participants on the autism spectrum and psychosocial disability cohorts. Person-centred planning was identified as crucial to ensuring employment options were better matched to a participant’s skills and interests.
- Having supports to meet base level needs (such as daily living, stable accommodation, mental and physical health) was identified as an important enabler for participants to have the energy and time to find and maintain employment.
- Many NDIS participants were lacking in self-confidence as an employable person. Capacity building supports were reported to play an important role in increasing self-efficacy. Families and a person’s own networks can also support the development of participants’ self-confidence and their work and career aspirations.
- NDIS participants struggled to identify what employment-related supports were available and funded by the NDIS. The system was described as confusing and overwhelming for some. Clear, consistent and accessible information and resources, for participants and service delivery staff, was considered important to help participants better understand what evidence-based supports and services are available and from what funding sources.

- Lack of suitable transport options was reported to restrict participant's access to workplaces. Travel training or supporting participants in gaining a drivers licence were seen as enablers to accessibility of workplaces.
- Lack of inclusive employers was consistently identified as the greatest barrier to finding a job (this includes employers not wanting to employ people with a disability, workplaces not sufficiently supporting people's needs, and inadequate support during pre-employment processes). Participants and service delivery staff suggested the NDIA can play a key role in promoting positive employment examples to improve attitudes of employers towards hiring people with disabilities.

2.3.2 School leaver and entry level employment

- Schools play an important role in identifying an individual's skills and interests and helping them to identify relevant employment options. Early employment discussions and planning with families was seen as an enabler to future employment pathways e.g., pre-high and high school discussions.
- Participant's own informal networks were identified as being instrumental in supporting participants to find, and have a positive experience, in their first job. Role models, such as peers, family, and people in the media, help broaden the options, show what is possible and change community, and employer, attitudes about disability.
- Work experience was identified as an important pathway to employment. However, there was uncertainty about what NDIS funding was available to support work experience while participants are at school. There was also a lack of understanding around how and when participants can access School Leaver Employment Supports (SLES) and employment supports. Greater clarity and communication on which employment supports are funded and at what age was identified as needed to better support participants in high school to prepare for employment.
- There was reported to be a lack of relevant post-school education and training options available for people with cognitive disability. Certificate levels I and II courses were utilised by participants when available. Informal supporters, such as family, carers and other supporters also played a key role in supporting young people to navigate post-school education options and avenues.

2.3.3 NDIS participants re-entering the workforce

Participants re-entering the workforce after a substantial break in employment faced many of the same barriers as those identified above. These barriers were magnified by being out of the workforce for substantial amounts of time.

- Long periods of unemployment was seen as a barrier to re-entry for participants due to looking unfavourable to potential employers and the stigma attached.
- Stretches of unemployment meant that some participants needed to rebuild their employment skills, but if they were not ready for Disability Employment Services (DES) then service delivery staff had difficulty knowing where to refer them.

- NDIS participants saw retraining and returning to further education as a way to successfully gain employment which reflected their skills and interests.
- Participants with psychosocial disability and those on the autism spectrum reported that having the NDIS and funded supports has been a positive step towards them re-entering the workforce.

2.3.4 Maintaining employment, career progress and changing jobs

- Participants with psychosocial disability and those on the autism spectrum described perceived and experienced stigma and discrimination associated with their disability as a barrier to maintaining employment. Others reported disclosure of their disability was an enabler and led to more appropriate supports. Informal (e.g. family or friends) and formal supports played a key role in helping participants navigate experienced or perceived stigma and discrimination through advice, support, and encouragement.
- Participants described the need for flexibility in support levels (such as travel training and support workers in the workplace) so that they could increase supports when starting or changing jobs and roles, but with the view of reducing supports over time as capacity and confidence is built. Workplace flexibility was also described as integral for many participants but there was a need for this to be individualised.

2.3.5 System barriers and blockers to open employment

Within the employment ecosystem, family and supports spoke about times when employment enablers acted as blockers or barriers to gaining employment. While not within the remit of the NDIA,

- Many participants reported being with Disability Employment Services (DES) providers for years without success. Some participants reported DES providers often having a lack of knowledge of disability beyond physical disability.
- Some participants reported being funnelled into Australian Disability Enterprise (ADEs) without exploration of other options. Some participants working at ADEs enjoyed their work and the friendships they had made. Participants working at ADEs would benefit from having the opportunity to participate in capacity building opportunities that may not be available through their ADE provider.
- Participants reported a tension between being employed and getting paid enough to warrant losing the Disability Support Pension (DSP). Participants want to earn a living independent of government payments, yet earning a sufficient wage from employment is difficult for many. Clearer information regarding the DSP would help reduce the unintended barrier the DSP poses to gaining employment for participants.

2.4 Considerations

Based on the findings from this research there are six interrelated key considerations that should be noted and may contribute to improved employment outcomes for the target populations:

1. **Person-centred planning and supports** are fundamental to overcoming key barriers and enablers to disability employment that exist at the program, practice, and policy/system levels. Ensuring that participants have their base level needs met, such as housing and daily living, will make way for participants to better engage with employment opportunities and capacity building.
2. **Participant empowerment and engagement** is important. NDIS participants need to be empowered and supported to navigate the employment eco-system. The system can be confusing and overwhelming for some. Clear, consistent and accessible information needs to be available, across the employment continuum, to better understand the remit and role of the different funding services and what evidence-based supports and services are available.
3. **Informal and own networks** need to be fostered as they play a critical role in the pathway to employment and building an individual's self-confidence and self-efficacy. Other activities and pathways to employment such as volunteering, work experience and community participation can help build participants' self-confidence.
4. **School leaver and early intervention initiatives** that target young people while still at school or in the transition from school to work (entry-level employment), and changing the conversation to 'careers', are important ways to foster an individual's employment aspirations. Schools play a key educative role in identifying employment options and participants' skills and interests. Government agencies should continue to work together to support these initiatives.
5. **Formal education and (re)training post school** was used to improve employment prospects and work that better matched a person's skills and interests. Having options that are appropriate for people with cognitive disability may play a key role to improve employment prospects for individuals that are better matched to their skills and interests. Retraining and further education, having individualised and person-centred support available while studying, will help to enable participants to complete their studies.
6. **More inclusive, flexible and adaptive workplaces** are needed. Employers need to be confident and adaptive to enable more **inclusive employment options** for people with disability. This includes ensuring the hiring process (pre-employment tests, interviews and in the office environment) is also inclusive. A person's individual skills and needs should be accommodated, where possible, so they have positive work experiences and having appropriate and individualised workplace supports and inclusive and flexible workplace culture is important.



3. Introduction

3.1 Background

People with disabilities have a right to access employment opportunities on an equal basis to the rest of the population (UNCRPD, 2006, Article 27). In 2018, 2.1 million people with disability were of working age (15-64 years). Of these, less than a half (47.8%) were employed, compared with 80.3% of people without disability, and only just over a quarter (28.3%) were employed full-time (ABS report).

Employment has a considerable positive impact on the overall wellbeing of people with disability. Not only does participation in paid employment increase their level of financial independence, it can also lead to a greater sense of identity and social inclusion and in turn positive health and well-being (Deloitte, 2018). To ensure that National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants have the necessary support to enter and stay in employment the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) launched the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy (2019-2022).

The primary goal of the strategy is to have 30 per cent of NDIS participants of working age in paid work by 30 June 2023. This Strategy outlines a series of activities that the NDIS will undertake to help remove barriers to employment for people with disabilities and help NDIS participants to set and work toward employment goals. This research project will help inform the current review of the Employment Strategy's action plan.

The research presented in this report is part of a larger research program that includes:

1. An **evidence review** that draws on data from over 150 published articles and reports and 34 experts (academics, senior government and non-government executives who hold expertise in disability employment policy). The review identifies interventions that improve employment outcomes for people with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum, and/or psychosocial disability. The evidence review was commissioned by the NDIA and was undertaken by the University of Melbourne in collaboration with the University of NSW and the Brotherhood of St Laurence. The findings from this research project are available on the [NDIS website](#).
2. A data analysis report using NDIS participant outcomes data to identify factors associated with finding or keeping a job. Employment outcomes for NDIS participants as at 31 December 2020; Employment outcomes for families and carers of NDIS participants as at 31 December 2020. The findings from this research project are available on the [NDIS website](#).

3.1.1 What we know from NDIS data about employment

The recent [employment outcomes report](#) that investigated the employment experiences of NDIS participants, found that as of 30 December 2020 only 17% of participants were working in a paid job at baseline (19% for those aged 15 to 24, 40% and for those aged 25 to 44). Overall, 36% of participants aged 15 and over who had a paid job at baseline were

working 30 or more hours per week. Of those employed, 48% were in open employment with full award wages and 34% were working in an Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE).

Approximately two-thirds of all NDIS participants have an intellectual disability, are on the autism spectrum, and/or have a psychosocial disability. Participants aged 15 to 24 years in this cohort have some of the lowest employment levels on entry to the scheme (16% for intellectual disabilities, 14% autism spectrum, 10% psychosocial disabilities). Participants (aged 25 years and over) with intellectual disability and Down syndrome were the least likely to be in open employment on full award wage (i.e. not reduced or subsidised wages) (8% and 13% respectively), followed by participants on the autism spectrum (35.1%) compared with an overall average of 47%.

Overall, 70% of participants aged 15 and over who had a paid job at baseline said they get the support they need to do their job. However, participants working in an ADE were more likely to say they get the support they need to do their job (within each disability type), whereas participants in open employment with full award wages were less likely. Longitudinal analysis suggests that participants who have a work goal and employment funding in their NDIS plans have a higher chance of finding paid employment at review than those who do not.

This report also provides some valuable insights on the key drivers of employment success, such as receiving support to find a job, educational attainment and achieving independence in daily living activities, using administrative data.

3.1.2 What we know from the literature about employment

Employment has many benefits for people with cognitive and/or psychosocial disability including increased self-esteem, self-confidence, and levels of independence (Almalky 2020). However, they experience disproportionate barriers to social, community and economic participation compared to people with either physical disability or no disability (Noel, Oulvey, Drake & Bond 2017; Gooding, Anderson & McVilly 2017) mainly due to a narrowing of the definition of job seeking, negative stereotypes, and long periods of unemployment.

A recent literature review undertaken for the NDIA on employment and economic participation of people with intellectual disability, autism and school leavers found that barriers to employment were at various levels (Crosbie, Murfitt, Hayward and Wilson 2019), including:

- Societal (institutions, structures, infrastructure, attitudes);
- Community (employers, businesses, and service providers);
- Relationship (family, friends, teachers and peers); and
- Individuals (and their family and friends).

Barriers at the individual level included disability type and severity, the intersection with other factors such as gender and socio-economic status, level of education attainment, previous work experience, internalised oppression, and individual capacity building. At the level of community and relationships, barriers included, expectations related to the person, transition

from school, employment support services, inclusive workplaces and collaboration between agencies. At the level of society, barriers included attitudes, community infrastructure, legislation, policy and funding, income support, siloed and complex service systems and work structure (Crosbie et al 2019).

Barriers specific to people with intellectual disability include a narrowing of the definition of job seeking (Meltzer et al. 2020), an assumption that people with intellectual disability are more suited to unpaid voluntary roles (Richards & Flynn, 2020), lack of work experience and transportation (Noel, Oulvey, Drake, & Bond 2017) to finding and maintaining employment. Further, there is a missing public and policy discourse of career development for people with intellectual disability (Carlson, Morningstar, & Munandar 2020). For people on the autism spectrum, job fitness, defined as a matching people's interests, abilities, preferences and strengths has been noted as an important facilitator for people on the autism spectrum to find, maintain, and grow in employment (Harmuth et al 2018; Hurlbutt & Chalmers 2004).

A large cross-sectional study conducted in the United States of America (USA) found people with psychiatric disabilities were more likely to have longer periods of unemployment compared with people with physical disabilities only (Sevak & Khan, 2017). Flexible work schedules and modified work duties were found to be associated with increased employment retention (Sevak & Khan, 2017). A more recent USA cross-sectional study reported self-employment and microenterprises were a potential pathway back to employment following experiences of discrimination and stigma in the workforce (Ostrow, Smith, Penney, & Shumway, 2019).

Despite the availability of literature specific to employment for people with disability, the barriers to employment specific to NDIS participants are less understood. In 2018, the Nous Group, an Australian-founded management consulting firm, were commissioned by the Department of Jobs and Small Business to undertake a consultation project to inform the development of the future employment services model (Nous 2018). A key finding was the need to better support job seekers who face multiple barriers to employment and provide more intensive and tailored support for those most disadvantaged. This consultation project involved over 500 external stakeholders but only nine job seekers.

Understanding the barriers and enablers to employment from a NDIS participant and planning perspective is require to help inform what supports they require for improved employment outcomes.

3.2 The NDIS is part of a broader employment ecosystem

The NDIS is one part of a wide and complex network of employment-related services and organisations, often referred to as the employment ecosystem (Figure 1). NDIS participants are required to navigate this system to get ready for, find and maintain employment.

This ecosystem also includes the [NDIS Participant Employment Strategy](#) and the [National Disability Employment Strategy](#).

FIGURE 1: Employment ecosystem and the NDIS



3.2.1 NDIS participant employment strategy

In 2019, the NDIA developed and released an NDIS participant employment strategy (2019-2022) which aims to have 30% of NDIS participants of working age in paid work by mid-2023 (NDIA, 2019).

The five key focus areas of the strategy are:

1. Participant employment goals and aspirations in NDIS plans;
2. Participant choice and control over pathways to employment;
3. Market developments that improve the path to paid work and support the career development of NDIS participants;
4. The confidence of employers to employ NDIS participants; and
5. NDIA leading by example as a government employer.

The NDIS participant employment strategy specifically addresses employment for NDIS participants. The Australian Government, through the Department of Social Services, is developing a [National Disability Employment Strategy](#) to increase employment opportunities for people with disability in Australia more broadly. The strategies will be complementary, each playing a role in the broader employment ecosystem to build employer confidence and support people with disability to achieve their employment goals.

Both employment strategies will act as key elements of the [National Disability Strategy](#) which aims to increase disability inclusion in Australian society so that people with disability can fully participate as citizens.

Impacts of COVID on the Australian labour market

In 2020, Australians experienced greater restrictions on their economic and community participation activities due to measures to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. From late February, Australia started responding to the threat of COVID-19 and, as case numbers increased, States and Territories enforced stay-at-home measures. Australians experienced restrictions on their economic and community participation activities. Across the Australian population unemployment rose to 6.6% in December 2020 (7.5% at its peak in July 2020) from 5.2% prior to COVID-19 restrictions (ABS 2020). It is likely that people with cognitive disability encountered greater levels of disadvantage compared to people without disabilities (Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability 2020). As the pandemic continues to disrupt workplaces, the competition for jobs in 2021 will be fierce, and people with disability will likely be at a significant disadvantage (State of Disability Report 2020 NDS).

The Employment strategy review

While the NDIA remains committed to the original participant focused vision, goals and focus areas of the Strategy and the NDIS Corporate Plan goals, it is developing some new priorities for 2021, which will strengthen some activities, re-think others, and promote new ideas to improve employment outcomes for participants.

3.3 The research

This research project aimed to explore the pathways, enablers and barriers to paid employment for NDIS participants with intellectual disability, autism spectrum and/or psychosocial disability. This was from the perspectives of NDIS participants and their family, carers and other supporters, and NDIS planners, Local Area Coordinators (LACs), Partners in the Community (PiTC) and other NDIS service delivery staff (such as Subject Matter Experts [SME]).

Specifically it sought to:

- understand and explore participants' experiences and the pathways to paid employment;
- explore the barriers and enablers to finding and keeping a job, specific to these NDIS participants; and
- identify the information and supports required by participants (families, carers or supporters) to help them develop employment goals and get ready for work.

The findings from this research project alongside the [evidence review](#) and the [employment outcomes report](#) will inform the Agency's targeted approach to delivering the Participant Employment Strategy in 2021-2022 and will continue to do so. The research will also be used to develop participant-facing resources to support participants to implement their plan and resources for front-line staff to use in conversations with participants to help them find and keep a job.

While the focus of this research was to primarily take a NDIA lens, due to the interdependent nature of disability supports and services, the research looked to understand the barriers and enablers to employment within the broader employment ecosystem. Exploring participants' experiences within the broader system can also help to inform the [National Disability Employment Strategy](#) to bring greater coherence to the experience of participant in navigating employment supports and services.

4. Research methods

This research combined:

- In-depth interviews with NDIS participants (families, carers or supporters) aged 14 to 44 years.
- Online interviews and focus groups with NDIS planners, LACs, PiTC and SMEs and an online survey.
- Interview data from NDIS research participants were linked to data held by the NDIA to explore barriers and enablers to employment by disability type, level of impairment, and employment status.

Consultation was undertaken to inform the focus of the research.

Details on the methods of each component of this research are described below.

This research project was funded by the NDIA and approved by Monash Health Human Ethics Committee (RES-20-0000-276A).

4.1 Qualitative research design

The research design was informed by three participant consultants with lived experience representing all three of the disability cohorts. The participant consultants shared their expertise as people with lived experience of a disability and therefore contributed to the research design. This ensured the design and methods reflected the needs of the participants, by providing input into the interview schedules (Appendix 3), and the data analysis to check the validity of the findings and readability of the report. Further input was sought from an external expert panel (researchers, industry partners and NDIA subject matter experts) in disability employment, who advised on the research design, gaps in the knowledge base and practical considerations of undertaking this research across these cohorts.

