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EXPLORING THE INTERFACE OF THE NATIONAL DISABILITY INSURANCE SCHEME AND DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

The influence on employment outcomes
for Australians with disability



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u><i>Executive summary</i></u>	3
<u>Research aims</u>	4
<u>Purpose of this report</u>	4
<u>Recommendations</u>	4
<u>Introduction</u>	5
<u>Background</u>	5
<u>Disability Employment Services</u>	5
<u>National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)</u>	5
<u>The interface between the NDIS and DES</u>	6
<u>Research questions</u>	7
<u>Overview of methods</u>	8
<u>Preliminary emerging themes and findings</u>	8
1. <u><i>Supporting the work capabilities of people with disability</i></u>	8
2. <u>Experiences within the NDIS and DES systems</u>	11
3. <u>The NDIS and DES interface</u>	14
4. <u>Future priorities for research</u>	20
<u>Next steps</u>	20
<u>Limitations</u>	20
<u>References</u>	21

Executive summary

In Australia, people with disability continue to experience poorer employment outcomes compared to those without disability. Australia has one of the lowest employment participation rates for people with disability, when compared with other OECD countries.¹ This disadvantage will only be amplified as a consequence of COVID-19 on the Australian economy and labour markets. Improved access to employment for people with disability is one of the key goals of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Disability Employment Services (DES) and the NDIS provide two key policy mechanisms to assist with this goal.

The DES program is the Australian Government's specialised program for people whose disability is assessed as their main barrier to gaining and maintaining employment.² DES assists people with disability to access and maintain employment. The DES program has undergone transition over time, moving from being delivered and funded publicly, to delivery by a mix of government-contracted for-profit and non-profit providers of DES services. It's most recent reform, in July 2018, allowed greater choice for DES participants, enabling them to determine the provider they use and to change providers if they are not satisfied with the service they receive.³ The Department of Social Services (DSS), which oversees DES, has recently commissioned a further review of the program.⁴

The NDIS is now fully implemented across Australia. Improving participant employment outcomes is a major objective of the NDIS, with NDIS individual plans and DES seen as playing an important role in supporting NDIS participants to achieve their own employment goals. This objective is yet to be fulfilled. It is therefore important that we understand the intersection between the NDIS and DES in advancing employment outcomes for people with disability. Stakeholder perspectives on the interface between the NDIS and DES and its impact on employment outcomes for people with disability in Australia are critical to this understanding.

In 2020, the Melbourne Disability Institute (MDI) funded a research team from the University of Melbourne and the Brotherhood of St Laurence to undertake first stage qualitative research on the NDIS and DES policy and practice interface. The aim of the research was to capture and understand the perspectives of key disability and employment

¹ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. See: Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC), (2011), *Disability expectations: Investing in a better life, a stronger Australia*; accessed online at: <<https://www.pwc.com.au/industry/government/assets/disability-in-australia.pdf>>.

² Department of Social Services, (2015), *National Disability Employment Framework Discussion Paper*, Canberra: Department of Social Services.

³ Department of Social Services, (2017), *Disability Employment Services Reform 2018 Industry Information Paper*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

⁴ National Disability Services (NDS), 'Member feedback sought on review of DES program', 02 June 2020, (accessed on 25 August 2020), accessible at <<https://www.nds.org.au/news/member-feedback-sought-on-review-of-des-program>>.

stakeholders, including Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs), DES providers and people with disability who are participants in both the NDIS and DES to share their experiences and observations of pathways to work for NDIS participants. We sought to identify areas for deeper consideration in future research to help shape and progress a body of evidence aimed at improving employment outcomes for all Australians with disability.

Purpose of this report

This report documents the preliminary findings of the research for stakeholders, to enable consideration.

Key findings

We identify the following key issues undermining the effectiveness of the NDIS and DES interface:

- Gaps in recognition of the work capabilities of NDIS participants and their barriers to work;
- Lack of early career development opportunities for young NDIS participants;
- Barriers in the processes by which NDIS participants try and access and receive support from DES;
- Limited resources and capacity in the NDIS workforce to encourage participants to develop employment goals and identify appropriate supports available to achieve these goals;
- Knowledge gaps in the NDIS and DES workforce about each other’s work and how their work intersects;
- Lack of clear and accessible information and resources so that people with disability can be aware of, and make decisions about, employment support available to them;
- Gaps and overlap in the growing number of government and non-government initiatives aimed at improving employment outcomes for people with disability and other target groups of marginalised jobseekers.

Recommendations

The key findings point towards a focus for future investigations on the interaction between the NDIS and DES in order to achieve better employment outcomes for people with disability. We recommend the outlined findings and proposed research ideas be considered and further prioritised by stakeholders and the research team, to help shape a shared future research agenda.

Introduction

Background

In Australia, people with disability continue to experience poorer employment outcomes compared to those without disability. Australia has one of the lowest employment participation rates for people with disability, when compared with other OECD countries.⁵ Improved access to employment for people with disability is one of the key goals of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and is also part of the role and function of the Disability Employment Services (DES) program. While the NDIS and DES program are distinct and different, both are responsible and accountable for supporting the workforce participation of people with disability.

