RESEARCH TO ACTION

>> Bridging the gap between what we know and what we do

Effective school to employment transitions for young people with disability. A Rapid Review of the Literature

Centre for Applied Disability Research

An Initiative of National Disability Services

NDS National Disability Services

THE CENTRE FOR APPLIED DISABILITY RESEARCH

The Centre for Applied Disability Research (CADR) is an initiative of NDS. CADR aims to improve the wellbeing of people living with disability by gathering insights, building understanding and sharing knowledge. CADR's applied research agenda is helping to build the evidence base and support stakeholders to better understand what works, for whom, under what circumstances and at what cost.

RESEARCH TO ACTION GUIDES

Our objective is to build a comprehensive online collection of disability research and translational resources for the Australian context. Our Research to Action Guides are based on the best available local and international evidence and put together by subject matter experts to support research end users to engage with the evidence. We gather and analyse evidence about what works, and package that information into efficient and practical resources.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This Research to Action Guide articulates the key components of best practice for supporting the transition from school to employment for young adults with disability in Australia, based on the best available evidence. This suite of resources includes this rapid review of relevant literature and three practice guidance resources targeted at service users, service providers and disability employment practice leaders.

FEEDBACK

Do you have feedback, or a suggestion for a Research to Action Guide? We welcome your thoughts and ideas. Please contact info@cadr.org.au.

EFFECTIVE SCHOOL TO EMPLOYMENT TRANSITIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY. A RAPID REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
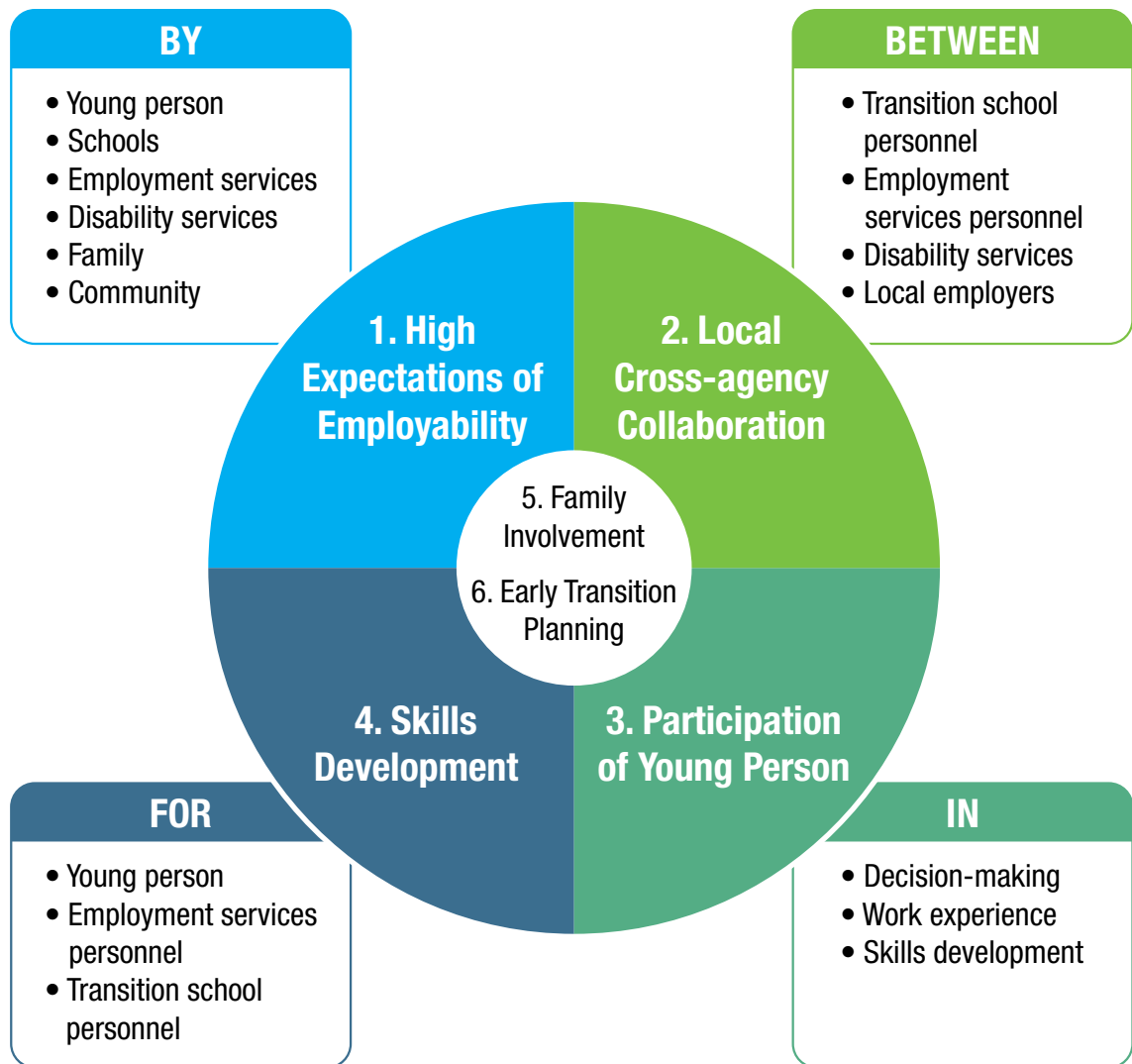
This paper reports on the literature that informs our understanding of the needs and recommended practices for key stakeholders when considering the transition to employment for young adults with disability, particularly those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE

The research evidence points to six elements of effective transitions from school to employment for young people with disability. These elements, or 'principles', can be considered a shared vision for those supporting young people into employment. The principles and their relation to supporting the journey to employment are displayed in Figure 1.

1. Expectation[1-5]
    Young people can work

2. Collaboration[3, 6-8]
    Different sectors can work together

3. Participation[1, 5, 6, 9-13]
    Young people should partake in meaningful work during their school years

4. Skills development[3-5, 11, 14-16]
    Everyone involved in school transitions needs expertise

5. Family involvement[12, 13, 15, 17, 18]
    Family-centred transitions have better outcomes

6. Early transition planning[3, 11-13, 19]
    Early planning impacts outcomes

Figure 1. The shared vision: Six elements of effective school to employment transitions

BY
- Young person
- Schools
- Employment services
- Disability services
- Family
- Community

BETWEEN
- Transition school personnel
- Employment services personnel
- Disability services
- Local employers

1. High Expectations of Employability

2. Local Cross-agency Collaboration

5. Family Involvement

6. Early Transition Planning

4. Skills Development

3. Participation of Young Person

FOR
- Young person
- Employment services personnel
- Transition school personnel

IN
- Decision-making
- Work experience
- Skills development

AN EFFECTIVE TRANSITION SERVICE ACCORDING TO THE EVIDENCE:

Building a streamlined, integrated local transition service for young people with disability requires the following:

- **Local community consultation and 'buy-in' to create:**
  - A collective local vision for the employment of young people with disability
  - A climate of respect and collegiality amongst service agencies
  - Lines of communication between service providers at all levels
  - Easily accessible local knowledge about service provider roles and capacities
- **Commitment at each level of service provision to:**
  - Learn about and understand the philosophy and purpose of other service groups
  - Build knowledge of the continuum of learning and skill development across school year levels, during the transition years and into the post-school environment
  - Identify and clarify roles, responsibilities and timelines for key actions across each service level
  - Identify key personnel in each organisation who can take responsibility for good communication practices
- **Highly trained personnel at each service level who:**
  - Understand the learning needs of young people with disability
  - Implement client and family-centred approaches
  - Facilitate interviewing based on principles of self-determination
  - Understand the needs and nuances of the local employment context

'Efforts to change the employment landscape for young people with IDD (intellectual and developmental disability) must ultimately occur at the level of individual communities' (Carter et al, 2016, p. 413)[7]

THE ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL TO EMPLOYMENT TRANSITIONS

BACKGROUND

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 and Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 recognise that all people with disability have the right to work "on an equal basis with others." It states that "this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities". Despite these visions, young people with disability continue to face significant barriers to employment in their transition from school in Australia[59].

In 2015, there were 2.1 million Australians of working age with disability. Of these, 1.0 million were employed and 114,900 were looking for work. Therefore, 53.4% of working age people with disability were in the labour force, compared to 83.2% of people with no disability.

The unemployment rate for people with disability was 10% compared to 5.3% for people with no reported disability. Only 25% of people with severe or profound core activity limitation were employed in 2015, compared to 58.9% of those with mild core activity limitation.