4.1.1 NDIS participant interviews

NDIS participants across Australia were invited to be part of the research if they identified as having intellectual disability, Down syndrome, autism spectrum and/or psychosocial disability and were aged between 14 and 44 years old. Parents, carers and other supporters of NDIS participants for the same disability cohorts were also invited along with parents and guardians of young NDIS participants seven years and over.

Purposive sampling (Campbell, Greenwood et al. 2020) was used to match participants to the objectives of this research. Participants (and their supporters) were purposively sampled for disability type, age, gender, state/territory, level of disability impairment and employment status. We aimed to undertake 80-100 interviews with final sample dependent on reaching data saturation.

Participants were mainly recruited through the Participant Engagement Group at the NDIA (people who have previously signed-up to receive information about paid and unpaid consultation opportunities with the NDIA), the NDIS website, peak bodies, social media and disability providers and advocacy groups.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, telephone or email depending on the person's choice. Face-to-face interviews were not possible due to COVID-19 physical distancing measures. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded and transcribed by a transcriber who had signed a confidentiality agreement. Those who chose to complete email interviews were sent the questions in a Microsoft Word document. Interviews took place between July 2020 and December 2020.

Research participants provided informed consent, including written consent of one parent for NDIS participants aged 14 and 17 years. Plain English and Easy Read information explained the research and gave participants the time to think about participating. Participants were encouraged to speak to someone they trusted about the research before consenting to the interview. Continuous assessment of consent and potential for distress was undertaken throughout the interview by the researcher. Participants were advised they could stop the interview at any time.

Research participants speaking about NDIS participants that they support were encouraged to seek permission from the person to share their experiences with the research team.

Research participants were paid for their time in-line with the NDIA Participant Engagement Payment Policy.

4.1.2 NDIS staff interviews, focus groups and survey

NDIS service delivery staff (including planners, LACs, PiTC and other staff such as SMEs) from all states and territories were invited to participate in the research. They were recruited for interviews and focus groups via regional networks and through internal communication channels such as the NDIA intranet. Interviews and focus groups were conducted between June 2020 and August 2020.

An online survey, based on the themes from the interviews and focus groups, was conducted between 18th December 2020 and 19th January 2021. The survey was open to service delivery staff across all states and territories. Recruitment of staff for the online survey involved emails through the Employment Outcomes Branch networks and through an Intranet and Huddle notice. The results from the survey were used to triangulate the qualitative findings from the focus groups and interviews and to provide greater context and perspective of the challenges being faced by participants.

4.2 Data linkage to NDIA data

Consent was obtained from NDIS participants for linkage of interviews with NDIA administrative data (that is collected as part of participants' engagement with the NDIA). These data were used to provide a description of the sample characteristics and to enable analysis of key findings across sub groups. Most NDIS participants (87%) represented in this

research gave consent for their interview data to be linked to NDIA participant administrative data. Appendix 1, Table 1, details the linked data from the research participants and compares to the data about NDIS participants in the disability cohorts.

4.3 Data analysis

4.3.1 Qualitative – interviews and focus groups

The interviews and focus groups data were analysed and coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2014) by three of the researchers. The thematic coding involved a process of reading the interview and focus group transcripts and allocating text to different categories (codes). Emerging themes and recurring patterns of interest were also identified and coded (Braun & Clarke 2014). Iterative analysis was used; that is, the data were examined, coded and compared until saturation was reached (i.e. no more new codes/themes were identified). This involved both inductive (from the data) and deductive coding (from pre-determined themes from the literature and internal and external consultation) (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006). The resulting codes were collapsed into themes and explored in relation to the research objectives. The three research consultants with lived experience assisted to ensure consistency and interpretation of findings, checking them against their own lived experience and understanding. Further, the preliminary findings, based on initial coding, were presented to internal NDIA stakeholders who provided expert feedback on the direction of the research. The computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 20.3, was used to aid the coding.

Themes identified in the research are presented within each of the sections of the results with example quotes from the interviews and focus groups. Where applicable, these are supported with the findings from the survey with NDIS service delivery staff. Quotes have been edited for readability and all names and places have been changed to protect anonymity.

The qualitative themes presented in this report are ones that were common to the participants in this research and mentioned by more than a few participants. To support readers to know how common the different themes were the terms ‘some participants’, and ‘many participants’ have been used. ‘Some participants’ indicates that less than half of the participants mentioned this. ‘Many participants’ indicates that this theme or sub-theme was mentioned by more than 50% of the cohort.

Research participants’ include all of those who participated in the research. When we refer to ‘NDIS participants’ in the findings we include those who spoke to the participant experience such as family, carers and supporters. ‘NDIS service delivery staff’ refers to data collected from NDIS planners or delegates, LACs, PiTCs and SMEs.

4.3.2 Quantitative – online survey of NDIS service delivery staff

The survey was analysed using descriptive statistics in Excel. The survey results were compared with the staff interviews and focus groups to validate the findings in a larger sample. Descriptive analysis was used to report linked NDIS participant data.

5. Findings

5.1 Research participant characteristics

A total of 121 people participated in the interviews and focus groups (representing 85 NDIS participants, families and carers, and 37 NDIS service delivery staff). A total of 142 service delivery staff completed the online survey.

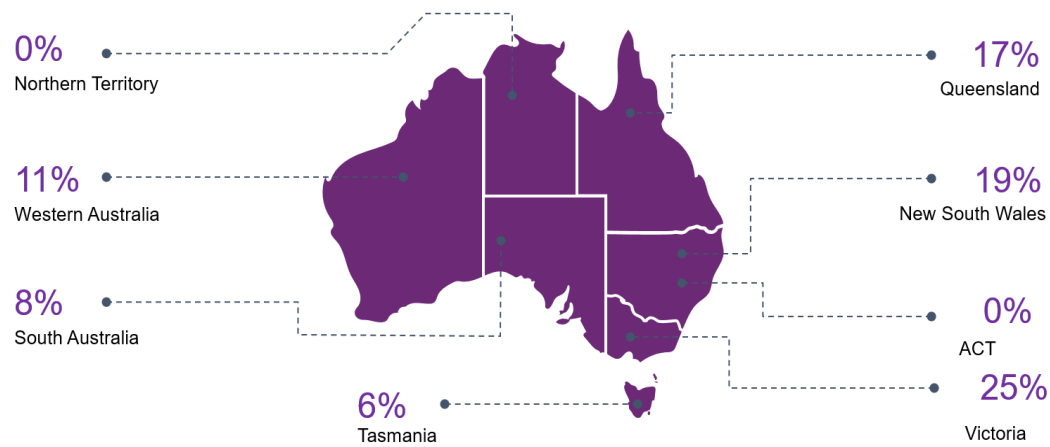
Forty-six parents, carers and supporters were interviewed along with 39 NDIS participants. This represented 86 NDIS participants aged between 7 and 44 years with a primary or secondary disability of:

- Intellectual disability or Down syndrome (n=35),
- Autism spectrum (n=30),
- Psychosocial disability (n=21).

As some interviewees spoke about multiple NDIS participants the number of interviews do not match the number of NDIS participants. In some cases both the NDIS participant and the person who supports them were interviewed resulting in two interviews about the same NDIS participant.

The sample of NDIS participants represented all states and territories of Australia except for the Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory (Figure 1). Overview of the NDIS participants represented in the research is summarised in Table 1. A detailed summary of NDIS participants is described in Appendix 1. Participant characteristics by group and compared to the greater NDIS participant population are summarised in Appendix 4.

FIGURE 2: NDIS participants' state of residence



Infographic by Slidesgo.com

Compared to the population of NDIS scheme participants with intellectual disability, Down syndrome, on the autism spectrum, and/or with psychosocial disability, the sample in this research were:

- higher educated (TAFE/Diploma/Other (33% compared to 15%);
- more likely to have a paid job (27% compared to 12%);
- more likely to want a job if not currently employed (39% compared to 20%); and
- more likely to have an employment goal in their latest plan (44% compared to 23%).

The sample in this research were less likely to be culturally and linguistically diverse (4% compared to 9%) or be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (4% compared to 7%).

Table 2 summarises the NDIS service delivery staff who participated in this research. A detailed summary of the characteristics of service delivery staff who participated in the online survey is available in Appendix 2.

NDIS service delivery staff were well represented in the survey and the interviews and focus groups. Staff working in the Northern Territory (NT) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) were under-represented in the interviews and focus groups. The majority (71%) of survey respondents were women and 24% was a staff member with a disability.

TABLE 1: Participant characteristics

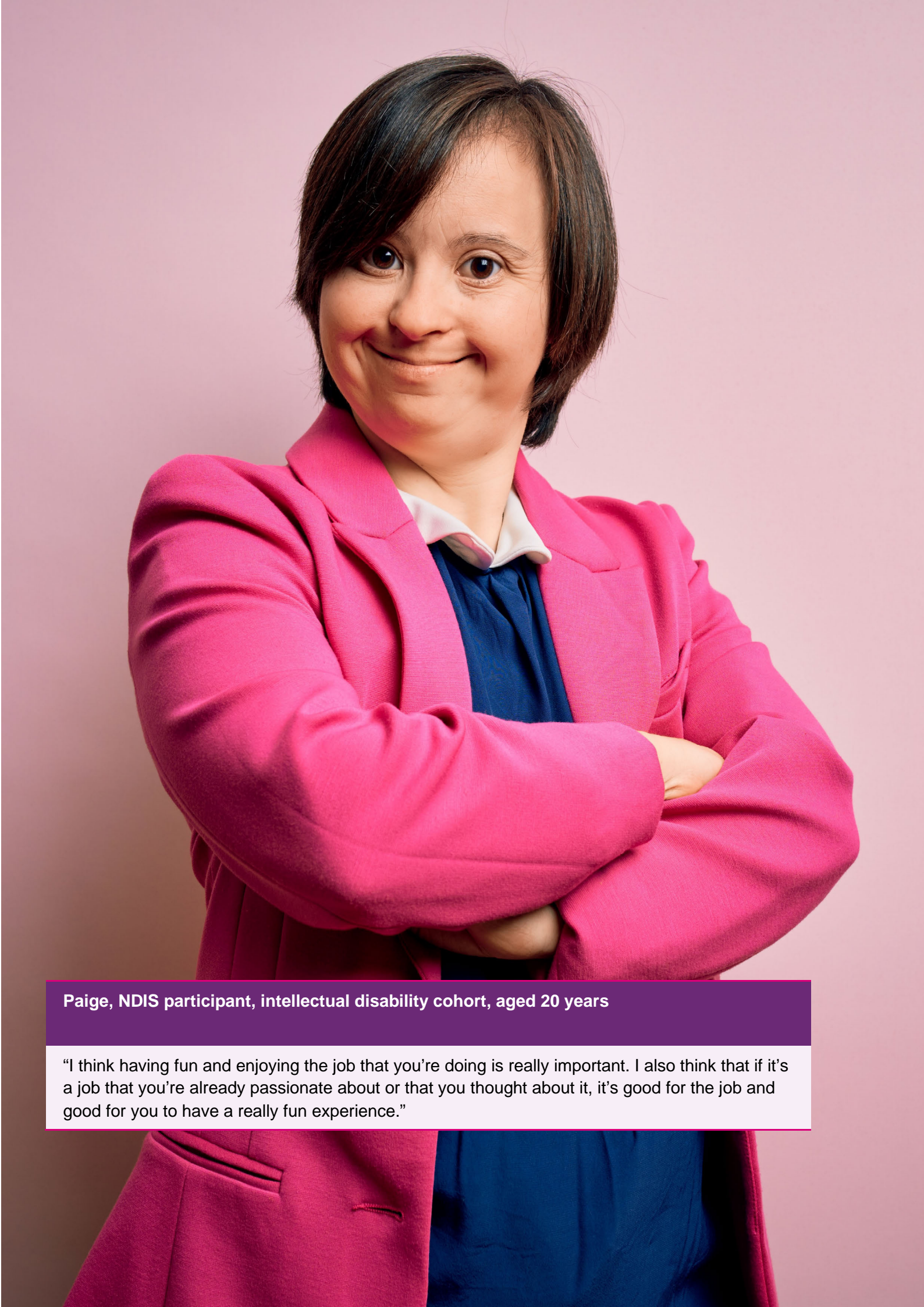
| Characteristics | Intellectual disability | Autism spectrum | Psychosocial disability | Total |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------|
| NDIS participants represented* | 35 | 30 | 21 | 86 |
| Age in years | | | | |
| 7 – 13 | 1 | 9 | 0 | 10 |
| 14 – 17 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| 18 – 24 | 12 | 10 | 1 | 23 |
| 25 – 34 | 11 | 6 | 2 | 19 |
| 35 – 44 | 9 | 3 | 15 | 27 |
| State and territory | | | | |
| Vic | 9 | 5 | 11 | 25 |
| NSW | 7 | 10 | 2 | 19 |
| Qld | 6 | 6 | 4 | 16 |
| SA | 4 | 2 | 1 | 7 |
| WA | 5 | 6 | 0 | 11 |
| Tas | 3 | 1 | 2 | 6 |
| NT | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ACT | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Gender | | | | |
| Male | 16 | 24 | 7 | 49 |
| Female | 17 | 5 | 12 | 36 |
| Gender fluid | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Geographical area | | | | |
| Metro | 22 | 15 | 10 | 49 |
| Regional | 9 | 8 | 7 | 24 |
| Rural | 2 | 3 | 1 | 6 |
| Identity, culture and language | | | | |
| ATSI | 2 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| CALD | 4 | 5 | 5 | 14 |
| LGBTIQA+ | 1 | 4 | 4 | 9 |

ATSI Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; CALD Culturally and linguistically diverse; LGBTIQA+ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual and + to represent the many more identities and affirmed genders

*Some NDIS participants had more than one disability, so they were allocated into the cohort that they identified with the most.

TABLE 2: NDIS service delivery staff

| Research Participants | LACs | Planners or delegates | Other | Total |
|--|-------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Focus groups or interviews | 21 | 10 | 6 | 37 |
| Completed online survey | 71 | 62 | 9 | 142 |
| State and territory (service delivery staff in focus groups and interviews) | | | | |
| Vic | 6 | 1 | 0 | 7 |
| NSW | 6 | 2 | 0 | 8 |
| Qld | 2 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| SA | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| WA | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Tas | 2 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| NT | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ACT | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| NSW/ACT | 0 | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Vic/Tas | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |



Paige, NDIS participant, intellectual disability cohort, aged 20 years

“I think having fun and enjoying the job that you’re doing is really important. I also think that if it’s a job that you’re already passionate about or that you thought about it, it’s good for the job and good for you to have a really fun experience.”

5.2 Employment is important to participants

Participants liked many aspects about having a job. Increasing their social connections and making friends was one of the most mentioned reasons for working. Helping other people was also important for many. For some this meant using their own lived experience of disability and for others it was helping the public. Participants noted a range of positive emotions associated with paid employment including feeling proud, having a sense of purpose, feeling challenged and enthusiastic. Work that was meaningful and not tokenistic was desirable along with having welcoming and supportive colleagues.

I just like the atmosphere here. It's very friendly and welcoming and that. Yeah. And the people are nice too. (Sarbear, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability, aged 40 years)

5.3 Types of employment

At their latest plan review (or first plan), 75 NDIS participants told the NDIA about their employment status. Of these: 20 worked in paid employment; 29 wanted employment but did not have paid work; nine unemployed and did not want employment; and employment status was unknown for the remaining 17 participants. Thirty-three had an employment goal within their current plans. However, this was not reflective of whether people wanted employment in the future. Instead, some participants spoke about wanting employment in the future once they felt that they were ready, but were unsure about when this would be.

Participants represented a range of employment stages, including young people (aged 7 to school leaver), through to people who had a lot of work experience, to those who had worked in the same job for many years. There was also a large breadth of types of employment requiring different levels of skill and education. Participants described their experiences engaging in and pursuing four key types of employment:

1. Open employment (with and without support)
2. Microenterprises and self-employment
3. Employment related to lived experience
4. Australian Disability Enterprises

NDIS participants experienced a range of barriers and enablers to finding and maintaining employment within all of these types of jobs. These are explored in detail in the following sections of the report.

Open employment

NDIS participants across all disability cohorts worked in a variety of roles in open employment, described as the broader employment market. Participants in open employment worked in jobs such as manual labour, retail, and administrative work. Some participants were able to work unsupported while others had support, such as support workers, attend their workplace.

Microenterprises and self-employment

Participants defined microenterprise and self-employment as working for themselves including on a very small scale. This type of employment offered participants the opportunity to engage in employment that meets their interests while supporting them to develop work related skills and experience. Microenterprises may gain importance as the general employment market becomes tighter.

The good things are that I can make this job become what I need it to be – set my own hours, choose my own support team when needed, and I can work from home. The down sides can be it can be isolating (working from home), I have to keep the momentum going myself – which can be really hard sometimes – and I am responsible for my income. (Mikayla, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, 35 years)

Employment related to lived experience

Some participants worked in employment relating to their lived experience. This included as mental health support workers, peer supporters, and consultants and in disability advocacy organisations. This was an attractive option for some NDIS participants where they could draw on their expertise and support others. NDIS participants noted that training opportunities for employment related to lived-experience could be cost prohibitive if participants already have the same or higher level of education or training.