Disability Employment Services

Australia's DES program is the Federal Government's specialised welfare program for people whose disability is assessed as their main barrier to employment.⁶ DES providers are contracted by the Department of Social Services (DSS) to support and monitor the efforts of people with disability in receipt of income support (and a small number of voluntary participants) to actively promote their employability and participation in the labour market.⁷

Support offered by DES providers may include career advice, assistance to prepare resumes and job applications, job readiness skills training (e.g. interview skills, searching and applying for work), identifying appropriate education and training courses, as well as supporting employers and job seekers to access wage subsidies or implement workplace modifications. The program has undergone considerable reform and investment, yet various challenges continue to undermine its effectiveness. These include challenges both within and outside its control, including persistent discrimination against people with disability in recruitment, and limited availability of jobs that meet the aspirations and needs of job seekers with disability.⁸

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The NDIS is an insurance-based approach to supporting people with disability, their families and carers. The NDIS is administered by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA)

⁵ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. See: Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC), (2011), *Disability expectations: Investing in a better life, a stronger Australia*; accessed online on 17 August 2020, at: <<https://www.pwc.com.au/industry/government/assets/disability-in-australia.pdf>>.

⁶ Department of Social Services, (2015), *National Disability Employment Framework Discussion Paper 2015*, Department of Social Services: Canberra.

⁷ Department of Social Services, (2016), *New Disability Employment Services from 2018 Discussion Paper*. Department of Social Services: Canberra.

⁸ Devine et. al. (2020) 'If I had stable housing I would be a bit more receptive to having a job.' Factors influencing the effectiveness of Disability Employment Services reform', *WORK: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment, and Rehabilitation*.

under the National Disability Insurance Scheme Act (2013), with government oversight from the Minister for Families and Social Services and DSS. The NDIS was initiated in seven trial sites across Australia between July 2013 and July 2014, with full roll-out beginning in July 2016. The NDIS provides individualised packages of support to eligible people with disability and more broadly, aims to support the independence and social and economic participation of people with disability.⁹

A key premise of the NDIS was the assertion and modelling that it would lead to improved employment outcomes for many people with disability and their carers, as the NDIS would provide increased funding for people with disability to build their capacity to work and carers would experience reduced caring responsibilities.¹⁰ The National Disability Insurance Agency's (NDIA) has set a target for 30 per cent of NDIS participants of working age to achieve meaningful employment by 30 June 2023.¹¹ Recent reporting indicates that **23 per cent of working-aged NDIS participants are currently working.**

Despite the visionary objective of the NDIS, people with disability continue to experience barriers to employment. Factors (both direct and indirect) such as limited availability of jobs, insufficient employer confidence in employing people with disability, and, gaps in support for early career development have been difficult to overcome in the context of the NDIS to date and these issues are likely to be compounded under current economic conditions.¹² Competition for work in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic will also pose significant challenges for jobseekers on the margins of the labour market.

NDIS participants can use their packages to access support to develop work-related skills (e.g. transport training, communication skills). However, the NDIS will not fund skills development that should be funded by employers, DES or other sectors. Previously, it has been noted that current DES model places high reliance on the NDIS to provide pre-vocational and capacity building support and function as a complimentary service to DES.¹³ Further, there has recently been a raft of changes to how the NDIA funds employment-related supports. For example, from 1 July 2020, NDIS funding for support in employment will be 'more flexible' for participants who require ongoing and/or frequent support to succeed at work, including on-site workplace support. Participants can include support to work in an Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE), a job in the private or public sector, social enterprise, self-employment or a microbusiness within their NDIS plan. Participants can also

⁹ *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act (2013)* (Cth).

¹⁰ Productivity Commission, (2011), *Disability Care and Support*, Report No. 54. Productivity Commission: Canberra.

¹¹ Council of Australian Governments (COAG), (2020), *Disability Reform Council Quarterly Report*, 31 March 2020.

¹² Devine, A., Smith-Merry, J., et al. (2020), *Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability*, Employment Issues Paper

¹³ Cotton, R. (2019), *How People with Mental Illness in Disability Employment Services are Predisposed to Failure: Discussion Paper*, Worklink.

access supports to build their capacity towards future employment from the age of 14 years..¹⁴

The interface between the NDIS and DES

There are multiple and often complex points of intersection between the NDIS and DES. The most obvious point of intersection between the NDIS and DES systems occurs either when an existing DES participant enters the NDIS, or when an NDIS participant requests employment support within their package. However, the way that the NDIS and DES interface to support people with disability to gain and keep employment can be complicated if not confusing for all stakeholders. Challenges previously identified include the eligibility of DES often leads to the exclusion of NDIS participants; neither program is yet able to effectively support participants to overcome vocational and non-vocational barriers to employment; and, knowledge gaps on the roles, responsibilities and available resources of each program to support participants to gain and maintain employment. ¹⁵

