



# What works in employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability

## An Indigenous-led evidence synthesis report

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May 2026

## Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which Centre for Inclusive Employment is located, in Melbourne's east and outer-east, and pay our respect to their Elders past and present. We are honoured to recognise our connection to Wurundjeri Country, history, culture, and spirituality through these locations, and strive to ensure that we operate in a manner that respects and honours the Elders and Ancestors of these lands. We also respectfully acknowledge Swinburne's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, alumni, partners and visitors.

We also acknowledge and respect the Traditional Owners of lands across Australia, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures, and heritage, and recognise the continuing sovereignties of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

This evidence synthesis was commissioned by the Centre for Inclusive Employment on behalf of the Department of Social Services.

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**Suggested citation:** Cooms, S., Leroy-Dyer, S., & Beetson, S. (2026). What works in employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability: An Indigenous-led Evidence synthesis report. Centre for Inclusive Employment. <https://doi.org/10.60836/54vk-e293>

**Keywords:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability; Indigenous employment; disability employment services; Indigenous-led practice; cultural safety; community-controlled organisations; co-design; workforce capability; employment participation; service design; disability supports; Indigenous data sovereignty.

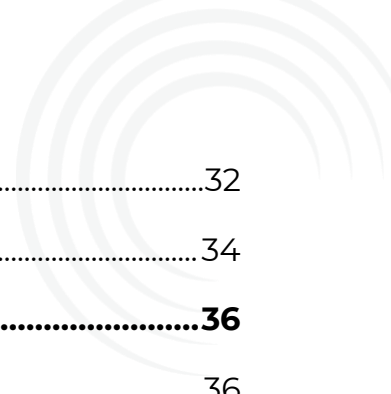
**Disclaimer:** This evidence synthesis was produced using a methodology commissioned by the Centre for Inclusive Employment.

The evidence was current at the time of production.

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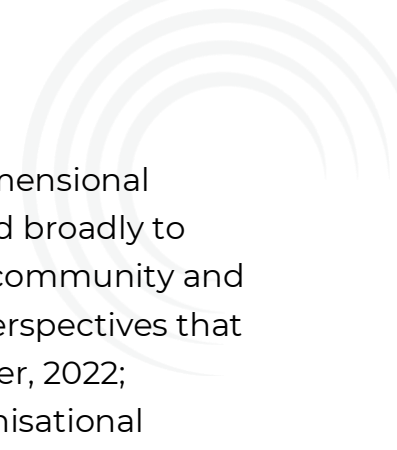
# Executive summary

This report examines what works in employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. The synthesis interprets lower employment rates as evidence of structural exclusion rather than individual deficit, with barriers produced through culturally unsafe systems, racism, inaccessible services and limited opportunities (Avery, 2018; Cooms et al., 2022; Temple et al., 2020). For government policy, the central finding is that employment, education and training pathways need to be treated as connected service systems: they work when Indigenous-led, culturally grounded and community-controlled approaches centre culture, community authority and self-determination in participation (AIATSIS, 2020; FPDNA, 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2020; NACCHO, 2021).

## Background and context

This report examines what works in employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability, with direct relevance to education and training services that shape employment readiness, transition, participation and retention (Hunter & Biddle, 2012; Leroy-Dyer, 2022). Here, employment services and supports include programs and systems that assist peoples with disability to prepare for, access and sustain employment, including job readiness programs, education and training pathways, case management, NDIS-related supports and workplace supports (AIHW, 2023; Productivity Commission, 2018).

Employment rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability are significantly lower than for other groups. The evidence attributes these disparities to intersectional disadvantage shaped by systemic discrimination, including culturally unsafe services, racism, inaccessible systems and limited employment opportunities, rather than individual capability (Cooms et al., 2022; Cooms et al., 2024; NIAA, 2020). This pattern is consistent with broader accounts of repeated disadvantage across justice, homelessness, child protection, education and disability systems, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living with disability (Cooms et al., 2022; Cooms et al., 2024; FPDNA, 2016; NIAA, 2020). Avery (2018) explains how repeated exclusion can produce apprehended discrimination, where expectations of further discrimination become a rational basis for disengaging from services and employment systems. This is interpreted as a signal of service design and policy settings that have not yet earned trust or demonstrated cultural safety, rather than as client failure (Avery, 2018; Temple et al., 2020).



In this synthesis, employment outcomes are defined as multi-dimensional rather than limited to employment status. Employment is framed broadly to include paid and unpaid work, recognising contributions to kin, community and Country as central to participation; this aligns with Indigenous perspectives that understand work as relational and context-dependent (Leroy-Dyer, 2022; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Walter & Andersen, 2013). Dominant organisational systems tend to privilege economically measurable outputs, leaving relational and cultural labour largely unrecognised. This misalignment contributes to cultural load, where First Nations employees undertake additional, often unacknowledged work to sustain cultural safety, navigate institutional systems and maintain relationships across community and workplace contexts (Avery, 2016, 2018; D'Aprano et al., 2024; Gilroy et al., 2023; Leroy-Dyer & Olssen, 2026; Paradies, 2016). For policy, recognising these broader forms of work is necessary because narrow labour-market measures risk undervaluing the very forms of relational contribution that make services usable and trusted.

Standard indicators such as employment rates, job entry and retention remain important, but the evidence indicates they are insufficient on their own to capture meaningful participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability (AIHW, 2023; Productivity Commission, 2018). Across the literature, outcomes also include sustained engagement over time, the quality and cultural safety of employment environments, and the extent to which employment aligns with individual, family and community contexts (Leroy-Dyer, 2022; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Walter & Andersen, 2013). This includes non-linear and intermittent pathways into and through employment, shaped by changing health, cultural obligations and community responsibilities. Taken together, these measures position employment participation as social, cultural and economic contribution, clarifying why policy assessment needs to look beyond short-term labour market status.

Mainstream, standardised employment service models are widely described as ineffective in this context because they often fail to account for relational, cultural and community-based factors shaping participation (Leroy-Dyer, 2026a). In contrast, Indigenous-led and self-determined approaches are consistently associated with stronger and more sustainable outcomes, particularly where Indigenous-owned and community-controlled organisations embed cultural values, relationality and collective responsibility into practice (Bennett et al., 2026; Cooms et al., 2025; Eva et al., 2023; Leroy-Dyer, 2022; Leroy-Dyer & Olssen, 2026; NACCHO, 2021). The evidence base is also dispersed: critical knowledge sits across grey literature, community-led research and Indigenous-authored scholarship, not only in academic evaluations. Indigenous Knowledge



systems foreground cultural continuity, relational accountability and collective agency as central to understanding barriers and enablers of employment (Leroy-Dyer, 2026a; Leroy-Dyer, 2026b; Martin, 2008; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Williams, 2023). Overall, the evidence supports a shift away from compliance-driven models toward Indigenous-led, culturally grounded and locally accountable approaches.

## Purpose and audience

The report addresses ongoing inequity in paid employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. Despite the availability of employment services and supports, many peoples experience barriers to accessing, engaging with and sustaining employment, driven largely by culturally unsafe systems, limited flexibility and approaches that do not reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Consistent with Gilroy et al. (2017) and Soldatic (2018), Programs that prioritise standardised compliance over relationships can reduce engagement. By contrast, Indigenous-led and culturally grounded practice places trust, community accountability, and local context at the centre of service delivery (Avery, 2018; Lowitja Institute, 2017).

This evidence synthesis identifies what works, what does not work and where gaps remain, to inform government policy, service design and education-to-employment pathways that are culturally safe, strengths-based and responsive to lived realities. The audience includes policymakers, education, employment and disability service providers, employers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, researchers and practitioners applying Indigenous-led evidence in practice.

## Key points

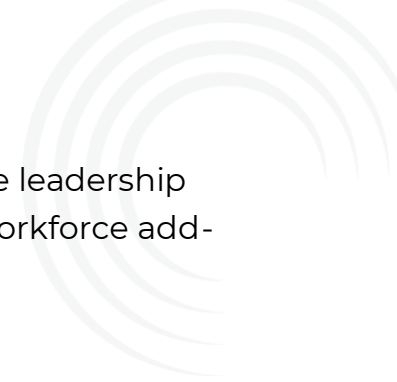
- Employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability remain significantly lower than for other groups.
- These disparities are driven by structural barriers, including culturally unsafe services, racism, inaccessible systems, and limited employment opportunities.
- Mainstream employment service models are typically standardised, compliance-driven, and misaligned with Indigenous social, cultural, and community contexts.
- Indigenous-led and community-controlled approaches consistently demonstrate stronger, more sustainable outcomes by embedding cultural



authority, trauma-informed practice, relational accountability and local knowledge.

- Cultural safety, relational approaches, and trust are foundational conditions for engagement, not supplementary service features.
- Racism often operates through everyday assumptions and interactions, with outcomes shaped by how these moments are recognised and responded to in practice.
- Flexible, context-responsive service delivery improves accessibility and enables ongoing participation by aligning services with lived realities.
- Employment, education and training outcomes are strengthened where services recognise kinship systems, cultural obligations, community contexts and connection to Country.
- Co-designed approaches are more relevant, accessible, and effective than externally imposed program models, particularly where decision-making authority is shared and ongoing.
- Indigenous-owned and community-controlled organisations provide culturally grounded environments that support both engagement and retention.
- Workforce capability remains a key system constraint, with gaps in cultural understanding, continuity, and the application of culturally-informed practice.
- Current workforce training approaches are often episodic and compliance-driven, with limited evidence and resourcing for sustained, practice-based workforce development
- The evidence base is fragmented, with critical insights located across grey literature, community-led research, and Indigenous-authored scholarship rather than formal evaluation studies.

