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Organisational and policy barriers to transitioning from supported into open employment for people with an intellectual disability

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ABSTRACT

Background: People with an intellectual disability prefer more choice with employment options and more community facing roles rather than just traditional supported employment roles. However, data reveal that transition rates from supported to open employment in Australia remain very low and these findings are also found internationally.

Method: To examine current organisational and policy barriers preventing transition from supported to open employment, a series of 27 in-depth interviews were conducted with people with an intellectual disability, staff from supported employers, and staff from open employers.

Results: There were several key policy and organisational barriers identified. These included inflexible funding models and packages, lack of knowledge and experience of open employers, and insufficient training, pathways, and supports for people with an intellectual to make that transition.

Conclusion: The findings highlight some of the broader policy and program reforms that are required, commencing in school and inclusive of all employer groups.

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Intellectual disability;
employment opportunities;
policy barriers

An inclusive employment opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities is a common policy goal in many countries. Employment can yield many benefits in social connections, sense of purpose and wellbeing, and the full range of employment opportunities and benefits has often been denied to people with intellectual disabilities (Joyce, 2024). People with an intellectual disability themselves have expressed the ambition for social enterprise and open employment opportunities (Meltzer et al., 2020; Taubner et al., 2023). However, the current research in Australia and internationally would suggest that people with intellectual disabilities are still being excluded from these opportunities. Australia is an interesting case study to explore why these barriers still exist given that major policy reform was meant to increase open employment opportunities.

The employment landscape in Australia for people with an intellectual disability is currently undergoing a series of policy reform and change. What previously had been termed sheltered employment was for the last 20 years called Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs). To date, they have been the main employer for people with an intellectual disability in Australia ADEs (Meltzer

et al., 2020). The funding for the ADE program ceased in 2021 and former-ADE organisations are evolving, some into accredited social enterprises. The combination of policy aligned with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has refocused attention on the right to a broader range of employment outcomes for all people with disability, including people with intellectual disability previously deemed to have limited “capacity” to work. The NDIS commenced in 2013 with the intent of being a market-based social insurance scheme (Thill, 2015). The aim was that people with significant and permanent disability would receive a personalised funding and care plan (Collings et al., 2016; Productivity Commission, 2011). As a result of these policy changes, the importance of “open employment” outcomes was highlighted with emphasis on opportunities to transition from former-ADE settings into open employment, which involve regular wages working alongside people with disabilities (Cheng et al., 2018).

Open employers can include social enterprises, particularly Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE), that often have a particular mission of social inclusion

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by creating meaningful jobs. Many also aim to transition people previously excluded from the labour market through the social enterprise and into open employment opportunities (Joyce et al., 2022). Open employment opportunities, including in social enterprises, are a goal of many people with an intellectual disability in Australia and internationally (Meltzer et al., 2020; Taubner et al., 2023). Reforms within the ADE sector and the introduction of the NDIS in the last 10 years should have enabled higher participation rates and transition from ADE to open employment opportunities. However, in this article we review some of the data on employment trajectories for people with an intellectual disability and while the data have limitations, it would seem that transitions to open employment from ADEs are still very low. This low rate of employment transition is also found internationally (Cheng et al., 2018; Taubner et al., 2023). To understand why there are still such low rates of transition from ADEs to open employment we then conducted a series of 27 in-depth interviews with people with an intellectual disability currently working in an ADE, staff from the ADEs, and other stakeholder groups to ascertain current policy and organisational barriers to employment transition.

Background

The stigmatisation and segregation of people with a disability became embedded in social institutions in the 1900s when government policies sought to ameliorate disability and protect society from the disabled (Carlson, 2010; Walmsley, 2005). The 1950s was a period in which policy settings particularly favoured segregation of people with disability resulting in institutionalisation in locations known as *sheltered workshops*. In the 1960s, in Australia, the Commonwealth government began funding sheltered workshops and work preparation centres as a form of vocational training for school leavers with intellectual disability. In the following decades as an emphasis on inclusion continued to emerge there was increasing criticism of sheltered workshops. In 1986, in response to the emerging inclusion movement, the *Disability Services Act* was enacted, in which two broad types of employment services, open and supported employment services, were established (Commonwealth of Australia, 1987). The Act essentially enshrined a bifurcated model where open employment was considered to be viable only for people who could work without ongoing support. In the Act, “supported employment services” were to be delivered for people that were “unlikely” to be able to compete in the open labour market and would require ongoing support in a workplace setting (Commonwealth of Australia,

1987). Thus while supported employment internationally can refer to attempts at supporting people to find employment in competitive and community inclusive workplaces, in Australia the term continued to be understood as a segregated workplace.