The policy practice interface between DES and the NDIS is not the only complication that must be navigated in relation to employment support and outcomes for people with disability. The NDIS-DES interface also intersects with (and sometimes competes with) multiple Federal, State and Territory education and training and employment programs. Stakeholders often have a very limited understanding of the role of the NDIS and DES in relation to the growing number of government and non-government initiatives aimed at improving employment outcomes for people with disability and other target groups of marginalised jobseekers (e.g. youth). ¹⁶

In 2018, DSS and the NDIA established a NDIS Participant Employment Taskforce¹⁷ to improve employment outcomes for people with disability..¹⁸ Within its mandate, the NDIS Participant Employment Taskforce aimed to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the NDIS and DES in relation to employment supports, with the specific objective of developing a seamless interface between the two programs. In November 2019, the NDIA released the *NDIS Participant Employment Strategy*..¹⁹ The strategy states that the NDIS is to work closely

¹⁴ National Disability Insurance Agency, (2020), NDIS Price Guide and Support Catalogue 2020-21, NDIA: Melbourne.

¹⁵ Devine, A., Vaughan, C., Byars, S., Kavanagh, A. (2019). *How disability and welfare policies interact to influence the right to work of people with psychosocial disability*. Paper submitted and presented for the Fourth International Conference on Public Policy, Montreal, 28 June 2019

¹⁶ Devine, A., Smith-Merry, J., et al. (2020), Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, Employment Issues Paper

¹⁷ National Disability Insurance Agency (2019), 'COAG Disability Reform Council Quarterly Performance Report Q3 2018-2019, retrieved from <<https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/publications/quarterly-reports>>; National Disability Insurance Agency (2019), 'NDIS Participant Employment Taskforce', paper presented at the Disability Employment Australia Leaders Forum, Canberra.

¹⁸ The Taskforce was comprised of Senior Executive Service (SES) staff from the DSS and NDIA and supported by officers from both agencies. The Taskforce was co-chaired by the Deputy Secretary, Disability and Carers, DSS and the Deputy CEO, Government, Communications, People and Stakeholder Engagement, Melbourne: NDIA.

¹⁹ National Disability Insurance Agency (2019), 'NDIS Participants Employment Strategy', Melbourne: NDIA.

with DES and other service systems, in a complementary way, while not duplicating existing systems. While the ambition is laudable, there is limited detail in the strategy of how this will be achieved.

It seems that the NDIS is being positioned to provide capacity building supports to NDIS participants **before** their engagement with DES.²⁰ For example, the NDIS Price Guide specifies that services and supports can be funded by the NDIA if they are 'likely to lead to successful engagement in a Disability Employment Service'.²¹ Further, the NDIS also makes support available through the NDIA's School Leaver Employment Supports (SLES) stream, which aims to support participants in their transition from school to employment. The *NDIS Participant Employment Strategy* states it hopes to see the majority of SLES participants transitioning to DES to 'undertake the job seeking, placement and post placement support phases of their pathway'.²²

Improving understanding of the interface between the NDIS and DES and leverage points to maximise effectiveness and impact in that interface will be integral to informing and monitoring the effectiveness of NDIS and DES policy and practice and ensuring that people with disability are not sidelined in the labour market as the economy rebalances. This first phase study seeks to identify and understand this interface by listening to and learning from participants as well as service providers and other key stakeholders working at this interface. It is designed to inform the scope of a future program of research aimed at deepening our understanding about what works to improve employment outcomes for people with disability.

Research questions

The specific questions our study aimed to answer were:

1. What are the perspectives of key stakeholders, DES providers and NDIS participants on the current functioning of the NDIS/DES interface and its influence on:
 - a. employment outcomes for Australians with disability?
 - b. the positioning of the NDIS/DES interface within the broader education, training and employment sector?
2. What are the key issues relevant to the NDIS/DES interface and its position within the broader education, training and employment sector requiring ongoing research and evaluation?

²⁰ Cotton, R. (2019), 'How People with Mental Illness in Disability Employment Services are Predisposed to Failure: Discussion Paper', accessible at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/249003/sub611-mental-health-attachment.pdf>, Worklink.

²¹ National Disability Insurance Agency, (2019), 'NDIS Price Guide 2019-2020', NDIA: Melbourne.

²² National Disability Insurance Agency (2019), 'NDIS Participants Employment Strategy', NDIA: Melbourne.

Overview of methods

This **exploratory qualitative research project**, involved nine **qualitative semi-structured interviews** were undertaken with four key types of stakeholders and a total of 12 participants:

- People with disability (n=3) of a range of ages who are currently accessing both the NDIS and DES and have employment goals in their plan. In one of these interviews, the participant was interviewed alongside their parent (n=1)
- One disability advocacy group representing people with disability (n=2)
- Two peak bodies representing disability and employment service providers (n=2)
- Three DES providers (n=4)

Key stakeholders were identified from the networks of the research team and early interviews. All interviews were conducted via telephone and online, due to COVID-19 restrictions and changes to university policy. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and all participants provided their informed consent to participate in the project. Interviews with DES services and stakeholders often included two representatives from the organisation.