My idea is that I would like to do support coordination, psychological education as a peer worker because talking to other people with mental illness about what's helped me and what I've experienced and things like that. (Emma, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 42 years)

Australian Disability Enterprise (ADEs)

Nine of the NDIS participants in this research currently work in ADEs. ADEs are generally not for profit organisations that provide support for people with disability to undertake in-house work activities such as packaging, or garden nursery work. They were described as offering supported employment and a sense of community connection to participants. There were a limited number of work activities undertaken by the NDIS participants in the ADEs, including packaging and other minimal labour tasks. However, ADEs can also act as a barrier for participants seeking open employment and progressing their careers. Section 4.4.5 explores this further.

5.4 Avenues into employment

According to NDIS participant data, 38% of the participants in this research who consented to their NDIA data being accessed (n=33) had an employment goal in their current plan.

The NDIS participants represented in this research gained employment through a variety of avenues. The four key avenues to employment were:

1. Own and family's informal networks
2. Community participation and volunteering
3. Work experience
4. Government funded employment services

While these are not the only avenues to finding employment, these were the most commonly referred to by the research participants. Section 5.4 discusses the barriers or enablers related to each avenue.

Own and family's informal networks

Many participants reported gaining employment through opportunities arising from activating their own informal networks, which included a mixture of parents approaching employers directly, and recommendations from friends and people known to the participant. Gaining employment through participants' own networks did assist in increasing acceptance to an individual's disability and active support in the initial stages of gaining employment.

Community participation and volunteering

Local volunteering and community participation (much of which is funded through the NDIS) supported the development of skills and abilities and could lead to paid employment for some NDIS participants in this research. These activities were opportunities to increase confidence and skill through having a feeling of a sense of purpose and receiving respect. These also lead to widening own networks where employment opportunities emerged for some participants.

I did [volunteering] after studying through TAFE. I went to a Nursing Home up in Queensland and I got a job out of that. I did a week voluntary and then they asked me if I wanted a job so I worked a year doing that. (Sarbear, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 40 years)

Work experience

Work experience offered a structured pathway for participants to meet potential employers. Work experience was often organised by schools, work ready programs, and own networks. This flowed on for some participants finding ongoing employment where they had undertaken their work experience.

Government funded employment services

Disability Employment Services (DES) are a commonwealth government funded support to assist participants to find employment, supporting people with disability with a range of work related activities such as resume development, finding opportunities and accessing workplace adjustments. Participants had mixed success in receiving effective support from DES to find employment. Some participants found employment with the assistance of a DES provider. However, others stayed with DES providers for many years without success. This is discussed further in Section 5.4.5.

School Leavers Employment Supports (SLES) are NDIS funded and provide support to NDIS participants who are in the final years of school or have recently left school. SLES programs focus on increasing young participant's confidence, communication time-management and travel. It is also an opportunity for participants to explore the types of careers they may like to have and can include work experience. Some participants found that engagement with SLES helped them to become work ready. Section 4.3.2 discusses this further.

5.5 Barriers and enablers to employment

The following section explores the barriers and enablers to employment. Themes that evolved from the data are presented in five categories:

1. Common experiences across all levels of employment
2. School leaver and entry level employment
3. NDIS participants re-entering the workforce
4. Maintaining employment, career progress and changing jobs
5. System barriers and blockers to employment

Each section includes key findings and quotes from interviews and staff focus groups. Online survey data is presented at the end of each section to support these data. Full survey results are in Appendix 2 on page 74.



Lady Nova, mother of Starkid, autism spectrum cohort, aged 17 years

“He worked in a very small retail situation in the back room of a computer repair shop. So he was working with a fellow who owned the business who has ADHD and some autistic traits, so he understood what Starkid was going through. He was a great role model and saying, “You know, I’ve got issues too mate. You can do this. This is fine. Keep going. You’re doing well”. So he knew exactly how to manage some of Starkid’s behaviours and fears so that was awesome”.

5.5.1 Common experiences across all levels of employment

Under this category the common themes across all participants at all levels of employment were explored. Five key themes were identified.

1. Supporting the individual first: meeting primary needs and building self-confidence
2. Understanding participant abilities and support needs to enable employment
3. Improving the roadmap to navigating supports and information
4. Employment market: inclusive employment options
5. Enabling access to employment opportunities with transport and travel training

Supporting the individual first: meeting primary needs and building self-confidence

Key points

- Many NDIS participants were lacking in self-confidence as an employable person. Employment related capacity building supports were reported to play an important role in increasing self-efficacy.
- Having support to meet base level needs such as daily living, stable accommodation, mental and physical health was an important enabler for participants to have the energy and time to find and maintain employment.
- Families can raise expectations and help to grow the career aspirations of participants

Having base level needs met, including stable accommodation, mental health access to allied health professionals, either through NDIS funding or other formal and informal supports, allowed participants to focus their energies to look for and/or maintain employment. Jack, who is an NDIS participant aged 34 years in the autism spectrum cohort, relayed an experience:

Unfortunately, I have never been in the mind frame to do any work experience or paid work because until I moved into this unit 12 years ago, I didn't have stable accommodation. (Jack, NDIS participant, autism spectrum cohort, aged 34 years)

Supports, such as seeing an allied health professionals, were identified as facilitating and building confidence and self-efficacy – where an individual has the self-belief in their capacity to exert control over their life (Bandura, 1977). Some NDIS participants needed to rebuild their confidence after being unemployed or having experiences of workplace bullying or discrimination, or periods out of the workforce due to psychosocial disability.

Seeing a psychologist has been hugely beneficial with working on my self-image and work things and the concept of safety at work and yeah, I guess, just the whole prospect of it [work]. (Monique, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 43 years)

Families play a key role in supporting participants to grow work and career aspirations and see themselves as employable. For some families this started when participants were children through exploring options with them and thinking about their interests and skills. Other families struggled to visualise their young children ever being employed.

I cannot see my child in a paid position at this stage based on her current disability challenges. (Sheena, mother of Lacy, autism spectrum cohort, aged 11 years)

‘Participants being disengaged from pursuing employment goals’ was identified by NDIS service delivery staff as one of the most important barriers when assisting participants to identify and work towards employment. This was the highest ranked barrier for working with participants in the psychosocial disability cohort (53% of staff), and the third highest ranked barrier for working with participants in the intellectual disability and autism spectrum cohorts (35% of respondents for both cohorts).

More than a third of service delivery staff survey respondents also ranked ‘low self-perception of employability’ in the top three barriers for NDIS participants with psychosocial disability to finding open employment.

Understanding participant abilities and support needs to enable employment

Key points

- Participants often felt their disability was not well understood by service delivery staff, especially for participants in the autism spectrum and psychosocial disability cohorts.
- Person-centred planning was identified as crucial in supporting employment options better matched to participant skills and interests.
- Informal supports such as family and peer groups play an important role in identifying employment options aligned with participants’ skills and interests.

Participants reported feeling that staff often misunderstood their capabilities and their need for supports in the workplace, especially for participants in the autism spectrum and psychosocial disability cohorts. This may present as a complex planning scenario for participants with less visible disabilities as a person’s support needs may not be as obvious, as with other disabilities. When skills and capabilities were not well understood, it can lead to underemployment and participant’s disillusionment with the employment process.

The last [NDIS service staff] we had was ... fantastic but the first one we had just didn't understand that things like asking your classmate to take to you the toilet is not appropriate ... My biggest fear is that my next planning meeting I'm not going to get the same guy and we're going to lose all our funding again. (Felicia, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 42 years)

Having a consistent contact and building rapport with NDIS service delivery staff was seen to facilitate positive planning experiences, trust in the scheme and increasing a participant's awareness of the supports available. Communication adjustments including giving people time to respond to questions may help participants to have positive planning meetings and build rapport with service delivery staff. Environmental factors such as noise and lighting was also noted to be distracting for participants.

I couldn't hear what she [LAC] was saying properly. I was having difficulty articulating myself. And I ended up just going, "Yes, ma'am, yes, ma'am," sort of thing, and just wondering when the meeting was going to end. I was looking for an out. (Kylie, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 43 years)

More than half of all service delivery staff ranked 'lack of individualised support to find work that meets the needs of participants' in the top three barriers for NDIS participants finding open employment for all three cohorts (by 43% of staff for intellectual disability, 50% for autism spectrum and 52% for psychosocial disability) (Table 3, Appendix 2).

Navigating employment supports and improving access to information

Key points

- NDIS participants struggled to ascertain what employment-related supports were available and funded by the NDIS.
- NDIS service delivery staff wanted more clarity on the role of the NDIS in supporting employment pathways compared with DES.
- Participants suggested an 'employment navigator' which is defined as an expert who understands the sector and supports available would help navigate supports.

NDIS participants found it difficult to navigate all of the information available about getting ready for, finding, and maintaining or changing employment, although there was a general consensus that specific guidance on employment pathways and supports is needed. Service delivery staff highlighted this as a particularly important barrier for participants with intellectual disability. In the online survey, 47% of staff ranked "not knowing how to navigate the options available" as the second most important barrier to finding employment for participants for people with intellectual disability.

It was agreed that planning staff and support coordinators were best placed to provide this information. The following exchange took place between Gia and her mother Tina:

Tina: Do you remember the planning session, and she didn't bring up anything there. It would have been more helpful if the planner would have said, "Well, Gia, you're this age now, is there things that you might want to learn about or those sort of things", so like people offering you rather than always having to think about it yourself?

Gia: Yeah, like maybe giving me a few suggestions that, you know, giving me a recommendation that I might be good at.

(Gia, NDIS participant, intellectual disability cohort, aged 20 years)

NDIS participants and NDIS service delivery staff noted the usefulness of peer support mentorship on locating available employment supports and options.

[I can foresee] within the NDIA, somebody taking a peer support role in supporting people to develop goals or to look at what services are available. (Nathan, planning staff, Tasmania, interview)

Having an actual peer support that can mentor us and help us say, "OK, these are the ones [workplace supports] that you fight for, and these are the ones that you let pass". (Shannon, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 38 years)

Many LACs and NDIS planners spoke about their confusion about the role of the NDIS in supporting participants.

I find the whole system quite confusing to be out there really... it's quite confusing for people to know where to go and who to get support from. (Anna, LAC, Tasmania)

Lack of person-centred support to find work that meets the needs of participants was also identified as an important barrier to finding employment for participants in the online survey. It was ranked the most important barrier for participants with psychosocial disability (by 52% of staff respondents), and third greatest barrier for those with intellectual disability and or on the autism spectrum (by 43% and 50% respectively), in the online survey.

Nearly one in three service delivery staff reported not being able to find the information they need to develop and implement employment goals within participants' plan. Approximately half of all service delivery staff reported it was difficult or very difficult to find up-to-date information on what supports or services the NDIS will fund (52%) and are available (46%) (Table 6, Appendix 2).

In the online survey, NDIS service delivery staff were asked to rank how helpful different information sources were for them to support NDIS participants with their employment-related goals. The NDIS intranet and speaking to colleagues were reported as the most accessed

resources when supporting participants to develop employment goals. The NDIS website and Disability Employment Services Website (e.g., JobAccess) was frequently used to support participants to implement their employment goals.

Inclusivity in the employment market

Key points

- Lack of inclusive employers (both large and small businesses who welcome and support people with disability) was consistently noted as a major barrier by NDIS participants, their family, carers and supporters and also NDIS service delivery staff.
- Participants and service delivery staff felt the NDIA could play a role in providing a best practice example of positive employment of people with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum, and/or with psychosocial disability, to increase awareness of the benefits and improve attitudes of employers towards hiring people with disabilities.
- Participants, family and carers experienced a number of barriers for a participant to demonstrate their attributes during the hiring process including standardised and inflexible pre-employment tests, interviews and the office environment.

Negative and stigmatising attitudes from senior managers or company owners towards hiring people with disability was perceived as the most important barrier to overcome (quoted by participants, their family, carers and other supporters, as well as NDIS service delivery staff).

Unfortunately, employers will ... say, "well, that person's got a disability they're gonna need more training, they're gonna take days off, they're gonna need more support". (Julie, LAC, South Australia, Focus group)

NDIS participants and service delivery staff identified the NDIA as leading the way in fostering inclusive attitudes, and providing equal opportunities for people with disability. Setting this example as a government organisation could influence and 'lead the way' in promoting inclusivity in other large organisations.

Some employers are still of the opinion that someone with disabilities is in a wheelchair, so it's just about ... continuously educating employers. (Susie, Service Area Manager, Queensland, Focus group)

A few participants found the recruitment processes challenging. This was primarily due to lack of clarity around expectations, whether they could take a support person and not being informed about the interview panel.

He has applied a few times for an apprenticeship and the methodology of how they go through applying for the apprenticeship has been a barrier to him ... And so a few times he has made it through the first stage but not through the second one purely because of the way that the process is structured. (Emily, mother of Kevin, autism spectrum cohort, aged 19 years)

This finding was confirmed by the online survey. Staff reported that lack of inclusive employers was the greatest barrier for participants in the intellectual disability cohort (by 47% of staff), and second for autism spectrum (by 51% of staff) and psychosocial disability cohorts (by 43%). This barrier was reported as a greater issue post COVID.

Enabling access to employment opportunities with transport and travel training

Key points

- Lack of suitable transport options restricted participant's access to appropriate employment.
- Travel training to and from work and work experience facilitated independence and accessibility to employment options.
- Supporting participants to gain a driver's licence was identified as an enabler to employment.

The importance of transport and travel training (defined as supporting a person to increase capacity to travel independently) was a common theme. For some participants identified the lack of accessible and appropriate travel as a barrier to accessing their preferred employment. The opportunity to access travel training provided skill and confidence in enabling participants to travel independently to and from work.

The bad [part of the job is] it is a long way to travel on the bus. (Louise, mother of Morgan, intellectual disability cohort, aged 32 years)

Being supported to prepare for learner and probationary driver licenses was described by some participants as a way of gaining independence and leading to a broader range of job opportunities. It was also noted that it looked favourable on resumes.



Fontaine, intellectual disability cohort, aged 30 years

“I was actually doing a work placement through – I think I was doing it through school or something, through college, and then a couple of years later I actually had a phone call from one of the supervisors who was working here, and she gave me a call to say if I was liking to work here, and she basically explained that she noticed that I was in the files for doing a work experience in the past, and I think she just offered to say, if I was wanting to work. So I basically came on a day, and probably spent maybe three or four hours in the afternoon, and yeah, really enjoyed it.”

5.5.2 School leaver and entry level employment

This section explores the pathways, barriers and enablers for participants with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum, and/or with psychosocial disability, to attain their first job. Four key themes were identified from the data:

1. The importance of schools
2. Building skills on a pathway to employment
3. Post-school education and training
4. Networks and the impact of role models

Entry level employment refers to participants who are seeking a job for the first time and have not been in the workforce before. Most commonly these are school leavers aged 14 – 24 years, and for participants with intellectual disability this could be at any age. Entry level employment options were described as both open and supported employment, mostly in the hospitality sector including retail, cafes, fast food restaurants, supermarkets, shopping centres, and ADEs.

Pathways identified into entry level employment included work experience through school, building skills and capacity with SLES funding, accessing DES and job ready programs, as well as post school education and training.

The strategies to enable employment were mostly provided by family, carers and other supporters by helping participants find employment within their own networks. Strategies included teaching participants about the wide range of career options available, and teaching them about work routines and other job ready skills such as resume writing and interview skills.

Importance of schools

Key points

- Schools play an important role in identifying an individual's skills and interests and helping them to identify relevant employment options.
- School-based work experience acts as a facilitator for ongoing or future employment.
- There is a lack of clarity about NDIS funding for supporting work experience during school years.

Mainstream and special schools (defined as schools for students with learning needs that cannot be met in mainstream schools) play an important role in transitioning school leavers into further education or directly into a job. The school's ability to scaffold information and increase the understanding and comprehension of that information helped participants with their decision making process.

It's really important that the NDIA captures these kids before they leave school and the pathway. That they work with the schools and there is a clear pathway post [school]. (Samantha, mother of Noah, intellectual disability cohort, aged 22 years)

I did work experience at a sports centre and then I did volunteering at that workplace ... that's how I started working there and doing reception. (Harrison, NDIS participant, autism spectrum cohort, aged 33 years)

It was a perception from most participants, family and NDIS service delivery staff that work experience opportunities were offered less in special schools than mainstream. However there were some exceptions; Angelina explained that her son had engaged in a variety of work experience opportunities but, “for a special school that was pretty exceptional to have that” (Angelina, mother of William, intellectual disability cohort, aged 29).

To support the transition from school, employment-related goals should be included in a plan long before the participant is employment ready. Sheena, Faith’s mother, saw this starting during teenage years:

Capacity building and core supports should be included around age of 15 to include employment related goals. Capacity building goals would ensure strategies are in place from allied health professions in order to maintain and gain employment. (Sheena, mother of Faith, autism spectrum cohort, aged 12 years)

Some NDIS service delivery staff expressed confusion over what supports can be funded to support participants to undertake work experience whilst they are at school.

There is a gap where the participant is in high school and is looking for work experience, we don't fund sort of like an employment goal. (Margot, Planner, Western Australia)

Building skills to facilitate employment

Key points

- Parents described the skills their children need to be job ready, but were not always aware of the programs available to help increase these skills.
- There was a lack of clarity about when participants can access SLES and employment supports.

The importance of building skills (such as in creating a resume, interviewing and how to present oneself) was identified as essential to increasing the likelihood of being successful at obtaining employment. This is bolstered by skills in managing social interactions and developing a work routine. However, many were unaware of some of the programs available to teach such skills (e.g. SLES). A number of participants also described a lack of employment goals and funding in their plans to help facilitate and build these skills due to a lack of understanding about what can be funded.