Supported employment services continued to operate throughout the 1990s, although funding for new services was limited, as government policy at the time showed a preference for open employment over segregated employment. During this time, supported employment services were labelled as “disability business services” or “business enterprises”. In 2008, supported employment services became known as Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs). When the NDIS was enacted in 2013, records indicated that there were 194 not-for-profit organisations that were operating ADEs and they employed about 20,000 people, most of whom had an intellectual disability and were in receipt of the Disability Support Pension (ConNetic, 2013). Dramatic changes to the disability employment sector were seeded by the 2013 NDIS Act. Funding for employment supports within an ADE were included in the new NDIS and ADEs were supported to prepare for transition from DSS funding to NDIS funding.

There was another change to the sector in 2021 as Australian Disability Enterprise Services was discontinued as a government funded program (Productivity Commission, 2021), when all employees had transitioned to NDIS funding. What this meant is that many ADE organisations then attempted to rebrand and reposition themselves in the employment landscape. For some they sought formal certification as Social Enterprises (i.e., “Social Traders Certified Social Enterprise”), and other organisations started using the term of social enterprise or business enterprise without any formal certification. Even though there has been considerable policy reform and that ADEs are now self-referring as social enterprises, the Disability Royal Commission noted that these workplaces are still considered a risk setting for exploitation, violence and abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). It was noted by the Commission that school leavers with an intellectual disability are still directed into ADEs as the first option and transition out of an ADE is very unlikely (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). It was recommended that open and inclusive employment settings should be the first employment option (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023), which mirrors other research conducted in Australia and internationally (Meltzer et al., 2020; Taubner et al., 2023).

Recent policy changes have also resulted in some major challenges in understanding current employment rates for people with an intellectual disability. There is

no national dataset for supported employment and there is no agreed upon nomenclature for organisational types. This has been exacerbated by many former ADEs now self-describing as social enterprises. However, there are a range of government sources that combined can provide a general sense of employment rates over the last few years. In 2005/6, there were 397 supported employment outlets across Australia (Australian Government, 2007), which would have been operating like sheltered workshops (Cheng et al., 2018). The numbers of people in these supported employment services between 2005 and 2010 varied between 21,000 and 23,000 (Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaCSIA], 2008; Department of Social Services, 2014).

After the *Australian Government Disability Services Census* ceased, data since 2010 have been more difficult to obtain. Current estimates are gathered from NDIS data and statistics on social enterprises that are collected. As of 2022, there were 477 ADEs in Australia, which were being operated by 147 organisations with approximately 16,000 supported employees working in this sector (BuyAbility, 2022). Data from the NDIS reveal very little movement from ADEs to other employment opportunities. Data from 2020 revealed that only 4% of 15–24-year-olds had changed from an ADE to open employment while there was 3% that moved from open employment into ADEs (NDIA, 2020). The data for people older than 25 show even smaller levels of movement to open employment. Only 1% of people aged over 25 years moved from ADEs to open employment while 3% move from open employment into ADEs (NDIA, 2020). These results mirror studies from other countries that show very low employment transition rates for people with an intellectual disability (Park, 2022).