The Lead Researcher and Research Assistant were responsible for analysing the de-identified interview transcripts. A thematic coding framework based on the objectives of the study was developed, with data coded by the researchers using a categorical thematic approach to analysis. Preliminary findings were shared with the research team, alongside one to two transcripts from each group of participants. Feedback from the research team was further incorporated into the analysis and findings. The following provides a summary of the key findings.

Summary of key findings

1. Supporting the work capabilities of people with disability

All people with disability we spoke to had clear aspirations to participate in the workforce. However, people with disability and other stakeholders noted that an improved understanding of the work capabilities of people with disability was needed by those working at the interface to support employment outcomes. All stakeholders underlined the importance of meaningful work experience opportunities (e.g. work experience through school-based programs, after school jobs) for young people with disability for positive employment outcomes.

1.1. *Aspirations and benefits*

Participants with disability described strong work aspirations, aligning with the objectives of the NDIS and DES to support people with disability to secure and sustain employment. All had previously worked, describing that when they were in jobs that they enjoyed, work led to positive outcomes including improved self-esteem and confidence. Other stakeholders agreed employment can be lead to numerous individual level benefit, especially when individuals are in work that suits their needs and with appropriate support mechanisms in place.

1.2. *Recognition of capabilities*

Almost all stakeholders interviewed noted that limited understanding of the work capabilities of people with disability, as a persistent barrier to people with disability finding and maintaining work. Poor understanding of the existing capabilities, capacity for the development of new capabilities and skills and the forms of support required from employers, families or support workers in achieving this, were reported to be commonly overlooked by key players in the individual's employment journey (schools, families, carers and staff in both the NDIS and DES). At a societal level, this is reinforced by social attitudes and biases towards disability. For example, participants with disability described not being supported in the workplace to adapt and learn new skills which would have better enabled them to take on new tasks and help them sustain employment. As acknowledged across the cohort, this often related to the need to raise the expectations - of individuals, families, schools, programs and employers - of the work capabilities of people with disability and the importance of supporting all individuals to reach their full capabilities.

[P1]: Imagine just six months of bagging potatoes and onions, non-stop.

[P1's parent]: Because they didn't think he was capable of doing anything else. Then he went and worked for [second place of employment] It was a very positive experience ... His self-esteem was so high, but when he turned 18 he was then too old.

[Interviewer]: In terms of?

[P1's parent]: In terms of payment. And because [participant] wasn't very comfortable talking to ... people coming in, customers ... he could only do out the back [of the shop where there is no customer interaction]. They couldn't keep him employed if he wasn't going to be able to do the whole lot [engage with customers]. (P1, NDIS and DES participant, participating with parent).

1.3. Early career development

All noted that that early access to work experience for young people with disability is crucial to improved work outcomes later in life. Many emphasised the potential of both the SLES program within the NDIS and the Early School Leaver (ESL) program within DES in obtaining better employment outcomes for young people with disability.

There's quite a bit of evidence that you need to start early and those experiences should be during school. NDIS providers can do that, but they haven't got quite got their head around what they can do and how they can do it and they don't know what to do ... We get lots and lots of calls from parents just saying 'my kid's 15, 16, 17, 18, they're leaving school, we have no idea'. You know, they haven't had those career development kind of experiences. **(P7, stakeholder organisation).**

However, we heard from peak bodies and the advocacy organisation that young people with disability are often locked out of many casual or after-school jobs in an increasingly competitive jobs market. Due to factors such as the high rate of youth unemployment, this often means that more young people are competing for work opportunities.

You're competing against a whole lot of other young people that have had after school jobs and work experiences and all these wonderful things. And, you know, young people with disabilities have missed out on those opportunities. **(P7, stakeholder organisation).**

In addition, young people with disability often have additional support needs (e.g. personal, within the workplace), or require on the job support to ensure that they are positively positioned to maintain work and may be juggling other commitments such as schooling. These forms of support, however, are not readily available with many finding it difficult to navigate their way through the different programs and systems that may be available.

So for example, myself I've got a vision impairment. My first job was when I left university and went into social work, because you can't – because of the nature of your disability, and casual employment, which was, which is where most young people work-you can't compete for jobs. It's just too competitive. So you know, I'm not going to be taken on in a cafe, if I have to be one on one, memorise where everything is because I won't, I can't just look across and see something on a shelf and know where to find it. .. It's also about ... you know, often when you've got a disability, you have to spend more time doing things because it might take you longer to read or anything longer to move around to get from A to B, so you're not necessarily got the time to invest in, or be able to work, while you're studying. **(P9, Stakeholder organisation).**

Early career development for people with disability is further impacted due to the current design of both DES and NDIS supports, which places age restrictions on when participants can start receiving employment related services. Disability advocacy group and peak body stakeholders felt more needed to be done to improve the understanding of government and various agencies responsible for overseeing these programs in regards to the importance of meaningful work experience and in intervening early to build the capacity of younger people with disability.

