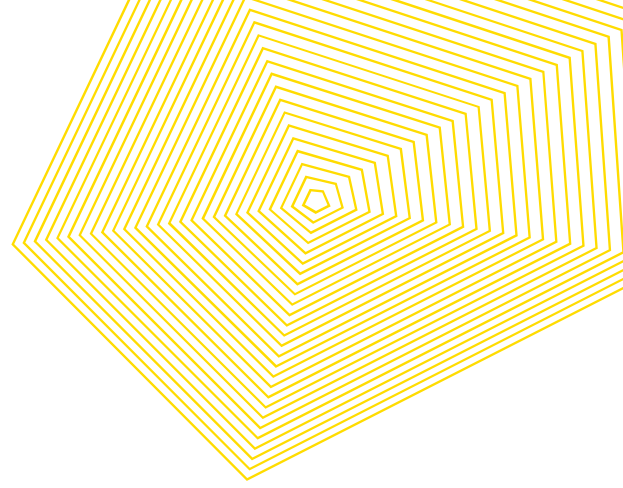




Road to Employment

Final Evaluation Report

Prepared for: JFA Purple Orange

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Glossary

Co-design	People with lived experience involved as paid staff or paid advisors in a project or research
Community of Practice	Community of Practice (COP) are a group of industry partners and employees who come together around a specific goal
DES	Disability Employment Services
DSS	Department of Social Services, funder of the project and evaluation
EYDN	Enabled Youth Disability Network (previously Julia Farr Youth)
Evaluation	Undertaking research to find out what impact a project has made and how it has achieved its aims (process and activities)
Flinders University	Research partners on this study
Mainstream support	Public social support available to all people with and without disability, such as health, education, housing, home care, income support, employment services
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NDIS plan	Funding package allocated to about 10% of people with disability for specialist disability support need
JFA Purple Orange	Social Profit Organisation in South Australia, the project owner funder of this evaluation
Project	A group of people or organisations plan and dedicate resources to achieve one or more goals within a set timeframe
Road to Employment	The project takes a life-course approach to address barriers to employment for people with disability
RTO	Registered Training Organisations are registered providers that deliver Australia-wide recognised vocational education and training qualifications
Story of Change	Short summary of a person's or workplace experience of being part of the Road to Employment project and the impact it had on them
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW
UNSW	University of New South Wales, Sydney

Short summary

Employment is a central pathway for wellbeing, participation and security. Australians with disability face barriers to finding and remaining in paid work. Road to Employment is a 3-year government funded project to increase employment opportunities for people with disability, change employment practices and influence work expectations of families and employers. The project applies a life-course approach to address barriers to employment.

The project achieved its intended and funded objectives. It worked with employers in a community of practice approach and delivered business mentoring to industries (aged care, accounting and finance and councils). The project also delivered workshops to pre-school parents, Year 5/6 students, parents and educators, and engaged Year 9 and 10 students, their families and teachers.

Road to Employment reached three diverse industries and employer groups; many people with disability at different life-stages; and some families. The project achieved this by working with a defined practice framework. The elements of the framework were: harnessing lived experience leadership by people with disability; investment in relationships; iterative reflection, modification and review; peer group industry-driven change goals (like the traineeship model or the accounting finance inclusion toolkit); the project team providing the external facilitator perspective and 'hands-on' inclusion support to employers.

Evidence of the impact from the project was: 122 people with disability were engaged in the project, and 22 were paid to deliver or facilitate workshops and mentoring; 8 people participated in traineeships and 6 secured ongoing employment. People said these opportunities helped them progress their careers, consider new career goals, grow in confidence and feel more valued and respected.

Three lessons from the Road to Employment project are indicators for the future:

1. Employers required different types of inclusion capacity building over time, including identifying barriers, carving out tailored roles and creating a supportive workplace culture. Inclusion capacity building was not a linear or one-off process.
2. The traineeship model demonstrated that with the right level and types of support, confidence and capacity building, people with disability achieved their employment and training goals.
3. When people with disability became active members of schools, workplaces and communities it benefited them and created opportunities to challenge and improve organisational practices, beliefs and expectations.

Full summary

Background

Australians with disability of all ages experience barriers to finding and staying in work. The majority of people with disability can and want to work, given the right support, encouragement and opportunities. Transition points, such as leaving school and starting new employment, are times when people benefit from tailored guidance, mentoring and workplace supports.

Road to Employment is a 3-year Department of Social Services (DSS) funded project from April 2020 to March 2023, with an extension to June 2024. Road to Employment applies processes to increase employment opportunities, improve employment practices and influence work expectations for people with disability. Road to Employment applies a life-course approach to address barriers to employment for people with disability. It recognises the growing evidence of the role of attitudes towards and of people with disability during childhood and adulthood and how attitudes can affect employment outcomes later in life.

The Road to Employment project works with employers, with schools, students and families to change employment expectations of people with disability. To achieve these outcomes the project applied processes such as: leadership, lived experience, and co-design by people with disability; developing and investing in relationships and connections; iterative reflection and review and flexible project management; peer group (industry) driven change goals (like the traineeship model or the accounting and finance inclusion toolkit); providing an external facilitator perspective; and 'hands-on' inclusion support to employers. The detailed Project Logic (Figure 1) explains the project rationale in more detail.

This is the final report from the research. The evaluation was from April 2020 to March 2023.

Impact and outcomes

Outcomes for people with disability

Road to Employment promoted direct employment outcomes and leadership of people with disability.

From January to December 2022, 122 people living with disability were supported and engaged in the project parts: Raising the Bar school workshops, Year 9 and Year 10 student mentoring, community of practice groups and the aged care traineeship. Twenty-two people with lived experience of disability gained paid

employment or were paid to deliver project activities (workshops, presentations and co-design) as part of Road to Employment. Six aged care trainees accepted ongoing or permanent employment after their traineeship graduation. Two other trainees graduated (one with a certificate of attendance) and one trainee was offered work experience with a new employer.

People who gained part-time work developing project activities or ongoing employment said these opportunities helped them progress their careers, consider new career goals (leave a role or job), and grow in confidence and feel more valued and respected.

The project raised expectations held by year 9 and 10 students and also by the people supporting them in their career decisions, like parents and teachers. Learning how to speak up and grow in confidence is an important outcome for people with disability connected to Road to Employment.

Impact on families and schools

Fifty-one family members took part in Raising the Bar workshops. Feedback from parents in the activities was overwhelmingly positive. For example, parents of preschool children said they “would do something differently” or “consider our local mainstream school options” as a result of taking part in the workshops. Teachers in schools where the project had repeatedly delivered workshops to students, parents and their teachers saw a gradual growth in interest and impact from the workshops. Teachers in some schools said they started seeing “shifts” in parental assumptions and engagement in their children’s career planning and goal setting towards a stronger family-centred career development process.

Many teachers of Year 9 and 10 students attended Raising the Bar workshops. Feedback from the educators was overwhelmingly positive. Teachers identified gaps in their own knowledge and biased assumptions. Some said they would make “changes in the future”, for example, “elevate the students’ voice” at career planning discussions with parents.

Impact on employers and employment practices

Many community members (employers, employees, HR staff and decision makers) participated in capacity building workshops and inclusion training to raise their understanding and potentially influence individual perceptions and local inclusion practices.

Road to Employment delivered tailored business mentoring and inclusion supports to twelve employers. Employers reported making accessibility changes to their physical environments and buildings, review of and changes to recruitment practices (for

example, allowing more informal interview conversations, encouraging people to disclose their support needs or disability, and visibly demonstrating that they value diversity at work). Employers said receiving “direct, tailored and hands-on” support and guidance to achieve their “inclusion objectives” and implement the necessary changes to policies, practices, trainings, spaces were “tremendously helpful”.

The finance and accounting COP developed and launched an Inclusion Toolkit for the industry. It is a practical ‘how to’ guide for HR and management to achieve more diverse and inclusive workplaces. Employers in the finance and accounting COP set themselves recruitment targets and were actively promoting the employment of people with disability in their organisations. To date however no new employee with disability was recruited. To achieve their goal for the coming year, some made connections with a local university.

The traineeship demonstration model, a partnership initiative between the aged care COP and Road to Employment, is an example how the project made inroads into an industry where there is little visibility and inclusion of workers with diverse skills and disability. The traineeship model achieved direct employment outcomes for trainees, it also had direct impact and “flow on effects” for the respective aged care workplaces and teams.