It would seem that while people with an intellectual disability have a desire for social enterprise and open employment (Meltzer et al., 2020; Taubner et al., 2023), the data would suggest that they are still being excluded from these opportunities both in Australia and internationally. The NDIS has an ambition of increasing employment rates for people with a disability with the aspiration of increased choice (Olney, 2021). In Australia the ongoing evolution of ADEs, coupled with individualised funding via the NDIS, in theory should provide people more opportunity to pursue their own goals related to employment experience and thus facilitate increased employment mobility. Theoretically, Australia should be producing different results from other countries with all these reforms and yet the data on employment transition are no different. Further, the data now are similar to research conducted over a

decade ago in showing how difficult it is to transition out of an ADE into other employment opportunities (Davies & Beamish, 2009) and with all this reform it is unclear why there are still such low transition rates. From an ecological perspective (Simplican et al., 2015), there has been some current research understanding barriers at an individual and family level but not at the broader organisational and policy systems level. Current international research has shown how family support is an important factor (Park, 2022) but there is a gap in understanding broader policy and organisational factors inhibiting employment opportunities (Cheng et al., 2018). The aim of this study was to understand in-depth the current policy and organisational barriers that prevent people from an intellectual disability from transitioning from supported to open employment and what changes can be made to increase transition rates. Understanding the causes of low employment transition in the midst of such large-scale policy transition provides valuable feedback for both Australia and other jurisdictions that are struggling with this policy challenge.

Method

The data analysed for this article come from a 12-month research project funded by the Department of Social Services through its Information Linkages and Capacity Building Scheme. The overall aim of the project was to understand how to better facilitate transition from supported to open employment opportunities. The project was conducted with organisations in Geelong, Victoria. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ADE staff, 10 supported employees, and 5 people from open employment organisations (labelled “stakeholder”). The inclusion criteria for interviews was as follows:

- People with an intellectual disability living in the Geelong region (aiming for a balance of men and women across organisations)
- Employers that employ people with an intellectual disability in the organisation
- Open employers with whom the organisation has an emerging relationship and where employment pathways may develop.

The invitation was open to anyone meeting that criteria rather than a set number based on data saturation; however, there were no new themes emerging in the last number of interviews (Minichiello et al., 2008). People were told about the research project and interview opportunity via team meetings at the ADE, they were

told to contact their manager if they were interested in participating. The questions focused on the barriers to transition to open employment. To enable informed consent all participants were provided with a Plain Language Statement and this was also made available in Easy English. If required, the information form was read to participants and then they were asked if they understood what they were consenting to and if they would still like to be involved.

The questions for people with an intellectual disability included what they liked and did not like about different employment experiences and their preference for employment options. Question prompts elicited examples of positive experiences and negative experiences in the workplace and what they perceived as barriers to working in open employment contexts. The interview questions for staff and partner organisations also asked about their perceptions of positive and negative work experiences they had noticed for people with an intellectual disability. The particular focus of these interviews then concentrated on the policy and organisational barriers that prevented successful transition from supported to open employment. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

While there have been a number of studies exploring barriers to open employment for people with an intellectual disability, there was no particular analytic frame that could be used to examine the current policy context and hence, a thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In following best practice qualitative research, we have outlined each of the data collection and analytic steps (Levitt et al., 2018). The data was initially analysed using inductive thematic analysis to uncover broad themes related to current perceptions of ADEs and barriers to transition to open employment based on the presenting data (Hansen, 2006; Saldana, 2016). This involved a process of reading the data line-by-line and grouping the data into meaningful categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Minichiello et al., 2008). The data were also analysed to examine differences and agreement between the different participant groups (Lindsay et al., 2018). The next stage of analysis involved making connections between some of the themes (Minichiello et al., 2008). Given recent changes to national policy, the intersection between organisational and policy factors to create barriers was a particular focus of the analysis. To check the credibility and integrity of the findings, the final set of themes were presented and discussed in a workshop that included some of the interview participants (Levitt et al., 2018). The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics committee of Swinburne University of Technology.

Results

The findings are presented according to the major barriers in shifting from supported to open employment as revealed by the interview participants. These are:

1. People with an intellectual disability not feeling supported in an open employment workplace.
2. Open employers lacking the knowledge and experience in being able to successfully recruit and retain workers with an intellectual disability.
3. Insufficient career preparation for young people with an intellectual disability while they are still at school. They lack an understanding of different career options.
4. Inflexible funding models and supports that make it more difficult to transition between supported and open employment opportunities.

