



**CRE-DH**

Centre of  
Research Excellence in  
Disability and Health

# SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY CONSULTATION REPORT

in partnership with



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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## About the submission

This submission is made on behalf of researchers from the Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health (CRE-DH) funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council, 17 May 2021.

## About the CRE-DH

The Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health (CRE-DH) aims to identify cost-effective policies to improve the health of people with disability in Australia. There are four interconnected research areas in the CRE-DH focused on:

1. mapping the health inequities between Australians with and without disabilities,
2. analysing the social, economic and environmental factors that contribute to the poorer health of people with disability,
3. modelling the cost-effectiveness of health policy interventions, and
4. policy analysis and reform.

The CRE-DH is an interdisciplinary research group comprised of academics from five universities, a team of international advisors and a Partner Advisory Group of stakeholders from the disability and health sectors. The CRE-DH Co-Directors are Professor Anne Kavanagh (University of Melbourne) and Professor Gwynnyth Llewellyn (University of Sydney). The CRE-DH includes Chief Investigators from the University of Melbourne, University of Sydney, Monash University, UNSW Canberra and RMIT with multidisciplinary skills in epidemiology, health economics, health and social policy, psychology, psychiatry, public administration and public health. In addition, we have Associate Investigators from a range of national and international universities and the World Health Organization. We work in collaboration with key stakeholders including DSS, ABS, AIHW and peak bodies in the disability advocacy and service sector through our Partner Advisory Group. Several members of the CRE-DH research team and the Partner Advisory Group also have lived experience of disability.

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# Submission to the Department of Social Services on the draft National Disability Employment Strategy Consultation Paper, 17 May 2021

## FOCUS OF OUR SUBMISSION

The CRE-DH has a particular focus on reducing disability-related inequities in the social determinants of health, that is, the upstream factors that affect health through the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, and which are, in turn, shaped by political, social, and economic forces.<sup>[1]</sup> We have therefore focused our submission on where we feel our current research can make the strongest contribution to the development of the National Disability Employment Strategy.

As such, we have prioritised feedback on

- the proposed vision of the National Disability Employment Strategy (NDES);
- the barriers experienced by people with disability that are missing from the consultation or require greater emphasis in terms of how they will be addressed within the NDES; and
- monitoring and evaluation of the NDES.

Much of our work on employment and disability is available through various reports and submissions. Where relevant, we have provided links to these bodies of work.

## KEY POINTS

### 1. The National Disability Employment Strategy should be positioned as a whole-of-government responsibility

Improving employment outcomes for people with disability requires policies and programs that address the vocational, non-vocational and structural barriers to secure and meaningful employment that are too often encountered by people with disability across the life course.

While the National Disability Employment Strategy (NDES) is being driven through the Department of Social Services (DSS), implementation requires commitment to strong action, clear targets and accountability across all Australian and state and territory government departments and relevant agencies to address multi-faceted barriers to work.

### 2. We need to improve the evidence base on what interventions work and for whom, and under what circumstances these interventions work

An accurate understanding of the availability and effectiveness of the plethora of employment policies and programs implemented across federal, state and territory jurisdictions, is currently missing from the draft NDES.

Also missing is a clear understanding of how different employment policies and programs could better interact and collaborate with other systems (e.g., mental health, housing) to more effectively address inequalities and barriers to employment experienced by people with disability.

The NDES must commit to address these gaps in understanding, and to enhancing the evidence base about which policies, programs and interventions are most

efficient and effective in supporting the diverse cohort of people with disability wanting to find work and remain employed.

### 3. Ongoing monitoring, evaluation and reporting of outcomes achieved through the NDES is vital for continual improvement

Monitoring the NDES implementation and outcomes is essential. This requires monitoring employment *outcomes* and also *barriers* and *facilitators* to the career development and employment for people with disability across the life course, and accessing employment.

# 1. The proposed vision of the NDES

Inclusion and participation across all life domains is critical to improving community attitudes towards disability and supporting the career-development and employment outcomes of people with disability<sup>[2,3]</sup>. We therefore agree that the vision of the NDES should include reference to ‘An inclusive Australian society’.

The vision’s relevance to disability and employment would be strengthened by specifically referencing Australia’s commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in relation to work; centering people with disability and their right to ‘just and favourable conditions of work’ (UNCRPD, Article 27, pg 20). For example, the NDES vision could emphasize ‘An inclusive Australian society where all people with disability can attain the right to decent work on an equal basis with others.’