Lessons from Road to Employment

Stakeholder engagement and commitment

Identifying and maintaining partnerships was critical for the project. It took time, resources and connections to establish new relationships with employers and schools. Achieving stakeholder participation and senior level commitment were key to the establishment and sustainability of activities, implementing the planned actions and attracting participants to the activities.

The commitment to the Road to Employment activities was greatest and grew in employers and schools where educators and leaders saw a direct benefit to themselves or the organisation. Examples included potential to help with engaging parents in family-based career planning, thereby reducing teacher workload or tasks. By participating in workshops, teachers could see some of the pressure lift, as parents started reaching out to them more.

The research found the COP process was effective because it facilitated industry representatives to drive “their own change” from within the industry, supported by Road to Employment. Employers explained they remained involved as they had a genuine self-interest in the identified group goal. Further building blocks to the effectiveness of the COP were commitment to cooperation between the members to overcome challenges and leadership within their organisations.

Building relationships from successes over time was evident in the schools. An opportunity to improve the reach of the school workshops was to continue investing in already engaged schools.

The examples from schools and the work with employers demonstrate that participation and commitment required time and continuous investment to be visible and multiply. This long-term approach might be especially so in sectors like education or aged care which are affected by structural challenges, limited capacity and devaluing.

External facilitator perspective

Having a well funded team, with diverse expertise and abilities to help strategise, coordinate, organise, facilitate and troubleshoot was crucial for achieving the goals of the multiple activities. Project partners in the COPs and business mentoring underlined the important contribution of the external facilitator to guide their process to achieve their goals.

The funded project meant the staff could act creatively to find solutions, such as applying for additional inclusion funding to support the traineeship model implementation. The team were regularly called upon to resolve interpersonal, attitudinal or capacity issues. This was possible because the project staff were “outsiders” to the organisations but still well enough informed, trusted and engaged to be able to find solutions that worked.

Iterative reflection, review and adaptation

Iterative reflection, review and adaptation was the third mechanism that Road to Employment applied to achieve the objectives of the project. The team met regularly to identify barriers, reflect how these could be mitigated and adapt how to achieve the project objectives. They used this mechanism at the project, organisation and participant levels. While each new approach might not be effective alone, they persisted with assessing the barriers and testing alternatives.

Celebrating small and big wins

A strategy to expand and reinforce stakeholder engagement was to celebrate and promote project achievements. Road to Employment invested resources to develop a suite of outputs from the project and promote these widely. They included lived experience podcasts, videos, written stories, promotional material, websites, presentations together with trainees at industry conferences and events, talks in radio and TV (e.g., ABC News), newsletter and newspaper articles, visibility on social media, large scale educational launches and events e.g., aged care graduation ceremonies, and an inclusion stamp for participating employers.

Incremental and opportunistic change

Common challenges to inclusion in the project were stereotyping, low expectations of people with disability, and organisational culture perpetuating exclusion. For example, some schools offered pre-defined disability pathways for students with disability, directly leading into supported employment. Some workplaces were reluctant to make accommodations for individual strengths and needs, rather, treating 'everyone the same'.

Road to Employment was clear about the long-term nature of their work to change beliefs, expectations and workplace practices. Lived experience facilitation and leadership by people with disability, at all levels of the project, helped to challenge stereotypes and assumptions.

Working with industry partners in the COP model was used as a systemic approach to reflect on opportunities for change. Another opportunity for the project is to work with incremental changes that occur in organisations, staffing, policy and harness these as they arise. Expanding from incremental changes in one organisation to inform other organisations in the sector was another approach used in the finance and accounting COP.

Project governance

The Road to Employment governance and project management were effective. The project has achieved more than specified in its original workplan and ILC funding agreement. Working within a reflective and responsive framework, where individual project teams had autonomy while remaining connected to the broader project, enabled staff and stakeholders to learn from each other and capitalise on lessons learnt across the project. Road to Employment has another year of ILC funding.

The project steering group was critical to identify and shape the project's direction and get leadership and co-design input from people with disability. Linking the project's goals to JFA Purple Orange and maintaining high level engagement enabled the project to remain responsive and innovative in their approach.

Future direction for Road to Employment

The three central lessons from the project are also indicators for the future of Road to Employment and similar projects.

1. Employers require different types of inclusion capacity building over time

Building employer confidence and inclusion capacity was not a linear or one-off process. Employers required different types of capacity building at different

times on their journey to identify barriers, carve out tailored roles, create a supportive workplace culture.

2. People with disability, supporters and families require capacity building at different stages in their life and during transitions

The traineeship model demonstrated that with the right level and types of support, confidence and capacity building, people with disability achieved their employment and training goals.

3. People with disability need opportunities to become active members of schools, workplaces and the community changes practices and expectations

When people with disability were more active members of schools, workplaces and communities it benefited them and created opportunities to challenge and improve organisational practices, beliefs and expectations. This lesson demonstrates the benefits from this type of initiative, which can have a cumulative effect. The people involved benefit from participating in the process, improving their voice and expectations. They also benefit from new participation and work opportunities. Second, the schools, workplaces and communities they participate in benefit from participating in the process of codesign, building skills and practices for listening and responding to expectations. They also benefit from adjusting practices so that more people with disability are active in their organisation.

Conclusion

Road to Employment was funded under the ILC economic and community participation program to build employer confidence and workplace inclusion. The project achieved its intended objectives and delivered a range of activities with schools, families, employers and workplaces in three industries. The project has promoted direct employment outcomes and leadership of people with disability at multiple levels in the project and influenced employment practices and expectations. These expectations are influenced in communities, schools and workplaces through the influence of active participation of people with disability.

1 Road to Employment

1.1 Background

Employment is an important avenue for a person to experience material wellbeing, social connectedness and participation. Underemployment and unemployment are serious social problems for people with disability in Australia. Working age people with disability (25-65 years) are twice as likely to be unemployed (10%) as people without disabilities (4.6%). The rate of unemployment increases for younger people with disability (15-24 years) who are more than twice as likely to be unemployed (25%) as those aged 25-65 years (AIHW, 2020).

Australians with disability of all ages experience many barriers to finding and staying in work. The NDIS Participant Employment Strategy 2019-2023 underlined that the “majority of people with disability can and want to work, given the right support, encouragement, and opportunities” (NDIA, 2019). Transition points in a persons’ life, such as leaving school into employment, are time when people benefit from tailored guidance, mentoring and workplace support to address the barriers to finding and maintaining employment (AHRC, 2016; NDIA, 2019; Stokes, Turnbull, & Wyn, 2013).

Challenging employment expectations and beliefs of families (O’Donnell et al. 2022), employers and communities are also important to bring about positive change and employment outcomes.

Road to Employment is a 3-year Department of Social Services (DSS) funded project from April 2020 to March 2023, with an extension to June 2024. Road to Employment applies processes to increase employment opportunities, improve employment practices and influence work expectations for people with disability.

Road to Employment applies a life-course approach to address barriers to employment for people with disability. It recognises the growing evidence of the role of attitudes towards and of people with disability during childhood and adulthood and how attitudes can affect employment outcomes later in life. Action to support workforce participation can start with supporters (parents and teachers) during childhood and extend to tailored support in workplaces and training during high school and adulthood to influence long term change.

1.2 Road to Employment project logic

The Road to Employment intention is to change expectations about the employment of people with disability, starting with the decisions parents make about inclusive education for their pre-schoolers, through the expectations of students and people

with disability and employers. Longer term project outcomes, some beyond the project lifecycle, are to increase the number of people with disability employed in different sectors and industries across South Australia.

Road to Employment focuses on working with employers in targeted industries to resource them to create more inclusive workplaces for staff. The industries targeted in Road to Employment are aged care, finance and accounting, and local government. The project uses several processes to bring about more inclusive workplaces, changes to organisational and managerial practices and employment expectations. Figure 1 summarises the Road to Employment rationale, the activities, processes, and project outcomes.

