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# Graduate experiences among apprentices and trainees with disabilities: supplementary report

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This document, produced by the authors, is presented as a supplementary resource to their report *Barriers and facilitators affecting course completions by apprentices and trainees with disabilities*. The report is available on NCVER's Portal: <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

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# Executive summary

This report is framed around the research question: What factors impact on the quality of the post training experience of apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities? It is based on qualitative data collected throughout a larger project, and is presented as a supplementary resource to the report *Barriers and facilitators affecting course completions by apprentices and trainees with disabilities*.

While there are different approaches to defining disability, Australian and international research and administrative data consistently illustrate that people with disabilities have low labour force participation rates, high unemployment rates, and are at increased risk of poverty (OECD 2003, 2007, 2010; ABS 2010a; Deloitte Access Economics 2011; ABS 2012; ACOSS 2013). Apprenticeships and traineeships have been identified as positive vocational pathways for young people in their transition to adulthood, with good graduate outcomes for people with and without disability (Cocks and Thoresen 2013a, 2013b; Cocks, Thoresen, and Lee 2013; Duggan and Byrne 2013; Lewis, Thoresen, and Cocks 2011a; NCVET 2013). However, most research and administrative data suggest that people with disabilities are underrepresented in VET generally, and in apprenticeships and traineeships specifically (Australian National Training Authority 2000; Ball 2004; Bagshaw and Fowler 2008; Cavallaro et al. 2005; Griffin and Beddie 2011; NCVET 2011; National VET Equity Advisory Council 2011, 2013; Ball and John 2005).

Furthermore, to the authors' knowledge, no previous research has explicitly investigated the graduate experiences for apprentices and trainees with disabilities. Rather, studies have been limited to investigating course participation, barriers and facilitators for course completion, or quantitative outcome measures such as labour force participation rates, employment rates, hours of work, and wages. There are some studies that have explicitly investigated the vocational experiences of people with disabilities. These studies largely relate to people with intellectual disabilities, encompass both sheltered and open employment, and investigate concepts such as social capital formation as well as social and community participation.

This research report contributes to our understanding of the utility of apprenticeships and traineeships for people with disabilities by providing an account of the contexts, quality of experiences, and outcomes.

## Methods

Interviews with 30 apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities from New South Wales (n=9), South Australia (n=10), and Western Australia (n=11) were carried out in 2011. Two subsequent annual interview waves with the same participants followed a similar format to capture outcomes and experiences over time (n=24 in wave two and n=21 in wave three). Participants were purposively selected among volunteers from a larger study that consisted of postal surveys of apprentices and trainees with disabilities to reflect a range of specific characteristics and circumstances. The interview schedule included a broad range of questions to capture changes in circumstances and focused on: social participation and inclusion, quality of life, training, employment, and career development.

Transcripts from the interviews were developed into case studies for each individual participant, contextualised with interviewer observations and case notes, as well as survey responses participants

completed from the larger study. The research findings are presented in this report as themes exemplified within participants' specific contexts and incorporated experiences, outcomes, challenges, achievements, and reflections.

## Findings

The research findings are presented as six themes within two overarching issues: 'transition' and 'wounding experiences of disability'. The first issue, transition, is a major process in the lives of young people as they move from school into adulthood and employment. Some young people may become entrenched in specialist disabilities services such as Australian disability enterprises (formerly known as sheltered workshops). Others adopt more normative roles which may be facilitated by further education, training, and workforce engagement. To a large extent, this transition process reflects the socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants as almost three-quarters of participants were under 30 years of age. The two themes within 'transition' related to 'personal support' and 'personal motivation'.

- **Personal supports.** Personal supports included those which assisted with completing training and obtaining employment, as well as other domains of everyday living. Support may be both informal and formal, and be provided by a range of people including family and friends, colleagues, and people within the training environment. The right supports helped to minimise the impact of disability.
- **Personal motivation.** People with disabilities can be very successful, even early in their careers. This may require ambition, hard work, and making the most of the opportunities that arise. It may require people to be mature beyond their age, to build strategic and strong professional and personal relationships, and to capitalise on earlier success.

The second overarching issue was the 'wounding experiences of disability'. Four themes were captured within this issue: 'complexity of needs', 'mature age experiences', 'experiences of discrimination' and 'financial in/security'. These four themes highlighted specific vulnerabilities experienced by the participants. While some participants overcame their wounding experiences and dealt with underlying vulnerability, other participants faced very complex and challenging circumstances. Half of the participants reflected experiences within these four themes of the wounding experiences of disability, showing that these experiences were common encounters.

- **Complexity of needs.** People with disabilities are a diverse group. Those with high and complex needs, including deteriorating conditions, may experience substantial challenges in their employment and training environment. These challenges may be beyond the capacity of generic disability employment services and other service providers to adequately address. Specialists with comprehensive knowledge of the specific disability, syndrome, or condition may be required to develop targeted interventions and supports.
- **Mature age experiences.** Mature aged people, including those who acquire their disabilities later in life, face different challenges than younger people with disabilities who are transitioning from school or further education and training to employment. These may include issues around re-training and re-entry into the workforce, intensification of their disabilities including onset of mental illness, and the different contexts of a mature age person's circumstances including family commitments.
- **Experiences of discrimination.** Discrimination may take many forms. It is broadly accepted that disability is a major source of discrimination and there is a multitude of codes, conventions, and

laws that address disability discrimination. Within this research, discrimination was operationalised as negative experiences of participants related to their disabilities. It also included the issue of disclosure of disability.

- **Financial in/security.** People with disabilities have similar financial goals as everyone else. These include purchasing a house or car, and travel for leisure. People with disabilities are, however, much more likely to experience poverty than people without disability. Low social security payments and the impact of the supported wage system may contribute to this and there are concerns, particularly from family members, about their financial security.

Many participants with positive outcomes had mitigated the impact of their disabilities through accessing assistive technology, and obtaining specialist or personalised support from agencies, families, friends, and others in their personal networks. Participants with poor outcomes or negative experiences faced challenges around unmet needs and the complexity of their disabilities, a training or employment model that did not suit their circumstances as mature age workers, discrimination and bullying, and financial insecurity. Participants reflected a range of outcomes and experiences, supporting the notion that disability is a continuum of functioning and support needs rather than a binary condition of being disabled or not disabled (Loeb and Eide 2006) and that support may be more effective if individually tailored.

# Introduction

This report is presented as a supplementary resource to the report *Barriers and facilitators affecting course completions by apprentices and trainees with disabilities*.

People with disabilities face substantial social and economic disadvantage (National VET Equity Advisory Council 2013; Australian Government 2011; National People with Disabilities and Carers Council and FaHCSIA 2009; ACOSS 2013; OECD 2003, 2007, 2010). International research has concluded that disability is associated with poor health, economic disadvantage and poverty, and social exclusion. The World Health Organization and The World Bank (2011) describes the circular link between disability and poor health: poor health contributes to disability and disability contributes to poor health. People with disabilities are less likely to be in the labour force and more likely to be unemployed than people without disability. Furthermore, in economic downturns, people with disabilities are more likely to leave the labour force (OECD 2010).