Furthermore, the NDES must go beyond getting people with disability into any job. Instead, the NDES must strive for quality and sustained employment outcomes that provide sufficient hours and conditions and enable job satisfaction and career progression<sup>[5]</sup>.

The NDES must be a whole-of-government responsibility. The Strategy must clearly articulate how DSS will work with key departments and agencies, such as the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), Department of Health and, the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), to address known barriers to employment and improve pathways and outcomes for people with disability.

Strong whole-of-government involvement is vital, particularly given the NDES will be a key mechanism by which Australia upholds its obligations as a signatory to the UNCRPD. The Strategy must be informed by the content of Article 27, Work and Employment, and needs to explicitly address each of the actions listed in sub-clauses 27(1) a–k. It should also address the recommendations made to Australia by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2019 concerning work and employment. The Committee recommends that the State party:

- a. Take measures to reform the Disability Employment Services and develop a national disability employment strategy that incorporates the recommendations from the “Willing to work” inquiry and contains targeted gender sensitive measures;

- b. Undertake a comprehensive review of Australian Disability Enterprises to ensure that they adhere to article 27 of the Convention and provide services to enable persons with disabilities to transition from sheltered employment into open, inclusive and accessible employment, ensuring equal remuneration for work of equal value;
- c. Implement measures to address systemic and structural barriers experienced by persons with disabilities, particularly by women with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons with disabilities, persons with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and refugee and asylum-seeking persons with disabilities.<sup>[6]</sup>

## 2. Key barriers experienced by people with disability in gaining and maintaining employment that require emphasis within the NDES

The NDES consultation paper recognises that the current system of employment-related supports does not effectively address the barriers that make it difficult for jobseekers with disability to gain and maintain employment. These barriers however are not sufficiently described. The NDES must acknowledge these barriers and describe how they will be addressed. Key areas for action are set out below, citing relevant research evidence.

### ***Limited supply of jobs that meet the diverse needs, capabilities, and aspirations of people with disability.***

[Research published](#) by the CRE-DH in 2017 using data from the HILDA survey, revealed that there was no reduction in unemployment inequalities between people with and without disability over the period 2001 to 2016, and that in 2016 the rate of unemployment for people with disability was two and a half times that of their non-disabled peers.<sup>[7]</sup>

Our [Improving Disability Employment Study](#) (IDES) highlighted that one of the key structural barriers to employment most commonly reported by people with disability is the limited supply of jobs that meet their diverse needs, capabilities and aspirations. [8,9] Similarly, our study on the transition from vocational education and training to employment in NSW found that there were very poor job markets for people with disability, particularly in rural and regional areas. We also concluded that the bar is set way too low for people with disability, where any job, rather than a career, is set as the employment aspiration.<sup>[10, 11]</sup>

As highlighted in our submission to the public hearing on [Employment Discrimination](#) at the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (DRC), addressing the limited supply of jobs and pathways to these jobs requires the NDES to prioritise *the development and implementation of an ambitious Inclusive National Jobs Plan* that sets out how and where new jobs that meet the diverse needs and aspirations of people with disability can be created.<sup>[9]</sup> This could sit alongside the Australian Public Service Disability Employment Strategy 2020-2025.<sup>[12]</sup> Such a plan must include that appropriate employment accommodations are readily available (and funded) and that their uptake can be monitored and evaluated.

### ***The cumulative impact of discrimination and limited understanding of disability on career-development and employment***

Limited understanding of disability, low-expectations of capabilities, and discrimination across the life course - within and external to the labour market (e.g., education, early career development, communities, the media and broader civil society) - greatly hinders the capabilities of people with disability to find and maintain work.<sup>[2,3,9-11]</sup>

Changing community attitudes about the capabilities of people with disability – both within and external to the labour market – must be a priority focus of the NDES. Aligning with the NDES vision, we highlight that key to changing community attitudes is ensuring people with disability are included and can participate on an equal basis with others across all life domains (e.g., social, educational, health, economic, media, civil and political domains). A related priority is identifying and publicising a range of success stories among people with disability, employers, disability employment services and the broader public to provide role models and to raise expectations about the capabilities of people with disability as workers and their contributions to the labour force.