Figure 1: Road to Employment project logic

Road to Employment project		
Focus	Activities with employers	Activities with schools and families
Aims	Changing employment expectations with employers, inclusive workplace practices, attitudes and supports for employees	Changing employment expectations in schools and with families, mentoring year 9 students on their career goals
Activities	Aged care Community of Practice (COP) and Business mentoring	Raising the Bar co-design groups and working parties develop workshop material and content
	Finance and accounting Community of Practice and Business mentoring	Raising the Bar face to face and online workshops to parents, teachers and students
	Local government Community of Practice and Business mentoring	Year 9 student mentoring program
Processes	Leadership, lived experience, co-design Connections and relationships Peer group driven change (COP) Traineeship model Celebration and promotion Iterative reflection and review Project governance	
Outputs	Finance Inclusion Toolkit How to work with me Resources for students	
Outcomes	Inclusion confidence, practices and more inclusive workplaces Changes to recruitment processes and physical spaces 8 people with disability in traineeships; 6 enter long term employment in aged care Employment and leadership of people with disability across all levels of the R2E project Impact and stories shared with community and industry circles, influence community expectations	Parents of pre-school students have greater confidence and understanding of mainstream education and career options Changes in teacher beliefs and attitudes about disability employment High-school student access to peer mentors, information and career development guidance

1.3 Activities with employers

Community of Practice (COP)

The project works with employers through Communities of Practice (COP) and business mentoring. The goal is to influence change in the sectors of finance and accounting, aged care, and local government to increase employer capacity and confidence to recruit, support and maintain the employment of people with disability. A concurrent aim of this work is to create more inclusive workplaces for all employees in the organisations involved.

Road to Employment successfully established three COPs. The industry groups included up to 10 members consisting of senior employer representatives (HR, CEOs, management), disability champions and representatives from industry peak bodies. The members of a COP come together, under the facilitation and guidance of Road to Employment, to work through a group specific goal. Each group identified a goal that aligned with the project's objectives to change expectations and create employment opportunities.

The COPs use processes employed by Road to Employment throughout (skilled facilitation, co-design, lived experience and leadership by people with disability, celebration and promotion). They used these processes to determine the group goal, progress objectives and share their achievements with industry peers (employees not directly involved in the group and other industry partners) and a broader audience. By the end of 2022, the three COPs were continuing to meet and two had accomplished their group objectives.

Finance and Accounting Community of Practice

The Finance and accounting COP was established during the first year of the project, at the start of the Covid-19. The group included disability champions already working in accounting and finance, representatives from major employers and both industry peak bodies, Chartered Accountants of Australia and New Zealand (CAANZ) and CPA Australia. The finance COP identified the need to foster greater inclusion capacity, knowledge and confidence in the finance and accounting sector, supporting HR, senior management and inclusion and diversity units. Their goal was to develop a finance industry inclusion toolkit and launch the output with a major, promotional event. The inclusion kit was successfully launched in October 2021 at a well-attended educational event (76 participants). Stakeholders recognised the launch as a major achievement and success, sending a strong message to the sector on the importance of inclusion in the workplace.

Similar to the processes applied in the other COP groups (co-design and leadership by people with disability, strong facilitation), bi-partisan support from both industry

peak bodies was a facilitator for the group. The leadership support “gave a strong message” to the industry and ensured a successful launch of the finance toolkit. An estimated 380 small, medium and larger finance and accounting employers received the toolkit. Evaluation feedback from the launch highlighted the value of raising capacity in the sector, “This session was thought-provoking ... I loved hearing about the speakers’ respective journeys and the statistics ... were eye-opening ... very valuable from a Recruiter’s perspective.” Several members of the accounting and finance COP also participated in one-to-one business mentoring offered by Road to Employment.

Aged Care Community of Practice

The aged care COP was the second industry group to be established. Originally seven large to medium aged care employers were part of the group, and five of them continued. The COP created an aged care traineeship pilot program after reflecting on the consistent workforce issues experienced by the sector from high staff turnover and difficulties recruiting new staff.

The primary aim of the traineeship model was to provide direct employment opportunities and outcomes as well as fostering a more diverse workforce in the five employer organisations. The secondary aim of the traineeships was to highlight the benefits for the industry of employing people with diverse strengths and abilities and how diversity in teams can positively influence broader workplace culture.

The pilot was a considered a huge success. Eight people with disability started traineeships (six with intellectual disability), seven completed their accreditation and six secured ongoing employment. The traineeship achievements were celebrated and promoted in events and forums throughout the traineeships and at a final graduation event. The lessons from the pilot were documented throughout, ‘How to Work with Me’ developed in partnership with some trainees. In early 2023, Road to Employment Aged Care CoP started recruiting for a pre-employment program interested in working in aged care. They were also seeking new aged care employers to join the COP.

Local government Community of Practice

The local government COP was established in October 2022, starting with six members, currently the group consists of 23 representatives. The group is facilitated by Road to Employment to discuss barriers to employment for people with disability and practical solutions to enact the councils existing inclusion and diversity plans. Before establishing the group, Road to Employment ran a consultation workshop and an online survey to understand the specific barriers, challenges and opportunities to access and inclusion in the sector. The consultation work concluded with a summary report, shared with a broader group of local councils. This new COP showed ‘strong

demand' for the Road to Employment opportunities: support, guidance and lived experience knowledge through the COP; peer driven ideas how councils can implement change and achieve diversity and individual business mentoring. Four councils in the group commenced "hands on" tailored business support with Road to Employment.

Business mentoring to employers

Members of the industry COPs, also employers in the community, can receive one-to-one mentorship support and inclusion training. The mentoring is modelled on the Business Inclusion and Diversity Services program designed by the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations. The business mentoring program is tailored and targeted to a small proportion of the COP employers (12). The program provides advice to employers about changes to make their workplace more inclusive of people living with disability and to create long-term employment opportunities.

1.4 Activities with schools and families

Changing attitudes and expectations about future employment

The second Road to Employment objective is to work with schools and families to shift attitudes and expectations about future employment outcomes and raise awareness about educational pathways for young people with disability and their supporters involved in decisions about work at key points in students' lives.

The *Raising the Bar* workshop series and material are tailored to five audiences:

- Parents of pre-school aged children
- Year 5 and 6 students
- Year 9 students
- Parents and teachers of year 5 and 6 students
- Parents and teachers of year 9 school students.

The series was developed over 1.5 years by dedicated co-design groups and working parties, facilitated and coordinated by Road to Employment. The co-design groups consisted of members with lived experience of disability, parents and young people, teachers and other educators.

By the end of 2022, Road to Employment worked with 9 schools and delivered 49 Raising the Bar workshops to families, teachers and students in different school years. The remaining workshops were planned for 2023. Most workshops were delivered in person, some were adapted for online delivery due to Covid-19 and to increase accessibility and reach.

Year 9 Student mentoring

In partnership with the Enabled Youth Disability Network (EYDN), Road to Employment implemented a co-designed student mentoring program for Year 9 students. Mentors were people with lived experience of disability who worked alongside School Support Officers and teachers, over the course of a term, to encourage Year 9 students to focus on their interests and strengths, provided them with information about future employment goals and applying for work. In 2022, 34 students participated in the mentoring program.

1.5 This study

This is the final evaluation report of the Road to Employment research project. The research was commissioned and funded by JFA Purple Orange as part of their DSS ILC project funding.

The research asked three questions:

1. **What impact did Road to Employment have on people with disability** seeking to be employed and employment opportunities, and changing employers, families and schools' expectations around employment?
2. **What processes were effective for the projects** to connect people to employment opportunities and to improve expectations and inclusion practices of employers, schools, families and communities?
3. **What barriers, challenges and opportunities were evident, resolved and remain in the project process?** How might these contribute to better ways of working with people with disability, families, school communities and employers to increase employment opportunities?

Data sources, methods and reporting

The information for the evaluation research about Road to Employment was collected by the staff involved in the project, university researchers and peer-community researchers. The study had UNSW and Flinders' university ethics approval (HC200741).

The data used and analysed for this report are from four sources:

- Significant change stories with people with disability, employers and schools
- Observation of Road to Employment activities and meetings
- Interviews with people, staff, employers and partners in the project

- Review of program information collected by Road to Employment.

The methods and analysis are described in more detail the Appendix A.

The report was written in partnership between staff employed by Road to Employment, researchers at UNSW Sydney and Flinders University.

The focus of the final report is on how the project used the available processes and resources to overcome and resolve challenges.

Any name used in the report is not the person's real name to protect privacy.

2 Impact and outcomes

This section presents findings about the impact and outcomes of the first 3 years of Road to Employment, outcomes for people with disability (section 2.1), raising employment expectations in schools and with families (section 2.2) and impact of activities on employers and workplaces (section 2.3).

2.1 Outcomes for people with disability

Road to Employment promoted direct employment outcomes and leadership of people with disability. From January to December 2022, 122 people living with disability were supported and engaged in the project parts: Raising the Bar school workshops, Year 9 and Year 10 student mentoring, community of practice groups and the aged care traineeship.