Someone that can teach him interviewing skills and just how to be at work. Teaching how to deal with his disabilities in the work situation would be really helpful and then sort of being like being a translator between him and a prospective work place. (Felicia, NDIS participant, ASD/psychosocial disability cohorts, aged 42, speaking about her son Sid, NDIS participant aged 15, autism spectrum cohort)

There was an overall lack of understanding of the SLES eligibility criteria by participants, this was reinforced by service delivery staff who were unsure about the information provided and how to include it in plans. However, as providers, schools, and participants have built their understanding of SLES it is becoming easier for staff to have conversations in planning meetings about this option.

I was quite excited when SLES came in because although, at the start, [it was] a bit confusing ... but I think now a lot of the providers are offering it and a lot of the schools have heard about. I think we're having more of a conversation with that cohort [school leavers] as well. (Chris, Community Development Manager, Queensland, Focus group)

To further help with transitioning, NDIS service delivery staff and participants (and their supporters) suggested that large goals should be broken into small activities that are manageable to implement and achieve.

So it's starting with the smaller goals of getting interview techniques or a resume together and helping them through those steps. So it's almost like they don't know where to start (Margot, Planner, Western Australia, Focus group).

Post-school education and training

Key points

- A lack of post-school education and training options available for people with cognitive disability was reported.
- Receiving individually tailored and person-centred support while studying (e.g. support with executive functioning) enabled participants to complete their studies.
- Informal supporters played a key role in supporting young people to navigate post-school education.

Having the necessary qualifications was perceived as important for participants to obtain a job, particularly work that align with their interests.

I think there needs to be some kind of partnership with the NDIS and the Education Departments to prioritise learning and qualification opportunities for disabled people. Because if they want us to be employed, we can't just rock up without qualifications. (Shannon, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, 38 years old)

There are several barriers to accessing and completing education such as the upfront costs of TAFE courses if the person was ineligible for government subsidies, availability of certificate I and II TAFE courses, and access to supports for attending and completing higher education or post school training.

It's very hard to find, in fact impossible at the moment, to find a training organisation that will take on a Certificate I and II in Business Administration that would suit a person with intellectual disability, that's accessible to them. (Emily, mother of Kevin, autism spectrum cohort, aged 19 years)

Many participants reported struggling with the social aspect of studying. They felt disability support units were not accommodating this. Further, support while studying was seen as a way to reduce stress and potentially increase retention.

He was enrolled in animal studies at our local TAFE but had to pull out after a week or two because it was too stressful. So this time we can use the funding to give him additional one-on-one support to get into TAFE. (Danni, mother of Brandon, autism spectrum cohort, aged 18 years)

The importance of training was recognised by service delivery staff in the survey ranking 'ongoing support and job readiness training' as the greatest enabler for participants across all cohorts to finding open employment (ranked by 51% of staff for the intellectual disability cohort, 53% for the autism spectrum cohort and 52% psychosocial disability cohort).

Networks and the impact of role models

Key points

- Having own networks were instrumental in finding and having a positive experience in a first job.
- Role models helped show participants what is possible and broadening the perceived employment options.
- Engaging in career discussions with families early was an important enabler to help participants transition from school to employment.

Having access to own networks were described as being instrumental in providing inclusive work experiences. Participants spoke about the opportunities that were afforded when doing working experience or getting a job with people they know. This often led to positive experiences as employers would spend more time educating other staff and put in workplace adjustments that were more individualised to the participant.

One of my friend's mum, works with the Board [at a disability advocacy organisation ... she said to my friend "Try and get this job", so she's spoken to my family. Then my sister went to help me to get this one. Like getting prepared, what to say. And so, like the interview. (Leah, NDIS participant, intellectual disability cohort, aged 35 years)

Role models were seen by participants and family, carers and supporters as showing what can be possible. They were also noted as potentially igniting the desire for paid employment. High profile role models were seen as having a role in changing community and employer attitudes about disability.

I think the profile of some of the more well-known people and athletes who are getting more presence on TV ... that representation in the media is changing some attitudes ... I think that some of those people are high profile people and that's changing some perspectives. (Emily, mother of Keven, autism spectrum cohort, aged 19)

Role models provide encouragement for people within the workplace, helping to foster self-esteem. Families and carers often facilitate access to role models. Parents saw this as helping their children, including adult children, to see what is possible.

When I see like a STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths] workshop, I'll take Sophia to it so that she can be exposed to females in science. (Aphrodite, mother of Sophia, autism spectrum cohort, aged 9 years)

The survey results reinforced how important a person's own network is to enable employment. Service delivery staff ranked 'Informal supports and community' as the second most important enabler to employment for participants in the intellectual disability and autism spectrum cohorts (by 35% of staff for the intellectual disability cohort and 36% for the autism spectrum cohort), and third most important enabler to employment for participants in the psychosocial disability cohort (by 34% of staff).



Alexis, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 44 years

'I guess for me, it's been about improving myself to move into a better position. Because after being hurt at work, I didn't want to just get some basic checkout chick job and feel like bad about myself. I actually wanted to see my time off as somewhere where I could improve. And that's why I went back to university and ultimately moving into a different area that I actually have an interest'

5.5.3 NDIS participants re-entering the workforce

Participants re-entering the workforce after a break in employment faced the same barriers explained in Section 5.4.1 of this report. Breaks may be due to health issues arising from their disability or change in the job market. This often meant that participants had to overcome two obstacles, managing their disability when finding a job and being out of the employment market for a considerable time. Two additional themes that emerged from the data for this cohort were:

1. Gaps in employment history
2. Retraining for future employment

Gaps in employment history

Key points

- Long periods of unemployment was seen as a barrier to re-entry for participants due to looking unfavourable to potential employers and the stigma attached.
- Stretches of unemployment meant that some participants needed to rebuild employment skills but if they were not ready for DES then service delivery staff found it difficult to know where to refer them.

Gaps in employment created a barrier to re-employment due to employers looking unfavorably on stretches of unemployment. Some participants attempted to fill these gaps with studying or volunteering if these options were available to them. Others wanted employers who understood disability and the reasons why there may be gaps in resumes:

[Important things in a job include] flexibility. Understanding mental illness ... Understanding about flawed work history due to lack of references. (Kylie, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability, aged 43 years)

Participants who had been unemployed for a long time needed to become employment ready again and this included being used to being in a workplace again or understanding newer technologies. However, if the participant had been unemployed for a long time and were not ready for a DES, then some NDIS service delivery staff found it difficult to funnel them in the right direction.

There is a lot of long term unemployed where they've just previously felt out of the loop. [Relying] upon long term DSP, and now they would like to gain employment. And it's really difficult if they're not quite ready for DES. (Cath, LAC, focus group, NSW)

Retraining for future employment

Key points

- Retraining and returning to further education were used to improve employment prospects and work that better matched a person's skills and interests.
- Having the NDIS and receiving better supports has enabled participants with psychosocial disability and on the autism spectrum to return to further education.
- Cost of re-training and lack of access to accessible education options were barriers to participants retraining.

Retraining was sought to improve the ability to gain work that was more secure, professional and higher paid by many NDIS participants with psychosocial disability and on the autism spectrum. It was also seen as a way of moving towards employment that better matched their interests, potentially placing them in a better position to maintain that employment or progress their career.

I actually wanted to see my time off as some way I could improve. And that's why I went back to university and ultimately moving into a different area that I actually have an interest in. (Alexis, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 44 years)

NDIS funded supports including access to support workers, allied health professionals such as occupational therapists, and travel and travel training, has supported participants to retrain, which has been a positive step towards re-entering the workforce. Gaining confidence and better mental health to enable a return to study was seen as a prerequisite to returning to study for some participants.

I'm planning to get myself well enough to go back to study at TAFE, do the tertiary preparation course then hopefully go to university. But my OT has told me it could take many years to get to that point. (Jack, NDIS participant, ASD cohort, aged 34 years)

However, the cost of courses prevented some participants from retraining especially if they already had higher degrees and could not receive government schemes (e.g. HELP payments) for lower level courses. Re-training for certificates that were no-longer valid, such as aged-care certificates, was difficult for some participants who could not afford to pay for the course again. Accessing education in the right format, for example online, was also important for participants returning to education especially if they had caring responsibilities or disability needs that were not conducive to face to face education:

I don't particularly like bookkeeping but it is something I could get qualified for online and also something I could do online with minimal face to face communication required. (Phoebe, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 38 years)

5.5.4 Maintaining employment, career progress and changing jobs

Employed NDIS participants spoke about maintaining employment, progressing in their careers and/or changing jobs and the barriers and enablers experienced. Four main themes were identified:

1. Lack of focus on career progression
2. Informal supporters, such as family and carers, help participants maintain employment
3. Individually tailored workplace supports assist with job retention
4. Disclosure of disability: an enabler and barrier to maintaining employment

Lack of focus on career progression

Key points

- Career progression was not often talked about by participants, highlighting the need to support participants to think about this aspect of employment trajectories.

Language around career progression was missing in the interviews with NDIS participants, the people who represented them and the NDIS service delivery staff. Empowering participants to think about other possible employment options, how to progress their role within existing jobs, and to think of their careers as lifelong rather than seeing job attainment as the end goal can support NDIS participants to be fulfilled in their employment. While there can be a lack of inclusive employment options in the employment market, participants can be supported to advocate for themselves within workplaces.

Nicholas started in the dining room and had to approach management to progress from there after he had been doing it for 12 months. He has worked mainly on fries since however, would still like to train in other areas. (Suzy, mother of Nicholas, intellectual disability cohort, aged 20 years)

Informal supporters help participants maintain employment

Key points

- Informal supporters provided advice, support, and encouragement to enable participants to maintain employment.

Informal supporters such as family, carers and friends provided support for participants negotiating the workplace, especially regarding social aspects of the workplace and providing emotional support. Colleagues were also important supports who could contribute to an inclusive workplace culture. These informal supports were a crucial enabler for some NDIS participants to remain in their job.

[Dad] gives me like a lot of emotional support and then just help with what to say and then just like help afterwards and it's just helpful ... because I need help like negotiating like pay or like how I'm being treated or just anything and lots of emotional support because I find it pretty stressful. (Harrison, NDIS participant, autism spectrum cohort, aged 33 years)

Individually tailored workplace supports assist with job retention

Key points

- Appropriate and person-centred workplace supports played an integral role for participants to maintain employment.
- Workplace flexibility was integral for many participants but needed to be tailored for them.
- Leaving a job was difficult for some participants who then needed support to become job ready again.

Appropriate workplace supports depended on the person and the context within which they were working. For people with psychosocial disability this included: flexible working hours, leave arrangements, working from home, and choice of communication mediums such as email rather than phone communication with colleagues. For participants in the other cohorts, support workers may provide assistance in the workplace.

Participants described the need for flexibility in support levels (such as travel training and support workers in the workplace) so that they could increase supports when starting or changing jobs and roles, but with the view of reducing supports over time as capacity and confidence is built.

If we get him a good job he could be supported until he's very confident of doing that. (Pam, mother of Oliver, autism spectrum cohort, aged 24 years)

The lack of individualised and person-centred supports to maintaining employment was recognised by service delivery staff. In the survey this was ranked as the greatest barrier to maintaining employment for participants with intellectual disability and on the autism spectrum (by 66% and 62% of staff respectively), and ranked second greatest barrier for participants in the psychosocial cohort (by 59% of staff). NDIS service delivery staff also viewed 'lack of workplaces accommodating individual needs (e.g., need for working from home)' as the third greatest barrier to maintaining employment for the participants with intellectual, and psychosocial disability (ranked by 55% and 49% of staff respectively) (Table 2, Appendix 2).

Disclosure of disability: an enabler and barrier to maintaining employment

Key points

- Perceived and experienced stigma associated with psychosocial disability and autism spectrum was a barrier to maintaining employment.
- Disclosure by some participants led to more appropriate supports.
- Informal and formal supports play a key role with participants navigating this space.

Disclosure of disability was seen as an important barrier to maintaining employment for participants with psychosocial disability or on the autism spectrum. Participants often tried to hide their disability due to the anticipated stigma and discrimination that could lead to bullying and job loss. Disclosing as an NDIS participant was seen as especially stigmatising to employers as it reveals the severity of illness. Participants who previously disclosed their disability experienced employment termination and denial of workplace supports, resulting in deciding not to disclose in the future.

Other participants who did not disclose their disability reported having faced termination of employment because of extended absences for treatment or hospitalisation or not having appropriate workplace supports. Others reported disclosure of their disability led to more appropriate supports. Informal and formal supports we described as playing a key role for participants navigating this space.

I just feel like as soon as you mention NDIS there's a big difference between saying you have a mental health issue, and then saying your mental health issue is so severe, it's a psychosocial disability. They're two vastly different things, I think. Because, you know, every man, woman these days has depression and anxiety but there's a big difference between that and being in and out of hospital over the course of years. (Zac, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, 30 years old)

This finding was also consistent with NDIS service delivery staff ranking the 'Stigma of disability and issues of disclosure to the employer' as the third greatest barrier to maintaining employment for participants in the psychosocial cohort (by 56% of staff). NDIS service delivery staff saw the 'episodic nature of the disability' as the greatest barrier for participants in the psychosocial disability cohort to maintain employment (by 60% of staff) which relates to the tension participants spoke about regarding disclosing disability to employers and the potential support and flexibility to maintain employment during episodic illness.



Emily, mother of Kevin, autism spectrum cohort, aged 19 years

“He works unsupported for the most part ... They've changed some of the procedures because he gets very overwhelmed with lots and lots of different things to do all at once, and with lots and lots of instructions, so they break it down for him and he uses their ... standard operating procedure. So he's now allowed to print it off and tick it off as he goes so that he doesn't lose where he's up to and get distracted and that sort of thing”.

5.5.5 System barriers and blockages to open employment

The participants in this research highlighted the scenarios when the employment systems designed to help them acted as barriers to gaining employment. The four themes arising from the data were:

1. Disability Employment Services can be an ineffective support to employment for some
2. Australian Disability Enterprises may narrow the options for some participants
3. Confusion around disability support pension and interaction with paid employment
4. Volunteering replacing paid employment

Disability Employment Services can be an ineffective support to employment for some

Key points

- Some participants reported being with Disability Employment Services (DES) without success.
- Participants felt that DES providers sometimes lacked knowledge of disability beyond physical disability.

Disability Employment Services (DES) are intended to help participants find suitable employment, helping both with developing resumes and finding opportunities. Some NDIS participants gained employment through their engagement with DES and this was noted as an important pathway to employment. However, other participants expressed lack of assistance and success in finding suitable employment through DES.

That was so terrible the two experiences with the DES ... And I mean how do you spend eight months with somebody and not even get a job interview? What's that about? (Angelina, mother of William, intellectual disability cohort, aged 29).

DES providers were sometimes perceived as having little or no experience working with participants on the autism spectrum or with psychosocial disability. Participants felt DES providers did not understand their capabilities, employment needs (such as job function, work environment, and number of hours able to work) or the impacts of their disability. As a result participants found person-centred support lacking. Some participants needed new or different supports to gain employment.

They work in disability employment agencies, and they don't seem to have any understanding of disabilities or how to help people with disabilities... This is when I told my local area coordinator it was crap, and he said I had to use it anyway. (Emma, NDIS participants, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 42 years)

'Inappropriate job matching' was ranked as the second greatest barrier to maintaining employment for participants with intellectual disability and on the autism spectrum (ranked by 57% and 58% of staff respectively) by NDIS service delivery staff in the survey. Service delivery staff also ranked 'Lack of clarity on the role of NDIS employment supports compared to DES' as one of the top barriers faced when assisting participants to identify and work towards employment (the third greatest barrier for supporting participants with intellectual disability and on the autism spectrum, by 45% and 42% of staff respectively).

Australian Disability Enterprises may narrow the options for some participants

Key points

- Some participants reported being funnelled into ADEs without exploration of other options.
- Participants wanting to move from ADEs to open employment encountered many barriers such as few opportunities for capacity building while at the ADE.

ADEs were the only options presented to some participants following completion of school. While some participants described the security, friendships, and support as reasons for them wanting to continue working in ADEs, others found it difficult to move into open employment if this is what they wanted. NDIS service delivery staff also recognised this experience:

So many participants that I've seen come through who've been set up to go straight to ADE without having had any other experience outside of an ADE. (Karen, LAC, WA)

NDIS service delivery staff experienced difficulty having employment conversations that did not include a referral to DES or suggestion of an ADE. However, it was noted that with the introduction of the NDIS Employment Strategy, service delivery staff were learning to have more in-depth conversations with NDIS participants about broader employment options.

The introduction of a new pricing framework for participants who require on the job supports introduces new opportunities for participants to expand their employment options and for providers to develop new service models. Over time, it is expected that more participants will have greater choice over where they work and who supports them at work.

Service delivery staff felt there were greater opportunities to have these conversations with the NDIA's greater focus on employment.

The guys that go straight into those ADEs, or have been within the ADEs for a long time, that maybe would like a change..., it's pretty exciting that..., there'll be the ability to assist them to do that. (Chris, Community Development Manager, Queensland, Focus group)

Some of the participants working in ADEs highlighted the low pay rate and repetitive workload as reasons to leave. While social participation with colleagues and friends was a reason for many to stay, this also presented a barrier for some people who felt torn between

wanting to remain with friends and working in employment that better matched their interests at the time. For example, Bobby has been working at an ADE for 20 years and is currently working in packing and taping boxes. When asked if he wanted to go somewhere different to work:

I want to, but they said, 'I miss you,' and all that, so I must stay here... I wanted to do the lawns, the mowing crew... Because it's very fun to do... (Bobby, NDIS participant, intellectual disability cohort, aged 36 years)

The support received in ADEs helped participants to understand their work tasks and roles and provided reassurance. Participants welcomed variety of tasks, but for some this was not possible given the type of work undertaken at the ADEs. There was mixed opportunity for training and while some participants experienced these opportunities, other participants struggled to access them through the ADE.