Positively, there were many examples of good practice and innovation shared that can inform future practice. For example, one DES representative spoke of using place-based approaches in assisting young people with disability (predominately intellectual disability) to gain work experiences through similar school to work pathways as non-disabled young people. Their place-based approach involved building local networks and partnerships between various organisations in local communities (including schools, employers and employment services) to create employment opportunities for young people with disability. Although these learnings are not consistently implemented across the NDIS and DES system interface, they provide examples of innovative programs and ways of working across systems that can be scaled up and supported in the area of school to work transition for young people with disability.

Work experience was identified by all stakeholders as a critical component of early career development. Most noted the role of meaningful work experience in school as a determinant of improved post-school employment outcomes and early career development interventions more generally. Importantly, it demonstrates young people's capabilities families, employers, and the wider community. The role of other intersecting systems and services (including schools, apprenticeship centres, council programs, local learning employment networks) was also emphasised and should be considered important infrastructure complimenting the NDIS and DES interface. The flow on impacts for young people also included a boost in confidence and improved expectations.

By having that opportunity to work while at school, just means that everyone can see possibilities. There's added expectations and even you know, some of our schools were saying, that the Year 7 [class] and the parents are seeing the Year 10, 11 and 12's going out and working and doing a school day. So then their expectations are, 'Oh, I want to do that when I get older', so that kind of, I guess a bit of cultural change. **(P7, Stakeholder Organisation).**

While eligibility could be reformed within the NDIS and DES interface to increase the uptake of support at earlier points, stakeholders notes that it is promising to see that the NDIA updated their Price Guide to reflect that NDIS participants can now receive individualised funding supports to help keep a job from age 14.

2. Experiences within the NDIS and DES systems

Participants in NDIS and DES highlighted both positive experiences and challenges while engaging with both systems, which impacted on their ability to access employment. In relation to DES, several key issues were identified including access to a provider that meets their needs and desire for enhanced support when engaged in the program. Within the NDIS, interviewees identified a need for greater encouragement of employment goals within NDIS plans, and, collaboration and practice knowledge within and external to the NDIS workforce to help participants' access appropriate supports to help them achieve their employment goals.

2.1. Support within DES

Participants with disability highlighted the challenge of accessing a DES provider that met their needs. One participant described that it had taken months of going into their local DES provider requesting access to the service, only gaining access when they raised the issue with their local Member of Parliament: 'All they need to do is give me a referral and punch some information into the computer.' (P6 NDIS and DES participant). Other participants described having to change providers on numerous occasions due to negative experiences within the system. Indeed, one parent indicated that her son was asked to leave an employment service, despite receiving very little support whilst there.

For starters, they never looked for work for [participant] and they just had him in an office and asking him what kind of work he wanted to do. I was the one that went around trying to find him actual work, which I didn't think was correct. I thought that's what their job was. They asked him then eventually to go off their books because my son had a [disability support] pension, and the other kids in the area didn't have a pension, so they were the main priority. **(Parent of NDIS and DES participant).**

Participants with disability often felt they were placed in jobs with limited training, induction or on-the-job support from their DES provider or the employer. This undermined their ability to maintain work, which subsequently negatively impacts on work confidence.

It impacts on accessing work because when I apply for a job and they say there's an induction, I need a proper induction when I'm being employed and so that I know what I can do and what I can't do and what's not acceptable. Most of the time, it's just been thrown into the deep end with the sharks and I don't get the support that I have required. **(P4, NDIS and DES participant).**

All participants with disability highlighted the need for more effective support from their DES provider to help them find work. Themes emerging in their discussions about support needs included capacity building and support in relation to job readiness (e.g. confidence building) and applying for jobs (e.g. identifying appropriate jobs, writing resumes and applications), and supporting more engagement with potential employers.

A feature across interviews with DPOs and peak bodies was the need for improved avenues and forums for DES providers to be able to connect, learn and share examples of good practice. Also highlighted by advocacy organisers were the benefits of forums and projects that allow employers to come into the conversation, such as employer-led initiatives.

2.2. *Support within the NDIS*

Participants mentioned a range of challenges and benefits within their general and employment-related NDIS experience. In terms of general challenges, themes emerging included difficulty accessing information and communication issues; limited support from NDIS planners and/or support coordinators in the implementation of their plans; and the lack of support from the NDIA to address the issue of fraudulent service providers. A consistent employment related theme, was that of NDIS staff not having sufficient knowledge of the DES system and how it might complement NDIS supports. Interviewees also reported that employment related goals are still not adequately discussed or encouraged with NDIS participants.

Encouragingly, participants described many positive experiences and benefits encountered through their engagement with the NDIS. This was particularly so when they were engaged with well-suited, appropriate and skilled NDIS planners/LACs, support coordinators and support workers, who manage to build rapport with the person with disability. However, participants did often reported having a few negative experiences within the NDIS system, prior to finding planners and supports that were more positive and effective.