Twenty-two people with lived experience of disability gained paid employment or were paid to deliver project activities (workshops, presentations and co-design) as part of Road to Employment. Six aged care trainees accepted ongoing or permanent employment after their traineeship graduation. Two other trainees graduated (one with a certificate of attendance) and one trainee was offered work experience with a new employer.

People who gained paid work or were paid to deliver project activities (peer mentors), explained how important the opportunities were to build their capacity in a new role, “learning through paid experience”. These opportunities supported people to progress an existing career path, consider new career goals (leave a role, job), and grow in confidence and feel valued and respected.

In Figure 2 Tom describes his experience developing capacity as a mentor to Year 9 students. The story highlights the many mechanisms the project team used to ensure Tom was successful and felt supported in his new paid role.

Learning as part of a friendly team, receiving the right level of support and independence to make decisions, guidance and opportunities for review and reflect were key aspects that made Tom's employment experience a positive one. These aspects were also reflected in stories of other people with disability who secured employment through Road to Employment (for example, aged care trainees).

Figure 2: Story of Change: Building capacity of Year 9 mentors

Tom is a young man with disability who was recruited to deliver paid mentoring activities to Year 9 students.

At the time Tom was working in a fast food outlet. He enjoyed working as part of a team. Tom previously completed School Support Officer (SSO) work as a volunteer, a role that he had organised himself. When the new job with Road to Employment was advertised for peer mentors for students with disability, Tom said he “jumped at the opportunity”. “I really wanted to become part of the program also to get more work experience ... in a different area”.

Tom says “I was expecting challenges, I mean, I didn’t know the students I was going to work with, and they didn’t know me. Also, I had not much previous work experience or training as a mentor”.

Tom says several people helped him “find his feet and settle into the role”. The support of the SSOs and the Road to Employment staff guided him to build his capacity along the way. He said,

The support from the SSO was invaluable, I couldn’t have done my role without them ... they had an in-depth knowledge of the students’ strengths and their needs. They also helped manage the sometimes competing interests and voices within the groups.

A challenging incident for Tom came from a behavioural issue experienced by one student. The support from the present SSOs and the principal assisted the student to return to the program later and complete the session. Tom emphasised,

I learned so much being a mentor! I found it less stressful and more enjoyable doing my role as a peer mentor as part of a team with the SSO staff, and Road to Employment supervision and guidance as needed ... It was good to be able to debrief and reflect on how I was feeling in my mentoring role and what I could do to overcome some of the challenges.

Tom recalls he enjoyed the paid job opportunity and “would jump at any future opportunities to work with students in a mentoring capacity ... I’d even consider becoming a SSO worker myself !”.

Tom summarised the benefits he gained from this employment experience, “feeling more confident”, being armed with knowledge of his own skills and capacity and more clarity about the work, “I better understand this type of work, like the rewards and challenges SSO workers can face”.

Road to Employment raised the expectations students hold for themselves and their future. Forty-seven Year 9 students participated in the post-school transition planning workshops and set goals for their future study and post-school employment goals. Thirty-four students participated in the high-school mentoring program and increased their skills and knowledge about applying for work for now and in the future.

Some Year 9 and Year 10 students said that as a result of taking part in workshops and mentoring, their confidence grew. Some of them started to look for work experience or part-time jobs, using the information from the workshops and mentoring program. One student said, “I applied for my first job...I learned how to research my jobs and info about uni”. Another added, “I know I can ask for more help from parents and teachers”.

Learning how to speak up and grow in confidence is an important outcome for people with disability connected to Road to Employment. John’s story is about his personal growth from taking part in the Year 9 mentoring at his school.

Figure 3: Story of Change: John (student) in Year 9 mentoring program

John’s story is told by one of the Road to Employment mentors working with the group of Year 9 students.

The Year 9 student mentoring provided weekly meetings over nine weeks in a mix of small group work and one-to-one activities.

John was a quieter student in the group. He liked to test the mentors to see if they understood the ‘teenage language’. During the first session John understood that the mentors were not at all like teachers. Joking around with the mentors seemed to help John to make a connection and build trust with them. The facilitator said, “Building relationships is an important part of the mentoring process and having a small group of eight students enabled this to happen quickly.”

John’s post-school goal was from the school to work transition planning workshop he had attended previously. John said he wanted to work in disability support, like his mum, his second idea was to become a fire fighter, because he loved adventure and thrills. Over the 9 weeks mentoring period, John made a plan to speak to his mum, and ask her to help him to organise his work experience at her place of work. In addition, John started to search for information about pathways of becoming a fire fighter with support from a mentor. John said he wanted to “keep my options open ... If I don’t like one job, I can change”.

Over 3 months, the facilitators observed John’s skills to “speak up for himself”, to contribute his ideas and perspectives in a small group context improved greatly. The

small group work helped him gain a stronger sense of self and esteem in his skills and abilities. One example was, when John learned about the housework tasks and roles everyone else in the group were doing, he noticed that he was doing “more than everyone else”. As a result, he went home and talked to his older siblings about sharing the jobs around the house more equally.

2.2 Impact on families and schools

Fifty-one family members took part in Raising the Bar workshops. Feedback from parents in the activities was overwhelmingly positive. For example, parents of preschool children said they “would do something differently” or “consider our local mainstream school options” as a result of taking part in the workshops. Parents also reported feeling more “confident to ask for alternatives ... I have a script to use now, I know what I can ask for” when negotiating children’s education pathways. Raising parents’ inclusion awareness, confidence and knowledge of alternatives seemed to be a powerful start to shifting conversations within families and with their local schools.

In one school Road to Employment delivered activities regularly over two years. Over that time, educators reported “starting” to see “shifts” in parents’ assumptions and engagement in their children’s career planning and goal setting. An educator was hopeful that the parents showing a stronger involvement in a family-centered career planning process would benefit students’ work placement readiness, their future employment outcomes, as well as the school environment.

Our hope for the future is that parents keep getting involved in students post-school transition planning and goal setting. This is vital for raising students’ post-school employment prospects, and their readiness to be involved in work experience. Also, it helps to take off some workload of already overstretched educators. Educators should be investing time to support young people in their career planning and endeavours rather than trying to get parents interested in it.

Figure 4: Story of Change: Students and parents in Raising the Bar workshops

In 2021 and 2022, Road to Employment ran Raising the Bar workshops with students in the disability stream Years 9 and 10 and some of their parents.

Ramona, a senior leader and educator at the school, explains that all students get to develop vocational goals through their Personalised Learning Plans which are undertaken from Year 10 onwards. Students in the disability stream are supported to create yearly One Plan goals, outlining the students' personalised goals for the year. Though the One Plan process is designed to involve parents and carers, educators have found it challenging to get parents involved in the process.

Reflecting on the impact of the Raising the Bar workshops with Year 9 and Year 10 students and their parents, Ramona said,

Students were in small groups not more than 10 students or fewer, parents were also invited to the conversation about goal setting with a view to raising expectations of future employment outcomes ... This process has been really helpful ... Suddenly we had parents engaged and interested, in a more hands-on approach ... helping their child to set goals and develop a longer term career plan ... Parents were invited to share their own experiences of early employment and career development. This allowed them to connect on a personal level with the process ... they become more actively involved in their child's future.

Post workshops, she noticed an,

increased investment in the One Plan process from parents ... more parents than previously have reached out to our school; they want to discuss their child's One Plan. This is a positive outcome ... We also found parents to extend those conversations with the school the following year, and asking for teachers to be involved who were not initially part of the workshop or program.

Ramona underlined the value of the Raising the Bar workshops. "Our students have shown an increased understanding of both the purpose of 'One Plan', and their central role in influencing their own futures."

For the future, "I'd like them [Road to Employment] to return next year, to help us increase the focus on a family centred approach ... the benefits of it for student's future opportunities and outcomes".

Though the Road to Employment team noted it was difficult to measure impact or change resulting from the school to work workshops with the different stakeholder groups, they saw emerging anecdotal evidence of change occurring in some families. Examples included: parental expectations being shifted, more parents asking questions about their child's future and career, parents showing support for their child's employment goals, and fewer assumptions about low expectations pathways such as supported disability employment being "the default option". Road to Employment staff noted,

I think the work that we've done there has been good, but it certainly has been a challenge getting in there and delivering. In my view the space where we've done the best and what's worked really well, parents of pre-school aged children... we've caught them ready to go on to the segregated path and we've shifted their focus to a mainstream path which is massive, it's a big outcome for this project.