Research and administrative data have identified that vocational education and training (VET) generally, and apprenticeships and traineeships specifically, significantly improve social and economic outcomes for people with disabilities through improved labour force participation and income (OECD 2003, 2007, 2010; ABS 2010a; Deloitte Access Economics 2011; ABS 2012; ACOSS 2013). However, there is a dearth of empirical studies into the graduate experiences. The current literature and evidence base provide limited insight into the experiences and individual outcomes, challenges, and achievements apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities face. Rather, current understanding of apprenticeship and traineeship graduate outcomes are limited to those captured in survey data and administrative datasets.

This report explores the quality of the graduate experiences of a cohort of apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities who were followed for up to three annual waves. By employing a qualitative framework, the study illustrates the complex and interrelated challenges, achievements, pathways, and trajectories experienced by these research participants. Their stories are depicted in vignettes that provide 'illustrative results and key lessons' (Yin 1993, 7). This report contributes to bridge the current knowledge gap of contextual graduate experiences and outcomes among apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities.

The findings in this report have been reported as themes. While it is likely that these themes are relevant for the broader group of apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities, the findings presented here are specific to the participants of this research.

# Background

## Defining and operationalising disability

There is no single definition of disability in Australia (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2012). Definitions commonly reflect the international movement towards the principles of the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (World Health Organization 2001). The ICF views disability at the intersection of health conditions, environmental factors, and personal factors. The ICF has been operationalised into different core activity limitations, which are the basis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics periodic Survey of Disability, Aging, and Carers (SDAC) which provides the most comprehensive snapshot of disability in Australia. This is consistent with international acknowledgement that disability is not binary, that is, you have a disability or you do not, but rather exists on a continuum (Loeb and Eide 2006). The most recent SDAC, carried out in 2012, suggested that the prevalence of disability in Australia was 18.5%, unchanged from the preceding SDAC in 2009. The SDAC defined and operationalised disability as 'any limitation, restriction or impairment which restricts everyday activities and has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months' (ABS 2013b, no page number). With slight variation, this approach is aligned with the generally accepted definitions across Australia.

It is important to acknowledge that different conceptualisations of disability within different contexts and systems shape operational definitions and eligibility criteria. This may have profound impacts on individuals, particularly regarding eligibility for benefits. In Australia, there are examples of definitional differences when applied to assessment of eligibility criteria for access to specialist disability services and social security benefits.

## Disability, un/employment, and poverty

Disability is significantly associated with poverty. A major contributing factor for the interrelationship of poverty and disability is the low labour force participation rate and high unemployment rate among people with disabilities. The 2012 SDAC (ABS 2013b) found that while 82.5% of people without disabilities were in the labour force, the participation rate of people with disabilities was 52.8% and their unemployment rate of 9.4% is almost double the 4.9% unemployment rate for people without disability. The labour force participation rate decreases substantially according to support need. People with mild core activity limitation have a participation rate of 55.4% which decreases to 46.7%, 35.9%, and 20.0% for people with moderate, severe, and profound core activity limitations respectively. There is less variation in the unemployment rate which fluctuates from 9.4%, 10.3%, 9.5%, and 12.7% for people with each core activity limitation respectively.

High risk of poverty (ACOSS 2013) can be viewed as the combined result of low labour force participation and high unemployment (OECD 2003, 2007, 2010; ABS 2010a; Deloitte Access Economics 2011; ABS 2012). Poverty risk is also related to low or inadequate social security benefits (ACOSS 2013; OECD 2003, 2007, 2014). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) utilised two measures of relative poverty: 50% of median income and 60% of median income (OECD 2014). The Australian Council of Social Services (2013, 39) has identified that the average gap between the disability support pension and the 50% median income poverty gap was \$129 between 2005-06 and 2009-10 or \$168 for the 60% of median income per week. Australians with disabilities



have the highest relative poverty risk among all OECD countries and the poverty rate is the second highest in the OECD (after the USA) (OECD 2010).

## Apprenticeships and traineeships

While there is broad agreement that people with disabilities are socially and economically disadvantaged, there is some evidence illustrating that VET generally, and apprenticeships and traineeships more specifically, are strong vocational pathways with positive outcomes. The utility of apprenticeships and traineeships for people with disabilities is the workplace training model embedded in these courses (Cocks and Thoresen 2013a, 2013b; Lewis, Thoresen, and Cocks 2011b; Cocks, Thoresen, and Lee 2013; Duggan and Byrne 2013). Roughly half of all apprentices and trainees complete their courses (NCVER 2012a, 2012b). People with disabilities are generally viewed as less likely to commence and complete an apprenticeship or traineeship than their peers without disability (Australian National Training Authority 2000; Ball 2004; Bagshaw and Fowler 2008; Cavallaro et al. 2005; Griffin and Beddie 2011; NCVER 2011; National VET Equity Advisory Council 2011, 2013; Ball and John 2005). There are, however, some studies that suggest the participation and completion rates are comparable for people with or without disabilities (ABS 2010b, 2013a; Polidano and Mavromaras 2010).

There is limited information to date on employment and related economic outcomes among apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities. The student outcomes survey (NCVER 2013) reports a limited number of outcomes for VET graduates with disabilities, but not specifically for apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities. Among the VET graduates in 2012, 80.1% of completers without disability compared with 52.4% of completers with disabilities were employed after completing their training. A contributing factor to the apparent inequitable employment outcome for VET graduates with disabilities may be that a large proportion of people with disabilities who complete VET undertake a certificate I or II course which is less likely to lead to employment compared with higher level qualifications (Griffin and Beddie 2011; National VET Equity Advisory Council 2011; Lewis, Thoresen, and Cocks 2011b; Australian National Training Authority 2000; Cavallaro et al. 2005; National VET Equity Advisory Council 2013). A review of administrative records by Ball (2000) found that almost half of VET students with disabilities were enrolled in courses that did not lead to a specific occupation compared to one-third of their non-disabled peers. Furthermore, she also found that:

Students who reported that they have a disability were less likely to undertake further studies at a higher level than students without a disability after completing an enabling course. About 57 percent of these students enrolled in the same level of qualification compared to only 48 percent of students who reported that they do not have a disability. (Ball 2000, 6)

Studies looking specifically at graduate outcomes for apprentices and trainees with disabilities are scarce. Ball (2000) suggested apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities are as likely to be employed as their peers without disability with a new employer following course completion, but less likely to be employed by their training employer. Her findings from analysis of administrative data concluded that people with disabilities were generally undertaking shorter courses of lower skill levels than their peers without disability, which lead to poorer graduate employment and income outcomes for all VET graduates with disabilities compared to their peers. A more recent study investigated graduate outcomes for apprentices and trainees with disabilities utilised a retrospective matched-pair analysis of apprenticeship and traineeship graduates, non-completers, and people who never undertook an apprenticeship or traineeship within the same disability employment service. The

study found significantly better outcomes among graduates as well as people who withdrew from their apprenticeships (Lewis, Thoresen, and Cocks 2011a). However, the study only compared outcomes across groups of people with disabilities rather than apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with and without disability.

## Vocational experiences

There are very few studies that explore vocational experiences related to apprenticeships and traineeships for people with disabilities. The emphasis, as is the case for most studies investigating apprenticeships and traineeships, centre on in-training experiences, including barriers and facilitators for course completion, as well as quantitative graduate outcomes such as proportion of participants in employment, hours of work, and wages.