Employment includes both paid and unpaid contributions, with care for kin, community and Country central to participation (Leroy-Dyer, 2022; Walter & Andersen, 2013). However, organisational systems prioritise economically measurable outputs, leaving relational and cultural labour undervalued. This contributes to cultural load, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees undertake additional, often unrecognised work to sustain culturally safe and effective service environments (Avery, 2018; Brown et al., 2020; Leroy-Dyer & Olssen, 2026). There is limited evidence on how Indigenous leadership operates within employment systems, particularly in relation to Indigenous disability leadership and its impact on outcomes; this gap has direct



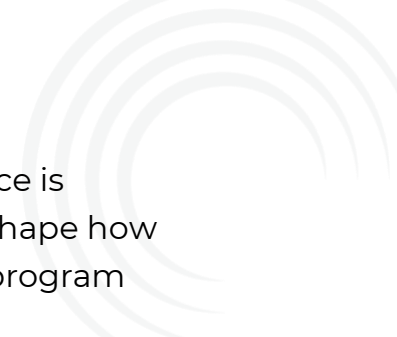
implications for education, training and workforce policy because leadership pathways are part of the service infrastructure, not an optional workforce add-on (FPDNA, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013).

## Key findings

Sources were prioritised using The Australian Education Research Organisation's Standards of Evidence framework (AERO) for assessing the strength of education evidence through rigour and relevance. The framework supports transparent judgements about whether a policy, practice or program is likely to be effective in a particular context, while recognising that research design needs to follow the research question, context and form of knowledge being generated. However, for research involving Indigenous peoples, AERO's evidence framework needs to be applied alongside Indigenous-led research principles, cultural authority, community accountability and Indigenous Data Sovereignty, so that evidence is not judged only through conventional causal evaluation hierarchies. The AERO framework was applied through an Indigenist research lens to prioritise Indigenous-led and community-controlled evidence. Remaining materials were then assessed based on their relevance to the review question and their usefulness for informing policy and practice. Findings were generated through relational thematic analysis: evidence was immersed in, patterns were noticed and mapped across sources, then clustered into themes and grounded through Indigenous Storywork and yarning so meanings stayed connected to context and cultural accountability (AIATSIS, 2020; Martin, 2008; Smith, 2021). Themes were then evaluated by considering both methodological strength and cultural authority, and synthesised as convergent mechanisms and enabling conditions rather than as a hierarchy of study designs or isolated intervention effects. This gives government policy a defensible basis for acting on Indigenous-led evidence even where conventional outcome evaluations remain limited (Lowitja Institute, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020).

## What works

Across both grey and academic literature, employment services and supports are more effective when they are Indigenous-led, community-controlled and culturally grounded (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; NACCHO, 2021). Where authority, governance and decision-making sit with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, services are more accessible, more trusted and more likely to sustain engagement over time. The evidence attributes this to practice that embeds cultural Knowledges, recognises collective responsibility and prioritises relationships and accountability to community over transactional delivery (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024; Gilroy et al., 2023; Lowitja



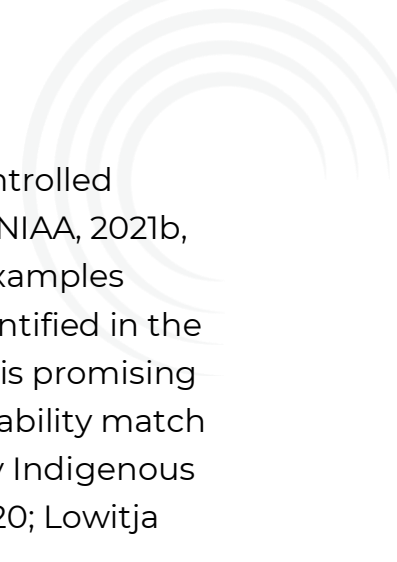
Institute, 2020; NACCHO, 2021; Talbot et al., 2025). Effective practice is characterised by shifts in governance and accountability that reshape how services operate, rather than by the implementation of discrete program components.

Cultural safety is a foundational condition for engagement. Services that acknowledge history, address racism and respect diverse understandings of disability create environments where participation becomes possible; without this, peoples may reasonably disengage (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024; Talbot et al., 2025; Temple et al., 2020). Across the evidence, culturally safe services are those where peoples feel respected and believed, rather than judged or managed, and where safety is maintained in everyday interactions rather than asserted through policy statements (Avery, 2018; Lowitja Institute, 2017). This positions cultural safety as a precondition, not an add-on, shaping whether peoples will engage with education, employment and disability pathways at all.

Relational and trust-based practice is a key mechanism through which services support participation. Continuity of staff, local presence, time invested in relationships, and respectful communication are consistently linked to stronger engagement (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024; Gilroy et al., 2023; Talbot et al., 2025). Trust is built over time and shaped by historical and institutional experiences, so services need to demonstrate consistency, credibility and relational accountability rather than relying on episodic contact (Avery, 2018; Walter & Andersen, 2013). This includes how moments of misunderstanding or bias are handled, with trust strengthened through recognition, accountability and repair rather than the assumption that good intent is sufficient. Overall, relational practice is understood as a core requirement for engagement, rather than an optional interpersonal approach.

Flexible and context-responsive service design supports engagement because it aligns service delivery with local realities, family and cultural obligations, health fluctuations and community contexts. The evidence shows flexibility enables pathways to shift over time, rather than constraining participation through rigid rules, fixed timelines or linear program models (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024; FPDNA, 2016; Veli-Gold et al., 2023). Flexibility is not simply a 'nice to have'. It is a core part of whether education, training, and employment services remain accessible and work well over time.

These findings are reflected in emerging policy initiatives such as the NIAA's remote employment reforms and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations' Reconnection, Employment and Learning (REAL) pre-



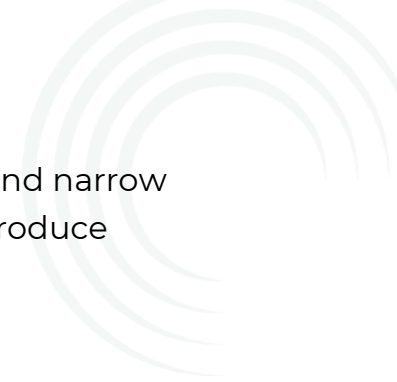
release employment program, which emphasise community-controlled delivery, early engagement and relational support (DEWR, 2025; NIAA, 2021b, 2025a, 2025b). While outcome evidence remains limited, these examples illustrate how policy is beginning to align with the conditions identified in the evidence base. The key evaluative point is that policy movement is promising only when implementation resourcing, governance and accountability match the relational and community-controlled conditions identified by Indigenous organisations and Indigenous-authored scholarship (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020; NACCHO, 2021).

## **What doesn't work**

Standardised, compliance-driven and one-size-fits-all models are poorly aligned with Indigenous contexts. These approaches tend to prioritise administrative efficiency over relationships, restrict flexibility, and fail to recognise cultural obligations and collective ways of participating in work, which can intensify cultural load for First Nations employees expected to bridge system and cultural gaps without formal recognition (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024; Gilroy et al., 2023; Veli-Gold et al., 2023). As a result, services are frequently experienced as inaccessible, unsafe or irrelevant by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. Overall, these models undermine the conditions needed for engagement, trust, safety, and local accountability that support effective employment and education pathways.

Culturally unsafe environments, including experiences of racism, judgement and deficit framing, undermine trust and contribute to disengagement and service avoidance, including employment-related settings (Avery, 2018; Paradies, 2016; Temple et al., 2020). Unexamined assumptions within service interactions can reinforce disengagement, particularly where cultural responsibilities are misinterpreted or reframed as barriers. Where services ignore cultural context or treat disability solely through western administrative frameworks, peoples are more likely to disengage entirely (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024). This makes cultural safety an evaluative test of service quality, not a general statement of good intent.

Short-term, fragmented and throughput-focused arrangements further weaken engagement. The evidence shows frequent staff turnover, inconsistent contact and externally imposed requirements disrupt relationships and break trust, reinforcing perceptions that services are unaccountable to community (Gilroy et al., 2023; Talbot et al., 2025; Veli-Gold et al., 2023). In practice, these conditions make it difficult to sustain the continuity and relational accountability identified elsewhere in the evidence as necessary for



participation. For policy, this indicates that short funding cycles and narrow output measures can actively work against the conditions that produce engagement.

## Evidence gaps

While there is strong and consistent evidence on barriers and enabling conditions, direct evaluations of employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability remain limited. Much of the strongest knowledge is qualitative, context-specific and located in Indigenous-authored research, community-led practice and grey literature, rather than outcome-focused evaluations (AIHW, 2023; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020). There is emerging but less developed evidence on the operation and outcomes of Indigenous-led and community-controlled employment models, including how these approaches sustain participation over time (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Gilroy et al., 2023; Talbot et al., 2025). A significant gap remains in evidence on Indigenous disability leadership, cultural load, and the mechanisms through which effective practices translate into long-term employment, education and training outcomes (AHRC, 2019; FPDNA, 2016; Langton et al., 2012; NIAA, 2020). Addressing these gaps requires Indigenous-led research, evaluation and data sovereignty approaches aligned with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities and ways of understanding work, inclusion and participation (AIATSIS, 2020; Lovett, 2016; MNWIDSC, 2018).