Many teachers (179) of Year 9 students attended Raising the Bar workshops in 2022. Feedback from the educators was overwhelmingly positive. Teachers identified gaps in their own knowledge and biased assumptions. Some said they would make "changes in the future", for example, "elevate the students voice" at career planning discussions with parents, and support students to understand "their strengths and interests" better when developing personalised career goal and plans.

2.3 Impact on employers and employment practices

The aim of the inclusion and capacity building activities is to raise expectations, change attitudes, and enable more welcoming and inclusive workplaces and practices. To date, 456 community members, teachers, employers and employees participated in capacity building workshops and inclusion training to raise their understanding and potentially influence individual perceptions and local inclusion practices.

Twelve employers took part in tailored business mentoring. Employers reported making a range of accessibility changes to their physical environments and buildings, review of and changes to recruitment practices (for example, allowing more informal interview conversations, encouraging people to disclose their support needs or disability, and visibly demonstrating they value diversity at work). Employers said that receiving "direct, tailored and hands-on" support and guidance to achieve their "inclusion objectives" and implement the necessary changes to policies, practices, trainings, spaces was "tremendously helpful".

Several employers in the finance and accounting COP set themselves recruitment targets and were actively promoting the employment of people with disability in their

organisations. To achieve their goal for the coming year, some organisations made connections to a local university, where students with disability received mentoring through Road to Employment to assist them to consider a career in the finance industry.

The finance and accounting COP developed and launched an Inclusion Toolkit for the industry. It is a practical how to guide for HR and management to achieve more diversity and inclusive workplaces. The educational event and launch were celebrated and regarded as a “major success”, sending a strong message about inclusion to the industry and raising visibility at a community level. The impact of the finance and accounting COP was less direct for individual members, rather benefiting the industry as a whole. Employers in business mentoring and the COPs said that while progress was made there were still ongoing barriers for employers to become more inclusive.

The traineeship demonstration model, a partnership initiative between the aged care COP and Road to Employment, is an example how the project made inroads into an industry where there is little visibility and inclusion of workers with diverse skill sets. The traineeship model achieved direct employment outcomes for trainees, it also had direct impact and “flow on effects” for the respective aged care workplaces and teams. Examples of the “flow on effects” included developing leadership capacity in stakeholders, such as mentors in the aged care teams; trainees (became peer-leaders, presented at conferences, developed outputs about their experience); and enhancing leadership capacity in aged care COP members and the organisational management teams.

A new pre-employment program is about to commence, based on the successful traineeship model. This shows promise of models such as this becoming a replicable recruitment model for the aged care and similar industries.

A major finding from the traineeship model was that “employing people with diverse skill sets” and “having a colleague with disability on my team” was a powerful stimulus. It meant workplaces reviewed and changed how they supported employees with diverse needs and how teams work together. It opened up the potential for attitudinal change on a person to person level, and for workplaces to become more welcoming. Accommodations of individual circumstances (family life, disability, diversity) afford employees greater workplace satisfaction, potentially improving quality of care and retention of staff. One stakeholder commented,

A wider culture change will benefit all our staff, not just employees with disability. Mutual respect and recognition of individual needs are important for all, particularly in the care sector.

3 Effective processes

The Road to Employment project applies a range of processes to achieve its objectives. Central processes driving the projects' success were discussed in earlier parts of the evaluation (Gendera et al 2021a, 2021b) and are summarised below.

Lived experience leadership and co-design

Leadership and co-design by people with disability, parents and teachers were present and effective across all project activities and Road to Employment governance groups. Co-design, co-facilitation, power and leadership sharing in the project ensured the project's direction remained aligned with the interests of people with disability. This process also provided diverse paid roles, full and part time employment, and career development opportunities to people with disability. The approach was a clear demonstration to Road to Employment collaborators (employers, organisations, schools, parents and students) about effective inclusive practice.

Connections and relationships

Identifying and sustaining connections and relationships (with employers, schools, stakeholders, media, industry partners, Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and partnerships e.g., with EYDN) were central in the project. The approach contributed to Road to Employment's gains. Establishing relationships, identifying collaborators and project partners often took longer than anticipated, but remained critical to the delivery of the project activities and processes. The skilled management of group dynamics and relationships in co-design, community of practice and workshops further enabled and strengthened this process.

Traineeship model

The traineeship model was implemented in the second half of the project. The traineeships were generated from the industry driven need to attract new staff and facilitate greater diversity of skills and abilities across the aged care workforce. The traineeship process was possible because Road to Employment accessed additional state inclusion funding (Skilling South Australia Projects) and established relationships with an RTO and two dedicated Disability Employment Service (DES) providers. Road to Employment was part of the traineeship design and establishment process, provided continuous support to trainees and the five aged care providers. In addition, they brought together the trainees and their families, employers and co-workers, and other stakeholders to celebrate and share the lessons from the demonstration process with wider audiences.

Mentoring

Road to Employment used mentoring as strategy to work with stakeholders, trainees, students and employers. Mentoring built on a persons' or employers identified strengths and interests with the objective to assist them to achieve their goals. This process was effective when staff were clear about "where the person is at, where they are coming from", instead of imposing a preconceived idea of an ideal outcome.

Celebration and promotion

A central component of activities with employers (community of practice, business mentoring and traineeships) was the celebration of achievements, alongside industry-wide promotion. Road to Employment used multiple strategies, including podcasts, written and spoken news contributions, presentation at industry conferences, dedicated educational events and large scale launches for project outputs, traineeship graduation ceremonies, promotion through social media and industry platforms (newsletters, project website with resources), and the creation of an inclusion digital stamp for participating employers in the business inclusion mentoring. The purpose of these activities was to celebrate the investment, change, outputs and outcomes achieved and to generate interest in the project from potential new partners and industry sectors. Lastly, these diverse promotion activities contributed to changing employment expectations of people with disability at broader community levels.

Facilitation

The Road to Employment team, often two staff members with diverse skills, with and without disability, were involved in facilitating, organising and supporting the delivery of the project activities and group discussions, workshops. Skilled facilitation, combined with relationship-based ways of working (listening, respect, valuing, sensitive ways of challenging biases) with partners and stakeholders, were core to the operation and focus of the Road to Employment project.

Practice of iterative reflection and review

The practice of regular reflection and review was crucial to a complex, multi-stranded project like Road to Employment. The project team used debriefing strategies and documentation of review processes after group meetings, co-design work, workshops and mentoring. Regular reflection, listening to the diverse perspectives of staff and stakeholders, taking on board feedback from the participants and employers in activities helped the project to refine, respond and manage challenges. Remaining responsive to the perspectives of individual project participants (employers, parents and students), which the staff described as, "meeting people where they are at", without compromising the overarching objectives and values, informed the project to evolve to meet its objectives.

Project governance

Road to Employment had five staff members across the industry and school parts of the project. The team brought together a wide range of professional and lived expertise in disability employment, education, project management and facilitation. The project was governed by an internal project group, involving all staff, in charge of the day to day project decisions and linking the parts of the project. The staff level of governance communicated to leaders from JFA Purple Orange and the Steering Committee group.

The project, especially in its establishment phase, received input and direction from a Steering Committee. The Committee consisted of 15 members, representing high policy levels, advocacy, and employment services. Members included a government representative of the SA Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family businesses; a representative of the Equal Opportunity Commission and the Disability Royal Commission and others. Some members were people living with disability. The Committee met bi-annually in the first year, and since met annually.

Another layer of governance in Road to Employment was the commissioned, university-led research and evaluation embedded in the project. The formative evaluation contributed to documentation and review of the project implementation, collection of stories of change for the impact evaluation, and bringing the emerging evidence from central project processes: the leadership by people with disability, codesign, and the traineeship model into the public domain through publishing academic articles and research reports.

4 Resolving challenges

This section examines how Road to Employment resolved challenges over the 3-year evaluation period.

4.1 Stakeholder engagement and commitment

Achieving stakeholder participation and senior level commitment were ongoing challenges for the project across all the stages of the project activities (community of practice, workshops and mentoring). Stakeholder commitment was key to the establishment and sustainability of activities, implementing the planned actions and attracting participants to the activities.

Two industry COPs (retail and education) could not be established. Participation rates at student and parent workshops fluctuated, at times less than 30 per cent of the enrolled participants attending or the workshops were cancelled due to low registrations.