Studies that investigate the vocational experience for people with disabilities are often framed within the domains of social inclusion or community participation. Outcomes and experiences are reported across a spectrum, partially illustrating the diverse participant group. Dixon and Reddacliff (2001) investigated the family vocational contributions among a small sample (n=15) of people with mild intellectual disabilities in the south-west metropolitan area of Sydney who were engaged in open employment. The qualitative study indicated that participants had developed relationships through their workplaces, but these were not 'real friendships'. The study found that participants' families played significant roles in the vocational development of participants, social and community participation, and a level of protection, including against discrimination and exploitation within and outside the workplace.

Hall and Kramer (2009) investigated the social capital people with intellectual disabilities developed through the workplace in a qualitative study in the US. They found differences between the type of social capital in open and sheltered employment, which to an extent reflected the different characteristics of these settings. Participants in sheltered employment developed stronger social relationships from, and within the workplace, than those in open employment. This may be influenced by the social aspect of sheltered employment. While participants in open employment did not develop more social capital associated with relationships, they developed a different type of social capital which led to vocational opportunities not afforded within the sheltered environment. Participants who were engaged in both open and sheltered employment were viewed as having very positive outcomes, including high social status within the sheltered environment as well as benefiting from social capital in the normative work environment that leveraged different networks and connections than those made within the sheltered workshops.

Humber (2014) investigated the challenges in enhancing the participation and outcomes from open employment for people with intellectual disabilities in the UK. The findings included a number of negative experiences for people with intellectual disabilities within the workplace and few tangible outcomes associated with broader social or community inclusion. These findings were contextualised within the existing UK policy environment that provided support to people with disabilities, including the segregated approach of previous education and training, and provision of sheltered work in segregated settings. Participants' experience in subsequent open employment included exclusion by non-disabled colleagues in what was coined as 'included exclusion' (p. 283). Participants' colleagues were not necessarily actively trying to exclude people because of their disabilities, but did not have the skills to include people with disabilities. Participants with intellectual disabilities had difficulties in integrating and understanding the workplace cultures. The author concluded that it was unrealistic to expect positive social inclusion outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities simply by

participating in open employment. Rather, there needed to be specific strategies to facilitate integration in the workplace to support both the person with a disability and his or her colleagues. This was particularly the case for people who had been in segregated education and training environments, in some cases for decades.

These studies strongly indicated the need for effective support strategies to achieve positive vocational and related outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities. It does not draw too fine a line to conclude that this finding can be generalised to people with other disabilities.

# Methods

This report is a descriptive, qualitative representation of the experiences and outcomes of a small sample of apprenticeship and traineeship graduates (participants) selected from a larger study. A case study approach was adopted to allow graduate outcomes and participants' experiences to be explored within their specific contexts and circumstances. Further, the researchers were able to utilise varied sources of gathered information, including participants' interviews, their survey responses (collected as part of the larger study), and observations and information gained from people who supported them (chiefly family members, and, in one instance, a support staff). Together, this approach allowed for a more in-depth investigation into the contexts and outcomes among apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities than could be captured in a postal survey.

## Case studies

Face-to-face interview participants in three states were purposively selected from volunteers of a postal survey. Survey respondents were asked to indicate their willingness to participate in an interview and just under three-quarters of survey participants with disabilities responded positively (293 out of the 403 apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities). Interview participants were selected to reflect a range of circumstances (based on age, gender, main disability, and training level) rather than a representative sample (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005). A total of 30 interviews were carried out across three states, New South Wales (n=9), South Australia (n=10), and Western Australia (n=11) in wave one. Potential participants (those who indicated willingness to participate in an interview in the first wave postal survey) in reasonable proximity to the capital city of the three selected states were hand-screened by the researchers and contacted by phone. Only one potential interview participant refused as his new work schedule made it difficult to participate. The same participants were approached to participate in two additional interviews approximately one and two years following the baseline interview.

The first wave interview schedule, developed in 2011, was designed to capture quantitative and qualitative information on social participation and inclusion, quality of life, training, employment, and career development. Four interviews were carried out in Western Australia to pilot the interview schedule and procedure. These required no changes, and were used in all subsequent interviews. The second and third wave interviews followed a similar format to that used in the baseline interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. This report used the qualitative material from these transcripts contextualised with interview notes, quantitative surveys, and participant observations.

Participants were a non-representative convenience sample, which aligned to the case study methodology that permits cases to be selected on 'conceptual groups, not representative grounds' (Miles and Huberman 1994, 29). Table 1 outlines the socio-demographic characteristics of participants.

**Table 1 Socio-demographic characteristics of interview participants**

	Wave one (n=30)		Wave two (n=24)		Wave three (n=21)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Gender</i>						
Females	11	36.7	8	33.3	6	28.6
Males	19	63.3	16	66.7	15	71.4
<i>Age group</i>						
19 or younger	2	6.7	2	8.3	2	9.5
20-24	11	36.7	9	37.5	9	42.9
25-29	9	30.0	6	25.0	3	14.3
30-39	5	16.7	5	20.8	5	23.8
40 or older	3	10.0	2	8.3	2	9.5
<i>Labour force participation</i>						
Working	24	80.0	21	87.5	20	95.2
Looking for work	3	10.0	1	4.2	1	4.8
Not in the labour force	3	10.0	2	8.3	-	-
<i>Training level</i>						
Apprenticeship	11	36.7	8	33.3	7	33.3
Traineeship	19	63.3	16	66.7	14	66.7
<i>State</i>						
New South Wales	9	30.0	7	29.2	6	28.6
South Australia	10	33.3	9	37.5	8	38.1
Western Australia	11	36.7	8	33.3	7	33.3
<i>Main disability</i>						
Blind or vision impairment	3	10.0	2	8.3	2	9.5
Deaf or hearing impairment	3	10.0	2	8.3	2	9.5
Head injury or acquired brain injury	1	3.3	1	4.2	1	4.8
Intellectual or learning	13	43.3	11	45.8	9	42.9
Medical condition	3	10.0	2	8.3	1	4.8
Mental illness	2	6.7	2	8.3	2	9.5
Physical	5	16.7	4	16.7	4	19.0

## Data analysis

The findings presented have been derived through common qualitative data analysis stages consisting of data reduction, meaning making through data coding and analysis, and verification of the themes accounted for in the findings section (Miles and Huberman 1994; Hall and Kramer 2009).

Data analysis involved seven stages.

- 1 The authors worked in pairs where a pair included an author who had interviewed participants and an author who had not. Transcripts were circulated to each pair so that each pair received the transcripts of participants who had been interviewed by the respective author who had carried out that interview. Members of each pair then read through the transcripts they had been allocated.
- 2 Transcripts for each participant were then shared by authors within each pair and data reduction began by each author developing a concise summary or case study narrative for the participants whose transcripts they received.
- 3 The author in each pair who had interviewed the pair's participants verified or clarified the summaries using interview notes, interview observations, and survey information.

- 4 Once summaries were developed in pairs, data reduction continued with the four authors independently extracting initial themes from each summary and across all summaries.
- 5 The four authors then met and discussed the initial themes, drawing on examples from interviewed participants. This resulted in 44 initial key themes being identified, avoiding duplicate themes. Following further review and discussion, these were reduced to 12 themes.
- 6 Each author then took three themes and provided an initial descriptor of each theme with illustrative quotations or examples from the transcripts.
- 7 Theme consolidation occurred in further discussion and six overarching themes within two overarching issues were agreed.

The presentation of the research findings includes descriptors of the key elements in each theme as well as illustrative examples of participants' experiences, outcomes, challenges, achievements, or reflections. Theme development followed the principle that participants' quotes or vignettes did not necessarily have to reflect all or many participants, but be representative of a specific research participant.