So the bad things is like they'll say to us, oh, they'll train us up to do something and they don't do it. So that's a bad thing. So they get us all worked up and say, oh, you know, we're going to do this today or, you know, you're going to learn a machine, and that never happens. And 95, or I'll say 100% of the time it never happens. (Jess, NDIS participant, intellectual disability, aged 38 years)

Confusion around disability support pension and interaction with paid employment

Key points

- People felt anxious about losing their DSP due to the lack of inclusive employment options for people with disability.
- Participants want to earn a living independent of government payments, yet earning a sufficient wage from employment was difficult for many.
- For some participants the pension was a stable source of income when employment options were insecure and/or difficult to maintain.

Confusion about the impact of employment on disability support pensions was a barrier for some participants. For some participants, the concessions received through the DSP were just as important and created a sense of security that they were concerned about losing.

And it is a big barrier, actually, I feel, when you've gotten used to the help that you can get through DSP and concessions you can get, then all of a sudden you're like, ooh, maybe I can work again. But then you can't get the concessions. So it's like one or the other. (Cooper, NDIS participant, psychosocial disability cohort, aged 36 years)

For some participants it was difficult to earn enough money to warrant losing their disability support pension. For other participants, work was often unstable and therefore difficult to maintain income if the DSP was lost. NDIS service delivery staff also observed the low

earning potential for participants and felt that the lack of appropriate wages was a sign of disrespect for NDIS participants.

Volunteering replacing paid employment

Key points

- Participants do not want to be seen as “just volunteers” or for volunteering to replace paid employment.

There is a risk of exploitation through volunteering, and job trials being presented as volunteering that actually do not lead to employment. Some participants volunteered for an extended period of time with the promise of paid employment which never eventuated. Volunteering opportunities can be lacking especially in regional areas; this can be a further barrier for participants in regional areas to gaining employment.

We need to speak up and say that we actually want to work with pay. We want to be – we have a right to work as other people. (Grace, NDIS participant, intellectual disability cohort, aged 27 years)

5.6 Key findings from NDIS service delivery staff survey

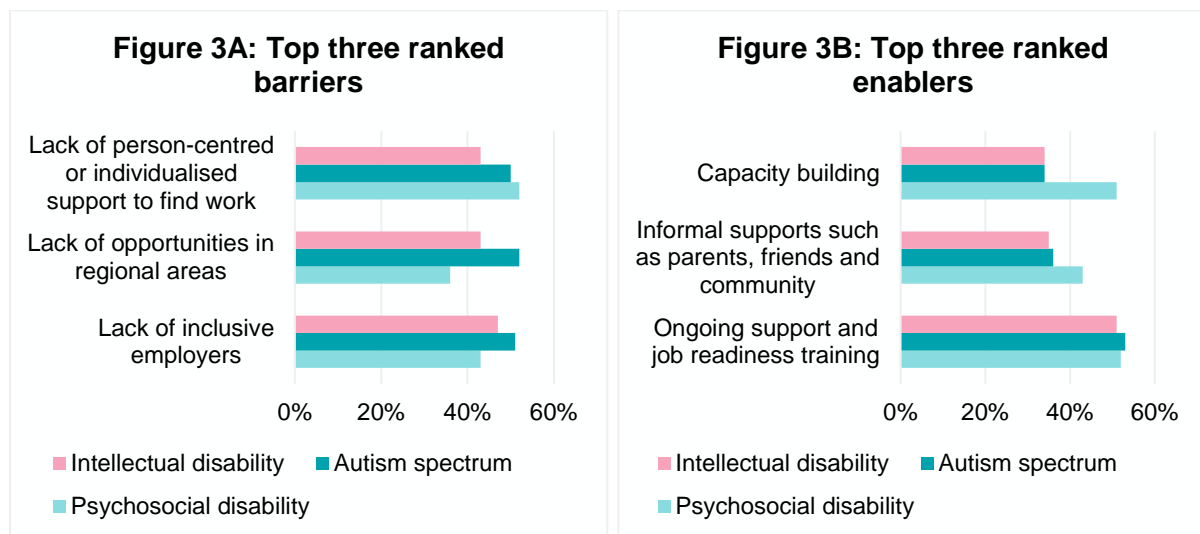
NDIS service delivery staff were asked about what they perceived to be the largest barriers and enablers to finding and maintaining employment for people with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum, and/or with psychosocial disability.

Lack of opportunities, inclusive employers, and adequate supports are greatest barriers to employment

NDIS service delivery staff (n=129) ranked the barriers (out of a list of 14 barriers) and enablers (out of 18 enablers) to finding employment for each participant cohort, that they believed would be most impactful after COVID-19 restrictions. Figure 3A graphs the top three ranked barriers to employment (refer to Appendix 2 for full details of the results). Service delivery staff ranked ‘lack of person-centred or individualised support to find work’ and ‘lack of inclusive employers’ as two of the greatest barriers for all three participant cohorts. ‘A low self-perception of employability’ was also seen as a major barrier by service delivery staff (n=47, 37%) for people with psychosocial disability. However, this was seen as less of a barrier for people with intellectual disability (ranked 8th most important, n=18, 14%) or on the autism spectrum (ranked 5th most important, n=29, 22%).

Figure 3B graphs of the top three ranked enablers to employment (refer to Appendix 2 for full details of the results). ‘Ongoing support and job readiness training’ was rated as the greatest enabler (out of 18) to improving employment outcomes (52% of survey respondents) for all three participant cohorts.

FIGURE 3: NDIS SERVICE DELIVERY STAFF, TOP THREE RANKED BARRIERS AND ENABLERS (N=129)



Colleagues and guidelines most helpful information for service delivery staff

NDIS service delivery staff were asked to rank how helpful different information sources were for them to support NDIS participants with developing and implementing their employment-related goals (out of 19 potential information sources).

Service delivery staff found different information sources useful when supporting participants. When supporting participants to develop goals, service delivery staff found procedural information the most useful such as the 'Let's talk about work' guide (72%) and operational guidelines for identifying supports in employment (71%). When identifying supports that would help participants work towards their employment goals, service delivery staff found talking to colleagues (77%), using frequently asked questions (FAQ) (68%) and fact sheets (63%) most helpful.

6. Key insights and considerations

Six key barriers and/or enablers to employment for NDIS participants with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum, and/or with psychosocial disability emerged from the data.

1. Person-centred planning and supports
2. Empowerment and engagement
3. Informal and own networks
4. School level and early intervention initiatives
5. Formal education and training post school
6. Inclusive, flexible and adaptive workplaces

The barriers and enablers to employment have been summarised and visually represented in Figure 4. They have been detailed in Sections 6.1 to 6.8 along with key considerations and applicable actions for the Agency. The considerations presented in these sections have been drawn from the data from talking with participants and NDIS service delivery staff.

As some of the identified considerations sit outside the role of the NDIS, there is an important role in disseminating the research to inform providers, the market and other government agencies to inform policy and practice.

Person-centred planning and supports

- Discussion should be about 'careers' as opposed to 'finding a job'.
- Training and resources for staff skills, knowledge and understanding of cognitive disability.
- Person-centred employment planning is crucial to better match employment to participants' skills and interests.
- Supports required to ensure daily needs met and support capacity building.

Participant empowerment

- Participants need support to navigate the employment ecosystem.
- Clear, consistent and accessible information needs to be available about the remit and role of the different funding services and what evidence-based supports and services are available.
- Expectations of participants, families and carers need to be raised around work and careers.

Informal and own networks

- Informal and own networks need to be fostered as they play a critical role in building self-confidence and self-efficacy.
- Networks lead to more positive experiences in a person's first job.
- Volunteering, work experience and community participation can increase these networks.



School leaver and early intervention initiatives

- Schools play a key educative role.
- Conversations and planning for employment should start early while participants are at school.
- Government agencies should work together to support intervention initiatives that target young people while at school or in the transition from school to work.

Formal education and training post school

- Retraining and further education were used to improve employment prospects.
- More opportunities for further post-school education, that is at the right level with the right support, needs to be available for people with cognitive disability.
- Receiving individualised and person-centred support while studying enabled participants to complete their studies.

Inclusive, flexible and adaptive workplaces

- There remains a lack of inclusive employment options and recruiting practices.
- There is a further need to upskill the market to build greater disability confidence and to provide inclusive employment options.
- Workplace culture and communication with colleagues plays a central role.
- Individual workplace supports are crucial enablers to successful employment.

FIGURE 4: EMPLOYMENT SYNTHESIS DIAGRAM

6.1 Key factor 1: Person-centred planning and supports

Planning conversations and funded supports play an integral role in supporting participants to increase their employment participation. Table 3 outlines the key barriers and enablers to person-centred planning and supports.

TABLE 3: Barriers and enablers – Person-centred planning and supports

| Barriers | Enablers |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants on the autism spectrum or with psychosocial disability often felt that staff and providers did not understand their disability well. • Lack of suitable transport options restricted participants' access to appropriate employment. • Lack of travel training to and from work reduced independence and accessibility to employment options. • Lack of focus on career progression, such as changing jobs and seeking other opportunities. • Many NDIS participants were lacking in self-confidence as an employable person. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person-centred planning was identified as crucial in supporting employment options better matched to participant skills and interests. • Support to meet basic needs (daily living, stable accommodation, mental and physical health) is an important enabler for participants. • Employment-related capacity building supports played an important role in increasing self-efficacy. • Participants gaining a driver's licence was an enabler to employment. |

Improving planning conversations and building service provider capability in delivering person-centred service planning and supports will be instrumental to reducing the barriers to employment and will facilitate individualised pathways for participants towards greater economic participation. The following considerations are put forward for the broader disability ecosystem and the NDIA.

6.1.1 Considerations for employment planning

- Service delivery staff, support workers and providers need to have the skills, through sufficient training and resources, to enable proactive person-centred conversations with participants about employment opportunities and a person's career journey. This includes skills in how to start proactive conversations about employment, typical pathways to employment, as well as knowledge and skills relating to work with people with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum, and/or psychosocial disability.
- The importance of stable and supported activities of daily living needs to be emphasised in training and resources so service delivery staff have greater awareness of this and its relationship to employment.
- It is acknowledged the pathway to employment may require time to develop skills and gain experience to be ready for work. Having short term and long term goals may be beneficial to acknowledge the steps required in the journey to work and to measure progress along the way.

- Staff working with NDIS participants experiencing long term unemployment may benefit from focusing on supporting participants to access training, volunteering and community participation to build capacity, increase own networks, and fill gaps in work history.
- Having a consistent contact and building rapport with NDIS service delivery staff (which includes planners, LACs and PiTC) may help to facilitate positive planning experiences that are more individualised and person-centred.
- Clear, consistent and easy to access information and resources for staff and participants is needed to better facilitate employment planning and the development and implementation of goals. This information should be available in multiple mediums and locations to ensure greater utility and should include information about what is funded through the NDIS and what is funded through other sources.
- Where possible discussions about work should pivot from focusing on finding work to incorporate more of a career focus. This will help to build the expectation of participants towards careers, progressions and the opportunities for change across the continuum of the participant's life.
- Embedding capacity building and allied health supports such as psychology and occupational therapy in participants' plans can support participants' to improve their mental health and build self-confidence. Other activities and pathways to employment can help build participants' self-confidence, such as volunteering, work experience and community participation.
- Transport and travel training are important elements to include in employment discussions and resources, including clearer information about what funded supports are available for participants to gain their drivers' licence.

6.2 Key factor 2: Participant empowerment

Participant empowerment through the right support and information can increase a person's confidence with making decisions and open up options about the type and kind job they would like. Table 4 outlined the key barriers and enablers relating to participant empowerment.

TABLE 4: Barriers and enablers – participant empowerment

| Barriers | Enablers |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both NDIS participants, and service delivery staff expressed confusion about the mainstream employment supports available for participants and what additional supports are funded through the NDIS. Participants felt that DES providers often lacked knowledge of disability beyond physical disability and reported being with DES providers for years without success Some participants reported being funneled into ADEs without exploration of other options. There was a tension around being employed and getting paid enough to warrant losing the pension. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants want to earn a living independent of government payments, yet earning a sufficient wage from employment was difficult for many. For some participants the pension was a stable source of income when employment options were insecure and or difficult to maintain. Capacity building for participants wanting to move from ADEs to open employment was identified as important. |

Participants need to be empowered and expectations raised so they see employment as an option. The following considerations are put forward for the broader disability ecosystem and the NDIA.

6.2.1 Considerations for empowering participants

- The system was described as confusing and overwhelming for some. NDIS participants need support to navigate the employment eco-system. Clear, consistent and accessible information needs to be available, across the employment continuum, to better understand, what evidence-based supports and services are available from mainstream sources, what additional supports are funded through the NDIS is important.
- Clearer information resources for participants regarding the DSP and implications of gaining employment would support participants to better navigate this.
- Investment in an employment navigator may be warranted for some participants; someone who would help navigate the employment eco-system of supports, servicers, providers, and employment options.
- Upskilling of staff, support workers and providers in the needs of people with cognitive and psychosocial disability is essential so they can better support them in achieving their employment aspirations.

- For participants working at ADEs having the opportunity to participate in capacity building opportunities that may help them move to open employment may be of benefit and staff working with participants who work in ADEs could include discussions about career choices and options.

6.3 Key factor 3: Participants’ informal and own networks

Participants’ own networks are instrumental in finding, and having a positive experience in, a first job. They help participants maintain employment by providing advice, support, and encouragement and play a key role in navigating the disclosure of disability in the workplace. Table 5 outlined the key barriers and enablers relating to participants’ informal and own networks.

TABLE 5: Barriers and enablers – Participants’ informal and own networks

| Barriers | Enablers |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low expectations from families and a person’s social networks can result in reduce work aspirations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal supports, including family and peer groups act as an enabler to finding employment, by identifying employment options aligned with participants’ skills and interests. • Having own networks are instrumental in finding, and having a positive experience in, a first job and help participants maintain employment by providing advice, support, and encouragement and play a key role in navigating the disclosure of disability in the workplace. • Role models help show participants what is possible, thereby broadening the perceived employment options. |

A participant’s own and informal networks should be fostered and encouraged as they play a critical role in the pathway to employment and building an individual’s self-confidence and self-efficacy. The following considerations are put forward for the broader disability ecosystem and the NDIA.

6.3.1 Considerations for strengthening informal and own networks

- Staff who work with participants need to have the skills and knowledge about the importance of these networks and help participants to identify and use these networks.
- Participants should be encouraged to use their own networks to help develop employment goals and identify employment options they align with their skills and interests. Where participants are lacking informal supports, this should be identified so participants can be supported to build these networks through activities such as increasing community participation (such as volunteering, work experience, training and education).

6.4 Key factor 4: School leaver and early intervention initiatives

Schools were seen as a key enabler to future employment; they play a key educative role in identifying employment options, a participant's skills and interests. Table 6 outlined the key barriers and enablers relating to school leavers.

TABLE 6: Barriers and enablers – School leaver and early intervention initiatives

| Barriers | Enablers |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a lack of clarity about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ NDIS funding for supporting work experience during school years. ○ How SLES works, who is eligible and when participants can access SLES and employment supports. • Overall, there was a lack of discourse concerning 'careers', limiting expectations and the potential of participants. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing employment goals early, while still at school, was reported to be a key enabler to future employment. • Work experience is a key facilitator that leads to future employment. |

School leaver and early intervention initiatives that target young people while still at school (including home school) or in the transition from school to work (entry-level employment) should be encouraged to help foster employment and career aspirations early. The following considerations are put forward for the broader disability ecosystem and the NDIA.

6.4.1 Considerations for supporting school leavers

- Introducing the language of 'careers' for NDIS participants in resources and discussions will help to counteract low expectations by participants and their family, carers and other supporters.
- Conversations about employment and careers need to be embedded into NDIS planning conversations before participants leave school.
- Resources for ongoing professional development for staff working with school leavers need to have information about what funded employment supports are available is up-to-date and that early planning conversations can pivot towards 'careers'.
- Families/carers should be encouraged to engage in conversations with their children early. Seeing their children as having future careers will help children with disability to see themselves in this way. The promotion of stories of participants who are working and role modelling, should be encouraged, so young people can see what is possible.
- Greater clarity and communication on what additional and appropriate supports are available to help build the capabilities of students for them to prepare for work, would benefit participants, their families and supporters, schools, as well as planning staff.
- Other activities and pathways to employment such as volunteering, work experience and community participation can help build participants' self-confidence.

- Inter-agency networks are likely to be essential for improvements in NDIS employment outcomes.

6.5 Key factor 5: Formal education and training post school

Some participants spoke about the importance of receiving individualised and person-centred support while studying (e.g. support with executive functioning) which enabled them to complete their studies and undertake post school education and in turn helped to facilitate employment opportunities. Table 7 outlined the key barriers and enablers relating to accessing education and training post school.