Road to Employment worked with senior managers and employers and time poor parents, schools and students in a Covid or post-Covid school context. In these already challenging environments and contexts, the project used strategies to overcome challenges of engagement and continuous commitment.

Direct benefit from change

Road to Employment staff were aware of the critical role of articulating the direct benefit to the participants to generate commitment and for the activities to be successful. They applied this insight about self-interest to generating the organisational level participation and the workshop participation. For example, at workshops with Year 9 students and their parents, parents are asked to tell their story of finding their first job and progressing in their careers.

The commitment to the Road to Employment activities was greatest and grew in employers and schools where educators and leaders saw a direct benefit to themselves or the organisation. Examples included potential to help with engaging parents in family-based career planning, thereby reducing teacher workload or tasks. By participating in workshops, teachers could see some of the pressure lift, as parents were started reaching out to them more (see Figure 4 Story of Change).

The finance and accounting COP work has the potential to create future change across the industry, creating employment and training opportunities for people with disability and influencing policy at a national level. The finance COP also empowered staff in HR departments who were advocating for inclusion and greater diversity with

the tools and rationale to move their organisations towards greater awareness, education and investment of resources.

Owning and driving the change

Community of practice was a way of working with industry partners. Building on existing relationships and connections and linking these to new potential partners helped the project to identify and engage potential stakeholders, employers and schools to partner with and run their activities.

The research found the community of practice process was effective because it facilitated industry representatives to drive “their own change” from within the industry, supported by Road to Employment. The groups were supported to determine and define industry focused objectives that could be acted on by the group. For COP members to remain engaged over 2-3 years, required sufficient buy-in from each member at the start and throughout the process, including interest, investment of time and resources and following on with action.

Employers in the COP explained that they remained involved as they had a genuine self-interest in the identified group goal. They wanted to see positive outcomes for their own organisations, beyond talking about the problems. The concrete results they wanted included harnessing new pool of potential recruits and diversity of skills. An aged care COP member said,

The biggest challenge we have right now in the sector is recruitment. The sector is growing, and the workforce is shrinking ... So, as an organisation, and the leadership team behind me, we were really invested and interested in the process that Road to Employment offered ... helping us to grow future recruits. It was important that this [COP] was not only a talk fest, that we were all committed to action ... This meant some organisations dropped off early on. We ended up with a committed, small, high- level group ... able to make decisions with a very clear purpose of employing people with disability.

Decision making powers and leadership

Group members identified two further building blocks that helped them to achieve their goal: a commitment to cooperation between the COP members to overcome challenges and leadership within their organisations. An example of cooperation was organisations assisting each other to find the best fit for a trainee. About half of the trainees moved during their traineeship between the organisations or between tasks and roles.

As the COP group objectives changed and developed, some group members did not maintain interest. Although members leaving was not ideal, stakeholders reported it

allowed the remaining members to work “closely and focused ... everyone who stayed on was on the same page”. Importantly, the remaining members had two characteristics that contributed to effective change: seniority and support in their own organisations to decide, plan and implement the change.

Building relationships over time

Identifying and maintaining partnerships was critical for the project. It took time, resources and connections to establish new relationships with employers, aged care providers and schools. Road to Employment had ongoing challenges engaging new partners to join the communities of practice and workshops in schools. The approach they took was to build on the lessons from the community of practice and ensure goals are shared across the industry partners. They focused on meeting the specific interests of each employer to justify the investment in the time and resources of the employer to start or continue with the working partnerships.

Building relationships from successes over time was evident in the schools. An opportunity to improve the reach of the school workshops was to continue investing in already engaged schools. The educators who started seeing flow-on effects from the workshops (e.g., parents being more engaged in the planning process) expressed interest for the workshops to be repeated. Also, in schools where student and parent workshops were repeated, over time word-of-mouth about these activities had spread and registrations grew. There was evidence that the word about the workshops had spread to other, nearby schools.

These examples demonstrate that participation and commitment required time and continuous investment to be visible and multiply. This long-term approach might be especially so in sectors, like education or aged care, affected by structural challenges, limited capacity and devaluing.

4.2 External facilitator perspective

A central mechanism for resolving challenges in the Road to Employment project was the role of the project staff. Having a well funded team, with diverse expertise and abilities to help strategise, coordinate, organise, facilitate and troubleshoot was crucial for achieving the goals of the multiple activities. Project partners in the COPs and business mentoring underlined the important contribution of the external facilitator to guide their process to achieve their goals. An aged care COP member said,

At the beginning of the traineeship, clearly we identified some challenges. But then, it turns out, we probably had four times as many problems, we had not even considered or prepared for. There were many administrative, regulatory,

training and capacity building needs of different people and groups ... I really think we'd not get this far without a third party to guide the process.

They said facilitation from Road to Employment was important because the staff were "funded to help shape our ideas, find resources, link us to DES, guide the interface where trainees, mentors and employers come together".

The funded project meant the staff could act creatively to find solutions, such as applying for additional inclusion funding to support the traineeship model implementation. The team were regularly called upon to resolve interpersonal, attitudinal or capacity issues. This was possible because the project staff were "outsiders" to the organisations but still well enough informed, trusted and engaged to be able to find solutions that worked.

[R2E Staff name] was firsthand involved, she came into the organisations to try to understand what the barriers were ... So, we needed someone with *understanding* to help us through those challenges ... came talked to everyone, observed what was going on and worked out a solution. Several of the trainees moved from one organisation to another, we tried to find a better fit for the person, based on their strengths and interests...In another case, we found that the mentors themselves needed more capacity building...All this was possible because we had that *third party* investment. (Aged care COP member)

Stakeholders spoke of the role of the facilitator who was available, supportive and "removed enough from the daily management" to be able to "see" what's occurring on the ground and bring in constructive ideas and answers.

In the next Story of Change (Figure 5) Trusha, one of the eight trainees in aged care, speaks of how the Road to Employment team facilitated change in the workplace with managers, staff and developing her capacity to speak up about how she preferred to be supported.

Figure 5: Story of Change: Trusha becoming part of the aged care team

Since completing high school, over 6 years ago, Trusha was not in paid work. She had some previous work experience and was "very keen to find work".

At the end of 2021, Trusha's employment support provider approached her to take part in the traineeship. At first, Trusha was apprehensive, she had no prior experience or interest in the area, "I never worked with older people, I didn't know anything about the job, it was scary to say yes ... I also worried about not knowing what to do, like with people who have dementia".

After thinking it over, and speaking to her family and friends, she took up the opportunity, “I thought, I’ll just give it a go”. When starting Trusha looked forward to being part of a supportive team, learning from his colleagues, and becoming a compassionate carer.

The traineeship proved to be challenging in ways Trusha had not expected. After a few weeks, Trusha felt some of her supervisors and colleagues resented the workplace changes provided for her. “I noticed the others getting frustrated with me ... it happened more frequently ... Luckily [name worker] from Road to Employment was there. I spoke to them about my problems at work, we worked out a plan.”

The advice was for Trusha to disclose her intellectual disability with her colleagues. Road to Employment with Trusha and her direct manager created a safe discussion space, inviting colleagues and enabling an open conversation about her strengths, capabilities and support needs. These discussions seemed to give staff ‘permission’ to ask questions about Trusha’s disability which partially dispelled some tensions. Also, the discussions provided a forum for Trusha to make “specific requests” to her colleagues about how she wanted to be supported (requests about communication and task allocation).

After these meetings Trusha said, “things got a lot better ... staff were more friendly”. Some colleague’s attitudes however remained unchanged. “When I am talking and listening to a resident” some say, I am “too slow”. Trusha felt that the attitudes at her workplace had to shift for “my way of working ... to become acceptable.”

After completing her traineeship Trusha was offered an ongoing paid position as an Activity Assistant. Today, she works across two aged care employers, in two locations, and says she “loves [her] work”.

“The traineeship and the employment are great ... finally I have my own money, money I have earned! And I have a purpose ... I have more structure in my day, in my week... I enjoy my free time more!”

The Road to Employment facilitation role meant the staff could enhance the commitment of the organisations and participants in the activities and find creative solutions to problems. The challenges they addressed were at the organisational level, such as workplace practices and managerial structures, or at the personal level such as attitudes and support needs. The Year 9 mentoring program benefited from project staff guiding mentors in their role, providing moral support and confidence.