Lack of support in an open employment role

It was commented by a number of staff that they were uncertain as to whether supported employees would receive appropriate support when they commenced in an open employment role. There was concern that an open employer might not have the requisite skills and experience to handle what they termed “bad days” and some of the mental health challenges that people experience. It was also commented by staff that open employers would not be able to provide the same level of support learning new skills and tasks, which would create uncertainty. Elements of the working day that many people take for granted were something that might not be as readily understood for people with an intellectual disability who may require more structure and support to navigate expectations. Questions were raised about whether:

Supported Employees know when to take breaks? Do they have access to food and water? Will their needs be met and their rights upheld? Who can they speak to if they are not well or comfortable? (Staff 2)

How do employers balance the requirements of the role whilst not placing unreasonable expectations on Supported Employees? (Staff 3)

Being able to support employees with these issues and being able to navigate and structure their day was seen as very important. Staff currently providing that support within a supported work environment were unsure about whether this could be replicated in an open workplace environment. It was highlighted that transitions into open employment need to take place gradually, at a pace that suited the individual. This would enable

the person to acquire the skills and be able to adapt to the changed environment in a non-threatening manner. People were concerned that the tasks would not be explained in specific detail or broken down into meaningful smaller tasks that someone with an intellectual disability would be able to follow and succeed in completing. Alternatively, there was a concern that employers would not make the reasonable adjustments necessary and assume they were incapable of certain tasks due to prevailing stigma around capability. ADE staff were able to support employees to develop skills gradually on-the-job:

And that's what I'm observing and that's what I'm seeing. After six months of that, if that hasn't improved, then that will indicate what sort of work is going to be more suitable for them and it's probably not going to be car washing or anything to do with productivity or speed... We could practise some of those things in a secure environment, only for the ones who need it. We'd still have all the ones going out to do placements straight away, but for some, that would be so beneficial and just give us so many more options, but they would have to be quite a large space. (Staff 3)

For that reason, support staff would broker the pathway from the supported to open employment and were very specific and clear in the capabilities of the employees with intellectual disability. This increased the possibility of a successful transition and that they could have success with the allocated tasks:

... if we're going into an employer, we don't want to be ambiguous... So, if I was going to go into a factory, I would've already thought about what tasks would happen in this factory... you just be very specific about some ideas of things that our participants could do to generate those conversations in the beginning. (Staff 10)

It is not just the tasks that people need support with, it also includes some of the behavioural and social expectations of the workplace where people with intellectual disabilities need coaching and support:

Time management. Dealing with difficult other employees or customers. Being punctual. Being consistent in the work they do. Good hygiene. Having a work/life balance and not relying on others to assist. Expectations. Obligations. Working to a deadline, or working to a budget. (Staff 4)

Where it's always falling down for me is, as I said before, the money goes away or something and the support structure disappears, and all of a sudden you're in trouble. You've got a minor issue that's blowing up, and sometimes it can be just a misunderstanding, and you want to get on it quickly, but you need that mediator sometimes who can take them away and feel that they're being supported. (Stakeholder – Employer 3)

These concerns about understanding workplace culture and fitting in with other employees in an open employment workplace were shared by supported employees:

If I went into open employment, I might say the wrong thing to someone not meaning to say that... or I take offence when they get angry at me and it'd make it impossible for me to work, like if they bully me or whatever. Make it hard for me to do, get my job done, like harassment and stuff like that. I worry about open employment because you can't always get along with everybody... [if] I was in open employment I feel like I'd be on my own a little bit with a situation like that. Like, I could talk to my boss, but most bosses would say, "Don't worry, mate, get on with your job," or something like that. (Supported Employee 10)

It was felt that support on behavioural and cultural expectations is necessary for success in an open employment context. It was acknowledged that this type of support has a financial implication that needs to be accounted for in policy design and implementation. Ongoing support in the workplace was seen as critical for a successful long-term transition to open employment. It was suggested that policy reform consider how to embed this type of support within the organisation rather than at the individual level to promote sustainability as if individual funding ceases then this puts that person's open employment opportunity in jeopardy. There is another government service, Disability Employment Services (DES), that can also potentially support an individual with the transition from supported to open employment. However, it was felt that the level of support that can be received through DES was insufficient for people with moderate to higher needs:

... there is a lot of conversation about holistic supports and all of the extra things that they [DES] could be doing... but the way that DES are often modelled limits the amount of support they can provide each jobseeker. Our supported employees moving into open employment and their new employer often require intensive supports, and within the workplace, particularly at the start. This is often outside of the scope of what a DES provider can assist with. (Staff 12)

One supported employee reflects:

I have been to [DES] and they pushed me away because I was with Centrelink and they said, 'You don't need a job, you're on Centrelink [i.e. income support], so you don't need a job'.