This approach enabled specific issues to be explored within its stated context without providing identifiable information about the participant. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants.

# Themes

The research addressed the question: What factors impact on the quality of the post training experience of apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities? Six individual themes were identified within two overarching issues: 'transition to adult life' and 'wounding experiences of disability'. The themes reflected the socio-demographic characteristics and specific circumstances of the 30 participants interviewed (21 remained at wave three) and provided a broad representation of their diverse experiences, challenges, achievements, and outcomes.

'Transition to adult life' provided a context for the experiences of most participants. With the exception of a small number of mature age participants, the age distribution of the sample reflected the transition from secondary education to early adulthood. Further education and engagement in the workforce that potentially provides strong focus and benefits through vocational and career development is illustrated in the first two themes under 'transition to adult life': 'personal support' and 'personal motivation', 'Wounding experiences of disability' consisted of four themes: 'complexity of needs', 'mature age experiences', 'experiences of discrimination', and 'financial in/security'. These themes detail a range of experiences that were challenging and unhelpful for some of the participants with disabilities.

## Transition to adult life

Transition encompasses the period when young adults begin their careers, move away from their family home to establish their own living arrangements, and develop more mature or adult relationships and personal networks. It is usually a time of trial and error and experimentation. For all young people, including those with disabilities, transition is a normative experience. However, the presence of disability provides particular challenges for both the person with a disability and the various systems with which they come into contact. Almost three-quarters of participants were within the broader transition period of growing up and establishing adult and more independent relationships, responsibilities, and social roles.

## Personal support

Personal support in their vocational journeys clearly made a major contribution to the quality of the experiences of most participants both during and following training and served often to reduce the impact of a disability. Formal support included vocational/career support and work experience whilst still at school, and support from disability employment support agencies and VET teachers. Informal support included family members, friends, and workmates. Lack of, or poor support also occurred with some participants, particularly where the support needed was specialised.

Henry was one of the youngest participants, aged 17, and was accompanied by his mother at the first wave interview. He had an intellectual/learning disability. Henry received strong support from family, a family friend, and from workmates. The family lived on a rural property some distance from the city. He carried out paid weekend work in a local dog pound in year 9 and had also worked on Saturdays and longer holidays for a family friend who had a small, one-man lawn mowing business. His mother stated that this was: 'a very important connection. If he didn't have this opportunity, then I think he would still be at school struggling.' Not uncommonly for young people with disabilities, the family decided that Henry should leave school early, not only for educational reasons, but also

because he was experiencing bullying. At the end of year 9 the decision was made for Henry to work in the mowing business and complete a traineeship.

And that's when the opportunity came. Do we go on to year 10 or do we get a traineeship. That's where the decision was made. It was his choice, with our consent. It was a big decision to make. Does he leave school and get a head start with a career, or does he stay at school? I don't know if he would have succeeded, for lots of issues, academically, but also with issues of bullying and stuff like that. So! (Henry's mother, intellectual/learning disability, wave one)

The mowing work was intense and demanding and Henry occasionally needed his mother's support to ensure that he got time off and the holidays that he was entitled. After remaining with the mowing job for another year, he and his boss had a falling out over work conditions and payment. He then started working as a sub-contractor for a local firm that did landscaping. He had no plans for study but he wanted to obtain his bobcat license. The new job had six bobcats and he was working harmoniously with a large group of 'young guys'. Conditions were more flexible and offered choices. After seven months, he reflected on the job: 'I love going there. I've got my name - my nickname is "Killer Henry"'. He was learning 'heaps more' and working with different people on different tasks. The new job required a White Card, hard hats, sunblock, hat, gloves, and a bright shirt - sources of pride and belonging.

At the final interview, Henry was living in a self-contained unit at the back of his parents' house that was constructed from a garage. He had given his mother his credit card to purchase furniture for his unit. At first he noted being nervous living alone, but through his parents' reassurance overcame this. In the final interview, he spoke proudly of having a girlfriend who was very supportive. Henry acknowledged his learning difficulties, but did not acknowledge this as a disability. The response of some of Henry's work associates to his disability further reflected the importance of informal support.

Interviewer: You mentioned that...you were identified in the study originally because of a learning disability and you mentioned in your survey that you don't really consider that to be relevant.

Henry: No. Like, my girlfriend did something for me that is so awesome. What I'll do is talk to her [on] the phone. I write it and it [the phone] speaks back to me. If I can't read it, I will get it to read it to me. So if my boss sends me a big message, I will try to read it myself and then the bigger words - I will think I can't read that, so I will press that and then it will talk to me. Everybody tells me to go get lunch...there are going to be about thirteen or fourteen people that want Maccas - one person gives me twenty - one person gives me fifty - one person gives me ten. So I write it all down on notes, speak to it [the phone]. Everybody goes: "what are you doing?" I tell them I am talking to my phone. I go - "yeah - listen", and they all say "that is wicked". So they are all impressed.

(Henry, intellectual/learning disability, wave three)

Craig had received substantial "wrap-around" formal support in his transition from school, including a school based traineeship. Craig was in his early 20s in wave one and had an intellectual/learning disability. He completed high school as part of a special school enclave attached to a mainstream college. He was supported by his school and teachers, a disability employment service, a group training organisation, as well as his local TAFE. His host employer had also been very supportive and Craig noted that family and friends were: 'really proud of me to get my certificate'. While he was not employed beyond his training with the host employer, he was offered an apprenticeship at a different place, still supported by the disability employment service, but without the group training



organisation. He was well into his apprenticeship when the study began and completed it and was retained by the employer at the final wave of the study.

While Craig's story is clearly a success story, he had encountered some substantial challenges during his traineeship and subsequent apprenticeship. In reflecting, Craig indicated that he had matured substantially over the few years to now accept his disability:

For other people to understand - that like other people got problems but they learn to deal with it every day... At first I hated my disability but I sort of learnt you got to live the positives of life and like it took 21 years to fully understand my disability and deal with the disability every day you know, because that was a big concern.

(Craig, intellectual/learning disability, wave three)

Craig spoke about how the adoption of a valued role as an uncle helped him with the acceptance of his disability.

I'm just trying to do the best I can, you know, to become a role model to myself...and the five kids have helped me a lot more. ... Five nephews...and like I have learnt a lot more from them, like I've learnt like being a good uncle is a lot different. Like there's a lot more to it, but yeah, I just love it. ... I learnt to do like the right thing. It's pretty hard but it takes a lot of time. Especially with my disability, you know, but you might not be able to sort things right away, but over time, if you try, you will be able to sort out what you're doing wrong or what doesn't make you happy you know.

(Craig, intellectual/learning disability, wave three)

## Personal motivation

Despite the disability, a person with a disability can be very successful and a high achiever, even early in their careers. Two examples are described below and some of the factors that appeared to have contributed to their success are noted.

Brett is a young man in his early twenties. He had a physical disability that occurred in high school. Prior to this, he was considering a trade career, influenced by working at his uncle's car dealership and other paid work during high school. With the onset of his disability, he received specialist support from a disability employment service which provided employment opportunities in his transition from high school. The first was a warehousing job which was: 'a bit like pick and pack sort of stuff'. He then took some months off and changed to a different disability employment service. He was then offered a traineeship through a group training organisation, initially in the company mail room, and due to staff turnover, was given the opportunity to move into an administration role. Following the completion of Certificate II in Finance, Property, and Business Services, he finished a certificate III in four months (rather than one year). Just before the first interview, he received a promotion to a coordinators role in the commercial property management area in charge of two staff that provided a 'relatively decent' salary increase. He was completing a certificate IV and keen to stay with his current employer: 'for as long as I possibly can, obviously unless an offer appears that is too good to walk away from'.