We've got a support worker, you know the guy who, the intermediate with the NDIS [Planner] ... I can't remember what his job title is ... he is brilliant. He's got a wacky sense of humour, which makes [participant] laugh. He is very understanding. He listens to what we both say. And he does his best to help us achieve what we need to achieve **(Parent of NDIS and DES participant).**

Participants also spoke of ways that they can or hope to use their NDIS plan to reach employment goals outside the use of a DES service, such as through self-management and the use of support workers to assist in finding employment (e.g. looking for jobs and drafting a CV). Some participants were also engaged in study in hope of seeking work and this was supported in their NDIS plan.

I haven't gone with it this year, I haven't pushed it this year with [NDIS participant]. That's the only reason why the NDIS hasn't done anything. But, because I'm also self-managed, I can get the support worker to work with [NDIS participant] to work on finding a job. It's just finding the work.
(Parent of NDIS and DES participant).

I've been studying quite a lot in the last few years, so I'm trying to get a job. A proper job. I do a little bit of work here and there, but it's not like regular and it's not ... like proper part-time, or anything like that. **(P6, NDIS and DES participant).**

2.3. *Persistent challenges undermining the effectiveness of NDIS and DES*

Many of the barriers to employment mentioned throughout the interviews were the result of deeply structural and systemic problems, such as a lack of available and suitable jobs, entrenched stigma and discrimination and the impacts of disrupted work history due to disability or other conditions, which can arise as a result of a range of factors: systems failures, policy failures and practice failures. Almost all participants cited stigma and negative attitudes towards disability; a lack of available and suitable jobs; and a range of difficulties around being out of the workforce for long periods of time as impeding their access to work. DES services also told us of the difficulties that are likely to arise in their ability to provide support as a result of COVID-19's economic impacts and on available jobs. These factors were acknowledged as undermining the effectiveness of both programs in the capacity to support participants to find and maintain work.

3. The NDIS and DES interface

Stakeholders acknowledged that the DES eligibility criteria of having the capability to work a minimum of eight hours per week with supports excludes a number of NDIS participants from DES. Yet, for NDIS participants that are eligible, interviewees described a disconnect between the NDIS and DES systems in how employment supports are provided to NDIS and DES participants. The disconnect was linked to workforce capabilities and resourcing and the need to enhance supports for NDIS participants to firstly include employment as a goal

and then access available supports across the two programs, to help them achieve their employment goals.

3.1. *Disconnect between the systems*

Participants with disability felt that their experience at the NDIS and DES intersection could be improved through increased connectivity and communication between the two systems, as they expressed a feeling of disjointedness between services and that this brought added difficulties in navigating both systems.

Maybe they should be hooked up together like ... like other providers are NDIS registered, why aren't they? Maybe instead of the government paying through another source maybe you could pay through the—I don't know ... that might make it bigger mess having to pay them every week yourself when you see them ... Don't know what the right thing is. But they definitely need to be hooked up together, as in communicating and sharing information, stuff like that. **(P6, NDIS and DES participant).**

Improved flexibility within and between NDIS and DES supports was also identified by program participants as having the potential benefit of facilitating access to a wider range of employment and non-employment related supports. For example, the potential of the NDIS to support participants to address non-vocational barriers to employment, that in turn could improve the effectiveness of their engagement with DES, was recognised.

So the benefit from a specific NDIS program [is] almost about to help with those non-vocational barriers, which is keeping them from being successful. So integration that way, would be better and potentially, if the improved flexibility between 'core' and 'capacity' within the NDIS plans that's mentally happening, that potentially will allow people to choose different supports that support them for that long-term employment journey. But is it always going to come down to the NDIS participant having knowledge of what to ask for? And what's out there? If they don't know what they can ask for what they can get, then you're not going to see the integration between NDIS and DES. **(P1, NDIS and DES participant).**

Other stakeholders highlighted the need for enhanced collaboration between the NDIS and DES, hoping that this would improve trust and knowledge between the programs and address current implementation challenges occurring at the intersection. Some interviewees noted the potential for more interconnectivity

between DES providers and the NDIS, if more DES services provide SLES support over time.

To me there's been more and more uptake of SLES in terms of DES providers becoming either SLES ... delivery of SLES and then also then trying to, work [participants] across. Provide support and then some [SLES participants] are moving into DES and into employment. Not everyone, I don't think it's perfect. But I think that seems to have increased maybe in the last 12 months. **(P3, Stakeholder Organisation).**

3.2. *NDIS and DES workforce capabilities*

Stakeholders spoke of issues in both the NDIS and DES workforce which in turn undermine what could be achieved at the interface of the two programs. The NDIS workforce, which includes Local Area Coordinators (LACs) and NDIA planners, was described as often lacking the required experience, skills and training to understand DES and other forms of employment support available for people with disability. This includes the capacity of the NDIS workforce to support participants to develop and implement plans that build work capabilities across the life course. This was acknowledged, in part, as an issue of the under-resourcing of the NDIA, which has meant the workforce has never been able to function in the way it was originally designed and recommended by the Productivity Commission.²³

It really comes down to the NDIA, the planners, the people, you know, are they knowledgeable enough about the employment system and the employment opportunities? There's ... from what we can gather, there's a lot of issues around low expectations. **(P7, Stakeholder Organisation).**

Similarly, DES workforce issues included the level of skills, qualifications and knowledge of the how to help NDIS/DES participants engage with the intricacies of the labour market and available NDIS employment supports and limited understanding of the NDIS and how the two systems interact. Again, capped staffing levels at the LAC and planner level, leaves little time to collaborate and nurture cross-program knowledge and skills transfer.