Q: As in you're on the disability pension?

A: Yes. So, yeah, they pushed me away (Supported Employee 1)

This relates to the theme of inflexible funding arrangements stifling the transition from supported to open employment and challenges in building organisational capacity of open employers, which will be covered later in the results. The NDIS is unable to meet these needs at the moment in the way that all supported employees would like and neither is DES.

Employer knowledge and confidence

One of the common issues identified if transitioning to open employment related to whether the employer had the requisite knowledge and confidence to employ someone with an intellectual disability who had employment support needs. Some open employers felt that they did not have the knowledge and skills to support people with an intellectual disability and thus felt reluctant to recruit workers who required support. It was acknowledged that, in certain business areas, staff may not have the knowledge and confidence to properly support someone with an intellectual disability and this creates a potential barrier to open employment:

Easily, the biggest challenge is the employer understanding the disability or mental illness, and how it affects them in different situations within the community and the workplace. (Staff 3)

Sometimes efficiency's a key and if you've fallen behind it can be a bit harsh and it's not your fault. You're working a hundred percent but people think you're not and all that sort of stuff. It's key for the employer to know and start them off in a nice environment and over time that they will get better and more efficient at things and just need that guidance and a bit of understanding. (Staff 7)

I think some frustration if something doesn't go a team member's way, or they're not happy doing what they're doing, or they don't understand, whatever the case may be – I think challenges in that are for our teams to be able to manage that. I think you – for us as a business, I think we have to acknowledge that our warehouse workers, if I can explain it like that, they are, you know, are basic trained warehouse staff. (Stakeholder – Employer 5)

Even if there was the interest and willingness to employ people with an intellectual disability, it was also noted there are insufficient resources to guide employers:

The biggest downfall is employers not having a toolkit ready, and that toolkit can simply mean "people to call out to". It's not just "a book". It can be a phone number, it can be anything ... It can be a website. (Staff 3)

While it was noted there are resources it was felt that often this advice was generic and did not provide the

level of specificity required to properly equip organisations with the knowledge they need in supporting people with specific needs and in certain situations. ADE staff themselves took on the role of providing some of this specific support to open employers to build their confidence and knowledge of how to handle certain situations:

... it's about [our ADE] building those relationships with the employers so that if there's a hiccup, they can come to us ... there's lots of employers that will call and say, "Look, things are not going well. We really need you guys to step in and help us out here." (Staff 11)

The provision of support to employers by ADE staff is currently outside their funding remit and reflects on the need for greater capacity building efforts required for open employers to ensure appropriate working conditions for people with intellectual disabilities. For staff at the ADE this means that employers need to be "open minded, supportive and accepting" and that this culture needs to be represented across different levels of the organisation:

If the employer has that quality and has a really good culture at their workplace where they are inclusive and they're open minded and they're willing to perhaps change things, ... I think that that's important and sometimes that open employment may not have time, like they don't have the support services ... It very much comes down to their manager or management or the staff that work there to make sure that the person does feel included and does feel safe and happy at their workplace. (Staff 8)

Insufficient career preparation

There was a concern that school leavers with intellectual disabilities are not being properly prepared to enable meaningful employment. There was a view presented by some supported employees that more information about career options and possible work opportunities should be presented in school.