In 2015, employed people with disability were more likely to work part–time, compared with employed people without disability. 27.0% of people with disability were working full–time, compared with 53.8% of those without disability[63, 64].

A lack of early planning and collaboration between community and employment services and schools[57], combined with a low expectation that young people with disability will work upon leaving school [61], contribute to poor employment outcomes for students with disability in Australia.

High–quality benchmarking is required if we are to track improvements in employment outcomes over the coming years. This is particularly important with the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, of which economic participation as a key principle.

METHOD

A database search was conducted using keywords related to disability, employment, vocational rehabilitation, work skills, transition and youth for the period 2007 to 2017. 92 papers met the criteria for full text review and, from these, 50[1–10, 15, 19–57] were included for data extraction. A further nine papers[11–14, 16–18, 58, 59] were added from hand–searching, meaning a total of 59 papers were used for the purpose of answering the following questions:

Our current knowledge of the best ways to support the journey to employment for young people with disability is drawn largely from observational and cross–sectional or 'snapshot' studies which have been conducted in the USA. These tend to focus on the experiences of young people with disability and their families, or factors that predict employment outcomes. 90 per cent of the papers reviewed for this Research to Action Guide fall into these research categories, and only a small number of studies have evaluated the effectiveness of programs designed to prepare young people with disability leaving school to enter the workforce. Cross–sectional and

experiential literature do provide a solid basis on which to build interventions and programs. However, studies which examine the effectiveness of these programs are urgently needed.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the factors affecting employment participation for young adults with disability?

What are the key elements of effective service provision for young people with disability transitioning from education to employment?

Research Question 1: What are the factors affecting employment participation for young adults with disability?

The factors affecting employment participation for young adults with disability identified in the literature generally fall into two categories. First, the environment, such as the physical, social and political environment and the service and employment context. Second are those that relate to the individual or 'person' factors, including being motivated to work, having the capacity for independence in self-care, having the social and work skills necessary for employment, and having a belief that employment is achievable. These factors are identified in the literature as being either positive (enabling) or negative (barriers) when considering their link to participation in employment. They have usually been identified through studies which correlate the things that have happened for a young person at one point in time with their employment status at a later point in time. They can be considered predictors of future employment, and may reasonably be assumed to have influence over outcomes, but not a direct causal effect.

FACTORS IDENTIFIED AS ENABLERS FOR EMPLOYMENT

Expectation

'Environment' factors

- High expectations of those around the young person[20]
- Being 'treated as an adult'[22]
- High parental expectations and experience with household chores[1, 5]
- Support with planning during the transition process[20]

Skills development

- Opportunities for young person to participate in career development activities[24] and vocational experiences[34]
- Provision of career-related services which include support to develop skills in problem-solving and stress management[25]
- Opportunities for work experience[20]
- Practical work experience, repeated over time [22]

Participation

- Paid work experiences[1, 5]
- Parent and family support and influence[54]
- Participation in vocational experiences at school as a starting point for a career pathway[34]
- Counselling and guidance for seeking and retaining job, including assistance on the

job[19, 29]

Expectation

– Early transition services[19]

'Person' factors

– Motivation and abilities[20]

Skills development

– 'Readiness for adulthood' such as the ability to navigate post-school systems, ability to manage oneself physically, ability to deal with stress[21] and self-advocacy skills[54]

– Ability to manage personal care and other activities of daily living[36]

Participation

– Participation in developing Individual Education Plan (IEP) specification of employment or work goals, written with measurable outcomes[24]

– Characteristics such as self-determination, social skills, work competence, general education [54]

– Career awareness and vocational skills[10]

– 'Job readiness'[19]

FACTORS IDENTIFIED AS BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Absence of Collaboration

'Environment' factors

– A lack of involvement with outside services during transition planning[23]

– Wait lists for services and/or diminished availability of services[28]

– A lack of capacity or willingness to adapt by workplace[26]

Low Expectations

– Parental ideas or expectations that do not match the reality of what is available in terms of work

– Fear of losing benefits[35]

– Work environment factors such as being accepted as part of the team[34]

– Low expectations of those around the young person[2]

– Difficulty with transport[2]

Low Expectations

'Person' factors

– A lack of employment may lead to unhealthy routines in an individual[26]