The NDIS is talking about trying to get, trying to increase the skills of the LACs, and also planners. In terms of their knowledge of disability, but also of the goals of the person and how do you build a package that's, that is well ... supposed to be like by the participant, you know, how do you make that work? **(P3, Stakeholder Organisation).**

²³ Productivity Commission, (2011), *Disability Care and Support*, Report No. 54., Canberra.

Stakeholders agreed that investment in communication and combined training across both services could go some way towards increasing knowledge, capabilities and performance across both the NDIS and DES. Advocacy groups also emphasised the benefits of and need for increased public sector employment of people with disability, including within the NDIA and DSS. Internships like the 'Stepping into Work' program, run by the Australian Network on Disability (AND), were highlighted as providing good practice models that are achieving good outcomes in the public and corporate sector. A further suggestion for reform included a national curriculum that would equip workforces with the industry knowledge and skillsets to work with employers and the benefits in investing in developing a recognised curriculum or standardised training for the DES workforce.

3.3. *Matching employment goals within NDIS plans to supports across the two programs*

.What we can see is that employment often doesn't feature. Well, I think that stats from the NDIS itself is showing the very low employment outcomes, and that it's really not factored into the major component of plans. **(P7, Stakeholder Organisation).**

Alongside the theme identifying a need for NDIS participants to be encouraged to include employment goals within their plans, is the need for this to be coupled with the practice expertise of planners, LACs and support coordinators, to assist participants to do this. It was apparent in our discussions with NDIS and DES participants that when employment goals are set out in their NDIS plan, participants still require ongoing encouragement and support to realise and successfully implement their employment goals. For example, NDIS and DES participants spoke of the difficulty in seeking out the DES service on their own and the potential benefits in drawing on NDIS supports to help engage with DES and better connect the two services.

.I had to do it [seek employment supports] myself. But I had it in my goals. But they wrote next to it that I had to source that myself with an employment agent. **(P6, NDIS and DES participant).**

For participants who require support to articulate or build up to employment goals, the effectiveness of NDIS staff support may be hindered by a limited awareness of DES and how it interacts with the NDIS system of supports. For some participants, the desire to maintain the current arrangement of supports was reported to reduce motivation to introduce employment into their goals. Additionally, delays with NDIS plan reviews, appeals or multi-year plans could mean missed opportunities to refine further supports or to add additional employment goals and aspirations.

Within this theme, stakeholders and people with disability also acknowledged the importance of accessible information and other resources (e.g. additional support for NDIS planners, LACs and support coordinators) are often required to make informed decisions about what employment supports are available across the two programs that might best suits their needs. Education and clarification about how the NDIS and DES can connect to provide support to participants was described as a potential benefit for participants, NDIS and DES providers, and the NDIA. One example highlighted was that additional guidance could be provided for the NDIS workforce around ways in which employment can be discussed and planned for, including the range of support which can complement DES.

.There isn't the foresight of future supports in plans, it's more been replicating what they're [participants] currently receiving. That's what they get and that's what is continued to be received rather than once you've been receiving the support for a little bit of time, we would like to now like to try and do this, this and this. It's almost keeping people stagnant in the level of support that they're receiving. **(P2, DES provider)**.

Further, enhancing the capacity of NDIS planners to better understand the work capabilities of people with disabilities and then encouraging participants to include work as a specific goal is something that stakeholders felt ought to be addressed through the NDIA's Employment Strategy.

3.4. School Leavers Employment Supports (SLES) and Eligible School Leaver (ESL) programs

Stakeholders identified SLES and ESL as a key example of how DES and the NDIS can overlap and therefore potentially better interact. In our interviews with stakeholders, the need for more flexibility and length of time in SLES was raised as an issue within the NDIS side of the interface. Stakeholders spoke of SLES being too focused on “getting people into work experience” and that it could be improved with a focus on building up skills and capacity before placement into work. One stakeholder emphasised the need for building capacity and training before the individual is placed—and discussed their model—which provides skilling up within specific industries, before job matching occurs. DES providers interviewed highlighted how they could offer SLES programs through the NDIS as well as ESL and aimed to support the skill development of young people with disability to enable access to open employment.

.We've got in the process of developing ten modules, and they'll be on different areas, so 'retail warriors' or 'IT gurus', that sort of thing. And so that they actually get practical skills in an industry. It's an area that's been identified as a real gap generally. So rather than just work experience, so it's also about scaffolding. So, before you go to work experience, and this is another thing that you see a lot about SLES, it's 'let's get them straight into work experience'. **(P5, DES provider)**.