I planned to go on to university, and then I realised I don't know what I'm going to do in university, and I also figured it's not right for me because I don't have a set goal, I don't have a set job that I would like to work towards, so it's not going to be that beneficial. So, I decided that I would start some work, but that didn't happen, so I did a few courses instead and as much as I enjoyed them, it wasn't getting me the experience that I wanted to actually get a job. That's when I started looking for a course to do with gardening or land care that would lead me into that industry that I'd be interested in doing. (Supported Employee 8)

In the absence of school or formal employment support, information about work opportunities came through

family and friends. Moreso it was often these personal connections organising work opportunities. It was considered important that more information and connections to employment services are provided while young people are still at school.

In addition to lack of preparation while at school, work preparation opportunities that were obtained were insufficient in duration to enable proper learning. For instance, it was commented by staff and supported employees that two weeks is a common time period for work experience and that was just not long enough to develop new skills, particularly for people with intellectual disability. Further, interviewees commented on insufficient supervision and explanations about tasks:

I thought I was selling the products but I was on cashier, which is not my strength... They [staff at employer organisation] walked in front of me and did it themselves, didn't explain what they were doing or anything ... they didn't give me a chance, so I was only working there for two weeks... I wasn't really comfortable with that and I was always calling and asking, "How do I do this, how do I do that?" (Supported Employee 1)

Yeah, so it'd be great if they helped me for a week and gave me the chance to learn and teach me things so I'm comfortable and ready to be on my own and that's what they didn't do. If they did give me a chance, I would have been in that job longer, but because they didn't give me a chance, I wasn't in that job for very long. (Supported Employee 1)

This inadequate support in the workplace diminished their confidence that they would be able to succeed in an open employment situation. It highlights the need for employers and policy makers to be cognisant of the needs of people with a disability in designing these kinds work preparation schemes and opportunities, including school to work transition and work experience.

To address these barriers staff in the supported workplace would trial the actual tasks in the support workplace and then also conduct a trial in the new workplace:

We could practise some of those things in a secure environment. (Staff 2)

We'll do a little trial day, whether it's two hours, three hours, four hours, we'll bring our clients to you. (Staff 9)

Inflexible funding and support

One of the significant challenges identified by a number of staff was how NDIS funding can inhibit the transition from supported to open employment and also the transition back to supported employment as required. It was commented by staff that a number of people with

intellectual disabilities would like to try open employment but with the security of being able to return to a supported employment option if, for whatever reason, it did not suit their needs. There have been changes to the NDIS, which should mean that there is more flexibility in pursuing different employment options but there were still significant barriers experienced in trying to move between supported and open employment. One of the common reflections was the risk that if people with intellectual disabilities used their NDIS funding for supports that enable open employment then this may change their future funding options. Once working in open employment, it may mean less funding for employment supports is available at the next NDIS review.

... it does have to be taken into consideration that what if this person goes out into open employment and in six months' time it's not working for them, but they're registered as able to work out in employment, and will not be funded to go back into supported employment? And we've seen that happen. (Staff 12)

People with intellectual disabilities' functional abilities and support needs can vary over time and even fluctuate within a day. This requires some sensitivity and flexibility with respect to funding with varying levels of support and NDIS funding at different times. It was commented by staff that some people with intellectual disabilities like to return to supported employment after trying open employment and that policies should be structured to enable such flexibility:

Some people do go into open employment but they want to come back because they feel more supported and safe and it's familiar, and there is that extra support there. It can be really scary for people to go from support and employment to open employment because they may really want to do it but it's just too overwhelming. And it's for anyone that [when] you do start new work, you don't usually know the people, it's a new place environmentally. (Staff 8)

It was suggested that flexible funding could encourage more supported employees to try a role with an open employer. Related to the issue of flexibility, is the level of detail required for NDIS plans. There is a lot of work required by the ADE staff to provide significant detail regarding the employment support needs of people with an intellectual disability (in both open and supported settings) for their NDIS plans. If this detail is not provided, then the supports may not meet the funding criteria of "reasonable and necessary", which means the funding is not provided. This assessment can create a lot of stress for the individual, staff, and carers and family members. It also means that once people with intellectual disabilities have an

established plan with funding certainty there is great reluctance to change their plans. This can result in people with intellectual disabilities being locked into plans and arrangements that may no longer suit and can stifle new training and employment prospects. Any changes to plans can also result in long delays:

We've had people on the waiting list that have been appropriate. They've got employment supports in their plan. They've got employment goals in their plan, they've got everything. Everything ticks the box. But they haven't got the allocated funding in their plan as a line item. They go back to the planner or to the LAC [Local Area Co-ordinator], and it can sit there for six months until they get a plan review. And so that's a real barrier... [to] people being able to start and get some real meaningful employment outcomes. (Staff 10)

There a lot of different elements that have to be coordinated and this can cause delays and frustrations as experienced by supported employees who wish to try open employment opportunities:

I got a job trial out at [organisation] and was offered a place in that, but I had to sort out my NDIS funding for it, and then that was start of November last year. Of course, I would have had to have a plan review and being so close to Christmas they sort of went, "We won't do it until next year." (Supported Employee 3)

There were also comments in relation to the variation in Planners' interpretations of an individual's needs, which creates uncertainties of what people can expect. It was felt by many participants that there was a lot of inconsistency in plans and that some people with intellectual disabilities received funding packages that enabled both supported and open employment opportunities whereas other people with intellectual disabilities with similar needs were not offered such flexibility in their plans:

One 19-year-old participant with School Leaver Employment Supports [i.e. an NDIS funding item] had his funding ceased after a plan review because he had a supported employment position one day a week. This was very stressful for him and his family because he still needed a lot of support to build capacity to be independent in a workplace, and he still had a goal to move to open employment. Eventually he received funding for a further 6 months after some lobbying, but this still is not enough time for him to build enough independence to find an open employment role. (Staff 11)

Thus, despite the promise of a more flexible funding model, the NDIS was seen as restrictive and challenging to navigate with respect to supporting open employment, particularly the movement between supported and open employment. Lastly many people with intellectual disabilities also commented on the risk of

reduced payments and the disincentive this created for open employment roles. It was commented by staff that some people with intellectual disabilities were reluctant to work too many hours in an open employment role as it could reduce other government support payments (such as income support). If they were no longer able to work those hours then it could result in financial stress and hardship if other supports had already been lost.

Discussion

The movement from ADEs to open employment for people with an intellectual disability is extremely low with data showing only a 1% transition rate from ADEs to open employment (NDIA, 2020). This is similar with research from other countries showing low transition rates (Park, 2022). The data from this study assist in understanding the reasons for such low transition rates. There are a complex set of policy and organisational barriers that are preventing people with an intellectual disability from transitioning from ADEs to open employment. At the policy level, this includes inflexible and inadequate funding programs, lack of knowledge and capacity of open employers at the organisational level, and lack of training and support provided to supported employees to enable a successful transition, which is both an organisational and individual level challenge. The results suggest that the kind of flexibility and support required for successful employment together with previous work experience where they can try different jobs (Taubner et al., 2023) was not being commonly experienced.

The results highlight some of the broader policy constraints that inhibit movement from an ADE into open employment opportunities even when this is a desired outcome for both the supported employee and the ADE. The results corroborate other research conducted with people with disabilities more generally about the current challenges with funding programs (Devine et al., 2020). According to a number of interview participants, the NDIS is not providing the flexibility required to enable support packages available at the ADE to also be available when working in an open employment workplace. There is an interaction of an inflexible policy and unavailability of open employers with the requisite workplace environment. Thus, while the goal of the NDIS is about choice and control, the current employment system is not meeting the needs of people with an intellectual disability, which is another form of market failure (Malbon et al., 2018). This choice depends on the availability of a service provider (Carey et al., 2017).

What these results highlight is that there is a limited available market of service providers that can assist people with an intellectual disability with their goals related to sustainable employment with an open employer. These service gaps and limitations with the NDIS market are found across a range of health and social welfare supports and local level actors are addressing some of these market limitations through information provision, capacity building of providers, and service coordination (Green et al., 2022). These local level market stewardship activities (Green et al., 2022) were also evident in the data from this study, whereby staff from the ADEs were performing the coordination function of linking employees with open employment options. Relying on staff to broker relationships with an open employer for the benefit of one individual, or the experience internationally of relying on families (Park, 2022), is not a scalable solution where linkages are made to each organisation for each individual employee. Local area partnership solutions are required to provide local level market stewardship (Green et al., 2022) and ensure that the coordination between supported and open employment options are developed and transition pathways established that can provide on-going transition opportunities.