– Doubt (in oneself or by others) about readiness to 'become and adult' and the social skills required to participate in the workforce[28]

Poor Participation

– Low expectations, low level of independence and ability in life skills, low levels of confidence[2]

SUMMARY OF BARRIERS AND ENABLERS IN SCHOOL TO EMPLOYMENT TRANSITIONS

There is strong evidence in the literature that work experience while at school is a key factor in predicting post-school employment[1, 6, 11]. In Australia, it has been shown that apprenticeships and traineeships are an effective way to achieve positive employment outcomes. Apprenticeships and traineeships provide paid, hands-on, on-the-job training with support and those with disability achieve similar outcomes to those without disabilities[34]. It is also evident that young people with disability require support to find an apprenticeship or traineeship, to keep going, and to finish the traineeship[34].

Research has found that paid work experience and supportive site visits not only help to build young people's skills, but also allay fears and concerns of employers about the prospect of employing and retaining a young person with disability[10,39].

Studies have also found that independent self-care and highly-rated social skills in the classroom are related to employment outcomes[1]. In addition, an expectation of post-school employment by the young person, and the young person's family, school staff and vocational counsellors, is highly-correlated with post-school employment[1, 5].

Findings also suggest that school and community-based vocational programs must be carefully-targeted to individual needs. In other words, support services must match the needs of the individual within the context of the environment[35].

It is therefore incumbent on educators and vocational specialists to know the young people they are working with, and to understand the manner in which the key elements for effective service provision can be embedded in their organisation and program delivery.

Research Question 2: **What are the key elements of effective service provision for young people with disability transitioning from education to employment?**

There are two key studies that inform the evidence answering this question. In 2016, Haber et al[6] pooled the findings from existing international studies on post-school employment outcomes and conducted a meta-analysis to explore trends and identify consistent results. They found that, although the existing literature is based largely on observational, cross-sectional, experiential or predictive studies, they are now extensive enough to provide a solid foundation of information on which to base future programs and research. These authors used the substantive body of research investigating relationships between what happens during the school years and post-school outcomes to assess which experiences have the strongest relationship with which outcomes. This provides us with the best available – and reasonably reliable – indicators of the elements for effective service provision for young people transitioning from education to employment. The findings reinforced the value and continued relevance of Kohler's[12] Taxonomy of Transition Practices consisting of student-focused planning, student development, family involvement, attention to program structure and interagency collaboration. Importantly, Haber et al found that some of the least-studied predictors were those that have the strongest effects on employment outcomes, such as interagency collaboration.

Combining the key constructs of Kohler's[12] Taxonomy of Transition Practices from 1996 and Haber et al's 2016 papers with other relevant evidence, the key elements of effective service provision for young people with disability transitioning from education to employment can be described as:

1. EXPECTATION

> Service organisations, including schools, disability employment services and community agencies, must have an expectation and belief that young people with disability can and will work when they leave school[1–3].

- Educators, health professionals and disability workers must convey a belief in the capacity of the young person for work and community contribution, and take active steps to foster this expectation in their colleagues and the young person's family.
- One of four key attributes identified in a study of successful disability employment specialists was 'principled optimism'. This means the workers believed in the capabilities of the young people they were working with and in their own capacity to support those young people into work[4].
- Belief and expectation as the forerunners to possibility have been supported by several studies[1, 2] and "high expectations and the assumption of employability for all young people with disability" have been articulated elsewhere as key elements of quality transition services[62].

This is not new, but it remains current! Early[58] and recent work[18] clearly state the need for high expectations, and contemporary work by Pleet-Odle, A., et al. [18] has suggested guidelines on how to achieve this with families. This article provides strategies and activities to create

expectation in working with families. In doing so, we may see a flow-on effect influencing the culture in education settings and service organisations.

2. COLLABORATION, WITH AN EMPHASIS ON INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

> Interagency collaboration is one of the strongest predictors of employment[6], yet little is known about how to make it happen.