4.3 Iterative reflection, review and adaptation

Iterative reflection, review and adaptation were the third mechanism that Road to Employment applied to achieve the objectives of the project. The team met regularly to identify barriers, reflect how these could be mitigated and adapt how to achieve the project objectives. They used this mechanism at the project, organisation and participant levels. While each new approach might not be effective, they persisted with assessing the barriers and testing alternatives.

Project level refinements

An example at the project level is from the Raising the Bar workshops with high-school students. They needed to address fluctuations in attendance ranging between 30 to 70 per cent. After observing these trends for a while and excluding external factors like Covid, some workshops were moved online. The project team were also looking to restructure the content to merge it in a single day event, inclusive of all students with and without disability.

Through the iterative review and reflection process the team identified another central barrier to running workshops in schools, namely, schools' capacity to host and coordinate additional demands. Road to Employment staff said,

We run Year 5/6 workshops that are with the whole Year 5/6 classes, we run separate workshops with the teachers and parents, teachers and parents of Year 9 students ... Some of these are followed up by a weekly mentoring program ... It's an intensive engagement for the schools! Once we're in with our program. It can be hard for schools to commit ... it means a lot of scheduling for them.

Instead, Road to Employment team were exploring the possibility of not relying on a particular school to deliver the workshops. An alternative may be to open the activities to a broader group of students and parents. Advocacy with policy makers in the Department of Education to get high-level sectoral buy-in was another avenue the project used. Another example from the school workshops was how to increase parent registrations. The team found that registrations sent out closer to the date (1-2 weeks) in advance had higher attendance rates than advertising 4 weeks ahead of time.

Organisation level refinements

An example at the organisational level was from the business mentoring. The approach was to tailor the program to ensure it was "practical and flexible" and met particular businesses' needs. Road to Employment staff said

When we work with an employer, we support them to reframe the support for people with disability in a way that all the staff can see advantages, also for themselves ... how that culture change is not just for someone with additional support needs ... With the employers we work with, the willingness is already there, but there are barriers, and they are failing for some reason. We check in, review where they are at, and then plan what's achievable and aligned with organisational goals ... we keep reviewing what's working and what's not.

Participant level adaptations

At the participant level, starting from the person and their strengths is a well-established practice. Road to Employment used a similar approach for working with businesses, meeting employers where “they are at” and gradually building their disability inclusion practices and confidence. Tailoring and adapting mentoring to employers, trainees and students meant that no organisation or person was regarded as “the same”.

Figure 5 Trusha's story is an example of applying the approach at the multiple levels, building from the strengths of the person, organisation and COP goal. The iterative-reflective approach helped Road to Employment achieve some of its major outcomes.

The traineeship program ... Originally it was never in our plan, but that's what the industry wanted, so we went to find additional funding for it. Our response was, “Well, that's a great idea how can we facilitate it”? ... Instead of us saying “No!” we've just got to stick to our plan ... We went, “Yep let's figure out how we do it”. It turns out the traineeship model is one of the greatest project outcomes!” (Road to Employment staff).

4.4 Celebrating small and big wins

A strategy to expand and reinforce stakeholder engagement was to celebrate and promote project achievements. Road to Employment invested resources to develop a suite of outputs from the project and promote these widely. They included lived experience podcasts, videos, written stories, promotional material, websites, presentations together with trainees at industry conferences and events, talks in radio and TV (ABC News), newsletter and newspaper articles, visibility on social media, large scale educational launches and events e.g., aged care graduation ceremonies, and an inclusion stamp for participating employers.

These outputs and activities served multiple purposes: visibility and leadership of people with disability, opportunities to promote the project activities, motivate new employers, trainees, industries or schools to join and collaborate, reframe disability

employment in the community. These activities also highlighted the progressive achievements of the project activities and generated motivation for stakeholders, empathy, and person to person connections. An example how celebration contributed to shifting attitudes is from Carl's experience as a trainee in aged care.

Figure 6: Story of Change: Carl's experience of being heard

Carl's story is told from the perspective of a Road to Employment staff member and a member of the community of practice.

Carl planned to work in early education with children. Despite a few attempts he had not been employed since completing high school. At first his traineeship went well, he said he was enjoying the work more than he'd anticipated. A few weeks into the traineeship Carl experienced major challenges at his workplace, to the point that after six weeks he said, he "was ready to walk away".

The Road to Employment team talked to Carl to find out the problems. He said to the team, "all I want is them to understand my disability". They supported Carl to formulate what he needed from his team colleagues to feel respected, included and supported at work. Helping Carl to develop his voice, express what he needed, taking it to educate his team was powerful. He said to the staff, "When you yell at me, I feel I want to leave and hide. When you yell at me, I don't feel valued. When you want to give me feedback, do this". A major thing Carl's colleagues changed was they started asking him *first* what he was doing, before giving him new instructions.

The COP also tried to influence attitudes by organising a halfway celebration event for all the trainees. The facilitator said to the COP partners, "Bring your staff...bring staff who are in opposition, and staff who work closely with the trainees, bring anyone ... This is really good education for them, it's an inclusion training for supporting the trainees ... And what we found, it was moving, everyone was very moved ... staff were crying, parents were crying, out of happiness and because people connected on an emotional level, person-to-person level. After these graduation celebration events, what we found was that the aged care teams were more empathetic. They were more understanding that different people need different things, and such accommodations are okay."

The COP member who is a manager in Carl's workplace said, "We worked out how to support Carl. He is a positive influence on the team and their perceptions. But a risk remains that when the team is overworked, stretched, or just lacking empathy for another colleague, they might slip and get frustrated with Carl if he gets more time to do his work. As a manager, I need to be aware of that possibility and intervene. Today, Carl feels included and is happy at his work. He's so popular every aged care reference group wants him on their team!"

4.5 Incremental and opportunistic change

Common challenges to inclusion in the project were stereotyping, low expectation of people with disability, and organisational policies and culture perpetuating exclusion. For example, some schools offered pre-defined disability pathways for students with disability, directly leading into supported employment. Workplaces were reluctant to make accommodations for individual strengths and needs, rather, treating 'everyone the same'.

Road to Employment was clear about the long-term nature of their work to change beliefs, expectations and workplace practices. Lived experience facilitation and leadership by people with disability, at all levels of the project, were applied to challenge stereotypes and assumptions. Working with industry partners in the community of practice model was used as a systemic approach to reflect on opportunities for change. The communities of practice allowed more experienced employers to influence and support other employers in the group, achieving outcomes for people with disability as well as challenging pre-existing beliefs and expectations.

Another opportunity for the project is to work with incremental changes that occur in organisations, staffing, policy and harness these, as they arise. Expanding from incremental changes in one organisation to inform other organisations in the sector was another approach used in the finance and accounting COP. The COP had not yet achieved concrete employment outcomes for people with disability. However, raising awareness (toolkit launch), altering practices and spaces through mentoring, establishing relationships with universities laid the foundations for future employment outcomes. There was strong evidence from Road to Employment that people with disability being in workplaces afforded real connections and opportunities to change others and employers' mindsets and expectations.

5 Future directions for Road to Employment

Value of diversity at work

Barriers to inclusion at work include expectations, organisational culture and workplace practices. In the future the project could consider building awareness and understanding of the benefits for all workers brought about by accommodating and valuing diversity. This message could be harnessed through the project, where such changes are visible. For example, by documenting changes to organisational culture in podcasts and videos as resources for employers and workplaces.

Sustainability of the community of practice and traineeship models

The research showed that employers and organisations that partnered with Road to Employment needed ongoing capacity building, awareness raising and inclusion confidence building at different levels and times. This required a skilled and dedicated team, like Road to Employment to work with employers (through mentoring) and industry-driven groups (community of practice) through co-design and leadership of people with disability with a clearly defined goal the group members are invested in to achieve (e.g., identify new recruitment pool).

Road to Employment built leadership in the community of practice and traineeship models. There was evidence that some of the industry-led practice groups could continue without the impetus from an external facilitator if senior members of the group took on the leadership and managerial role. Taking on responsibility for continuing the industry-driven community of practice or traineeship models would require support for a facilitator from employer organisations.

Project governance

The Road to Employment governance structure and agile project management were effective. The project achieved more than was specified in its original workplan and funding agreement. Working within a reflective and responsive framework, where each project team had autonomy while remaining connected to the broader project, enabled staff and stakeholders to learn from each other and capitalize on lessons learnt across the project. Road to Employment has another year of ILC funding.