There is also confusion with the roles of the NDIS and DES, with DES meant to support people with disabilities in finding employment. However, similar to previous research, the DES program was not providing sufficient support for people with higher needs nor the support required to sustain employment and often family members are doing some of these tasks (Devine et al., 2020). There is a lack of coordination and alignment with the NDIS and DES with one of the consequences being that DES service providers are disincentivised from supporting people with intellectual disability given that more supports are required. Thus people with intellectual disabilities are remaining in ADE employment despite their intentions of seeking more community focused opportunities through social enterprises and open employment (Meltzer et al., 2020). What seems to be occurring is what has been described as “post-institutionalisation” where policy ideals and settings have shifted from segregation and yet the programs and services, such as special schools and ADEs, continue to be the dominant model (Altermark, 2018).

The results of this study highlight the importance of job training and support commencing early while young people with intellectual disabilities are still at school (Taubner et al., 2023). Evidence from the United States shows that the “blending and braiding” of funding and employment supports, across systems, is a key element in increasing the employment ratio of people with

disability (Murphy et al., 2014). Likewise, a wide body of research over several decades and countries has identified “inter-agency collaboration” as a key element of successful employment support, particularly for young people with disability moving from school to work (Kohler et al., 2017). Such approaches require the ability to blend employment supports and funding delivered by different providers. This is not possible if the principle of non-duplication is adopted, as this will add a layer of requirement to show how one support is different from another, which may differ from person to person, region to region, employer to employer. The results also illustrate how staff from ADEs themselves are developing pathways to open employers using their networks. Other studies have shown that family members take on these roles (Devine et al., 2020; Park, 2022). At the moment from these results, it would seem that ADE staff are doing this on case-by-case basis and further research could explore how to make such pathways scalable through a local level network approach (Green et al., 2022).

While this study has revealed some common challenges in transitioning from ADE to open employment, it is limited with respect to sample size and geographical region. It would be interesting to explore how certain individual and family characteristic intersect with the organisational and policy factors that were uncovered in this study. However, the sample size was insufficient to address how the intersection between individual differences and other factors influences employment mobility. This study was limited to analysing the interaction between organisation and policy barriers and further research could examine how individual micro factors interrelate with these meso and macro factors. While it is always difficult to generalise from a qualitative sample of this size, some of the barriers identified are similar to previous research, which suggests these are common experiences in Australia (Devine et al., 2020; Meltzer et al., 2020) and that these issues of low employment transition are experienced internationally (Park, 2022; Taubner et al., 2023). The results highlight areas that need policy reform and demonstrate the need for better ongoing quantitative data on transition from supported to open employment. Improved tracking data can ensure that policy reforms are meeting intended targets.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the need for further reform of the employment landscape for people with an intellectual disability. One of the interesting reflections from these data is the extent to which concepts of competitive and supported employment from employment policy continue to shape a segregating and unfair

employment system. Current Commonwealth government policy is still based on a binary division, established by the *Disability Services Act 1987* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1987), between people who can work “independently” and therefore entitled to support to access “open employment” (i.e., competitive, integrated employment), and people that are assumed to be unable to work in open or competitive environments and therefore expected to work in “supported employment” settings (ADEs). Thus, even with the introduction of the NDIS, which should have enabled greater choice and flexibility, it is very challenging for people with an intellectual disability to transition from ADEs to open employment contexts and they cannot access the supports required to successfully make this transition.

Policies and funding programs need to ensure that the types of supports and job customisation that enable employment in an ADE setting are made available in any employment setting. These results show that a binary approach to disability employment policy, programs, and services are not currently meeting the needs of people with an intellectual disability. This article has revealed some of the areas requiring immediate reform to increase employment transition rates. The results also illustrate that future research is required both in Australia and internationally to investigate how to scale local level connections between supported and open employment opportunities. The data from this study and international research also highlight that connections to open employers are being made on an individual basis and there is a need for further research on developing and testing scalable solutions for increasing employment transition rates.

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