Brett noted that his employer acknowledged his hard work with informal promotions and bonuses. He was still keen on undertaking more formal qualifications, such as a diploma or master degree, but acknowledged needing the support of his employer and five years' experience in the industry before enrolling. He wanted more challenges. A few months before the third wave interview, Brett was

promoted to a manager as a part of succession planning. It was clear that he had experienced a rapid career progression over the three years of the study, working hard and acting upon the opportunities that arose. Reflecting on further opportunities he said:

‘There’s a few things that work quite heavily in my favour in the industry. One is that I am very young to be in the industry in the position that I am and I’ve got quite a good deal of experience for the age that I am so a lot of companies see that as you know quite a big positive’.

(Brett, physical disability, wave three)

Scott was also in his early 20s and had learning difficulties. While Scott had received some initial support in primary school, he had managed mainly with the support of his mother, other family members and friends, to read and complete his school assignments. Originally from a country town, Scott moved to the state capital for a VET course after completing high school. However, he dropped out of the course and took some time off before he moved back home and enrolled in a building and construction related apprenticeship. After completing this, he moved back to the city where his girlfriend lived and found casual work. A work-related injury put him out of work for a few months. There was also a slowdown in the building and construction industry in the city; however, there was substantial work available back in his home town. When Scott was unable to find work in the city after recovering from his injury, he moved back home:

He [his new employer in his home town with whom he had worked previously] rang me about two months ago, maybe three months ago, and at the time then I wasn’t sure of it, but then I thought about it for a week or two and then drove back here to talk to him about it and probably about two weeks later I started. And I haven’t really had any time off since.

(Scott, learning disability, wave two)

As Scott was getting more and more work, he had to put on hold some certificates he was doing for professional development and concentrate on completing the modules he needed to apply for a builder’s license: ‘...and [then] I can be a complete sub-contractor’. By the third wave, Scott was much more established and work was going very well:

It has been pretty straight forward as well. I am in my hometown, I know everyone, so it’s not that hard. I don’t know, it would have been...what I have done now, would have been a lot harder if I had stayed in the city, but since I moved home it has been a lot, lot easier.

(Scott, learning disability, wave three)

Scott had received substantial support from an unofficial business partner:

Yeah, I mean, for the moment the dude that I contract for is really good. I go out and do the general things that a builder does, so at the moment I am able to do all the things that a builder can do. ...I have got four years with him, so I guess, it is probably three years, so within three years he is basically going to hand the company over to me.

(Scott, learning disability, wave three)

This unofficial business partner was running two businesses and had in effect handed over the building and construction one to Scott. While Scott received substantial mentoring and support during the time of this study, it was clear that it was a mutually beneficial arrangement. Scott was a ‘local’, whereas his unofficial business partner was a relatively new arrival, and the community was more likely to bring business to a local person.

It was clear that Brett and Scott were highly motivated achievers with early success. They were both hard-working, and made the most of the opportunities that were presented to them. Both of them seemed mature beyond their years and had built strong professional relationships within their working environments, capitalised on their early success, and were on very positive career trajectories. Their disabilities did not appear to have hindered their progress.

## Wounding experiences of disability

As is illustrated in the specific themes of this overarching issue, participants dealt with, and many overcame, the wounding experiences of disability. However, about half of the participants stated or described poor experiences, such as bullying or discrimination. These wounding experiences of disability had detrimental effect on some participants' confidence and perception of self-worth, while others were able to overcome these obstacles through their own perseverance and/or with the support of others. The themes also illustrated the challenges faced by the range of educational and vocational support systems in effectively responding to the needs of participants with a disability.

## Complexity of needs

People with disabilities who had complex and deteriorating conditions faced substantial challenges throughout their education and employment. Participants reported that support services sometimes struggled to comprehend and respond to their needs and appeared to have limited specialist disability knowledge. Employment opportunities were very limited and conditions of work included part-time or casual jobs with low to very low wages, particularly in forms of sheltered employment.

Luke and James, both aged in their mid-twenties, provided examples of some of these challenges. Their disabilities were life-long.

Luke had frequent seizures:

[The school wasn't] quite prepared for me to have seizures and didn't know what to do with me when I had a seizure because of occupational health and safety and insurance lawsuits. Some (teachers) gave up, and they did everything they could think of.

[A] seizure is a lot like a person who has a hangover or passes out. You have nausea, imbalance, numbness. I don't really often recall - I collapse. Some people get scared, think you are toying, think you are drunk because you often look like one. Some people do get scared because they don't understand what's happening.

(Luke, medical condition and learning disability, wave one)

My health hasn't changed. Every 7-10 days I have a seizure. A side effect of my medication was making my teeth a little bit brown so everybody thinks I smoke, but I don't. Apparently my bones are in terrible shape, a side effect of the medication.

(Luke, medical condition and learning disability, wave two)

Teachers offered advice: "Oh, I think you'll have a lot of difficulty getting jobs. We're wishing you the best of luck", kind of thing.' However, the reality was that Luke's opportunities to pursue his interests were very limited by his condition and the responses to it:

[I had] all sorts of dreams - environmental science, but I couldn't go into the field. I wasn't allowed. I never got the talent for [photography]. I enjoyed it a lot, but you had to be healthy to do [it].

(Luke, medical condition and learning disability, wave one)

Luke also had difficulties getting support from disability employment services which are specialist service providers to support people with disabilities to obtain and maintain employment. ‘One or two [disability employment services workers] mistreated me and were saying why are you bothering to work at all?’ It was clear that further specialisation by support services to address complex needs may have been required, and the lack of this support led Luke to give up pursuing employment:

Until recently I was with a job service provider. I only ended it this week because I have been looking for work [with the same provider] for nearly six years. [The disability employment services worker] wasn’t quite understanding why I was having so much difficulty and even why I was even bothering looking for a job. (Luke, medical condition and learning disability, wave one)

Luke had completed six TAFE certificates up to certificate III and discontinued a certificate IV. His intention was to continue with VET courses although he acknowledged they had not resulted in vocational outcomes. He worked in an Australian disability enterprise for two days a week for 14 hours for \$6.95 an hour which had increased by 10c an hour in 2013. ‘Yes. It’s a sheltered place, it’s still a sheltered workshop: a warehouse. It does printing, graphics, mainly focuses on doing things by hand, mail and packaging, seals mass mail.’ Luke’s poor employment prospects, and only part-time work in a sheltered environment, despite all his certificates, contributed to him losing his confidence:

I’m not quite sure. I just don’t have a lot of certainty anymore and I am understanding less of what my government wants me to do. Like should I be sitting at home on the couch literally doing nothing, or should I be out there looking for a job? After so many [attempts] and not coming up with virtually anything, so I have lost confidence.