TABLE 7: Barriers and enablers – Formal education and training post school

| Barriers | Enablers |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a lack of post-school education and training options available for people with cognitive disability. • There is a lack of clarity on NDIS funding for supports to access and attend post-secondary education and training. • For participants re-entering the workforce: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cost of re-training and lack of accessible education options were barriers to retraining. ○ Participants in long-term unemployment needed to rebuild employment skills. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal supporters played a key role in supporting young people to navigate post-school education. • For participants re-entering the workforce: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Retraining and returning to further education were used to improve employment prospects and work that better matched a person’s skills and interests. • Having NDIS funding and receiving better supports has enabled participants on the autism spectrum and with psychosocial disability to return to further education. |

The NDIS plays an important role in supporting participants to undertake additional training and education so they can work towards their employment goals. The following considerations are put forward for the broader disability ecosystem and the NDIA.

6.5.1 Considerations relating to further education and training

- Staff working with participants need resources and training about the importance of post school education and training and about what supports and services are available for participants to support this, both through the NDIS and those available through other sources.
- Funding of individualised and person-centred supports while studying (e.g. support with executive functioning) should be promoted where appropriate to enable participants to complete their studies.
- There is a need for more training courses appropriate for a range of disability cohorts, across multiple levels (including certificates I and II), to provide greater options for people with cognitive disabilities.

- Access to supports and initiatives to reduce barriers to education and retraining for participants, such as subsidies or specialised loan schemes, may be beneficial.

6.6 Key factor 6: Inclusive flexible and adaptive workplaces

Participants and NDIS service delivery staff identified lack of inclusive work opportunities as the greatest barrier to employment. Table 8 outlined the key barriers and enablers relating to inclusive flexible and adaptive workplaces.

TABLE 8: Barriers and enablers – Inclusive flexible and adaptive workplaces

| Barriers | Enablers |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of workplaces that meet participants' support needs was a barrier to employment. • Standardised and inflexible pre-employment processes was a barrier for participants. • Long periods of unemployment can look unfavourable to potential employers. • Stigma and fear of discrimination was a barrier for some participants to disclosing their disability and receiving workplace supports. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers improving understanding of disabilities and increasing inclusive hiring and work practices was an enabler. • Appropriate and individualised workplace supports played an integral role for participants to maintain employment. • Individualised workplace flexibility was essential for many participants. |

There remains a lack of inclusive employment options and recruiting practices. People with cognitive disability or psychosocial disability require support to gain jobs, which often necessitate strong, trusting partnerships with employers. The following considerations are put forward for the broader disability ecosystem and the NDIA.

6.6.1 Considerations for development of inclusive, flexible and adaptive workplaces

- Collaboration with the sector will be important to stimulate a disability confident employment market by increasing the opportunities for people with disabilities in multiple areas of employment and creating inclusive environments. This may be especially important in regional areas where opportunities are limited.
- The NDIA and other government agencies should continue to play an educative role and promote positive examples of employing people with disability. This can involve working with national employers and government departments to build their capacity, advocating for person-centred approaches within these programs or promoting disability employment through the use of the Agency's purchasing power (such as monitoring NDIS participant employment targets in procurement arrangements with contracted partners where feasible).

- Participants who have an employment goal and are at danger of becoming long-term unemployed should be identified so providers and staff can work with them towards employment through training, volunteering and/or increased community participation.
- Appropriate and individualised workplace supports play an integral role for participants to maintain employment, and workplace flexibility is essential for many participants. The employment market needs to be better skilled in supplying inclusive employment options for people with disability and adopting inclusive approaches in the hiring process (pre-employment tests, interviews and in the office environment). This should be driven through investment in matching individuals with employer requirements as well as system level capability. Exploration of emerging approaches such as customised employment that pull on these practices should be considered. It involves working with the person with a disability and the employer to create jobs that are best matched to the skills and goals of the person. These approaches focus on how a person's strengths and interests may benefit an employer. They are becoming more common in Australia but evaluation of impacts are needed.
- Workplace culture and communication with colleagues plays a central role and allows participants to feel more comfortable to disclose their disability to potentially access more appropriate workplace supports.

7. Strengths and limitations of this research

This research involved over 100 interviews with a good representation of NDIS participants, their family, carers and other supporters as well as NDIS service delivery staff. This is a large data set for qualitative research amounting to hundreds of pages of text. The analysis of the data reached saturation, meaning that no new themes were identified in what people told us. The interview and focus group data (from both service delivery staff and NDIS participants) was used to develop a survey that returned a good sample size of 142 and allowed us to compare the survey findings to the findings from the interviews and focus groups.

Importantly, three NDIS research consultants provided expert lived experience. This supported the development of interview questions that were appropriate to each disability cohort. The NDIS consultants checked the findings and supported in a deeper understanding of their implications.

While the research was undertaken in a rigorous way there are limitations to this research that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. The recruitment of NDIS participants and their family, carers, and other supporters was mostly through a list of people who were interested in providing consultation and feedback to the NDIA. This may represent a sample bias that is weighted towards people who already had something that they wanted to say. The sample may have also been biased towards people who wanted employment, as well as parents and carers who say this is possible for their adult children. As a result, the voices of parents and carers who do not see employment as possible for the person they support may be missing from this research. However, it is important to note that this is a common research bias when people self-select to participate in research.

More male NDIS participants than women are represented in this research. However, there are more men than women in the NDIS within these disability cohorts.

The research was undertaken in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic. This resulted in data collection being conducted virtually or on the phone (or written). This may have excluded some people from participating.

Harder to reach populations such as CALD, Aboriginal and Torres Islander people, and those with complex support needs involved in the justice system are under-represented in this research. Pathways, barriers, and enablers that are more likely to affect these populations may have been missed in this research. The lack of NDIS participants from the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory is likely due to limitations of travel due to the COVID 19 pandemic. The lack of representation from these territories is a limitation of this research.

The research team received feedback that some NDIS participants had chosen not to participate due to concern that their NDIS plan would be negatively affected. While assurances were given to all participants that the research team did not have access to

NDIS participant's plans, and their planning staff would not know that they participated, this was a barrier for some people.

LACs, planners and other staff who participated in the interviews and focus groups were asked to nominate themselves potentially resulting in a sample who had previous experience, or an interest in, employment. The survey, however, gives us a broader understanding of how prevalent the perceptions and experiences of the focus group and interviewees were.

8. What's next?

This research recognises the unique insights and expertise participants offer and the important contribution they make through research. This research included in-depth interviews with 85 NDIS participants (families, carers or supporters) aged 14 to 44 years with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum, and/or psychosocial disability, focus groups or interviews with 37 NDIS service delivery staff, and responses from 142 NDIS service delivery staff to an online survey. Lack of inclusive employment options was identified and the greatest barrier to participants finding a job. Other barriers to employment included lack of clarity around funding and supports, discourse about careers, post school training options, participant self-confidence, and the stigma and discrimination experienced by people with psychosocial disability and autism spectrum. Enablers included having sufficient supports to ensure daily needs are met, person-centred employment planning, flexible and adaptive workplaces, starting employment and planning conversations early and while in school, access to transport and travel training, and participants having own networks, role models and informal supports.

Achieving improved employment outcomes for people with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum, and/or with psychosocial disability requires a multi-component approach that sees system, organisation, service provision and participants interact. Findings from this research will inform the Agency's targeted approach to delivering the Participant Employment Strategy in 2021-2022. Findings will inform resources for participants and NDIS service delivery staff to better support the development and implementation of employment goals.

Through dissemination of these research findings, the NDIA can contribute to a better understanding of the barriers and enablers to employment and promote more effective employment pathways for people with disability.

9. References

- ABS (2020) *Labour Force Statistics: Reference periods Dec 2020, July 2020 and March 2020* Retrieved from [Labour Force, Australia, July 2020 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](https://www.abs.gov.au/australian-bureau-of-statistics/publications/default.aspx?m=0&id=13101)
- ABS (2018) *Disability, aging and carers, Australia: summary of findings* Retrieved from [Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](https://www.abs.gov.au/australian-bureau-of-statistics/publications/default.aspx?m=0&id=13101)
- Almalky, H. A. (2020). Employment outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities: a literature review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 109, 104656.
- Braun, V. and V. Clarke (2014). "What can "thematic analysis" offer health and wellbeing researchers?" *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 9(1). DOI: [10.3402/qhw.v9.26152](https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v9.26152)
- Campbell, S., M. Greenwood, S. Prior, T. Shearer, K. Walkem, S. Young, D. Bywaters and K. Walker (2020). "Purposive sampling: complex or simple? Research case examples." *Journal of Research in Nursing* 25(8): 652-661. doi:[10.1177/1744987120927206](https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206)
- Carlson, S. R., Morningstar, M. E., & Munandar, V. (2020). Workplace supports for employees with intellectual disability: A systematic review of the intervention literature. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (Preprint), 1-15. doi: 10.3233/JVR-201075
- Deloitte, (2018). *Increased labour force engagement among Australians with a disability, Access Economics 2018*, Report prepared for the NDIA, September 2018
- Department of Social Services (2018). *Summary of consultation with supported employees*, Retrieved from [Supported Employee consultation summary report_final 29052018 \(dss.gov.au\)](https://www.dss.gov.au/australian-bureau-of-statistics/publications/default.aspx?m=0&id=13101)
- DeTore, N. R., Hintz, K., Khare, C., & Mueser, K. T. (2019). Disclosure of mental illness to prospective employers: Clinical, psychosocial, and work correlates in persons receiving supported employment. *Psychiatry research*, 273, 312-317. doi: S0165178118320961
- Fereday, J. and E. Muir-Cochrane (2006). "Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5(1): 80-92. doi:[10.1177/160940690600500107](https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107)
- Harmuth, E., Silletta, E., Bailey, A., Adams, T., Beck, C., & Barbic, S. P. (2018). Barriers and facilitators to employment for adults with autism: A scoping review. *Annals of International Occupational Therapy*, 1(1), 31-40. doi:[10.3928/24761222-20180212-01](https://doi.org/10.3928/24761222-20180212-01)
- Hurlbutt, K., & Chalmers, L. (2004). Employment and Adults with Asperger Syndrome. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 19(4), 215-222. doi:10.1177/10883576040190040301
- Jahoda, A., Kemp, J., Riddell, S., & Banks, P. (2008). Feelings about work: A review of the socio-emotional impact of supported employment on people with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 21(1), 1-18. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-3148.2007.00365

Meltzer, A., Robinson, S., & Fisher, K. R. (2020). Barriers to finding and maintaining open employment for people with intellectual disability in Australia. *Social Policy & Administration*, 54(1), 88-101. doi:10.1111/spol.12523

NDIA (2021) *Employment outcomes for NDIS participants*. Retrieved from [Employment Outcomes Report](#)

NDIA (2019a) *Participant Employment Strategy*. Retrieved from [Participant Employment Strategy | NDIS](#)

NDIA (2019b) *Employment Outcomes 30 June 2018 NDIS participants, their families and carers*. Retrieved from [Data and insights](#)

NDIA (2020) *Explore data*. Retrieved from [Explore data | NDIS](#)

Noel, V. A., Oulvey, E., Drake, R. E., & Bond, G. R. (2017). Barriers to employment for transition-age youth with developmental and psychiatric disabilities. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 44(3), 354-358. doi:[10.1007/s10488-016-0773-y](#)

Nous Consulting Group. (2018). *Employment services 2020: consultation report*.

Ostrow, L., Smith, C., Penney, D., & Shumway, M. (2019). "It suits my needs": Self-employed individuals with psychiatric disabilities and small businesses. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 42(2), 121. doi:[10.1037/prj0000341](#)

Richards, L., & Flynn, S. (2020). Barriers to and complexities of supporting paid work for adults with learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Practice*, 23(6). Doi:10.7748/ldp.2020.e2079

Rüsch, N., Corrigan, P. W., Waldmann, T., Staiger, T., Bahemann, A., Oexle, N., . . . Becker, T. (2018). Attitudes toward disclosing a mental health problem and reemployment: a longitudinal study. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 206(5), 383-385. doi:10.1097/NMD.0000000000000810

Sevak, P., & Khan, S. (2017). Psychiatric versus physical disabilities: A comparison of barriers and facilitators to employment. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 40(2), 163. doi:[10.1037/prj0000236](#)

UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 24 January 2007, A/RES/61/106*. Retrieved from [Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities](#)

10. Appendices

10.1 Appendix 1: NDIS participant characteristics

TABLE 9: NDIS PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

| | N = 75 | % NDIS research participants | % NDIS population |
|--------------------------------|--------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Disability type | | | |
| Autism | 27 | 36% | 33% |
| Down syndrome | 8 | 11% | 3% |
| Intellectual disability | 17 | 23% | 21% |
| Psychosocial disability | 12 | 16% | 12% |
| Other | 11 | 15% | 31% |
| Gender | | | |
| Intellectual disability | | | |
| Female | 9 | 53% | 42% |
| Male | 8 | 47% | 57% |
| Undisclosed | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Down syndrome | | | |
| Female | 5 | 63% | 45% |
| Male | 3 | 38% | 54% |
| Undisclosed | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Autism | | | |
| Female | 7 | 26% | 25% |
| Male | 20 | 74% | 73% |
| Undisclosed | 0 | 0% | 2% |
| Psychosocial disability | | | |
| Female | 10 | 83% | 48% |
| Male | 2 | 17% | 51% |
| Undisclosed | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Other | | | |
| Female | 5 | 45% | 45% |
| Male | 6 | 55% | 54% |
| Undisclosed | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Total | | | |
| Female | 36 | 48% | 38% |
| Male | 39 | 52% | 61% |
| Unknown | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Age | | | |
| Intellectual disability | | | |
| 7 to 13 years | 0 | 0% | 16% |
| 14 to 25 years | 7 | 41% | 33% |
| 26 to 44 years | 9 | 53% | 28% |
| Down syndrome | | | |
| 7 to 13 years | 1 | 13% | 15% |
| 14 to 25 years | 4 | 50% | 26% |
| 26 to 44 years | 3 | 38% | 37% |
| Autism | | | |
| 7 to 13 years | 8 | 30% | 57% |

| | N = 75 | % NDIS research participants | % NDIS population |
|---|---------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 14 to 25 years | 14 | 52% | 34% |
| 26 to 44 years | 5 | 19% | 7% |
| Psychosocial disability | | | |
| 7 to13 years | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| 14 to 25 years | 1 | 8% | 6% |
| 26 to 44 years | 11 | 92% | 38% |
| Other | | | |
| 7 to13 years | 0 | 0% | 18% |
| 14 to 25 years | 1 | 8% | 6% |
| 26 to 44 years | 8 | 73% | 20% |
| Total | | | |
| 14 to 25 years | 29 | 39% | 24% |
| 26 to 44 years | 36 | 48% | 20% |
| 7 to 13 years | 9 | 12% | 28% |
| State/Territory | | | |
| ACT | 0 | 0% | 2% |
| NSW | 19 | 25% | 31% |
| NT | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Qld | 11 | 15% | 19% |
| SA | 6 | 8% | 9% |
| Tas | 5 | 7% | 2% |
| Vic | 25 | 33% | 26% |
| WA | 9 | 12% | 9% |
| Unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Remoteness | | | |
| Major cities | 49 | 65% | 68% |
| Regional - population between 15000 and 50000 | 7 | 9% | 9% |
| Regional - population between 5000 and 15000 | 7 | 9% | 5% |
| Regional - population greater than 50000 | 9 | 12% | 11% |
| Regional - population less than 5000 | 2 | 3% | 7% |
| Remote | 1 | 1% | 1% |
| Very remote | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Locality | | | |
| Metro | 49 | 65% | 68% |
| Regional | 25 | 33% | 31% |
| Remote | 1 | 1% | 2% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander | | | |
| No | 62 | 83% | 74% |
| Not stated | 10 | 13% | 19% |
| Yes | 3 | 4% | 7% |
| CALD | | | |
| No | 71 | 95% | 89% |
| Not stated | 1 | 1% | 1% |
| YES | 3 | 4% | 9% |

| | N = 75 | % NDIS research participants | % NDIS population |
|--------------------------------|--------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Level of function | | | |
| Intellectual disability | | | |
| high | 0 | 0% | 17% |
| Low | 10 | 59% | 35% |
| Mid | 7 | 41% | 48% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Down syndrome | | | |
| high | 1 | 13% | 5% |
| Low | 3 | 38% | 52% |
| Mid | 4 | 50% | 42% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Autism | | | |
| high | 2 | 7% | 18% |
| Low | 6 | 22% | 22% |
| Mid | 19 | 70% | 60% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| high | 2 | 17% | 5% |
| Low | 2 | 17% | 29% |
| Mid | 8 | 67% | 65% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Other | | | |
| high | 2 | 18% | 33% |
| Low | 6 | 55% | 33% |
| Mid | 3 | 27% | 34% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Total | | | |
| high | 7 | 9% | 20% |
| Low | 27 | 36% | 30% |
| Mid | 41 | 55% | 50% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Daily living support | | | |
| high | 40 | 53% | 36% |
| Low | 2 | 3% | 6% |
| Mid | 19 | 25% | 19% |
| unknown | 14 | 19% | 39% |
| Paid employment | | | |
| Intellectual disability | | | |
| No and I don't want one | 3 | 18% | 29% |
| No, but I would like one | 6 | 35% | 23% |
| Yes | 6 | 35% | 18% |
| unknown | 2 | 12% | 30% |
| Down syndrome | | | |
| No and I don't want one | 0 | 0% | 36% |
| No, but I would like one | 2 | 25% | 18% |
| Yes | 4 | 50% | 19% |
| unknown | 2 | 25% | 28% |
| Autism | | | |
| No and I don't want one | 5 | 19% | 10% |
| No, but I would like one | 7 | 26% | 13% |
| Yes | 5 | 19% | 5% |
| unknown | 10 | 37% | 72% |