Visibility of people with disability in front-line positions is also essential to change the narrative around people with disability and employment. Many people with disability and employers base their understanding of disability employment on stereotypes rather than their own experiences of encountering and interacting with people with disability in workplace settings.<sup>[9-11]</sup>

National and international literature, and our own work on disability training and employment in NSW, has shown that work experience is highly valued by people with disability and an important predictor of successful transition into work.<sup>[13-17]</sup> Work experience has to be actively supported to function as a positive experience. Negative experiences, where people are not supported, or where they are exploited, only increase the cycle of poor self-esteem related to employment. The NDES must provide a framework that enables people with disability and employers to work together to create positive work experiences.

Nonetheless, we caution that changing attitudes should not be seen as a ‘pre-requisite’ and sufficient to achieving outcomes. There are a broad range of actions required to improve employment outcomes as detailed below.

### ***Focusing on young people with disability***

There is no doubt that the NDES must focus on young people with disability. Investment targeted to younger

age groups will deliver long-term returns. New research by CRE-DH using data from the HILDA survey shows that unemployment inequalities between young people aged 15-24 with and without disability actually increased over the period 2001 to 2018. In 2018, young people with disability were more likely to be unemployed than were their non-disabled peers (26% vs 10%), and less likely to have an educational attainment of at least Year 12 or Certificate 2 (60% vs 72%). Further, only 56% of young people with disability were engaged in full-time work or study, compared with 78% of their non-disabled peers.<sup>[18]</sup> (See [Disadvantage facing young people with disability: what's changed over time?](#))

Numerous factors contribute to the inequalities in employment outcomes experienced by young people with disability, many of which occur during transitions from school to post-school training and employment and early career development. For example, Xu and Stancliffe (2019) have noted that the absence of appropriate work experience placements and internships for students and school leavers with disability within programs such as Transition to Work (TTW) contribute to poor employment outcomes. A key issue is the high proportion of students with disability within TTW who are funneled into work experience in Australian Disability Employment (ADE) organisations, which often leads to future work in ADE. While this may be a preferred option for some students, we recommend that all transition programs and high schools be expected to provide suitable work experience in mainstream work environments.<sup>[19]</sup>

Poorer employment outcomes can in part also be explained by a disconnect between policy approaches to young people with disability transitioning from school to post-school training and employment, and the reality of challenges for young people with disability across these transitions. Pertinently, constrained local labour markets are often the key factor limiting employment.<sup>[9-11]</sup> *NDES strategies to support early-career development and transition pathways need to sit alongside strategies to increase the supply of jobs.*

This speaks to our earlier point about DSS working with other Australian government departments and agencies, such as DESE and NDIA, to better support students, schools, families and employers in transitions from school to post-school skills training and employment and early career development.

As highlighted in our submission to the DRC and other research, we recommend strategies focus on:

- maximising capabilities across all life domains through access to early intervention and supports
- resourcing the development and implementation of earlier, more coordinated and individualised early-career development programs which include well-supported work-experience and internships in diverse and open employment settings
- strengthening collaborative practice between young people with disability and their families, education and training providers, employment programs and employers, as demonstrated in programs such as the National Disability Service's Ticket to Work program.

Further research into the employment pathways and experiences of young people with disability - especially in the context of COVID-19 - is also required to inform understanding of barriers, facilitators and appropriate responses. Our [Youth Employment Study](#) (YES), funded by NHMRC, is currently addressing this gap.

Despite all of the above, given the large proportion of people with disability over the age of 35 currently engaged with employment programs (e.g., 70% of the current DES population is over the age of 34 years)<sup>[20]</sup>, building the skills, experience and confidence of job seekers cannot be limited only to young people.

### ***Improving systems and services for people with disability and employers***

As highlighted in the NDES consultation paper, people with disability and employers find it difficult to navigate the complex array of employment policies and programs operating across federal, state and territory jurisdictions. This is further complicated for people with disability who may also require services and supports across multiple other systems (e.g., mental health, housing) to address non-vocational barriers to employment. Many people with disability would therefore benefit from receiving integrated supports to simultaneously address vocational and non-vocational barriers to employment. Such integration is currently difficult to achieve due to the different funding and contractual arrangements that govern, for example, employment and mental health programs across different jurisdictions.<sup>[21-24]</sup>

*The NDES will not achieve its goal unless federal, state and territory governments work together*

to address this issue and determine how integrated services and supports that concurrently address vocational and non-vocational barriers to employment can be appropriately resourced and implemented across jurisdictions.