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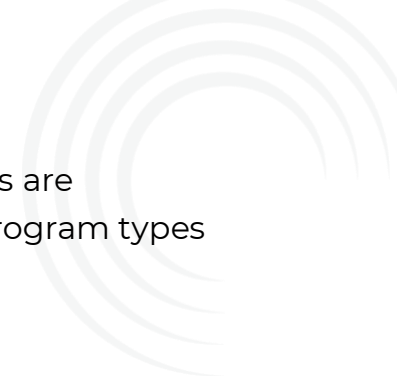
# Introduction

Employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability remain significantly unequal. While employment is widely recognised as a pathway to economic security, wellbeing and self-determination, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability continue to face barriers to accessing, engaging with and sustaining employment (Leroy-Dyer, 2016, 2022). These barriers are understood not as the result of individual capability, but as shaped by broader structural factors, including culturally unsafe services, racism, inaccessible systems, and limited opportunities in labour markets (Cooms et al., 2025; Gilroy et al., 2013, 2016, 2023; Productivity Commission, 2020). This framing matters for government policy because it directs attention from individual remediation toward system design, governance and accountability.

This review addresses the limited effectiveness of existing employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability (Gilroy et al., 2017; Productivity Commission, 2018; Soldatic, 2018). Many current models are standardised and compliance-driven and do not reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. As a result, services are often difficult to access, poorly aligned with community contexts, and less effective in supporting long-term employment outcomes (Hunter & Biddle, 2012; Jordan, 2016). The review is guided by the following question:

## ***What works in employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability?***

To address this question, our Indigenous research team draws on a structured synthesis of academic literature alongside targeted analysis of grey literature, policy documents and Indigenous-authored sources (Adams et al., 2017; Paez, 2017). Consistent with the project approach, Indigenous Knowledges and lived experience are treated as central to defining and interpreting evidence, rather than as supplementary to conventional evidence hierarchies (AIATSIS, 2020; Rigney, 1999; Smith, 2021). The service context examined includes employment services, disability supports, education and training pathways, and related programs designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability to prepare for, access, and maintain employment (AIHW, 2023; Productivity Commission, 2018). This includes job readiness programs, case management, workplace supports, services delivered through systems such as the NDIS, and initiatives led by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Indigenous-owned enterprises (Cooms et al., 2025; NACCHO, 2021). Culturally responsive service delivery, co-designed programs, workforce



development initiatives, and Indigenous-led employment models are understood as policy-relevant approaches rather than isolated program types (Lowitja Institute, 2020; NIAA, 2020).

## Aims

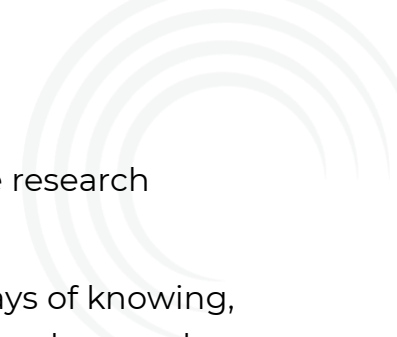
The aim of this project is to identify what works, what does not work and where gaps remain in employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. The project is grounded in Indigenous-led evidence principles, which recognise that evidence should be assessed for cultural authority, community relevance, and practical usefulness, alongside conventional measures of methodological quality (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020). Specifically, the project seeks to:

- identify effective practices, interventions, and service models that improve employment outcomes
- examine the conditions under which these approaches are most effective
- assess the quality and relevance of the available evidence, including academic, policy, and community-based sources
- highlight gaps in the evidence base, particularly in relation to Indigenous leadership and Indigenous disability leadership
- inform the design of employment services that are Indigenous-led, culturally safe, and responsive to community contexts

In line with the project scope, Indigenous Knowledges, lived experience and Indigenous-authored evidence are positioned as central to defining and understanding what works (AIATSIS, 2020; Martin, 2008; Rigney, 1999; Smith, 2021).

## Methodology

An evidence synthesis was undertaken to understand what works in employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability, drawing on evidence that reflects lived realities, community priorities and Indigenous authority. The review specifically focused on literature relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living with disability and the employment, education, training and support systems that shape participation and opportunity. Literature focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment more broadly was excluded where disability was not substantively addressed. The Indigenous research team systematically searched and synthesised evidence published predominantly within the last six



years, including peer-reviewed and grey literature relevant to the research questions (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020).

The methodology is grounded in Indigenous strengths-based ways of knowing, being and doing, recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples hold enduring Knowledges about work, contribution, care and responsibility (Leroy-Dyer, 2022; Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2023; Martin, 2008). This includes Knowledges formed through lived experience of systems and structures that can both enable and constrain participation (Cooms, 2023; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025). Rather than treating evidence as neutral or detached, this synthesis understands evidence as relational, situated and shaped by histories of colonisation, governance, culture and community priorities (Graham, 2014; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Moreton-Robinson, 2016). Evidence strength is assessed through its ability to explain what happens in community and service contexts, rather than through alignment with conventional evaluation hierarchies alone.

The evidence synthesis was designed to align with CIE evidence standards while resisting deficit-based framings and narrow hierarchies of evidence that have historically marginalised Indigenous Knowledges and experiences (Nakata, 2007; Rigney, 1999; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). Across the review, Indigenous-authored, Indigenous-led and community-grounded sources were treated as authoritative where relevant to the research questions (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Nakata, 2007; Rigney, 1999). Evidence was assessed not only for methodological rigour, but also for cultural grounding, Indigenous authority, relevance and practical usefulness in informing employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. This approach strengthens the policy utility of the synthesis because it recognises the forms of knowledge most likely to explain service trust, uptake and sustainability (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020).

To support transparency and replicability, detailed methodological documentation is provided in the appendices. This includes the evidence search strategy, search terms, databases and grey literature sources consulted, inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening and selection procedures, and evidence quality assessment processes. The appendices also outline how evidence was mapped and assessed against the CIE evidence model alongside Indigenous-led considerations relating to cultural grounding, community relevance and practical application (AIATSIS, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020). Supporting materials, including screening workbooks and evidence mapping tables aligned to each research question, are also included in the What works in employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. Appendix to evidence synthesis (Cooms et al, 2026).

# Findings

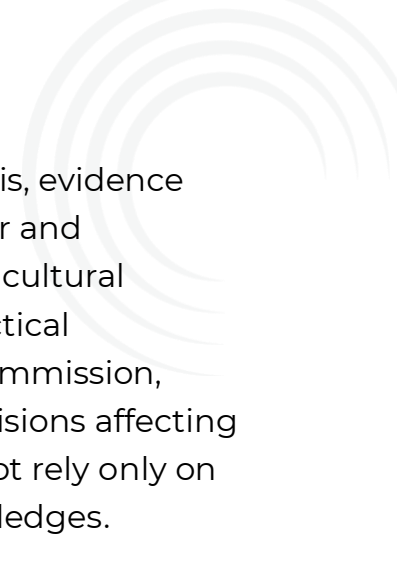
A total of 131 publications were reviewed and assessed using the AERO framework. Of these, 104 were identified as either Close Fit or Adjacent Fit to the review question. Many of these sources included methodological literature and broader evidence relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment, rather than material focused specifically on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability.

The findings presented in this synthesis are drawn from patterns identified across 35 key sources directly relevant to employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. These included 21 peer-reviewed journal articles and 14 grey literature sources, such as policy documents, practice evidence, and community-informed materials.

Findings are organised according to each research question and focus on effective practices, enabling conditions, barriers, service models and workforce considerations identified across the evidence base. This structure allows the report to move from description to evaluation by identifying not only what appears to work, but the system conditions that make it work (Lowitja Institute, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020).

Across the literature, the strongest and most consistent findings relate to the importance of Indigenous-led, culturally safe and relational approaches to employment participation and support (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Gilroy et al., 2023; NACCHO, 2021). Effective practices commonly include holistic and wraparound supports, culturally safe workplaces, flexible service delivery, sustained mentoring and navigation support, trauma-informed practice, and community-controlled approaches. The findings also highlight the importance of Indigenous governance, long-term relationship building and the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges in the design and delivery of employment and disability services (AIATSIS, 2020; FPDNA, 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2020). Where possible, the findings identify specific elements, implementation processes and outcomes associated with effective practices and interventions. This includes consideration of the relational, cultural and structural conditions that contribute to effectiveness across different contexts and communities.

Overall, the evidence base is mixed in methodological design and quality. While some studies demonstrate strong methodological rigour and formal evaluation processes, much of the evidence consists of qualitative studies, practice-based evidence, community reports and grey literature. Consistent with the



Indigenous methodological approach underpinning this synthesis, evidence quality was assessed not only according to methodological rigour and alignment with the AERO evidence model, but also according to cultural grounding, Indigenous authority, community relevance and practical usefulness (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020). This balanced assessment is necessary because policy decisions affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability cannot rely only on evidence forms that have historically excluded Indigenous Knowledges.

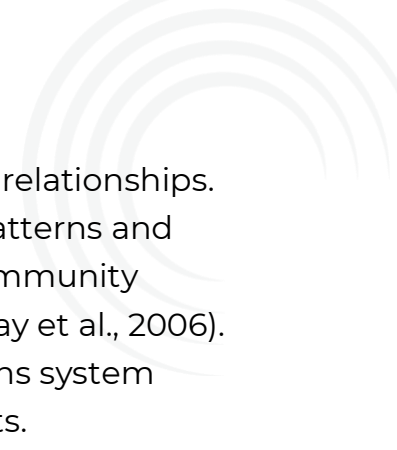
## Summary of evidence strength

Overall, the evidence base is growing but remains uneven. There is strong and consistent evidence identifying barriers such as culturally unsafe services, rigid system design and racism, as well as enablers including Indigenous leadership, relational practice and flexibility (AHRC, 2019; Cooms, 2023; Lowitja Institute, 2017; NIAA, 2020; Paradies, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2018; Temple et al., 2020). There is emerging but less developed evidence on the operation of Indigenous-led employment models and the mechanisms through which effective practices lead to sustained employment outcomes (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024; Eva et al., 2023; Gilroy et al., 2023; Langton et al., 2012; Leroy-Dyer, 2022; Talbot et al., 2025; Temple et al., 2020; Veli-Gold et al., 2023). The evidence is sufficient to identify key enabling conditions for policy design, while recognising that it does not yet support precise measurement of long-term impacts across all contexts.