(Luke, medical condition and learning disability, wave two)

James had a deteriorating bone disease that worsens with age and stress. He experienced constant arthritic pain and endeavoured to keep active. During high school he had some major surgeries and missed much school. During a TAFE course, he broke his leg and was unable to work for the rest of the year. He also had a tumour in his head which required surgery and recently: ‘my head started playing up with the tumour and the voice started going.’ He withdrew from a diploma course at TAFE and hoped to pick it up the following year, ‘if everything went OK with the tumour and the radiation and stuff like that.’ He described ‘three [tumours] in my head. Two in the back that’s causing voice problems and one in the centre. That’s the one playing around with my eye.’ He may need 15 radiation doses, which he has never had before, but would ‘...rather have that, than be cut open...again.’

Teachers at school were:

[F]earful due to the disability they were very cautious and I missed a lot of school. I spent a lot of time in hospital. One teacher in particular made an effort, bringing the work to me. Nothing [was done] to help me learn. I’ve never really had an issue with picking up most things.

(James, physical disability, wave one)

James also indicated that he made an ‘arrogant choice’ because he did not want too much support, or to stand out at school:

The teachers were always very supportive of me - I was just kind of always on my own, didn’t want that much help. I’ve never been one to get help. I’d rather do things on my own. On your enrolment form - disabled - they ask you what it is and if you require any special help and I ticked ‘no’.

(James, physical disability, wave one)

He expressed frustration with applying for jobs and then ‘getting blown off’, attributing it possibly to his disability. Two local council applications were unsuccessful, with no interviews offered, although he believed he was ‘overqualified so we’re not sure what happened there. Maybe someone found out I had a disability. That’s the only thing that I could think of.’ This: ‘definitely could have been (because of his disability). They know I have a disability but I don’t think they know the extent of it. I guess they find out I have a disability and they freak out.’

He accepted casual employment in a health service on 12 week contracts. Because of employment policies, every 12 weeks he was “sacked” and then re-employed after the 13th week. He was happy with the work but would have liked the extra week. As a casual employee, his position was insecure. He could be “sacked without notice”, had no sick leave, and was paid an additional 80c per hour for the casual status.

Both young men received the disability support pension. James only accessed the pension when his health precluded him from working. Both were concerned about their future financial security.

## Mature age experiences

Mature aged people, some of whom acquire disabilities later in their life or experience an intensification of their disability, for example with the onset of forms of mental illness, find returning to and continuing education and employment difficult. The experiences of Grace and Faith illustrate the challenges of attempting to return to work following onset of a disability at an older age. Similar to people with disabilities and complex needs, challenges include being offered casual or part-time employment and low wages. They also experienced low self-confidence as mature workers in work environments where the value of their work experience may not be fully acknowledged.

About 17 years ago, Grace who was in her mid-fifties, slipped on some ice on the floor and suffered a back injury. This event exacerbated an earlier back problem that she had associated with moving heavy tables in her roles as a caterer. She persevered with working, and then on a doctor’s suggestion, took six months off from work. After that, she was unsuccessful in getting another job: ‘but nobody would take you on because you’ve got an injury. And you’re not really an asset to them, you’re a liability.’ She tried to do some teaching:

[B]ut I had been out of the industry that long and I didn’t think I was doing the right thing by the students and the students aren’t very kind either when you’re a little bit older and a little bit insecure. I think that when you have an accident and you’re not involved in the workforce, your confidence loses, you know, you lose a lot of confidence.

(Grace, physical disability, wave one)

After experiencing being ‘really sick’, returning to her home country for family support, and doing some training courses there, she returned to Australia and unsuccessfully sought work in a school where she encountered the response:

“I don’t know why you’re coming here. We need professional people, not people that’s just got trade certificates and who haven’t got nothing to offer us”. So she just sent me away, so I didn’t really bother after that.

(Grace, physical disability, wave one)

A few years ago, Grace obtained work in a women’s fitness centre through a disability employment service and enrolled in courses on-line through the centre. She found this helpful because: ‘you have to approach people and speak to them. It was thought of as a way to build up confidence which did

help. It was good.’ Nevertheless, she found she lacked confidence in face-to-face fitness work, knowing the theory, but: ‘I’m not confident as a personal trainer because I haven’t been in the industry where the big gyms are. I’m a little intimidated.’ She was working about six hours a week which had recently been reduced to two. She had no plans for future employment:

[B]ecause of limitations really. It’s a shame because when you’re younger, you put all these aspirations of what you’d like to be, and as you get older, they’re just - they dwindle away and you lose confidence to go for things, you know?

(Grace, physical disability, wave one)

Her frustration was clearly articulated: ‘I can’t see myself, I can’t see how we could get out of this.’ Between the first and second wave interviews, she left Australia to return to her homeland.

Faith was in her mid-fifties and living with a mental illness. She lived in a department of housing home with her partner who had a psychotic disorder and a brain injury. Faith had completed a floristry apprenticeship when she was young and had worked in that industry for ten years. She had also worked in the bakery industry for a decade, as well as other work and volunteer work. In 2008, Faith had decided to work in aged care where she worked part-time for three years, although at times she worked up to 46 hours a week. She completed a Certificate III in Healthcare. Faith described work in aged care as being: ‘very intricate, it’s, you know, people think it’s just physical, but it’s mental as well, you have to remember everything and write everything down.’

Whilst working in the care facility, Faith disclosed to a fellow employee that she had experienced a mental illness and had been hospitalized for this illness. Following disclosure, Faith found other workers made it harder for her. After she was hospitalized a second time, her employer would only let her work two days a week. She was also injured at work but did not report it:

My self-esteem went down with this last job. The way I was treated. Not just by the staff members, but the HR department as well. I was forced to resign. Their attitude was, well, you know why should we bother with her, sort of thing. ... There was no team-work, it was all everyone for themselves when they found out that I had a mental illness, it was very hard for me to... get further along. Like, I applied for a supervisor’s position twice and was told that because of my illness I probably couldn’t cope with it. Yet, I was doing that job.

(Faith, mental illness, wave one)

After resigning from her job, it took a long time for Faith to get another job. She was referred to a disability employment service through Centrelink that helped her to get work in night fill at a large department store. Faith also managed to find work herself with a community care nursing agency which provided her with temporary casual/relief work. She worked for the nursing agency once a week and part-time at the store. The disability employment service provided on-the-job support for Faith: ‘they come in and see me all the time’, and helped by advocating on her behalf with the employer: ‘they were putting me off hours, so, she came in to see the manager and he put me on a permanent part-time contract, which is very good, yeah’. She was very happy with her current colleagues: ‘the people I work with they’re like a family’.

At the third wave interview, Faith was working 30 hours a week across day replenishment (filling shelves), fruit and vegetable department and check out at the store, and one shift a week (four hours) with the nursing agency. She had also gone for a fast track to management program but was unsuccessful after being selected for the interview process. Her manager said to her: ‘don’t worry if you don’t get it the first time because there will always be a second time’. Faith was happy with the

mix of work she was doing. She found that at work: ‘they are all very good towards me, so that is good.’

## Experiences of discrimination

Discrimination takes many forms and will be interpreted differently by different people, and in different contexts. For the purposes of this research, discrimination refers to negative experiences encountered by participants in relation to their disabilities. Discrimination is sometimes expressed as bullying and this was often described through the interviews and also reported in the surveys carried out in the larger study. Disability is universally acknowledged as a major target of discrimination and a focus of many codes, conventions, and laws. A key issue associated with discrimination is the decision a person with a disability makes to disclose the disability. Many disabilities are not obvious and some people may prefer not to acknowledge a disability in order to avoid negative responses, however not acknowledging a disability may also have consequences.