### **Employer engagement**

Reduced opportunities for people with disability to participate in early career-development activities and in the labour market more generally also reduces the opportunities for employers to build their understanding and confidence to employ people with disability.<sup>[9-11, 25-27]</sup> This makes it difficult to ‘break the cycle’: employers are less likely to consider a person with disability if they do not have previous experience. This is compounded when employers do not know how to access information and support to improve their capacity to include people with disability in the workplace<sup>[9-11, 25]</sup>. In turn, limited employer confidence, along with insufficient on-the-job support for employers and employees with disability, undermines the effectiveness of other ‘demand-side levers’, such as wage subsidies.<sup>[19, 28]</sup>

Recognising their inter-relatedness, the NDES must improve the efficiency and effectiveness of all current ‘demand-side levers’ including:

- processes by which employers can access information and support to build confidence and expertise to employ people with disability and provide reasonable on-the-job supports
- linking of wage subsidies to more focused employment outcomes (i.e., longer lengths of employment, more equitable conditions of employment).

Furthermore, the NDES must consider the *introduction of tax incentives for employers that are attached to quantifiable targets* to promote the employment of people with disability across the private sector, as has been implemented in other contexts.<sup>[29]</sup>

### **Improving on-the-job supports to maintain work**

The NDES consultation paper mentions that not all people with disability require on-the-job support. Our IDES study highlighted that nearly two thirds of DES participants surveyed want more ‘support when they gained employment’. Our research also found that the longer people remain unemployed, the more support they need to both find and then maintain employment. Critically, DES was often reported as not being able to provide the level of on-the-job support that participants required.<sup>[30]</sup> This is reflective of a broader issue of a limited supply of employment support practitioners (within and external to DES) that have the skills, expertise and resources to provide effective on-the-job supports.

As part of the future reform of the DES program, DSS must therefore work with people with disability, employers and employment support providers to ensure on-the-job supports are appropriately resourced and responsive to the needs of job seekers with disability and employers.

This requires a commitment to *meaningful workforce training and development, supported by research-informed tools and resources to guide high quality support that can be delivered within and external to the DES program*. For example, ensuring NDIS participants who may not be eligible or attached to DES nonetheless have choice and access to skilled on-the-job supports through other services and supports. Alongside these strategies, the responsibility of employers to provide reasonable accommodations and on-the-job supports must be made explicit within the NDES.

### **Improving the evidence base about which interventions work for whom and under what circumstances**

There are several examples of evidence-informed practice targeting specific cohorts of people with disability and/or conditions that significantly impact on finding and maintaining work (e.g., Individual Placement and Support for young people with mental health conditions). This is also the case for collaborative practice that supports young people with disability and their families to navigate the complexities of the Australian disability employment eco-system.<sup>[19, 24, 31]</sup>

A challenging reality is that different employment interventions are not evaluated in a consistent way. We therefore do not know which policies, programs and interventions are effective, for which groups of people with disability (e.g., type and severity, age, urban/rural settings), and under what circumstances (e.g., influences of labour market forces, impact of broader inequalities, how different interventions interact to influence outcomes).

*There is an urgent need to generate higher quality evidence about what employment interventions can be efficiently and effectively applied to meet the diverse needs and aspirations of all people with disability.* One approach to this is to develop practice-based evidence by identifying successful disability employment programs and supports, then closely analysing the key reasons for their success.<sup>[19]</sup> *Enhanced utilisation and evaluation of the National Disability Insurance Agency’s (NDIA) Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) focused on improving employment outcomes may assist in generating this much needed evidence.*

### 3. The need to monitor NDES implementation and outcomes

*Monitoring NDES implementation and outcomes is essential for ensuring that the Strategy is effective and stays effective in improving employment outcomes for people with disability and achieving a fair and inclusive society in which people with disability can fulfil their potential as equal citizens.*

The CRE-DH developed the [Disability and Wellbeing Monitoring Framework](#), in consultation with people with lived experience of disability, to measure and track inequalities between people with and without disability in relation to exposure to social determinants of health and wellbeing.<sup>[32,33]</sup> The Disability and Wellbeing Monitoring Framework has a hierarchical structure, with 19 domains grouped into three broad elements (Health and wellbeing, Social determinants, and Service system), within which 128 indicators are specified. It is possible to report nearly three-quarters of these indicators using existing Australian national data sources. For the remainder, national data are not currently available, highlighting important data gaps and the need for data development efforts. The CRE-DH is currently preparing to report national baseline data comparing people with and without disability, for all indicators where such comparison is applicable.