Best practice in 'transition to work' services and systems includes interagency collaboration. In fact, interagency collaboration has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of employment[6] – though little is known about what it looks like in practice, how we move towards it, or how we measure it. In 2016 in the USA, community consultations were conducted to see what local communities do to solve the issue of poor employment rates for young people with disability[7]. They found that there was a desire in local communities to:

- Develop employment opportunities by working with local council bodies and educating, supporting and rewarding local employers who hire young people with disability;
- Strengthen school and transition services by providing integrated opportunities for young people with disability to acquire 'work skills, attitudes and experiences' throughout the year;
- Equip young people with disability with strategies for social and professional networking that can lead to employment;
- Provide opportunities for 'mock interviews' before going on work experience or applying for jobs;
- Encourage young people to seek work-related learning opportunities outside the school setting;
- Encourage young people to link with existing networks, including vocational and employment services and civic and service clubs;
- Hold a local 'jobs fair' where employers come to meet prospective employees;
- Enhance and promote inclusive workplaces; and
- Support families in transition to actively participate in this process and engage in networking and social connection.

There is much in the literature (and practice) that indicates an unwillingness or lack of ability in agencies to understand the role of other service providers. This has led to service siloes, blame-shifting and inefficiencies. A survey of school teachers and vocational counsellors in the USA[3] found that both groups rated the importance of collaboration as high, but the feasibility of it occurring as low. Although interagency collaboration was a key variable in improving post-school employment outcomes, it occurred infrequently and was poorly understood. Barriers to interagency collaboration were thought to include:

- Differences in 'philosophies, language and procedures' which might bias each professional group towards their own way of thinking;
- Transition professionals having limited skills in collaboration with few opportunities to develop these skills; and

- A lack of optimism about whether collaborative practices could be improved.

School and vocational systems seem to remain separate. For this to change, teachers and employment specialists must find ways to align their beliefs about post-school outcomes for young people with disability.

Those involved in school to employment transitions must develop a shared vision, understand each other's roles and share information[3].

Given that work experience prior to leaving school is crucial, vocational programs in schools that coordinate with local community services would seem one effective way of building collaborative processes[8]. Community and disability employment services must work collaboratively with schools to establish effective pathways. There is a need for developing clear parameters, definitions and processes for interagency collaborations, and a need to measure the outcomes of this.

3. PARTICIPATION, WITH AN EMPHASIS ON STUDENT-FOCUSED PLANNING

> Participation in meaningful paid and unpaid work experiences during the last years of secondary school is consistently the most significant indicator of post-school success[1, 5, 6].

- Young people with disability who exit school with a job are more likely to maintain a positive career trajectory than those who do not[1].
- Having held a paid, community-based job while still in high school was strongly correlated with post-school employment success[1].
- Paid work at high school not only helped build skills in young people with disability, but also allayed the fears and concerns of employers[55].
- Parent and family participation in transition planning increased the likelihood of getting a job[5].
- Participating in early work experiences, traineeship and apprenticeship are all associated with higher likelihood of employment[5, 9].
- Participation by employers in supported employment programs that allow young people with disability to work in competitive work settings with ongoing supports[55] is significant.

As part of building local collaborative practice, service organisations (both educational and post-school vocational) must ensure young people with disability and their families participate actively in any decision-making processes, and in each of the following:

- Career development activities that assist with exploring vocational preferences and opportunities[1, 6]
- Decision-making meetings and processes, such as Individual Education Plan meetings[12, 13]
- Work experience[1, 5]
- Skills development[11]

- Vocational training[11]
- After-school work[11]

4. STUDENT AND SERVICE PROVIDER SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

> Skills development is required not just for young people with disability but for those who work with them on their journey to employment.

Research has shown that from the early secondary years, schools must set programs in place that prepare young people for work by developing vocational and employability skills and include opportunities for work experience11. Vocational development during school that provides students with authentic opportunities to acquire important work skills and values informs their vocational decision-making and shapes their career aspirations[14, 16].

Skill development is required not just for young people with disability but for those who work with them on their journey to employment, particularly educators and employment specialists[3]. Support to develop these skills might include:

- Training in person-centred approaches to conducting transition and employment preparation meetings[15]
- Training and skills development in developing creative and responsive vocational-preparation activities and programs both at school and in the community[11]
- Training and development in the roles and responsibilities of each of the different service providers[3]

Employment specialists in schools and community organisations provide a crucial resource for helping young people with disability to find and retain a job[4]. People working in these roles require a unique mix of skills and characteristics. To be effective, employment and transition services need to consider ways to attract and advance individuals with compatible characteristics and explore whether these core skills and competencies can be developed.