Eric was in his late 30s at the first wave interview. He had an intellectual/learning disability and received support from a range of specialist and generic service providers and his informal network throughout his life. Eric had different work experience placements at school and had been actively working or looking for work since finishing his schooling. However, he felt he was not given the same opportunities at work as other employees due to his disability:

The supervisor is saying at the moment the reason I can’t work on Saturdays is because of the speed. He reckons I’m a bit slow. But there’s another assembler there who’s been told he’s a bit slow and needs to get his speed up and there’s a lot of jobs I’m actually faster than he is and there’s times where he’ll say “slow down”. But you know he still gets the work on Saturdays but I don’t so I reckon it’s not to do with speed even though I am faster at stuff I’m still not allowed so I’m thinking it’s more of a disability thing: The way I’m born compared to the guy next to me who is slow.

(Eric, intellectual/learning disability, wave three)

He also believed that his employer did not have a good understanding of his disability, and that his abilities were underestimated:

I went to the supervisor and said to him that when I was welding yesterday I got a bit of metal in my eye [work place accident] so then from there to the doctors and to sort it out I had to explain to him what I did and because they know now about the disability they thought that I didn’t understand while the guy was showing me how to use the machine and I said no I did understand

(Eric, intellectual/learning disability, wave two)

Eric had shown reluctance to explicitly disclose his disability initially, as he believed that he may be treated different. He did, however, believe he had made the employer sufficiently aware of his circumstances:

When I went for the job interview I said to them that I have a job agency that helps me find work and ...when they have a job, they’ll come over every now and again and see how things are and if there’s a problem they’ll try and fix it. So I said the name [of the agency] but I didn’t mention the disability because some places treat you differently and so everything was fine. I made a few errors and mistakes but everything was going well. Three months was over and they said you are fulltime now and I got a bit of metal in my eye [the workplace accident described above] ...so I just let them [his disability employment service] know and then my case manager [at the disability employment service] just spoke to HR at work. They were a bit annoyed and angry

because firstly I didn't tell them about [the disability employment service] but I did say I was with a job agency and they didn't remember it but then about my disability and they said there are people there who have some care needs and they just wanted to know what care needs I need and I said I don't need any needs. Then they asked what can you do, what can't you do? And I'd been working there for almost four months and they would have seen what I could do so now that they know I have a disability they won't let me work on Saturdays because they think that I am too slow and so they give me less chances of earning the same money as the other guys and the type of jobs they give me are the less complicated ones.

(Eric, intellectual/learning disability, wave two)

Ingrid was in her mid-20s at the beginning of the study and had a hearing impairment. She attended mainstream school, and was supported by a special enclave for people with hearing impairments and teachers proficient in Auslan (Australian Sign Language). After school she completed a pre-vocational course at TAFE that was recognised as prior learning and took six months off her apprenticeship. She had not received career guidance at TAFE but noted feeling supported, especially with the excellent practical learning she received from a tutor who was a hairdresser and interpreter:

She was a hairdresser she was a [special support tutor] ...She happened to be a hairdresser which really helped me because when I had questions that needed rephrasing she basically just explained... like she knew about hair, so she would go: "don't worry about the questions", and show me. I'm really good with people showing me things, I learn better in practical than in theory if that makes sense, so it was perfect. That was probably the best support that I had.

(Ingrid, hearing impairment, wave one)

However, Ingrid experienced both bullying and discrimination during her apprenticeship and at some workplaces following her completion. She reported working with some 'horrible and nasty staff':

They were very selfish people. They weren't very nice the one I worked where I did my apprenticeship the lady that worked with us was like me, my boss and this other lady and they were very horrible so I obviously wasn't going to ask for advice from them.

(Ingrid, hearing impairment, wave one)

After graduating, she first worked full-time at a salon for a few months, but then her hours were reduced and she experienced discrimination:

I left that one. She was very discriminative against my hearing, wouldn't let me answer the phone so I couldn't get my clients and the girls were just snatching the phone off me.

(Ingrid, hearing impairment, wave one)

She then worked casually at another salon, during which time she bought her own business with a family member as a business partner. There had been some conflict due to different expectations of the business partners' active involvement in her salon:

[S]he was offering me money so I didn't throw money at the bank ...she was very good... she had good support for the business part of it but when it came to hair she didn't understand and we're clashing a lot.

(Ingrid, hearing impairment, wave one)

Ingrid was eventually able to sort this out by taking out a loan and buying out her business partner:

Yeah, it took so much confidence. When I came back, when it was all happening, she made me hate it. She made me hate hair dressing, but when I went back I don't know what made me do it.



What happened between my boss when I did my apprenticeship, she just used me and controlled me. She still got away with that. So I had to stand up for myself. My mom was like: “Just ... You have to, it is going to eat you alive”. My mom doesn’t want me to become bitter at the world ...I guess that is a lesson in life.’

(Ingrid, hearing impairment, wave two)

While Ingrid had been able to successfully overcome incidents of discrimination and unfair treatment, and succeed with her own salon, she reflected that her confidence had taken a dent and that there may always be a lingering query if her disability was the motivation for her unpleasant experiences:

Yeah, I always question was it because of my hearing. Is it because I was deaf she took advantage or was it because ... that is who she is? And I don’t know. I think that is just a question that remained. I think that is a question that every person with a disability has in mind. “Do they hate me because of this or is it because they don’t get along?”

(Ingrid, hearing impairment, wave two)

## Financial in/security

People are motivated to achieve financial goals that create opportunities for independence. These goals include saving for a house, travel, and purchasing a car. For people with disabilities, and from the viewpoint of their family members, there are concerns about financial security. Parents in particular actively seek strategies to ensure their children’s financial future. As discussed earlier in this report, people with disabilities are at a higher risk of poverty than people without disabilities, and inadequate social security and the supported wage system are contributing factors.

Ralph had a hearing impairment and was in his late 30s at the first wave interview. He was married with five relatively young children. His hearing impairment made studying and gaining employment challenging. Unwilling to disclose his disability, Ralph had not sought disability specific support because: ‘it feels like you have a disability’ and people would pay attention to his hearing aid, and not him as a person.

Ralph had completed many TAFE courses since finishing school including certificates in marketing/advertising, real estate, and cooking. He had a passion for food and chose to seek employment in this field after a short period of time in the real estate industry. Ralph found it difficult to obtain work with his TAFE qualification:

I found it very difficult to get into a job, ‘cause nobody would hire me as a qualified chef, because the TAFE systems tells you that you are qualified as a chef now, but when you go out into the real world, and me being thirty-eight, and I show them the certificate, they would never accept me as a qualified chef, so I either had to be an assistant cook or something like that or they force me to do an apprenticeship somewhere. ‘Cause I’d be looking for a job, I’d look all over the city. And that was very difficult. And then I came across [this large hotel], and they said they will hire me if I sign that apprenticeship.

(Ralph, hearing impairment, wave one)

Whilst working as an apprentice, Ralph reported that he experienced poor pay, a lack of career development opportunities, unlike his co-workers, and was made to complete a four year apprenticeship instead of two years that was usually required. Like Grace and Faith above, Ralph was a mature age person with a disability and he keenly felt that his treatment was discriminatory. In order to provide for his family, he supplemented his income with casual work at restaurants and

completed a patisserie course to create career opportunities. Like others, he noted experiencing some bullying in the workplace.