There is limited evidence on long-term employment outcomes, Indigenous disability leadership within employment systems, and how system-level reforms translate into measurable employment gains (Hunter, 2014; Jordan, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2020). These gaps reflect broader fragmentation between disability, employment and workforce policy, and point to priorities for future Indigenous-led research and evaluation consistent with principles of Indigenous data sovereignty and ethical research practice (AIATSIS, 2020; Beetson et al., 2020; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Gilroy et al., 2023; Lovett, 2016; MNWIDSC, 2018; Talbot et al., 2025; Veli-Gold et al., 2023). For education services, this indicates a need to track pathways across learning, training, transition and employment rather than evaluating each system in isolation.

## Overview of the evidence

The available evidence on employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability is limited, particularly when seeking formal evaluations that directly measure employment outcomes. As a result,



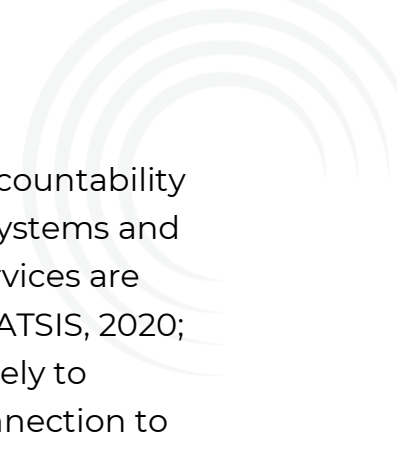
the review did not rely solely on studies testing cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, a structured approach was used to identify consistent patterns and shared findings across academic research, policy documents, community reports, and Indigenous-led evidence (Petticrew et al., 2006; Popay et al., 2006). This approach is appropriate because the policy question concerns system conditions and mechanisms, not only discrete intervention effects.

Across the evidence, there is strong agreement about the conditions that support or hinder employment participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. The findings show that employment outcomes are shaped not only by individual supports, but also by how services are designed, whether they are culturally safe, and the quality of relationships between people, communities and institutions (Gilroy et al., 2013; Gilroy et al., 2017; Martin, 2008; Walter & Andersen, 2013). This agreement across sources strengthens the conclusion that service design, governance and relational accountability are core determinants of outcome quality.

While there are relatively few formal program evaluations, the evidence consistently highlights similar themes across Indigenous-authored research, community-led evidence, policy analysis and qualitative studies (AIHW, 2023; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020; Rigney, 1999). Overall, effective employment support is not based on one single program or intervention. Positive outcomes are more likely when several conditions work together, including Indigenous leadership, cultural safety, strong relationships, flexibility and better alignment between systems and services (AIATSIS, 2020; NACCHO, 2021). These patterns appear consistently across the evidence base, even where outcomes are not formally measured. This gives confidence that the findings reflect broader and recurring experiences across different communities, services and contexts, rather than isolated examples.

## **Indigenous-led and community-controlled approaches**

The strongest and most consistent finding across the evidence is that Indigenous-led and community-controlled approaches create more accessible, trusted and sustainable pathways to employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability (Cooms et al., 2025; Eva et al., 2023; NACCHO, 2021). When services are designed, governed and delivered by Indigenous organisations, they are more likely to reflect community priorities, cultural responsibilities and local understandings of work, contribution and participation (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024; Talbot et al., 2025). This is analytically important because it locates effectiveness in governance and accountability, not only in frontline practice.



These approaches are effective because decision-making and accountability remain within community rather than being driven by external systems and requirements. Indigenous leadership influences not only how services are delivered, but how employment systems themselves operate (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2017). Indigenous-led organisations are more likely to recognise the importance of kinship, collective responsibility, connection to Country and long-term relationships when supporting employment participation (Martin, 2008; Walter & Andersen, 2013). They also tend to prioritise trust-based and ongoing support rather than short-term or transactional service models. For policy, this means commissioning arrangements need to resource Indigenous authority, not merely consult it.

The evidence further shows that Indigenous-led organisations often create workforce practices that are more culturally safe and responsive. This includes employing Indigenous staff, providing culturally-informed supervision and supporting organisational learning grounded in community experience and knowledge (Lowitja Institute, 2017; Walter & Andersen, 2013). These practices create the conditions for cultural safety to be put into practice in everyday service delivery, rather than remaining an organisational aspiration.

While much of the evidence is based on qualitative research, practice evidence and community experience rather than formal outcome evaluations, the findings are highly consistent across sources. Overall, the evidence indicates that Indigenous leadership and community control are foundational conditions for effective employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability (AIHW, 2023; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Gilroy et al., 2023; Productivity Commission, 2020; Talbot et al., 2025). This consistency provides a defensible basis for policy settings that prioritise Indigenous-led delivery while strengthening future outcome evaluation.

## **Cultural safety as a precondition for engagement**

The evidence consistently identifies cultural safety as essential for engagement with employment and disability services. Experiences of racism, judgement, stereotyping and cultural misunderstanding are commonly reported as reasons Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples disengage from or avoid services, including employment-related programs and workplaces (Avery, 2016; Brown et al., 2020; Paradies, 2016). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability, these experiences are often intensified by the combined impacts of racism and disability-related exclusion (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Cooms et al., 2024; D'Aprano et al., 2024; Gilroy, 2016; Soldatic, 2018; Temple et al., 2020). The

evaluative implication is that access policy cannot be separated from cultural safety and anti-racist practice.

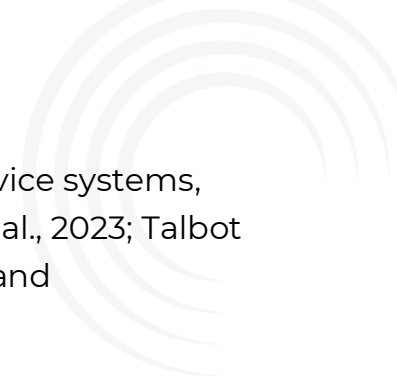
The evidence shows that culturally unsafe environments undermine trust and reduce participation, regardless of the intentions of the service or program. Experiences of disrespect, racism and exclusion are linked to disengagement from employment and disability supports (Avery, 2018; Gilroy et al., 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2017; Paradies, 2016). In contrast, services that demonstrate cultural respect, acknowledge historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation, and adapt to different understandings of disability are more likely to support ongoing engagement and participation (AHMAC, 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2017). This distinguishes cultural safety from cultural awareness: policy needs to require observable changes in service relationships, decision-making and accountability.

Across the evidence, cultural safety is not described as a checklist or one-off activity. Instead, it is built and maintained over time through respectful relationships, accountability, responsiveness and ongoing reflection (AIATSIS, 2020; Leroy-Dyer & Olssen, 2026; Martin, 2008; Ramsden, 2002). The findings indicate that cultural safety is a foundational condition for effective employment and disability services, rather than an optional addition to service delivery. For education and training services, this means culturally safe engagement is part of learning access and retention, not a separate equity activity.

## **Relational and trust-based service delivery**

Relational practice emerges as a central mechanism through which employment services become accessible and effective (Eva et al., 2023; Leroy-Dyer & Olssen, 2026). Across disability service, workforce, and Indigenous-authored sources, trust is consistently built through continuity of relationships, time, consistent staff, and respectful communication (Avery, 2018; Cooms et al., 2024; Cooms et al., 2025; Gilroy et al., 2013). Short-term, transactional or compliance-driven service models are widely described as misaligned with how trust is established and maintained (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024). This indicates that relational practice is an implementation mechanism, not merely a service style.

Relational approaches recognise that engagement occurs within family, community and historical contexts, not in isolation. Where services invest in relationships rather than throughput, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability are more likely to remain connected and to navigate complex systems over time (Cooms, 2023; Cooms et al., 2025). Relational



practice is therefore understood as a core feature of effective service systems, not an optional interpersonal skill (D'Aprano et al., 2024; Gilroy et al., 2023; Talbot et al., 2025). In practice, this requires funding models, caseloads, and performance measures that support continuity and trust.

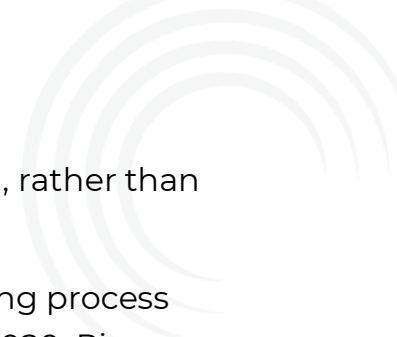
## **Flexible and context-responsive service design**

The evidence consistently identifies flexibility as an important condition for supporting participation in employment services. Rigid program rules, fixed timelines and strict eligibility requirements are commonly described as barriers, particularly when services do not take into account family responsibilities, changes in health, remoteness or the complexity of navigating multiple systems (Leroy-Dyer, 2016, 2022). Across the evidence, rigid approaches disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability by treating culturally grounded responsibilities, changing circumstances or non-linear pathways as non-compliance (Avery, 2018; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Cooms et al., 2024; D'Aprano et al., 2024; FPDNA, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2023; Veli-Gold et al., 2023). This is a design problem, not a motivation problem.