| | N = 75 | % NDIS research participants | % NDIS population |
|--|--------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Psychosocial disability | | | |
| No and I don't want one | 1 | 8% | 46% |
| No, but I would like one | 9 | 75% | 36% |
| Yes | 1 | 8% | 8% |
| unknown | 1 | 8% | 9% |
| Other | | | |
| No and I don't want one | 0 | 0% | 37% |
| No, but I would like one | 5 | 45% | 19% |
| Yes | 4 | 36% | 18% |
| Total | 2 | 18% | 27% |
| No and I don't want one | 9 | 12% | 27% |
| No, but I would like one | 29 | 39% | 20% |
| Yes | 20 | 27% | 12% |
| unknown | 17 | 23% | 40% |
| Paid Job Type | | | |
| Intellectual disability | | | |
| Australian Apprenticeship | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Australian Disability Enterprise | 3 | 18% | 11% |
| Open employment market at less than minimum wage, i.e. Supported Wage System | 1 | 6% | 2% |
| Open employment market with full award wages | 1 | 6% | 3% |
| Other | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Self-employed | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| unknown | 12 | 71% | 82% |
| Down syndrome | | | |
| Australian Apprenticeship | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Australian Disability Enterprise | 2 | 25% | 13% |
| Open employment market at less than minimum wage, i.e. Supported Wage System | 1 | 13% | 4% |
| Open employment market with full award wages | 1 | 13% | 2% |
| Other | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Self-employed | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| unknown | 4 | 50% | 81% |
| Autism | | | |
| Australian Apprenticeship | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Australian Disability Enterprise | 2 | 7% | 2% |
| Open employment market at less than minimum wage, i.e. Supported Wage System | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Open employment market with full award wages | 2 | 7% | 2% |
| Other | 1 | 4% | 0% |
| Self-employed | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| unknown | 22 | 81% | 95% |
| Psychosocial disability | | | |
| Australian Apprenticeship | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Australian Disability Enterprise | 0 | 0% | 3% |

| | N = 75 | % NDIS research participants | % NDIS population |
|--|--------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Open employment market at less than minimum wage, i.e. Supported Wage System | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Open employment market with full award wages | 1 | 8% | 4% |
| Other | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Self-employed | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| unknown | 11 | 92% | 92% |
| Other | | | |
| Australian Apprenticeship | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Australian Disability Enterprise | 1 | 9% | 2% |
| Open employment market at less than minimum wage, i.e. Supported Wage System | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Open employment market with full award wages | 2 | 18% | 13% |
| Other | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Self-employed | 1 | 9% | 2% |
| unknown | 7 | 64% | 82% |
| Total | | | |
| Australian Apprenticeship | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Australian Disability Enterprise | 8 | 11% | 4% |
| Open employment market at less than minimum wage, i.e. Supported Wage System | 2 | 3% | 1% |
| Open employment market with full award wages | 7 | 9% | 6% |
| Other | 1 | 1% | 0% |
| Self-employed | 1 | 1% | 1% |
| unknown | 56 | 75% | 88% |
| Employment related goal | | | |
| Intellectual disability | 7 | 41% | 45% |
| No | 6 | 35% | 66% |
| Yes | 11 | 65% | 34% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Down syndrome | | | |
| No | 4 | 50% | 71% |
| Yes | 4 | 50% | 29% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Autism | | | |
| No | 19 | 70% | 83% |
| Yes | 8 | 30% | 16% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Psychosocial disability | | | |
| No | 6 | 50% | 68% |
| Yes | 6 | 50% | 32% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Other | | | |
| No | 7 | 64% | 79% |
| Yes | 4 | 36% | 20% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 1% |

| | N = 75 | % NDIS research participants | % NDIS population |
|--------------------------------|--------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Total | | | |
| No | 42 | 56% | 76% |
| Yes | 33 | 44% | 23% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Volunteering | | | |
| Intellectual disability | | | |
| No, but I would like to be | 5 | 29% | 16% |
| No, it doesn't interest me | 7 | 41% | 41% |
| Yes | 3 | 18% | 8% |
| unknown | 2 | 12% | 35% |
| Down syndrome | | | |
| No, but I would like to be | 2 | 25% | 16% |
| No, it doesn't interest me | 2 | 25% | 40% |
| Yes | 1 | 13% | 10% |
| unknown | 3 | 38% | 33% |
| Autism | | | |
| No, but I would like to be | 4 | 15% | 6% |
| No, it doesn't interest me | 4 | 15% | 14% |
| Yes | 5 | 19% | 3% |
| unknown | 14 | 52% | 77% |
| Psychosocial disability | | | |
| No, but I would like to be | 7 | 58% | 29% |
| No, it doesn't interest me | 2 | 17% | 53% |
| Yes | 2 | 17% | 6% |
| unknown | 1 | 8% | 11% |
| Other | | | |
| No, but I would like to be | 0 | 0% | 18% |
| No, it doesn't interest me | 6 | 55% | 44% |
| Yes | 2 | 18% | 9% |
| unknown | 3 | 27% | 29% |
| Total | | | |
| No, but I would like to be | 19 | 25% | 16% |
| No, it doesn't interest me | 20 | 27% | 37% |
| Yes | 19 | 25% | 7% |
| unknown | 17 | 23% | 40% |
| Education level | | | |
| Intellectual disability | | | |
| Less Than Year 12 | 3 | 18% | 47% |
| None | 1 | 6% | 6% |
| TAFE/Diploma/Other | 8 | 47% | 13% |
| University degree | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Year 12 | 4 | 24% | 22% |
| unknown | 1 | 6% | 11% |
| Down syndrome | | | |
| Less Than Year 12 | 2 | 25% | 38% |
| None | 0 | 0% | 7% |
| TAFE/Diploma/Other | 3 | 38% | 11% |
| University degree | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Year 12 | 2 | 25% | 32% |
| unknown | 1 | 13% | 12% |
| Autism | | | |

| | N = 75 | % NDIS research participants | % NDIS population |
|--------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Less Than Year 12 | 17 | 63% | 70% |
| None | 0 | 0% | 2% |
| TAFE/Diploma/Other | 6 | 22% | 6% |
| University degree | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Year 12 | 3 | 11% | 9% |
| unknown | 1 | 4% | 13% |
| Psychosocial disability | | | |
| Less Than Year 12 | 1 | 8% | 36% |
| None | 0 | 0% | 2% |
| TAFE/Diploma/Other | 4 | 33% | 27% |
| University degree | 3 | 25% | 13% |
| Year 12 | 3 | 25% | 13% |
| unknown | 1 | 8% | 9% |
| Other | | | |
| Less Than Year 12 | 2 | 18% | 38% |
| None | 0 | 0% | 2% |
| TAFE/Diploma/Other | 4 | 36% | 21% |
| University degree | 3 | 27% | 17% |
| Year 12 | 2 | 18% | 12% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 9% |
| Total | | | |
| Less Than Year 12 | 25 | 33% | 50% |
| None | 1 | 1% | 3% |
| TAFE/Diploma/Other | 25 | 33% | 15% |
| University degree | 6 | 8% | 7% |
| Year 12 | 14 | 19% | 14% |
| unknown | 4 | 5% | 11% |
| Learning related goal | | | |
| Intellectual disability | | | |
| No | 11 | 65% | 77% |
| Yes | 6 | 35% | 23% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Down syndrome | | | |
| No | 6 | 75% | 80% |
| Yes | 2 | 25% | 19% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Autism | | | |
| No | 14 | 52% | 72% |
| Yes | 13 | 48% | 27% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Psychosocial disability | | | |
| No | 9 | 75% | 79% |
| Yes | 3 | 25% | 20% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Other | | | |
| No | 6 | 55% | 83% |
| Yes | 5 | 45% | 16% |
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 1% |
| Total | | | |
| No | 46 | 61% | 78% |
| Yes | 29 | 39% | 22% |

| | N = 75 | % NDIS research participants | % NDIS population |
|---------|---------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| unknown | 0 | 0% | 1% |

10.2 Appendix 2: NDIS service delivery staff survey results

TABLE 10: NDIS SERVICE DELIVERY STAFF RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

| | N=142 | % |
|--|------------|----------|
| NDIS role | | |
| LAC/Partner in the community | 71 | 50% |
| NDIA Planner and/or Delegate | 62 | 44% |
| Subject Matter Expert in Employment | 9 | 6% |
| Working with NDIS cohorts | | |
| Intellectual disability (including TBI/ABI, and conditions that cause intellectual disability including Down syndrome) | 129 | 91% |
| Autism spectrum | 129 | 91% |
| Psychosocial disability | 126 | 89% |
| Years working for the NDIS | | |
| <1 year | 13 | 9% |
| 1-2 years | 19 | 13% |
| 3-4 years | 48 | 34% |
| >4 years | 62 | 44% |
| Team leaders | | |
| Yes | 19 | 13% |
| Previous experience in the disability sector (N=141) | | |
| Yes | 110 | 77% |
| Specialised training | | |
| Disability employment | 56 | 39% |
| Community participation for people with disability | 89 | 63% |
| Other training | 26 | 18% |
| State/Territory | | |
| ACT | 3 | 2% |
| NSW | 28 | 20% |
| NT | 3 | 2% |
| Qld | 27 | 19% |
| SA | 26 | 18% |
| Tas | 8 | 6% |
| Vic | 28 | 20% |
| WA | 30 | 21% |
| Geographic area | | |
| Metro | 89 | 63% |
| Regional | 56 | 39% |
| Rural | 15 | 11% |
| Gender | 139 | % |
| Male | 31 | 22% |
| Female | 99 | 71% |
| Transgender | 0 | 0% |
| Gender fluid | 2 | 1% |

| | N=142 | % |
|--|--------------|----------|
| I would prefer not to say | 7 | 5% |
| Diversity information | 68 | |
| Cultural and Linguistically Diverse | 11 | 8% |
| Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander | 3 | 2% |
| LGBTIQA+ community | 20 | 14% |
| A person with a disability | 34 | 24% |

TABLE 11: NDIS SERVICE DELIVERY STAFF PERCEPTION OF THE TOP RANKED BARRIERS FOR NDIS PARTICIPANTS FINDING AND MAINTAINING OPEN EMPLOYMENT

| | Pre-COVID | | Post-COVID | |
|---|------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|
| Finding employment | n | % | n | % |
| Intellectual disability cohort | 129 | | 129 | |
| Lack of inclusive employers | 58 | 45% | 60 | 47% |
| Lack of opportunities in regional areas | 63 | 49% | 56 | 43% |
| Lack of individualised support to find work that meets the needs of participants | 80 | 62% | 55 | 43% |
| Not knowing how to navigate the options available | 60 | 47% | 42 | 33% |
| Autism spectrum Cohort | 129 | | 129 | |
| Lack of opportunities in regional areas | 48 | 37% | 67 | 52% |
| Lack of inclusive employers | 72 | 56% | 66 | 51% |
| Lack of individualised support to find work that meets the needs of participants | 65 | 50% | 65 | 50% |
| Psychosocial disability cohort | 126 | | 126 | |
| Lack of individualised support to find work that meets the needs of participants | 72 | 57% | 65 | 52% |
| Lack of inclusive employers | 52 | 41% | 54 | 43% |
| Low self-perception of employability | 56 | 44% | 47 | 37% |
| Maintaining employment | | | | |
| Intellectual disability cohort | 129 | | 129 | |
| Lack of individualised support to maintain work (e.g., support worker, travel assistance) | 90 | 70% | 85 | 66% |
| Inappropriate job matching | 82 | 64% | 73 | 57% |
| Workplaces not accommodating of individual needs (e.g., need for working from home) | 67 | 52% | 71 | 55% |
| Autism spectrum Cohort (n=129) | | | | |
| Lack of individualised support to maintain work (e.g., support worker, travel assistance) | 86 | 67% | 80 | 62% |
| Inappropriate job matching | 74 | 57% | 75 | 58% |

| | Pre-COVID | | Post-COVID | |
|---|-----------|-----|------------|-----|
| Workplaces not accommodating of individual needs (e.g., need for working from home) | 72 | 56% | 63 | 49% |
| Psychosocial disability cohort (n=126) | | | | |
| Episodic nature of the disability | 82 | 65% | 75 | 60% |
| Lack of individualised support to maintain work (e.g., support worker, travel assistance) | 71 | 56% | 74 | 59% |
| Stigma of disability and issues of disclosure to the employer | 77 | 61% | 71 | 56% |

Key: Pre-COVID and Post COVID relates to what the survey respondents thought were the main barriers before COVID and what is or would be post COVID

TABLE 12: NDIS SERVICE DELIVERY STAFF PERCEPTION OF THE TOP THREE RANKED ENABLERS TO FINDING OPEN EMPLOYMENT FOR PARTICIPANTS

| | Pre-COVID | | Post-COVID | |
|--|------------|-----|------------|-----|
| | n | % | N | % |
| Intellectual disability cohort | 129 | | 129 | |
| Ongoing support and job readiness training | 74 | 57% | 66 | 51% |
| Informal supports such as parents, friends and community | 55 | 43% | 45 | 35% |
| Capacity building | 42 | 33% | 44 | 34% |
| Autism spectrum cohort | 129 | | 129 | |
| Ongoing support and job readiness training | 63 | 49% | 68 | 53% |
| Informal supports such as parents, friends and community | 43 | 33% | 46 | 36% |
| Capacity building | 42 | 33% | 41 | 32% |
| Psychosocial disability cohort | 126 | | 126 | |
| Ongoing support and job readiness training | 61 | 48% | 65 | 52% |
| Capacity building | 56 | 44% | 51 | 40% |
| Informal supports such as parents, friends and community | 41 | 33% | 43 | 34% |

Key: Pre-COVID and Post COVID relates to what the survey respondents thought were the main enablers before COVID and what is or would be post COVID

TABLE 13: TOP THREE RANKED BARRIERS FACED BY NDIS SERVICE DELIVERY STAFF WHEN ASSISTING PARTICIPANTS TO IDENTIFY AND WORK TOWARDS EMPLOYMENT GOALS

| | n | % |
|---|------------|-----|
| Intellectual disability cohort | 129 | |
| Lack of opportunities in the open job market | 71 | 55% |
| Lack of clarity on the role of NDIS employment supports compared to DES | 59 | 46% |
| Participants disengaged in pursuing employment goals | 45 | 35% |
| Autism spectrum cohort | 129 | |
| Lack of opportunities in the open job market | 64 | 50% |
| Lack of clarity on the role of NDIS employment supports compared to DES | 54 | 42% |
| Participants disengaged in pursuing employment goals | 45 | 35% |
| Psychosocial disability cohort | 126 | |
| Participants disengaged in pursuing employment goals | 67 | 53% |
| Lack of opportunities in the open job market | 55 | 44% |
| Attitudes of employers not accepting of people with disabilities | 49 | 39% |

Key: Pre-COVID and Post COVID relates to what the survey respondents thought were the main barriers before COVID and what is or would be post COVID

TABLE 14: ACCESSING INFORMATION FOR EMPLOYMENT PLANNING

| | n | % |
|--|------------|------------|
| Ease in finding up-to-date information on what supports or services are available | 141 | |
| Very easy | 4 | 3% |
| Easy | 24 | 17% |
| Neither easy or difficult | 37 | 26% |
| Difficult | 67 | 48% |
| Very difficult | 9 | 6% |
| Ease in finding up-to-date information on what supports and services the NDIS will fund | 142 | |
| Very easy | 6 | 4% |
| Easy | 35 | 25% |
| Neither easy or difficult | 36 | 25% |
| Difficult | 50 | 35% |
| Very difficult | 15 | 11% |

TABLE 15: MOST ACCESSED INFORMATION RESOURCES WHEN SUPPORTING PARTICIPANTS

| | n | % |
|---|------------|-----|
| To develop employment goals within their plan | 112 | |
| NDIS intranet | 101 | 90% |
| Colleagues (including Subject Matter Experts) | 86 | 77% |
| NDIS Employment Services intranet page | 81 | 72% |
| To implement and work towards their employment goals (e.g., choosing supports) | 75 | |
| NDIS website (external) | 50 | 67% |
| NDIS intranet | 48 | 64% |
| Disability Employment Services Website (e.g., JobAccess) | 48 | 64% |
| Resources thought to be used by participants | 142 | |
| Support coordinator | 80 | 56% |
| Partner in the Community/LAC | 72 | 51% |
| Disability Employment Services Website (e.g., JobAccess) | 67 | 47% |

TABLE 16: ARE NDIS SERVICE DELIVERY STAFF FINDING THE INFORMATION THEY NEED?

| | n | % |
|---|------------|-----|
| To develop employment goals within participants' plan | 112 | |
| Yes | 77 | 69% |
| No | 35 | 31% |
| To implement and work towards participants' employment goals (e.g., choosing supports) | 75 | |
| Yes | 54 | 72% |
| No | 20 | 27% |