Whilst not currently quantified by the NDIA, stakeholders did raise concerns that an increasing number of young people receiving employment support through SLES were being channelled into segregated work experiences, often within Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs). Stakeholders felt this undermined the future opportunities of SLES participants to gain open employment.

3.5. *Participants with psychosocial disability*

People with psychosocial disability were raised as an important cohort for consideration at the NDIS and DES interface. Data shows that people with psychosocial disability experience difficulty in accessing the NDIS and have had a lower than expected uptake of engagement with the NDIS. People with psychosocial disability account for 38.9 per cent of the approx. 213,000 current DES participants.²⁴ However, issues have been raised about the difficulty for people with psychosocial disability in accessing the NDIS. It is anticipated that 13.9 per cent of the total NDIS cohort by 2019-2020 will have a psychosocial disability.²⁵ One DES provider specialising in psychosocial disability spoke directly to this issue.

.To my knowledge, we don't have any NDIS and DES co-participants. [It's just] the way that has fallen out. Or, if we do ... we haven't actually seen any NDIS participants come through with employment lines or employment goals in their plans. So, that obviously makes things harder. But we're also ... because we do community mental health programs, which is all about supporting people transition to the NDIS, we're seeing very low transition rates looking with a lived experience of mental illness as well. So the numbers that they're expecting, or what they're anticipating will be shared between the two programs, is not what we're seeing. **(P2, DES provider)**.

The issues of variation in eligibility criteria for the NDIS and DES, means that many people with mental illness and psychosocial disability within DES won't meet the criteria to receive

²⁴ Department of Social Services, (2019), Labour Market Information Portal, DES Monthly Data.

²⁵ Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme, (2017), Provision of services under the NDIS for people with psychosocial disabilities related to a mental health condition, Canberra; National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), (2018), COAG Disability Reform Council Quarterly Report 31 December 2018 (press release); National Disability Insurance Agency, (2019), COAG Disability Reform Council Quarterly Performance Report Q3 2018-19, accessible at <https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/publications/quarterly-reports>.

assistance through the NDIS. Additionally, the loss of funding for Federal Government-funded community mental health programs, such as the Personal Helpers and Mentors program (PHaMs) means that the complimentary services that supported DES clients with mental illness are now unavailable. The added difficulty for individuals with severe mental health issues were also noted as also providing barriers to access the NDIS (and employment support).

Because for DES [participants] with mental illness, it's a GP, it's ... you can show what your diagnosis is or what your history is, it's almost a self-declaration that this is what my diagnosis is, with your GP. Whereas it's very strict within the NDIS for psychosocial and it's very hard to get the eligibility, we're finding and it's a catch-22. The more severe that your psychosocial disability is, the more you need the NDIS, but unless you have a very strong support network behind you, the less likely you are to be eligible. **(P2, DES provider)**

Difficulties were also noted with the current DES performance framework, which causes difficulties for mental health specialists to adequately address barriers to work for people with psychosocial disability. However, there are many important benefits for people with psychosocial disability and work, as employment is widely recognised as facilitating both personal and clinical recovery. ^{26,27}

4. Priorities for future research

We asked all participants in this research about what they think the key priorities for future research should be. The common themes for future research included:

4.1. *NDIS and DES interface research needs*

- What are the implications and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment for participants in both the NDIS and DES?
- What do people with disability want from the interface between the NDIS and DES?
- What helps a person with disability (including NDIS participants) get into the DES program (what supports can be used to build an individual's capacity to reach the DES program's eight hour per week with intervention work capacity benchmark criteria)?
- What is the potential role of individual work coaches within the NDIS and DES?

²⁶ Slade, M. and E. Longden, 'The empirical evidence about mental health and recovery: how likely, how long, what helps', *Melbourne: MI Fellowship*, (2015);

²⁷ Devine, A., Vaughan, C., Kavanagh, A., et. al., "'I'm proud of how far I've come. I'm just ready to work': mental health recovery narratives within the context of Australia's Disability Employment Services", *BMC Public Health*, 2020, Vol. 20(1), pp. 1-18.

4.2. *Broader research priorities*

- What are the best-practice pathways for people with disability into work (both in Australia and internationally)? How can we better support these pathways for people with disability into work in the Australian context?
- What is the role and relationship between DES and self-employment and social enterprise?
- What work needs to be done so that open employment opportunities are fully explored first before other options are considered?

Next steps

Research participants are asked to review the preliminary findings and provide feedback on the listed future research ideas to further shape a shared future research agenda.

Limitations

COVID-19 significantly disrupted both the timeframes of the project and recruitment of interview participants. Consequently, the study does not represent a full sample of experiences of DES and the NDIS in relation to employment. Similarly, due to COVID-19, the research team was not able to go ahead with plans to conduct a workshop with participants to share preliminary findings and prioritise a shared research agenda.

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