In contrast, services that adapt delivery methods, participation requirements and support pathways to local and individual circumstances are more accessible and more likely to maintain ongoing engagement. The evidence shows that flexibility is not about lowering expectations, but about designing services that better reflect the realities of peoples' lives. This includes adapting how and when support is provided, recognising shared decision-making, and allowing employment pathways to change over time in response to people's circumstances and goals (Avery, 2018; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Cooms et al., 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024; Disability Royal Commission, 2023; FPDNA, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013; Productivity Commission, 2011; Veli-Gold et al., 2023). For education services, the same principle applies to attendance, assessment, transition and support arrangements.

## **Co-design and shared decision-making**

The evidence consistently shows that services designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more relevant, more culturally appropriate and more trusted than services designed externally without community involvement (AHRC, 2019; FPDNA, 2016; NIAA, 2020). Co-design approaches that involve communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability, and Indigenous organisations in decision-making are more likely to produce services that reflect local Knowledges, priorities and understandings of disability, work and participation (Avery, 2018; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024; FPDNA, 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2017; Talbot et al., 2025). Co-



design is most effective when it involves shared decision-making, rather than only gathering feedback.

Across the evidence, effective co-design is described as an ongoing process rather than a one-off consultation or feedback activity (AIATSIS, 2020; Rigney, 1999). Services are more responsive, trusted and effective when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are involved throughout the design, delivery and ongoing improvement of programs and supports (AHRC, 2019; NIAA, 2020; Rigney, 1999). In contrast, services developed without genuine shared decision-making are more likely to be experienced as externally imposed, culturally disconnected or poorly aligned with community needs and priorities, contributing to lower engagement, reduced trust and lower uptake (AHRC, 2019; FPDNA, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2023; Talbot et al., 2025). This makes shared authority a quality criterion for policy design.

## **Workforce capability and system conditions**

Workforce capability is identified as a system-level condition shaping the effectiveness of employment services. The evidence shows that limited cultural capability, high workforce turnover and inadequate organisational support can undermine service quality and continuity (ANAO, 2017; Gilroy et al., 2017; Talbot et al., 2025). These issues affect both mainstream and Indigenous service settings, particularly in regional, rural and remote contexts where workforce shortages and service instability are more pronounced (AIHW, 2023; Gilroy et al., 2023; Talbot et al., 2025; Veli-Gold et al., 2023). This means workforce capability must be treated as a policy and funding issue, not simply an individual staff training issue.

The evidence also indicates that workforce capability is shaped by organisational structures, funding arrangements, supervision, training, and the extent to which Indigenous roles and Knowledges are recognised and respected within services (Cooms & Okimoto, 2025; Mohamed, 2021; NACCHO, 2021). Services that resource cultural supervision, stable employment conditions, trauma-informed practice and Indigenous leadership positions are better positioned to deliver culturally safe, relational and responsive support (Atkinson, 2002; Lowitja Institute, 2017; Menzies, 2019; Talbot et al., 2025). Cooms and Okimoto (2025) further highlight that trauma-informed approaches are important because many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability engage with employment and disability services while navigating the ongoing impacts of colonisation, racism, exclusion and systemic harm. Workforce capability therefore includes the ability to build trust, safety and relational accountability rather than relying on punitive or compliance-focused



approaches. However, the evidence base relating specifically to Indigenous disability leadership within employment systems remains limited, highlighting an important gap in research, workforce development and policy attention (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; FPDNA, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013; Talbot et al., 2025).

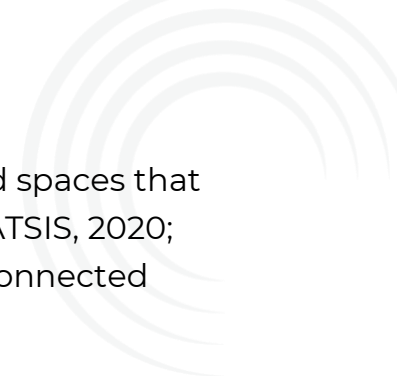
## **Identifying and addressing racism**

The evidence identifies racism as a major barrier affecting access to, and experiences within, employment and disability services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability (Avery, 2018; Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013). Racism occurs not only through obvious discrimination, but also through everyday assumptions, organisational practices and interactions that misunderstand cultural contexts, reinforce negative stereotypes or dismiss peoples' lived experiences (D'Aprano et al., 2024; Gilroy et al., 2023). Racism is understood as a service quality and accountability issue, rather than something external to service delivery.

Across the literature, seemingly small interactions such as stereotyping, dismissive language, or treating cultural and family responsibilities as barriers can damage trust and contribute to disengagement from services (Avery, 2018; Temple et al., 2020). When these experiences are not recognised or addressed, services are more likely to be experienced as unsafe, disrespectful or untrustworthy, making ongoing participation less likely (Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013). Effective services actively recognise and respond to racism as part of everyday practice, including staff reflection on assumptions, respectful responses in interactions, and organisational processes for addressing harm or misunderstanding (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020). The findings indicate that addressing racism is a core part of effective employment and disability support because service responses to racism directly shape whether trust and engagement are strengthened or undermined.

## **Positioning, themes and use of scenarios**

The analysis drew on the published and grey literature identified through the review process, as well as the Indigenous Knowledges, sector experience and community-based understandings held within the Indigenous Business Hub. Cooms, Leroy-Dyer and Beetson are cultural Knowledge holders within their communities and have experience working across universities, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and Aboriginal-led sectors. This positioning is important because relevant evidence is not always located in academic databases. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often share Knowledges through community reports, sector publications, policy



documents, practice-based resources and community-controlled spaces that may not be captured through traditional academic searches (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Smith, 2021). Across the evidence, seven connected themes were identified:

- Indigenous-led and community-controlled approaches .
- Cultural safety as essential for engagement.
- Relational and trust-based service delivery
- Flexible and responsive service design.
- Co-design and shared decision-making.
- Workforce capability and system conditions.
- Identifying and addressing racism.

These themes are closely connected and often overlap. Effective practice is not linked to one single program, model or intervention. Instead, positive outcomes are more likely when several conditions work together, including Indigenous leadership, cultural safety, strong relationships, flexibility, shared decision-making, capable workforces and active responses to racism (AIATSIS, 2020; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Lowitja Institute, 2020; NACCHO, 2021). When these conditions are present, employment services and workplace pathways are more likely to be trusted, accessible and sustainable. When they are absent, services are more often experienced as unsafe, inaccessible, irrelevant or overly focused on compliance. This evaluative structure is useful for government policy because it identifies the conditions that need to be funded and governed together.

The scenarios included throughout the Findings section are part of the analysis, rather than simply examples or case studies. They show how common patterns identified across the evidence can play out in real-world situations. For each theme, the first scenario demonstrates how current, ineffective or culturally unsafe practices can create or reinforce barriers to employment and participation. The second scenario shows how culturally safe, relational and responsive approaches can support stronger engagement and better outcomes. Together, the scenarios illustrate how everyday interactions, systems and service responses can either limit or support employment pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability (Avery, 2018; Temple et al., 2020). Additional references identified after the main screening process were used to strengthen or provide context for particular findings. These sources were not included in the core evidence dataset unless they were added

to the evidence spreadsheet and assessed using the same coding and review process, maintaining transparency and consistency across the analysis.

Each theme in the following section describes a pattern identified across the core sources. The synthesis then reflects on what that theme looks like in practice, drawing on examples from the evidence and using two scenarios to show how the same issue can be enacted differently. The scenarios keep the analysis connected to relational and lived contexts, consistent with yarning, conversational methods and Indigenous Storywork (Cooms et al., 2024; Martin, 2008; Smith, 2021).

## **Culturally grounded and Indigenous-led approaches**

### **In practice**

- Employment services delivered through Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) or Indigenous-owned enterprises.
- Programs that embed cultural Knowledges, community, and collective responsibility.
- Services designed and governed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### **Example from evidence**

There is consistent evidence that Indigenous-led and community-controlled organisations create more effective service environments because they are grounded in cultural values, relationships and accountability to community. The evidence shows that Indigenous organisations are more likely to incorporate connection to family, community and Country into service delivery, making services more accessible, relevant and culturally appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Cooms et al., 2025; Eva et al., 2023; NACCHO, 2021). Governance and cultural authority are understood as central to effective service delivery, rather than as background factors surrounding it.

Related evidence from the disability sector similarly suggests that engagement improves when supports align with Indigenous understandings of care, relationships and responsibility, rather than being delivered through externally designed systems that may not reflect community realities (Cooms, 2023; James et al., 2024). Across the literature, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely to engage with services that are trusted, culturally safe and connected to community structures, particularly where relationships and ongoing support are prioritised over transactional or compliance-focused service delivery (Cooms et al., 2025; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Gilroy et al., 2023).

Overall, Indigenous governance, community accountability and strong relational practice are key factors contributing to effective employment and disability service models.