The employment domain of the Disability and Wellbeing Monitoring Framework contains the following indicators:

- Labour force participation
- Employment
- Engagement in employment, education or training
- Unemployment
- Youth unemployment
- Long-term unemployment
- Under-employment
- Leave entitlements
- Employment in high skill jobs
- Job design modifications and reasonable adjustments
- Disability discrimination in the workplace

Monitoring, using reliable sources of data, is crucial to examine inequalities over time that must be addressed, to identify levers for more effective policy action, to hold key actors to account, and, to evaluate the overall impact of the NDES implementation.

In relation to monitoring NDES implementation and outcomes, we emphasise the following:

***Co-design and inclusive processes are essential.*** People with disability must have a leading and central role both in the development of the NDES monitoring framework and the monitoring and

reporting process. We note that CRPD Article 33(3) requires that ‘Civil society, in particular persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, shall be involved and participate fully in the monitoring process’.

***NDES monitoring must include tracking inequalities between people with and without disability.*** Reducing employment inequalities is a key objective. To understand how inequalities are changing over time, it is important to consider the overall prevalence of an outcome (e.g., unemployment rate) and both absolute (difference or ‘gap’) and relative (ratio) inequalities. For example, relative inequalities in unemployment (the rate for people with disability over the rate for people without disability) could rise in the context of falling unemployment and stable absolute differences between people with and without disability. Identifying which inequalities are reducing, remaining unchanged, or worsening for people with disability compared with their non-disabled peers is critical to developing effective policy actions.

***There must be a focus on tracking outcomes and inequalities for diverse groups of people with disability.*** The nature and extent of employment disadvantage experienced varies between different groups of people with disability (e.g., type and severity, age, location). There must be commitment to monitoring outcomes and inequalities for the people with disability who are most disadvantaged including women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, young people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, refugees and people seeking asylum, people who need support with communication, and people with less visible disability.

***Employment barriers and facilitators should be monitored.*** There is a robust and growing evidence base on factors that act as barriers to or facilitators of positive employment outcomes for people with disability. Monitoring these factors is required to understand whether vocational and non-vocational facilitators and barriers to employment for people with disability are changing and if so how and whether this influences employment outcomes. Factors to monitor could include, for example, uptake of incentives by employers, access to job design modifications and reasonable adjustments, and discriminatory attitudes in workplaces.

***There must be commitment to regular public reporting.*** Transparency and accountability require commitment to a regular (annual or biennial) reporting schedule. High-profile, public reporting on the NDES is essential for holding key actors to account, demonstrating good faith, and ensuring that the NDES performs its function as an effective policy instrument.



Reporting must clearly show where things are getting better, getting worse, or staying the same for people with disability. As a general principle, measures should be framed positively, as attainment measures (i.e., % of people with positive outcome), so that increasing rates and a narrowing of the gap between people with and without disability over time indicate improvement. However, where appropriate deficit measures will also need to be included (e.g., unemployment rate).

We note here Australia's obligations under CRPD Article 31 – Statistics and data collection – to collect appropriate statistical data, to disaggregate, as appropriate, and use these data to help assess implementation of the Convention, and to disseminate these data and ensure their accessibility to persons with disabilities and others.

NDES monitoring should align with other key monitoring frameworks at national level.

- National Disability Strategy Outcomes Framework
- NDIS employment indicators
- Australian Public Service Disability Employment Strategy monitoring

***DSS should continue to partner closely with the research community.***

The research community has much to offer, including:

- knowledge concerning existing evidence on particular topics that can provide important context for monitoring implementation and outcomes;
- experience in distinguishing correlations from causation for both randomized and (some) non-randomised policy interventions;
- evaluating the impact of policy and program interventions;
- understanding of the strengths and limitations of different data sources; and
- practical expertise in collecting and analysing both qualitative and quantitative data.

***NDES monitoring should also drive data improvement.*** The NDES should include a commitment to improving data on employment outcomes for people with disability, including filling data gaps (e.g., on pay inequalities) and increasing consistency of data so that outcomes can be compared across states and territories, between sectors and over time. Importantly, developing relevant administrative data sets will support improvements to practice and program delivery and also build the evidence base to inform more effective policy.

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