Ralph had setbacks along his journey. A motorbike accident left him with physical injuries that made it difficult to work, his wife had experienced depression, and he reported feeling frustration and depression that ‘comes and goes’. His dream was to own his own café and to mentor young people on healthy eating.

With the financial support of the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme and through completing a business management course with a not-for-profit organisation, Ralph became an agent for a food company that supplied major supermarkets. He saw this as an opportunity to secure the finances he needed to own a café. The contracting arrangements, however, left Ralph with substantial financial risks. The company providing the goods for him to sell required pre-payment and Ralph required virtually all his funds to replace stock and to set up the infrastructure he required to carry out the business.

Prior to the third wave interview, Ralph had commenced a university degree in food science, achieving distinction grades in many units. He was still running his business venture which had improved, but still not providing the financial security he sought:

Yeah, it’s expanded. ... For me to make a decent living without sort of worrying about my income, I need about another twenty to thirty clients, customers, on board. ... Then I can sort of take an income from the business. At the moment, it is good. I sell the products and that money goes back into the products. And because it has expanded, I get more products to cover for those ones. It just keeps revolving, so I want to get to that stage where I can get another twenty or thirty and stay there and maintain that and then I can get an income from it.

(Ralph, hearing impairment, wave three)

While things were improving for Ralph, it was clear that he still had some way to go. As Ralph commented, he wanted: ‘your own freedom of making money’.

Neil was in his early 20s at the time of the first wave interview and had an intellectual/learning disability. He lived in his family home and received substantial family support. His mother was present with Neil during the first and third wave interviews, while Neil participated in the second wave interview by himself, although his mother had provided some additional information at the conclusion of that interview.

Neil was in a special education class within a mainstream primary school but attended a special school during his high school years. He did some school-based training, received career counselling, and completed a VET course as part of his high school education. At the end of primary school Neil did yard work at his Uncle’s trucking yard and he started volunteer work after finishing high school. He discontinued this when he commenced his traineeship through a group training organisation with the support of a disability employment service. Neil noted that the traineeship was good and people could see: ‘about what I am able to do.’ Neil’s mother added: ‘...I think they have...where he is working...they do take that into consideration...that he has done that.’ However, at the third wave interview, Neil’s mother stated that: ‘...there hasn’t really been any benefit workwise’. She was displeased with the disability employment service following the completion of Neil’s traineeship as they were unable to find Neil a job, and she believed they were passing the responsibility back onto her:

I would go through the career pages every Saturday, find what I thought was suitable for [Neil], fax it off to [Neil’s contact person at the disability employment service]. [I] don’t think he ever

took it any further, or went to see those people. [I am] sure that [Neil] could have done better and I shouldn't have had to do that. That's what he was there for, you sort of do, [Neil's contact person at the disability employment service] never, never took any action, or I don't think so.

(Neil's mother, intellectual/learning disability, wave one)

Neil worked with a large Australian disability enterprise, formerly known as sheltered workshops, throughout the study. He was working full-time, and in effect in charge of a group of workers with disabilities:

Mother: When you first started, there had to be...they had to keep an eye on you because they weren't quite sure whether you could do the work and all that. Are they, are they happy for you to now do things and get a new sort of look after some of the other people?

Participant: Yeah, yeah, from time to time.

(Neil, intellectual/learning disability, wave one)

While Neil received the disability support pension through the study, his wages were miniscule and did not reflect the value of the work he was doing. He was earning \$2.16 an hour when he started his job, which had increased by 17c an hour at the first wave interview. There had been a relative substantial increase in his wage by the third and final wave, of 84%. However, he was still earning a very low wage: \$4.28 an hour. It was clear that Neil was receiving substantial support from his family, particularly his mother, in day-to-day activities, and also from his extended family including social and leisure activities. However, his financial security was a major concern from his mother's point of view. A contributing factor may have been that his mother and her partner were both ageing.

Between the first and second wave interviews, Neil purchased an investment property. Neil's view was that this was 'good' and provided 'bit more security with money in the future', but from his mother's point of view, it was a major accomplishment they had been working towards for many years. In effect, she was managing Neil's finances and had set aside his money for years to save up for the deposit. Obtaining the investment property in Neil's name provided her some comfort as it provided Neil with a modest income. While the rental income was currently being used to service the mortgage, it would provide some financial security for Neil in the future.

# Conclusion

Apprenticeships and traineeships are generally viewed as positive vocational pathways leading to employment and career development for young Australians (NCVER 2013). While the evidence base is developing, research to date suggests that employment and related outcomes are also positive for people with disabilities who complete an apprenticeship or traineeship (Cocks and Thoresen 2013a, 2013b; Cocks, Thoresen, and Lee 2013; Duggan and Byrne 2013; Lewis, Thoresen, and Cocks 2011a). However, very little is known about the graduate experiences among apprentices and trainees with disabilities.

In the transition to adulthood, people with disabilities experienced similar conflicts and challenges that all young people face, and accordingly, respond in different ways including trial and error and experimentation. They have the added complication of having to deal with the impacts of their disability. Success in further education and employment strongly contributed to the wellbeing and maturity of participants. Some people with disabilities were motivated, high achievers. They had mitigated the impact of their disability, for example, by using assistive technology, obtaining specialist support including wrap-around support from different service providers with complementary expertise, and engaging substantial informal support from family members and others, including friends and workmates, who took a personal stake in their wellbeing and success. Effective support was personal, responsive, and individualised. Participants described problems with some formal supports that were apparently ineffective in finding/securing employment, and sometimes conveyed, low expectations of success.

The themes also illustrated that participants' individual agency influenced social and economic outcomes. Agency was reflected in their attitudes, determination, and actions to overcome challenges or barriers, and their initiative to seek information and appropriate support.

Graduates with disabilities who have complex needs faced very difficult challenges in their transition to the labour market. Some were unable to succeed. The impact of prolonged failure was detrimental both to vocational outcomes and to the health and wellbeing of graduates. Effective specialist support for this group was required through disability employment services, but not always delivered. Completing many lower level certificate courses did not appear to contribute to vocational outcomes. Guidance was needed through strategies arising from closer collaboration between further education providers and effective specialist disability employment services. People with disabilities were especially vulnerable to discrimination in the workplace, particularly in regard to bullying and limiting of employment opportunities. Some people with higher support needs were only able to obtain casual or part-time work, or work in sheltered employment with very low remuneration. This was sometimes described by them as discriminatory.

Disclosure is a challenging issue for people with disabilities and requires sensitive responses by support staff within vocational settings. Acknowledging disability runs the risk of negative consequences that are largely related to the heightened risk of discrimination. Not acknowledging disability runs the double risk of repercussions when disability is recognised by employers or fellow workers and support needs are not recognised.

In this research, the thematic representations of participants' outcomes and experiences across the three research waves illustrated a range of outcomes. For some, there were substantial beneficial outcomes from completing their apprenticeship or traineeship and the impact of their disabilities was

minimal. For some participants who had very complex needs, the impact of their disabilities created significant activity limitations and impacted badly on outcomes.

This report has documented the graduate experiences among a small group of apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities. While previous research has accounted for graduate outcomes for apprentices and trainees with disabilities, a qualitative account of their experiences has been missing. This research identified positive outcomes particularly related to the broader transition from school to work for people with strong personal support and personal motivation. Of concern are the wounding experiences associated with disability that centred on complexity of needs, mature age experience, experience of discrimination, and financial in/security.

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