## Scenarios

### Scenario 1

*Michael gets a call from his employment provider reminding him he's missed another appointment.*

*He had meant to go. But his Auntie passed last week, and he's been travelling back and forward between community and town for Sorry Business. There's been a lot to do, cooking, sitting with family, making sure the younger ones are okay.*

*When he finally makes it into the office, the worker is new. The last one left.*

*She opens his file and starts again.*

*"So, what are your employment goals?"*

*Michael shrugs. He's answered this before.*

*She talks him through a plan, training, job readiness, attendance requirements; forms to sign, appointments to book, outcomes to meet.*

*He nods, but he's already thinking about getting home. His cousin needs a lift later. The next week, he misses another appointment.*

*His file notes "low engagement".*

### Scenario 2

*Michael hears about a program through his cousin, run out of the local Aboriginal organisation. When he walks in, someone already knows his family. They don't start with paperwork. They welcome him with a hug, sit down, have a yarn.*

*They talk about what's been going on, his Auntie, the travel, everything he's been carrying. No one rushes him.*

*Over time, they start talking about work. Not just jobs, what he's good at, who he knows, what he wants to be part of.*

*There's an opportunity with a local land management group. It means being on Country, working with other mob. Flexible hours.*

*Some weeks he's there every day. Other weeks he's not, when things come up in community. No one writes him off for that. They work around it.*

*He sticks with it because it makes sense and helps him care for country and community.*

# Relational and trust-based service delivery

## In practice

- Long-term engagement between providers and clients.
- Time invested in building relationships and trust.
- Continuity of staff and consistent service presence.
- Respectful, non-judgemental communication.

## Example from the evidence

The evidence shows that trust is a key factor shaping whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples engage with employment and disability services. Historical and ongoing experiences of colonisation, institutional harm and inconsistent service delivery have contributed to mistrust of government and mainstream systems (Avery, 2018; Sherwood, 2013). As a result, engagement is strongly influenced by whether service providers can build respectful, reliable and ongoing relationships over time (Cooms et al., 2025; Gilroy et al., 2013; Walter & Andersen, 2013). This means trust is an outcome of service behaviour and continuity, not a condition that can be assumed at entry.

The evidence also highlights the importance of understanding family and community contexts, involving extended family where appropriate, and working with community relationships rather than relying on standardised or one-size-fits-all approaches (Martin, 2008; Walter & Andersen, 2013). Qualitative studies show that even small negative interactions can damage trust and lead to disengagement from services, while consistent and respectful relationships can help peoples navigate complex systems and remain engaged over time (Avery, 2018; Temple et al., 2020). Across the evidence, relational continuity is a core part of effective practice rather than an optional or secondary feature of service delivery.

## Scenarios

### Scenario 1

*Leanne has had three different workers in six months.*

*Every time someone new comes in, she has to start again.*

*Her story, her family, what's been going on — all of it retold, piece by piece, to someone who's reading from a file while she speaks.*

*But it's not just repeating herself.*

*Each time, she's trying to work out who she's sitting across from.*

*What they think about her. About her family. Whether they're going to judge, or misunderstand, or write something down that could come back on her later.*



*She keeps some things to herself. Just in case.*  
*One worker asks why she missed an appointment last week.*  
*Leanne says her nephew had been taken to hospital.*  
*The worker nods, writes something down, and moves on.*  
*"We just need to keep you on track," she says.*  
*After that, Leanne stops answering the phone.*  
*It wasn't one big thing.*  
*Just enough to know; this place isn't safe for her to be fully honest.*

## **Scenario 2**

*When Leanne first met Karen, she didn't say much.*  
*Just answered what she needed to. Watched. Waited.*  
*Karen didn't rush it. She kept showing up. Same day each week. Same time.*  
*Some weeks they talked about work. Other weeks they didn't.*  
*Karen asked about her family. Remembered names. Asked again the next time.*  
*Slowly, Leanne stopped holding things back.*  
*She didn't have to figure Karen out each time, didn't have to wonder what she might write down, or how it might be used later.*  
*When something came up in the family, she said it straight. No explaining it away, no trying to make it fit.*  
*Karen didn't question it. They worked around it.*  
*Over time, Leanne started bringing her sister along. Conversations got bigger. Plans started forming; not just about jobs, but about what would actually work for her life and her family.*  
*Months in, Leanne was still there because she didn't have to protect herself to be there.*

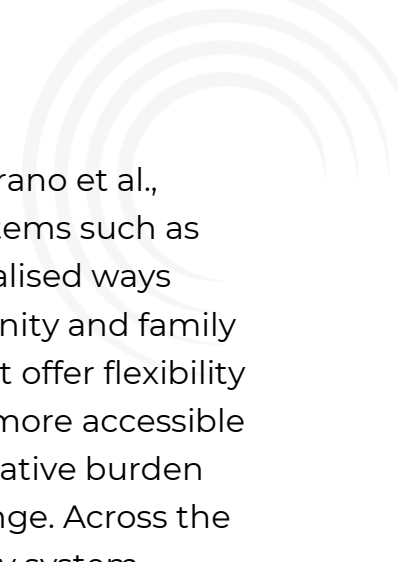
## **Flexible and context-responsive service delivery**

### **In practice**

- Services adapted to local community contexts and individual circumstances.
- Flexibility in how peoples access, engage with, and move through services.
- Recognition of family, kinship, and community responsibilities.
- Ability to adjust employment pathways rather than enforcing fixed program structures.

### **Example from evidence**

The evidence shows that rigid and standardised service models often do not work well because they fail to account for the realities of peoples' lives. Family and caregiving responsibilities, changes in health, and limited or unreliable transport can make strict appointment schedules and fixed participation



requirements difficult to manage (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D'Aprano et al., 2024; Veli-Gold et al., 2023). The evidence also highlights that systems such as the NDIS often assume people will engage in linear and individualised ways that may not reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and family contexts (FPDNA, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013). In contrast, services that offer flexibility in timing, participation requirements and modes of delivery are more accessible and easier to engage with. Flexible approaches reduce administrative burden and allow services to respond when peoples' circumstances change. Across the evidence, flexibility reduces forms of non-engagement created by system design rather than by a lack of motivation, while also supporting employment and participation pathways that are often non-linear and shaped by changing life circumstances.

## Scenarios

### Scenario 1

*Leanne relies on her brother to get around.*

*When he's working, she can't go anywhere.*

*Her appointment is at 10:00am. Same office, same time they've booked every week.*

*That morning, her brother gets called into work early. He can't take her.*

*There's no other way for her to get there. No bus that runs close enough. No one else available.*

*She calls the service to explain.*

*The worker tells her she'll need to reschedule. Next available appointment is in two weeks.*

*"You need to attend regularly to stay on track."*

*Leanne says okay.*

*After a while, it feels like she's always trying to catch up to something that doesn't move.*

*The plan keeps going. She doesn't.*

*Eventually, the file is updated. "Unable to engage."*

### Scenario 2

*Leanne relies on her brother to get around.*

*When he's working, she can't go anywhere.*

*Her appointment is at 10:00am.*

*That morning, her brother gets called into work early.*

*She sends Karen a message.*

*"Can't get a lift today."*

*Karen replies straight away.*

*"All good. Let's work it out."*

*She checks in with the local Aboriginal organisation. Someone's already heading out that way.*

*They organise a lift.*

*Leanne gets there, a bit later than planned, but it still happens.*

*After that, they stop booking things the same way.*

*They ask when her brother is usually available. They plan around that. And when things change, they adjust again.*

*It's not treated like a disruption. It's just part of how things work.*

*Leanne stays connected because the service doesn't expect her life to fit the system, it is flexible enough to fit around her life.*

## **Co-designed and culturally safe services**

### **In practice**

- Services and programs developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, rather than imposed externally.
- Inclusion of community Knowledges, priorities, and lived realities in design processes.
- Ongoing consultation, feedback, and adaptation, rather than one-off engagement.
- Decision-making that reflects shared authority and local context.

### **Example from the evidence**

The evidence consistently identifies co-designed approaches, shared decision-making and community authority as important for effective service delivery (AIATSIS, 2020; NIAA, 2020). Many mainstream services are built around western assumptions about disability, independence and participation, which can create barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (FPDNA, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013). In contrast, services developed in partnership with communities are better able to reflect cultural understandings of disability, family responsibilities and support needs (Martin, 2008; Nakata, 2007). Ongoing consultation, feedback and adaptation strengthen trust, relevance and ongoing engagement with services (AHRC, 2019; Productivity Commission, 2020). Across the evidence, co-design is effective because it builds services that are more culturally appropriate, locally relevant and trusted by communities through shared decision-making and ongoing community involvement over time.

## Scenarios

### Scenario 1

*The organisation sets up an Elders advisory group before launching the program.*

*Leanne's Aunty is invited to join.*

*They meet in a boardroom. There's a presentation: slides, timelines, the program already mapped out.*

*The staff walk them through it.*

*"We'd really value your feedback," they say.*

*The Elders listen. They raise a few things; how family works, who should be involved, what might not sit right in community.*

*The staff nod, take notes. "That's really helpful."*

*A few weeks later, the program rolls out. It looks mostly the same.*

*Leanne's Aunty doesn't go back to the next meeting.*

*She says they'd already made up their mind.*

### Scenario 2

*The organisation reaches out to local Elders before anything is finalised. Not to present a program, but to start a conversation. Leanne's Aunty is part of that group. They meet a few times. Not always in the office. Sometimes out in community. Sometimes just sitting together and talking things through.*

*The first version of the program is rough. The Elders pull it apart. What won't work. Who's missing. What needs to change.*

*The staff don't move ahead without that.*

*They come back again, with something different.*

*This keeps happening. Decisions shift. Timelines shift. The way the service runs starts to reflect what's been said, not just once, but over time.*

*Leanne's Aunty sees those changes. She keeps showing up.*

*Because this time, they're not just asking, they're listening and changing things because of it.*

## Workforce capability and culturally appropriate support

### In practice

- Staff with cultural capability and awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts.
- Understanding of historical, social and community dynamics shaping engagement.
- Ability to communicate in culturally appropriate and accessible ways.
- Service delivery that is trauma-informed and reflects respect, responsiveness, and relational accountability.
- Inclusion of organisational practices that support ongoing learning and adaptation, not one-off training.