In the future the project could focus on its existing relationships and networks (employers, industries, schools), effective industry-level change mechanisms (traineeship model, mentoring, school workshops) to continue to build and refine these practices and processes, develop lessons document from the traineeship model for similar models of traineeship development in other industries.

The project steering group was crucial to identify and shape the project's direction, with leadership and co-design input from people with disability. Linking the project's

goals to JFA Purple Orange and maintaining high level engagement enabled the project to remain responsive and innovative in their approach.

Future direction for Road to Employment

The three central lessons from the project are indicators for the future of Road to Employment and similar projects.

1. Employers require different types of inclusion capacity building over time

Different types of inclusion capacity building employers were required at different times on their journey. Building employer confidence and inclusion capacity **was not a linear or one-off process**. It took regular input, capacity building, reassurances also 'hands-on support' from Road to Employment at different stages in the process,

- Identification and enhancing organisational practices (e.g., employment practices, HR systems, interview processes) to recruit people with diverse skills.
- Assistance to employers to carve out tailored roles and provide individualised support to new employees and trainees (understand a person's strengths, learning style, how they want to be supported).
- Continuous support to review and shift workplace attitudes and practices (culture) to create safe and inclusive workplaces at every level.

Road to Employment was clear about the long term nature of their work and investment needed to change beliefs, expectations and workplace practices.

2. People with disability, supporters and families require capacity building at different stages in their life and during transitions

The traineeship model demonstrated that with the right level and types of support, confidence and capacity building, people with disability achieved their employment and training goals. The aged care trainees received support from Road to Employment team who 'kept a finger on the pulse' of each placement, provided intervention, guidance and opportunities to reflect and debrief in a safe space. DES providers supported trainees on the job and RTO providers assisted people with their study requirements to complete the aged care certificate. Trainees also had support from mentors and aged care supervisors and their teams.

The traineeship model is a central process and output of the Road to Employment project. The project could review and document arising lessons and necessary adaptations from the model to identify how it could be translated into other sectors and workplace areas.

3. People with disability need opportunities to be active members of schools, workplaces and the community changes practices and expectations

When people with disability were more active members of schools, workplaces and communities it benefited them and created opportunities to challenge and improve organisational practices, beliefs and expectations. This lesson demonstrates the benefits from this type of initiative, which can have a cumulative effect. The people involved benefit from participating in the process, improving their voice and expectations. They also benefit from new participation and work opportunities. Second, the schools, workplaces and communities they participate in benefit from participating in the process of codesign, building skills and practices for listening and responding to expectations. They also benefit from adjusting practices so that more people with disability are active in their organisation.

Conclusion

Road to Employment was funded under the ILC economic and community participation program to build employer confidence and workplace inclusion. The project achieved its intended objectives and delivered a range of activities with schools, families, employers and workplaces in three industries. The project has promoted direct employment outcomes and leadership of people with disability at multiple levels in the project and influenced employment practices and expectations. These expectations are influenced in communities, schools and workplaces through the influence of active participation of people with disability.

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Appendix A. Methods in detail

The SPRC, UNSW and Flinders University research team undertook the developmental evaluation from September 2020 to March 2023. The research had ethics approval from both universities, HC200741.

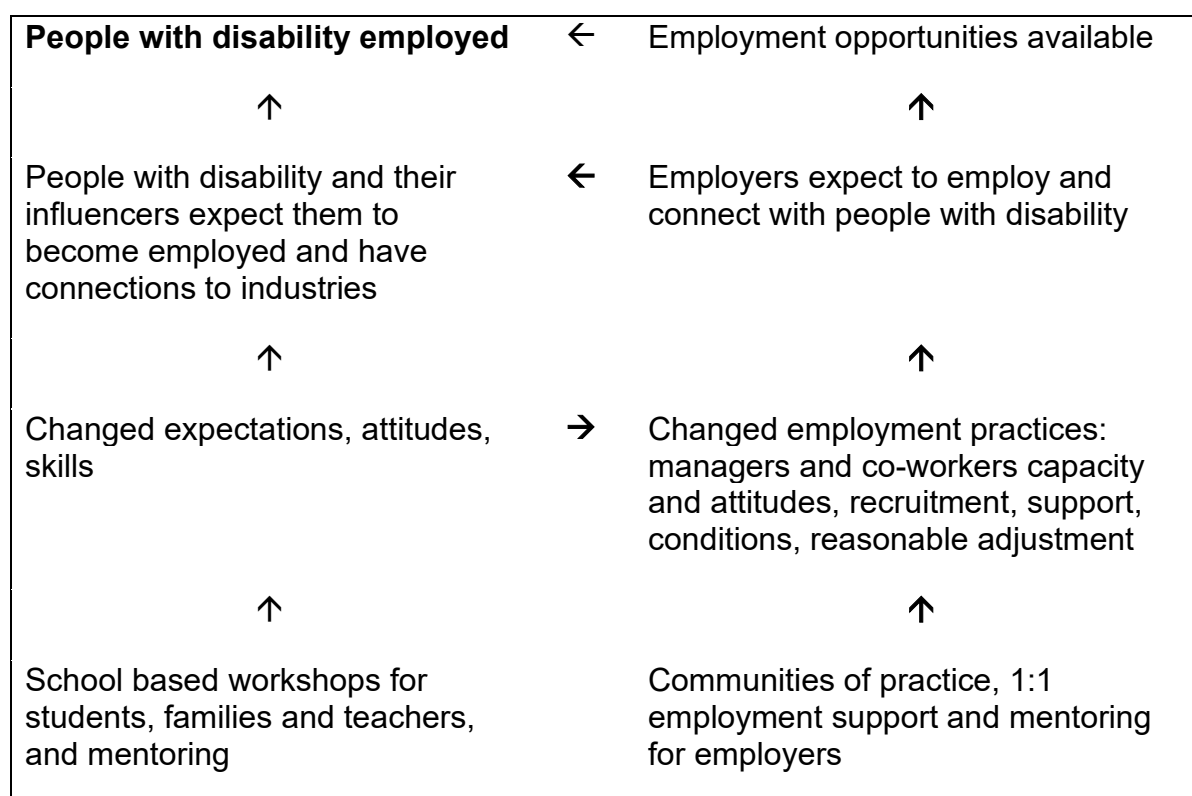
Research questions

The research was designed with Road to Employment stakeholders in a co-design process to inform project delivery and create knowledge about the impact of the project, identify effective strategies and remaining challenges, and lessons for future.

The evaluation questions were:

1. **What effect did the projects have on people** with disability seeking to be employed and employment opportunities?
 - extent to which the project achieves the intended outcomes
 - extent to which the projects meet the ILC grant outcome measures
 - impact on workplaces, industries, teachers, parents, children and adults with disability
2. **What processes were effective** for the projects to **connect people** to employment opportunities and to **improve the expectations and practices** of employers, schools, families and communities to employ people with disability: school-based workshops, mentoring, one to one support, communities of practice?
 - extent of and how the project built successful partnerships
 - impact of codesign and inclusive steering group on the project
 - impact on the people from participating in the codesign
 - how the project influences other workplaces and professionals
 - lessons learnt and good practice
3. **What barriers, challenges and opportunities were evident, resolved and remain** in the project process and how might these contribute to better ways of working with people with disability, families, teachers, schools and employers to increase employment opportunities?
 - unintended benefits or drawbacks of the project to participants, workplaces and professionals
 - strengths and weaknesses of the approach taken to build the capacity of employers, organisations, students, families and schools
 - what could be done differently.

Project logic



Research methods and analysis

The evaluation used mixed methods and data sources to answer these questions.

Review of project documents and data

The Project documents and project data collected by Road to Employment about the project activities, outputs and activities were analysed for this evaluation. The data included internal meeting minutes, project reporting to DSS, project plans, and other relevant documentation.

Observation of Road to Employment activities

The researchers observed meetings of the Road to Employment project (including staff, Steering Committee and meetings from the communities of practice groups). Observation data provided contextual information about the processes used in the project such as co-design, leadership of people with disability across all levels of the project and use of facilitation across different parts of Road to Employment and governance groups.

Stories of Change and interviews

The research team together with the Road to Employment collected a total of 31 stories of change and interviews of – people with disability, family members,

employers, educators in schools, other project stakeholders and staff – to demonstrate the impact and outcomes of the project and the processes driving change.

Analysis

We combined the data from the review of documents, interviews, stories of change, and observations to generate a strength based anonymised profile of change. Stories of change were presented as standalone outputs also integrated in the overall analysis and to answer the evaluation questions.