Desirable attributes and skills in employment specialists are noted as[4]:

- Principled optimism – high expectations and a belief that young people can and will work, and that they personally have the skills to facilitate this;
- Cultural competence – a broad understanding of the way values, norms and traditions influence how people act, and why it is important to understand these influences in the pursuit of skills for employment;
- Business orientation – approaches that show a capacity for understanding business needs and the importance of customer service; and
- Networking ability that is creative, strategic, and responds to business needs.

Employment specialists must have skills in discovery and assessment; building employer relationships; job matching; and providing or building workplace supports[4].

Other suggestions for building skills include group training sessions for families[15] and programs that include principles of self-determination, social skills applied to the work setting, work competence and general education. These have been linked with greater likelihood of getting a job[5].

> **Key message for all service providers**
> Young people with disability are often provided with fewer opportunities for developing work-ready skills when, in fact, they need more frequent and more varied opportunities for skills to consolidate and become transferable from one setting to another.

5. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

> Families that are involved in discussions about future careers and are active in networking and making links with employers in the local community have a positive influence on work-related outcomes for young people with disability[15].

There is much evidence supporting the view that family-centred transition planning helps to increase student and parent expectations for the future, self-determination, and vocational decision-making[12, 13, 15, 17]. Families that are involved in discussions about future careers and are active in networking and making links with employers in the local community have a positive influence on work-related outcomes for young people with disability[15].

Seven strategies were developed by a parent advocacy group for professionals aiming to support increased parental involvement[18]:

1. Engage parents in training opportunities and information sessions at school about post-school and community-based services:
   – Include transition information and introductions to employment services
   – Include families in visits to adult service agencies
2. Partner with families to explore role models who can provide a vision to the young person and their family of what adult life might be like:
   – Connect the young person and their family to successful adults with disability
   – Set up family support groups focused on transition to adulthood issues, including seeking and finding employment
3. Interact respectfully with families, taking into account unique cultural or social values and perspectives
4. Begin planning for post-school activities early, and engage families in the planning process through Individual Education Plans
5. Partner with families to support the young person's independence:
   – Young people who are independent in daily living skills and mobile within the community are more likely to be employed post-school
6. Partner with families to build networks in the community
7. Work with families to support students in domains of life beyond work such as recreation and leisure, continued education and community participation

Please refer to the article by Pleet-Odle et al for details of activities that align with these seven strategies[18].

6. EARLY TRANSITION PLANNING, INCLUDING ATTENTION TO TRANSITION PROGRAM STRUCTURE

> Students who receive early transition services (at age 14) are more likely to achieve employment outcomes compared to those who start transition services at age 16[19].

Research shows that student-identified transition goals and participation in employment-related activities lead to a higher likelihood of employment post-school[11]. Involvement of community-based employment organisations and transition services early in the transition process is crucial to successful post-school employment outcomes[47].

Transition planning should adopt the taxonomy first developed by Kohler[12] (and recently updated[13]) which states that transition-focused planning begins no later than age 14[13]. Kohler's updated model retains the five practice categories described in the earlier model (Family Engagement, Program Structures, Interagency Collaboration, Student Development, and Student-focused Planning) but includes updated activities and structure.

For effective transitions from school to employment, early transition planning is crucial so that school-based programs can take into account the work aspirations and skill development requirements to enable young people with disability to achieve employment. The Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 provides a "model for planning, organising and evaluating transition education services and programs"[13] which has remained relevant for more than 20 years and should not be ignored.