### Example from evidence

The evidence identifies limited cultural capability within the workforce as a major barrier to effective service delivery (Leroy-Dyer & Olssen, 2026). Low levels of cultural understanding in assessment, planning and communication can lead to misunderstanding, mistrust and poor engagement, particularly when services rely on standardised approaches that do not reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community contexts or ways of understanding the world (Avery, 2016; Leroy-Dyer, 2026a; Parmenter et al., 2024). This demonstrates that workforce capability is a structural condition: training alone is insufficient unless organisational systems enable staff to apply culturally-informed practice.

In contrast, service providers who communicate respectfully, remain open to learning and adapt their practice to different cultural contexts are more likely to support ongoing engagement (Lowitja Institute, 2017; NACCHO, 2021). The evidence also shows that important cultural and relational work, including responsibilities to kin, community and Country, is often not recognised within role descriptions, workloads or performance systems, despite being central to effective service delivery and participation (Avery, 2018; Brown et al., 2020; Leroy-Dyer & Olssen, 2026). Overall, workforce capability is not only about the knowledge or skills of individual workers. It is also shaped by organisational conditions, including how staff are trained, supported and retained, and whether culturally-informed practice is treated as a core part of service delivery rather than an optional extra (Avery, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013; Talbot et al., 2025).

## Scenarios

### Scenario 1

*The worker has done the training.*

*There's a certificate on the wall. A folder on the desk with cultural awareness notes.*

*When the young man comes in, she follows the process.*

*Assessment questions. Checklists. Structured conversation.*

*She asks about his living situation.*

*He tries to explain, who stays where, who comes and goes, who he's responsible for.*

*It doesn't fit the boxes.*

*She pauses, then simplifies it. "So you live alone?"*

*He hesitates. Then nods. It's easier.*

*Later, she builds a plan based on what she's understood.*

*It looks clear. Logical. Complete.*

*But it doesn't match his life.*

*When things don't work out, the notes say he didn't follow through.*

*She wonders why engagement is so difficult. She's done the training.*

### Scenario 2

*The worker doesn't rush into the assessment.*

*She starts with a yarn. Lets things come out in their own way.*

*When the young man talks about where he's staying, she listens carefully.*

*Who's there. Who moves through. Who he looks after.*

*She doesn't try to simplify it straight away.*

*She asks questions instead. "Who's usually around?"*

*"Who do you need to think about when you're making plans?"*

*Slowly, a clearer picture forms, not a neat one, but a real one.*

*The plan they build reflects that.*

*It leaves space. Accounts for people. For movement. For change.*

*When things shift, the plan shifts too.*

*The worker checks in, adjusts, keeps learning as they go.*

*It's not perfect. But it works. Because she's not trying to make him fit his life into the system, she's adapting the system to fit his life.*

# Identifying and addressing racism

## In practice

- Active recognition of how racism manifests in everyday interactions, policies and service delivery.
- Staff who are able to identify and respond to both overt and subtle forms of racism.
- Clear organisational expectations and processes for addressing racism when it occurs.
- Workplace cultures that support reflection, accountability, and learning rather than avoidance.
- Approaches that prioritise respectful engagement, listening and ongoing relationship building.
- Recognition that addressing racism is a part of effective service delivery, not separate from it.

## Example from the evidence

The evidence identifies racism as a major barrier affecting access to, and experiences within, employment and disability services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability (Avery, 2018; Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013). Racism is not only experienced through obvious discrimination, but also through everyday assumptions, stereotypes and organisational practices that do not reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander realities and lived experiences (D'Aprano et al., 2024; Gilroy et al., 2023). Anti-racism is understood as a core part of service design, supervision, and accountability, rather than a separate values statement.

Across the evidence, seemingly small interactions, such as dismissive language, stereotyping or failing to recognise cultural and family responsibilities, can damage trust and contribute to disengagement from services (Avery, 2018; Temple et al., 2020). When racism or harmful assumptions are not recognised or addressed, services are more likely to be experienced as unsafe and untrustworthy, reducing ongoing participation and engagement (Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013). This indicates that everyday practice is a policy implementation site: the success of policy depends on how frontline interactions are recognised, corrected and learned from.

The evidence also shows that responding to racism is an important part of effective service delivery. Services are more effective when organisations support reflection, accountability and culturally-informed practice among staff

(AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020). Across the literature, anti-racist practice is not separate from service delivery; it is a core part of building trust, cultural safety and sustainable engagement over time (Lowitja Institute, 2020; Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013).

## Scenarios

### Scenario 1

*A young man attends a group job readiness workshop.*

*During the session, the facilitator asks participants to talk about their "barriers to employment".*

*When it's his turn, he mentions helping care for younger family members and being involved in community obligations.*

*The facilitator nods, then responds,*

*"Sometimes family can hold you back from getting ahead. You might need to start putting yourself first".*

*A few people in the room glance over.*

*The young man shrugs it off, doesn't say anything more.*

*For the rest of the session, he keeps his answers short.*

*When asked about future goals, he just says, "Anything's fine".*

*He doesn't come back the following week.*

### Scenario 2

*A participant explains that community and family responsibilities have led to missed appointments.*

*The facilitator responds, "You need to be careful that those commitments aren't getting in the way of your employment goals".*

*There's a pause.*

*Another staff member in the room gently steps in.*

*"Can we rethink that a bit? Those responsibilities are important. Maybe ask how work can fit around them".*

*The facilitator stops. Nods.*

*"Yeah, you're right. Thanks for pulling me up".*

*They turn back to the participant.*

*"Sorry about that. Can you tell us what your week actually looks like? Let's work out something that fits".*

*After the session, the facilitator reflects with the team.*

*They talk about how assumptions show up in practice, and how to respond differently next time.*

*The participant returns the following week.*

# Discussion

Effective employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability are not achieved through isolated initiatives or discrete interventions. Outcomes are shaped by multiple interdependent conditions embedded within service systems, and the absence of one condition, such as cultural safety or relational continuity, can undermine the effectiveness of others (AIATSIS, 2020; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Lowitja Institute, 2020). Accordingly, we focus this discussion on the steps, elements and ingredients of effective practice as system configurations rather than stand-alone interventions.

There are limited outcome-focused publications that specifically address effective employment practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. Consistent with the broader evidence profile described earlier, Indigenous-authored scholarship and related qualitative, policy, and practice evidence are brought together to clarify the mechanisms and enabling conditions that support effective practice (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Gilroy et al., 2023; James et al., 2024; Temple et al., 2020). In this context, the absence of program trials is not treated as an absence of knowledge (Lowitja Institute, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020). Instead, converging explanatory evidence is understood as essential for explaining why systems succeed or fail.

## Steps, elements and ingredients of effective practice

Across the evidence, effective practice emerges through interrelated elements that must be present and sustained over time: Indigenous authority, cultural safety, relational continuity, flexibility, shared decision-making, workforce capability and active anti-racism (AIATSIS, 2020; FPDNA, 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2020; NACCHO, 2021).

## Establishing Indigenous-led authority and governance

Effective practice begins with the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in roles of authority, decision-making and governance. This includes the design, delivery and oversight of services through Indigenous-led and community-controlled organisations. The evidence indicates that when authority is held within community, services are more likely to reflect local priorities, cultural obligations and collective understandings of work (AHRC, 2019; NACCHO, 2021; NIAA, 2020). Indigenous scholarship further emphasises that self-determination and political integrity are essential to ensuring that



programs are accountable to community Knowledges and governance structures (Rigney, 1999; Walter & Andersen, 2013). This step is foundational because it determines how all subsequent elements are configured and enacted, shaping the legitimacy, responsiveness and sustainability of services (Cooms et al., 2024; Lowitja Institute, 2017).

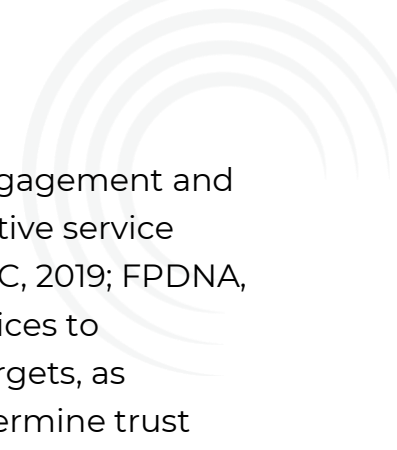
## **Embedding cultural safety as a precondition**

Cultural safety operates as a precondition for engagement rather than an outcome of service delivery. Effective services recognise the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation, racism and exclusion at both national and local levels. They actively create environments where individuals feel respected, understood and safe to participate. Without this condition, engagement is unlikely to occur, regardless of program design or intent (AHMAC, 2016; Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013). Indigenous-led evidence further demonstrates that culturally safe environments are grounded in respect for identity, community authority and cultural Knowledges, which underpin trust and sustained participation (AHRC, 2019; Lowitja Institute, 2017; Temple et al., 2020). This includes recognising how racism operates within everyday service interactions, and embedding capacity within systems to identify, respond to and learn from these moments in practice.

The evidence further indicates that cultural safety cannot be achieved without active attention to racism as it occurs in practice. Racism is often embedded in routine interactions, assumptions and institutional norms rather than isolated incidents (Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013; Temple et al., 2020). Effective services therefore require not only awareness, but the capacity to identify, interrupt and respond to these dynamics in real time. This includes organisational expectations, reflective practice and accountability mechanisms that support staff to learn from mistakes and repair relationships (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020). In this sense, anti-racism operates as a core mechanism of service effectiveness, shaping whether trust is eroded or strengthened through interaction.