TABLE 17: SUPPORTING PARTICIPANTS DEVELOP EMPLOYMENT GOALS - HELPFULNESS OF INFORMATION RESOURCES FOR NDIS SERVICE DELIVERY STAFF

| | Never heard of | Heard of but haven't used | Very unhelpful | Unhelpful | Neither helpful or unhelpful | Helpful | Very helpful |
|---|----------------|---------------------------|----------------|-----------|------------------------------|---------|--------------|
| NDIS website | 0% | 4% | 2% | 11% | 25% | 48% | 10% |
| The Employment Intranet Page | 7% | 10% | 3% | 5% | 19% | 49% | 6% |
| Participant facing resources: | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| “Let’s Talk About Work” booklet | 6% | 7% | 3% | 7% | 18% | 47% | 12% |
| Participant flyer – ‘Changes to supported employment’ | 5% | 14% | 1% | 11% | 26% | 35% | 7% |
| Resources for planners: | | | | | | | |
| “Let’s Talk about work” guide for LACs and planners | 8% | 10% | 2% | 4% | 12% | 57% | 7% |
| Let’s Talk About Work E-Learning Module | 7% | 6% | 3% | 7% | 21% | 47% | 8% |
| Supports In Employment E-Learning Module | 6% | 3% | 2% | 6% | 18% | 52% | 11% |
| Practice guide: determine reasonable and necessary supports | 0% | 0% | 8% | 7% | 19% | 53% | 13% |
| Briefing pack: new supports in employment | 19% | 11% | 3% | 4% | 19% | 38% | 6% |
| Supports in Employment SOP | 0% | 0% | 4% | 6% | 15% | 56% | 15% |
| Completing the participants’ statement SOP | 1% | 3% | 3% | 8% | 31% | 41% | 7% |
| The difference between SLES and DES fact sheet | 13% | 5% | 2% | 5% | 8% | 53% | 13% |
| Add SLES to the participant plan SOP | 0% | 4% | 3% | 9% | 11% | 58% | 13% |
| Supports in Employment FAQs | 7% | 10% | 4% | 5% | 11% | 55% | 6% |
| Tip Sheet: Employment Conversations | 18% | 6% | 3% | 6% | 20% | 41% | 6% |
| Resources for providers: | | | | | | | |
| The SLES provider booklet | 4% | 8% | 6% | 5% | 18% | 46% | 13% |
| Contact points: | | | | | | | |
| Colleagues (including Subject Matter Experts) | 13% | 6% | 1% | 3% | 10% | 36% | 29% |

| | Never heard of | Heard of but haven't used | Very unhelpful | Unhelpful | Neither helpful or unhelpful | Helpful | Very helpful |
|--|----------------|---------------------------|----------------|-----------|------------------------------|---------|--------------|
| 'Participant Employment' Yammer group | 19% | 25% | 4% | 0% | 15% | 21% | 12% |
| Participant.employment@ndis.gov.au inbox | 35% | 28% | 4% | 3% | 13% | 9% | 6% |

N=112 as not all NDIS service delivery staff respondents supported participants develop employment goals

TABLE 18: SUPPORTING PARTICIPANTS TO IMPLEMENT AND WORK TOWARDS THEIR EMPLOYMENT GOALS - HELPFULNESS OF INFORMATION RESOURCES FOR NDIS SERVICE DELIVERY STAFF

| | Never heard of | Heard of but haven't used | Very unhelpful | Unhelpful | Neither helpful or unhelpful | Helpful | Very helpful |
|---|----------------|---------------------------|----------------|-----------|------------------------------|---------|--------------|
| NDIS website | 0% | 3% | 5% | 8% | 33% | 43% | 5% |
| The Employment Intranet Page | 4% | 9% | 3% | 12% | 24% | 37% | 7% |
| Participant facing resources: | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| "Let's Talk About Work" booklet | 3% | 3% | 3% | 11% | 21% | 49% | 9% |
| Participant flyer – 'Changes to supported employment' | 5% | 7% | 3% | 9% | 27% | 40% | 8% |
| Resources for planners: | | | | | | | |
| "Let's Talk about work" guide for LACs and planners | 9% | 4% | 4% | 9% | 16% | 49% | 7% |
| Let's Talk About Work E-Learning Module | 7% | 5% | 4% | 12% | 27% | 36% | 9% |
| Supports In Employment E-Learning Module | 7% | 3% | 1% | 12% | 21% | 43% | 11% |
| Practice guide: determine reasonable and necessary supports | 0% | 0% | 9% | 12% | 19% | 48% | 9% |
| Briefing pack: new supports in employment | 12% | 8% | 1% | 13% | 19% | 37% | 8% |
| Supports in Employment SOP | 0% | 0% | 3% | 16% | 15% | 51% | 16% |
| Completing the participants' statement SOP | 0% | 1% | 3% | 13% | 31% | 45% | 7% |
| The difference between SLES and DES fact sheet | 8% | 4% | 1% | 8% | 13% | 51% | 12% |
| Add SLES to the participant plan SOP | 1% | 4% | 5% | 13% | 20% | 41% | 11% |
| Supports in Employment FAQs | 8% | 4% | 3% | 7% | 19% | 51% | 7% |

| | Never heard of | Heard of but haven't used | Very unhelpful | Unhelpful | Neither helpful or unhelpful | Helpful | Very helpful |
|---|----------------|---------------------------|----------------|-----------|------------------------------|---------|--------------|
| Tip Sheet: Employment Conversations | 15% | 8% | 4% | 9% | 21% | 33% | 9% |
| Resources for providers: | | | | | | | |
| The SLES provider booklet | 4% | 7% | 3% | 9% | 21% | 43% | 11% |
| Contact points: | | | | | | | |
| Colleagues (including Subject Matter Experts) | 1% | 4% | 0% | 5% | 11% | 52% | 25% |
| 'Participant Employment' Yammer group | 19% | 27% | 4% | 0% | 19% | 16% | 13% |
| Participant.employment@ndis.gov.au inbox | 37% | 31% | 3% | 1% | 8% | 9% | 8% |

N=75 as not all NDIS service delivery staff respondents supported participants to implement and work towards their employment goals

FIGURE 5 HELPFULNESS OF INFORMATION RESOURCES IN SUPPORTING PARTICIPANTS TO DEVELOP EMPLOYMENT GOALS (N=112)

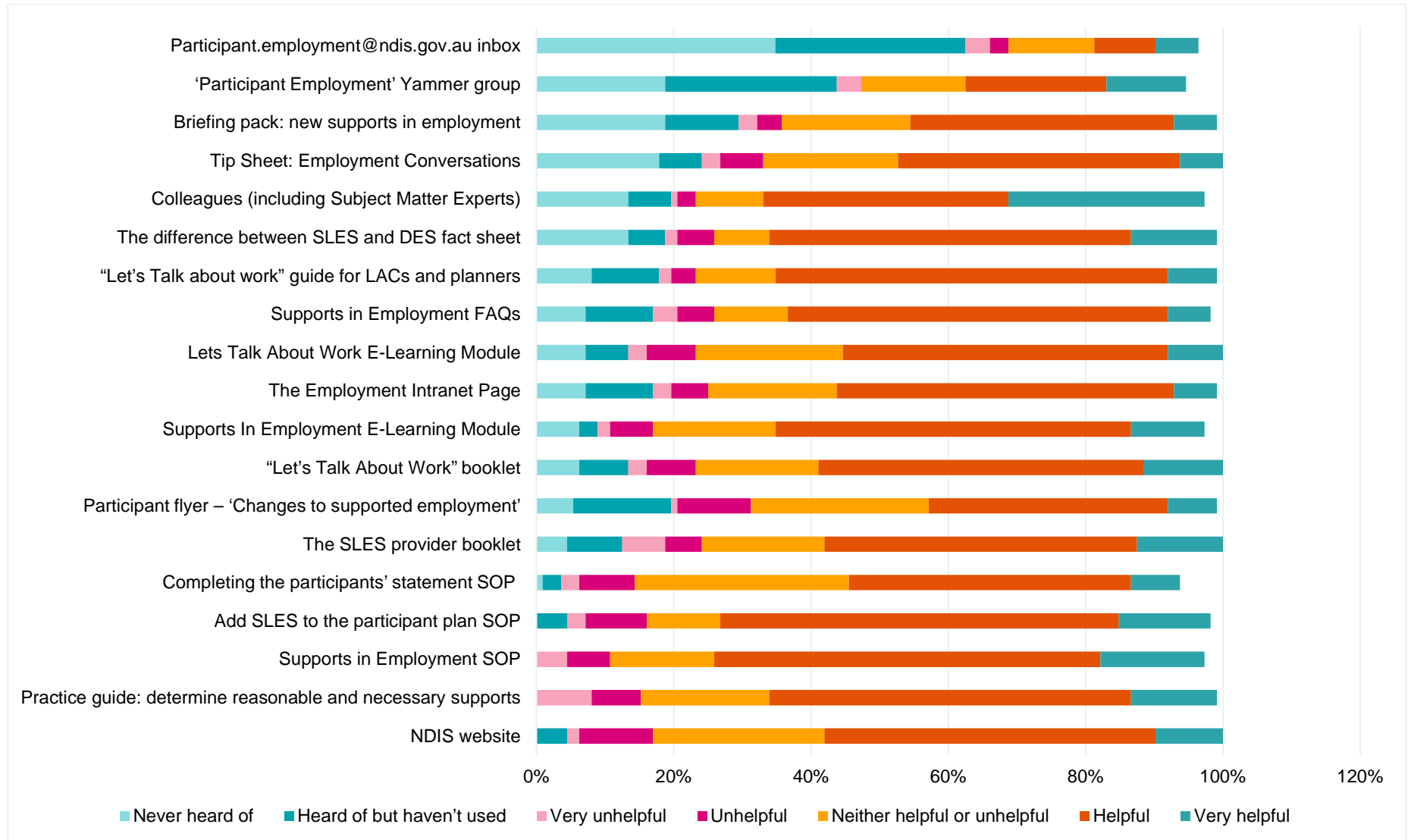
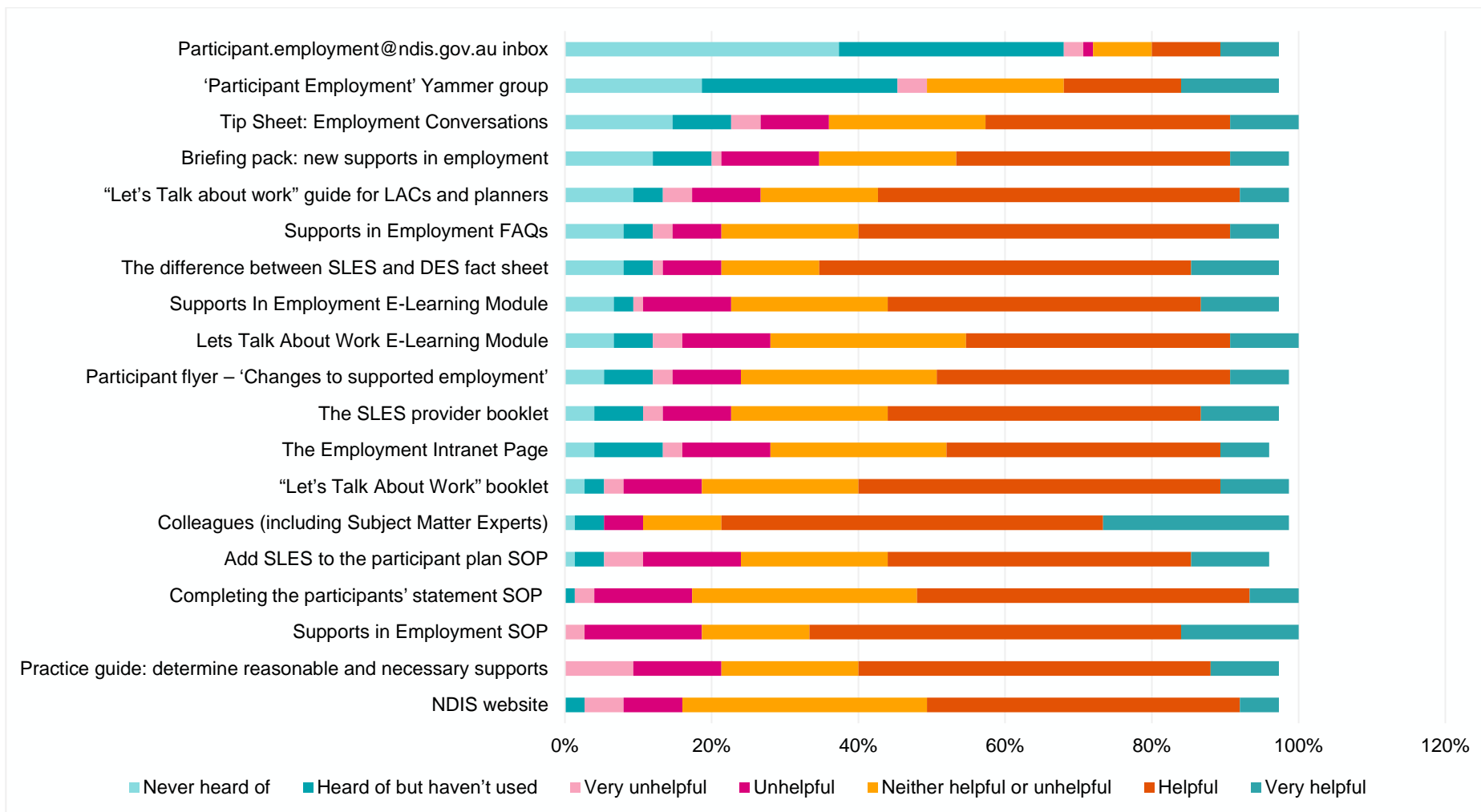


FIGURE 6 HELPFULNESS OF INFORMATION RESOURCES IN SUPPORTING PARTICIPANTS TO IMPLEMENT AND WORK TOWARDS THEIR EMPLOYMENT GOALS (N=129)



10.3 Appendix 3: Interview schedules

Research participants were asked a range of questions about their current and past employment as well as future career aspirations. An example of an interview schedule is included below. The Easy Read version and one for parents and guardians of NDIS participants aged seven to 13 years are available on request.

10.3.1 NDIS participants and family, carers and other supporters

Interview Schedule - NDIS participants with autism or psychosocial disability AND families, carers, plan nominees and other supporters (14 – 44 year old participants)

Demographic questions

[Note: the following are prompts for the interviewers rather than direct questions and names will be used rather than “NDIS participant”]

- Age (NDIS participant and Parent etc. if applicable) -
- Location: Metro/regional/rural (both cohorts if applicable)
- State or territory
- What is your cultural background?
- Are you Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both?
- Are you part of the LGBTIQ+ community?
- Who supports the NDIS participant in developing their plan?
 - An LAC?
 - An NDIA planner?
 - Support coordinator?
 - Self managed/ plan manager/ NDIA managed
- Who else is involved? (parents, friends, support workers etc.)
- What is your/NDIS participant’s primary disability? Do you have other disabilities or health conditions?
- What supports and services are funded out of the NDIS plan?
- Who does the NDIS participant live with? (i.e. family, group home, housemates etc.)
- What is your relationship to the person? (For parents/guardians/nominees)
- What is your or the person you support, NDIS number? (this information will be used to link your interview with de-identified basic information about the NDIS participant such as if they are in employment or if they live along for example).

Current employment

Ice breaker:

Can you please tell me something about you or the NDIS participant? (i.e. what do you like to do? What are you good at? Where do you go during the week?)

MAIN QUESTION:

Can you tell me about your/the NDIS participant's paid job?

Follow-up topics

- Type of employment
- Own Business
- Desirable job characteristics
- Job attributes
- Support at work
- Getting work ready
- Preparing places of employment:
- Work experience/internships/volunteering (Tease each out regarding supports, links to paid work etc.)
- Skill development
- Job matching
- Finding paid work
- What role does assistive technology play in supporting with employment?
- Maintaining paid work
- Aspirations
- Disability pension

MAIN QUESTION:

Do you/they have funding in your/their NDIS plan that means that you can pay for someone to help you get a job?

Can you please tell me about how or if your/their NDIS plan helped you/them prepare for getting a job?

Follow-up questions

- Perceived role of the NDIS
- How could the NDIS make it easier you you/them to get a job?
- Perceived role of parents/guardians/nominees
- Perceived role of NDIS participants

- Others – schools, case managers, services, support workers etc
- Developing employment-related goals:
- Materials for goal development
- Choosing supports
- Choosing providers:

Sub-set (14 – 17 year olds – or those still in school and parents/carers etc of same)

- Internship details
- Work experience at school
- What are your options after school?
- Do you/they currently have a job?
- What things will help you/them get ready for work?

10.3.2 NDIS service delivery staff

Interview schedule and focus group

Demographic questions

- Age
- Work geographical area or postcode
- State
- Are you:
 - An LAC?
 - An NDIS planner?
 - A Subject Matter Expert?
- Do you have a specialised planning role?

Ice breaker:

Can you tell me a bit about your role?

Can you please tell me about the pathway to paid employment and getting and keeping a job and the NDIS for people with autism, intellectual disability, and/or psychosocial disability?

Follow-up questions:

- What do you think employment means to NDIS participants?
- What are some of the pathways for NDIS participants to prepare for work, find a paid job and keep that job? (including school leavers, people who between jobs, those who want career progression, and those who have never worked)

- What prevents NDIS participants from preparing for work, finding a paid job and keeping that job?
- Developing NDIS goals for preparing for work, finding a paid job and keeping that job?
 - What is your role?
 - What is the role of the NDIS participant?
 - What is the role of the parent/guardian/nominee?
 - What is the role of the NDIS in supporting NDIS participants to gain and stay in employment?
 - What is the role of others such as schools, allied health?
 - What information is there to support you and the participant with developing these goals? (are these used, how are they used?)
 - What information would be helpful with this?
- What role does community participation and connectedness play in gaining paid employment?
- What does the NDIS play in this?
- What role could the NDIS play in this?
- Is there enough emphasis on community participation in current plans?
- Role of AT?
- What do you think was the impact of the coronavirus restrictions on this? What did the NDIS do during this time (to your knowledge)? What do you think that they could/should have done?