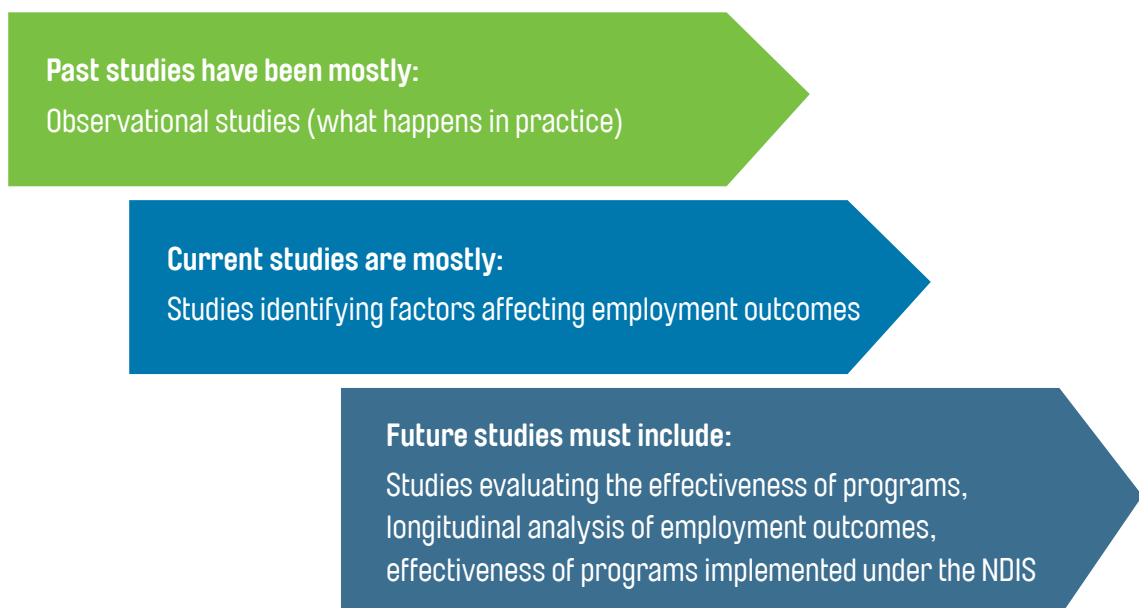# EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE SUPPORT

Frameworks and interventions that collaboratively incorporate the elements of effective school to employment transitions need to be developed. These might include:

- A conceptual framework and funding model for developing and implementing a cross-agency collaborative approach to supporting transition to employment
- Training and skill development programs for school and employment agency personnel for supporting students in their transition to employment
- Work experience programs co-constructed by schools and employment services to fit the local work context
- The development of sequenced, scaffolded work skills curricula for implementation at school and continued post-school
- Embedded structured, scaffolded work experience placements repeated throughout the transition years at school and continued post-school
- Exploring the use of simulated work experiences in order to develop skills for work experience in real settings

EVIDENCE GAPS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Running alongside the development of frameworks and interventions is the need for robust evaluation. Research has so far been mostly observational, cross-sectional or exploratory in nature. The findings from this research provide a valuable platform on which to build programs and interventions. Studies that examine the effectiveness of these programs are now urgently needed (see Figure 2 for a visual representation of the research agenda past, present and future).

Figure 2. Research past, present and future

Past studies have been mostly:
Observational studies (what happens in practice)

Current studies are mostly:
Studies identifying factors affecting employment outcomes

Future studies must include:
Studies evaluating the effectiveness of programs, longitudinal analysis of employment outcomes, effectiveness of programs implemented under the NDIS

FUTURE RESEARCH SHOULD INCLUDE:

Interagency collaboration

- Exploration of interagency collaboration: what it is, how we define it and how we measure it
- Once defined, research is needed to evaluate the impact of implementing an interagency collaborative approach: does it improve post-school outcomes in line with expectations?

Work experience and skills development programs

- Evaluation of work skills development programs, preferably those designed to compare two different approaches, or compare the effect of participating in a work skill program with not participating in the program at different times
- Evaluation of systematically co-constructed work experience programs, ideally compared to existing programs or approaches to work experience
- Studies that evaluate the effectiveness of vocational preparation programs at school or post-school, particularly those that are tailored to meeting the needs of the local community and employment context
- Studies examining the barriers and enablers to open employment, with an emphasis on effective practices (e.g., HR practices, policy, effectiveness of traineeships, local government practices)
- Studies that benchmark existing school transition programs against best practice approaches such as Kohler's Taxonomy of Transition Practices
- Longitudinal studies that track the educational attainment and post-school employment experiences of young people with disability for 10 to 15 years following school

The National Disability Insurance Scheme

- Longitudinal studies tracking employment participation following the introduction of the NDIS, effective benchmarking of employment via the NDIS
- Analysis of the role of the NDIS in supporting participation in employment, including skill development and the provision of supports in employment settings

FINAL MESSAGES

An active focus on employment outcomes is necessary.

Youth with disability face similar challenges in finding employment as youth without disability, but to a greater degree and in more areas[2].

Opportunities for career and skill development are required more frequently for young people with disability.

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