## **Building and sustaining relational, trust-based engagement**

The evidence consistently identifies relational practice as a central mechanism through which services become accessible. This involves continuity of staff, time invested in relationships, local presence and respectful communication. Trust is developed gradually and maintained through consistency and accountability (Cooms, 2023; Nakata, 2007; Walter & Andersen, 2013). Evidence from



Indigenous-led research further demonstrates that sustained engagement and relational accountability are essential for culturally safe and effective service delivery, particularly in disability and employment contexts (AHRC, 2019; FPDNA, 2016; Talbot et al., 2025). Effective practice therefore requires services to prioritise long-term engagement over short-term compliance targets, as discontinuity of staff and fragmented service arrangements undermine trust and participation (Gilroy et al., 2013; Productivity Commission, 2018).

## **Enabling flexibility and context-responsive delivery**

Effective services are responsive to the realities of peoples' lives, including family responsibilities, health fluctuations, community contexts and system complexity. Flexibility is reflected in how services are accessed, how participation is structured and how employment pathways are navigated over time. This element requires services to move away from rigid, standardised models toward adaptive and locally responsive approaches (FPDNA, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013; Soldatic, 2018). Evidence from policy and program evaluations further demonstrates that inflexible compliance-driven systems can undermine engagement and fail to accommodate cultural and community obligations (Jordan, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2018). Conversely, approaches grounded in Indigenous leadership and community priorities enable services to align with local contexts and support sustained participation (Lowitja Institute, 2017; NIAA, 2020).

## **Supporting co-design and shared decision-making**

Co-design emerges as a critical element where services are shaped in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Effective co-design is ongoing and iterative, rather than limited to one-off consultation. It involves shared authority in decision-making and continuous adaptation based on feedback and changing circumstances. This ensures that services remain relevant, legitimate and aligned with community needs (AIATSIS, 2020; FPDNA, 2016; NIAA, 2020). Indigenous scholarship further emphasises that privileging Indigenous voices and governance structures is essential to ensuring accountability and cultural legitimacy in service design (Bennett et al., 2026; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Rigney, 1999). Evidence also indicates that services perceived as externally imposed are less likely to be trusted or used, reinforcing the importance of sustained partnership and shared authority (AHRC, 2019; Cooms et al., 2024).

## Strengthening workforce capability and organisational conditions

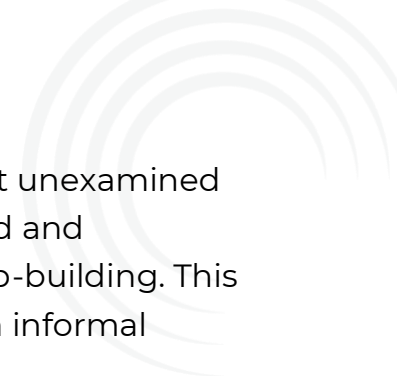
Workforce capability and workplace conditions are system-level factors shaping whether services are experienced as usable and whether employment can be sustained. While much of the evidence focuses on service design, outcomes are also influenced by employer practices, workplace cultures and the extent to which workplaces are inclusive and culturally safe. Effective practice requires staff and organisations to be resourced to develop cultural capability, engage relationally and adapt to diverse contexts, enabled through stable employment, cultural supervision, ongoing learning and recognition of Indigenous Knowledges (Gilroy et al., 2017; NACCHO, 2021; Talbot et al., 2025).

Indigenous scholarship emphasises culturally grounded and trauma-informed organisational practice and relational accountability in effective delivery (Atkinson, 2002; Bennett et al., 2026; Cooms & Okimoto, 2025; Lowitja Institute, 2017; Menzies, 2019; Mohamed, 2021). The evidence also shows barriers extend into workplaces: discrimination, lack of trauma-informed practice, low cultural understanding and inflexible expectations can limit entry and retention, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability (Cooms & Okimoto, 2025; Paradies, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2018). Conversely, workplaces that demonstrate cultural capability and flexibility are more likely to sustain employment. Synthesising across sources, improving outcomes requires alignment between service conditions and workplace conditions, including cultural safety, relational understanding and flexibility, rather than treating employment as separate from the environments in which it occurs (FPDNA, 2016; Walter & Andersen, 2013).

## Recognising and addressing racism

Racism is a central factor affecting whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability access and stay engaged with employment services. It often manifests through routine interactions, assumptions and institutional norms, such as deficit narratives and misunderstandings of cultural responsibilities, which undermine trust and lead to disengagement (Brown et al., 2020; Leroy-Dyer & Olssen, 2026; Paradies, 2016; Temple et al., 2020). This means racism needs to be analysed as a system mechanism that shapes access, engagement and outcomes.

Effective practice therefore requires more than general commitments to cultural safety; it requires the capacity to recognise and respond to racism in real time. Seemingly minor interactions, such as stereotyping or reframing



cultural obligations as barriers, can cumulatively erode trust if left unexamined (Avery, 2018; Temple et al., 2020). In contrast, when acknowledged and addressed, these moments can support learning and relationship-building. This makes accountability and repair part of the service model, not an informal interpersonal response.

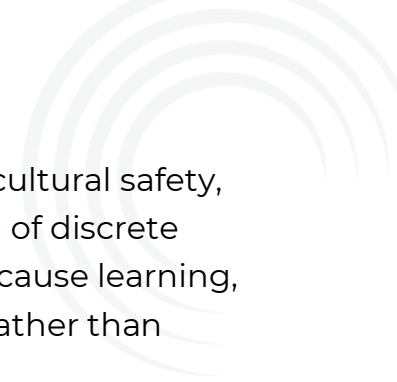
Addressing racism is essential for effective service because it influences ongoing engagement. Success relies on environments that encourage reflection, accountability and continuous learning (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020). Effective practice means acknowledging and correcting errors to maintain trust. Anti-racism is fundamental to service delivery, cultural safety and accountability, not a compliance requirement alone (Paradies, 2016; Sherwood, 2013).

## **What the solution looks like in practice**

Effective employment support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability requires the reconfiguration of service systems rather than the addition of standalone programs. In practice, this means Indigenous-led and community-controlled governance, with decision-making and accountability embedded within community (NACCHO, 2021; NIAA, 2020; Rigney, 1999). Delivery is grounded in cultural Knowledges and relational accountability, prioritising trust, continuity and long-term engagement (AHRC, 2019; Lowitja Institute, 2017; Walter & Andersen, 2013). Employment pathways are treated as adaptive rather than linear, allowing movement in and out of work in ways aligned with circumstances and responsibilities (FPDNA, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013; Jordan, 2016).

Services are locally embedded and responsive, with flexible delivery that reduces administrative burden and varies how, when and where support is accessed (Lowitja Institute, 2017; NIAA, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2018; Soldatic, 2018). Family and community are treated as central to decision-making and participation, not peripheral (AHRC, 2019; Walter & Andersen, 2013). Workforces are supported to deliver culturally-informed practice through stability, supervision and organisational learning, and cultural safety is actively maintained through respectful communication and responsiveness to different understandings of disability (AHMAC, 2016; FPDNA, 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2017; Mohamed, 2021; NACCHO, 2021; Sherwood, 2013).

The evidence does not support a single model to replicate uniformly. Instead, it identifies conditions that must be interpreted and enacted locally, with effectiveness emerging through grounded responsiveness and accountability to community (AIATSIS, 2020; Lovett, 2016; NIAA, 2020). The synthesis therefore



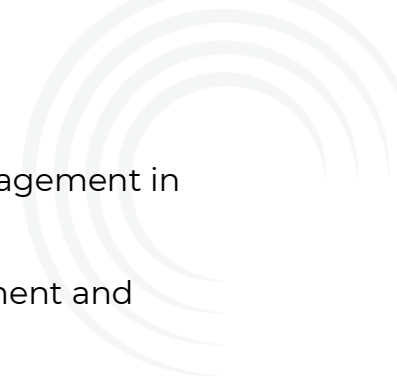
reframes what works as a situated configuration of governance, cultural safety, relational practice and flexibility, rather than a transferable menu of discrete components. This framing is important for education services because learning, transition and employment pathways need local interpretation rather than standardised replication.

Policy translation for education services follows the same logic. Education and training services that prepare Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability for employment need Indigenous-led governance, culturally safe learning environments, relational continuity, flexible participation arrangements and accountability to community (AIATSIS, 2020; FPDNA, 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2020; NACCHO, 2021). This does not convert the report from an employment synthesis into an education review; rather, it clarifies how the employment evidence informs education-to-employment policy where learning, training, disability support and work pathways intersect.

Enhancing employment outcomes necessitates comprehensive system-level reform rather than supplementary standalone programs. Current service systems are often shaped by short-term funding cycles, compliance-driven performance measures, and fragmented policy responsibilities across disability, employment and community sectors (ANAO, 2017; Productivity Commission, 2018). These settings can constrain relational, flexible and culturally grounded approaches, even where they are recognised as effective. For example, relational and cultural labour needs to be recognised as core service delivery work and embedded within workforce design, resourcing and accountability structures, rather than relying on individual First Nations peoples to carry this work without formal recognition (Avery, 2018; Brown et al., 2020; Leroy-Dyer & Olssen, 2026). In particular, funding models that prioritise throughput and short-term outcomes are misaligned with the time, continuity and trust required to support sustained engagement.

Policy responses need to focus on enabling conditions identified consistently across Indigenous-authored scholarship, Indigenous organisations and policy evidence (AIATSIS, 2020; FPDNA, 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2020; NACCHO, 2021):

- Resource Indigenous-led and/or community-controlled organisations as primary service providers.
- Support longer-term, flexible funding arrangements that enable relational practice.
- Recognise that employment includes both paid and unpaid contributions, and design services that enable participation across these forms of work,



including care for kin, community and Country alongside engagement in paid employment.

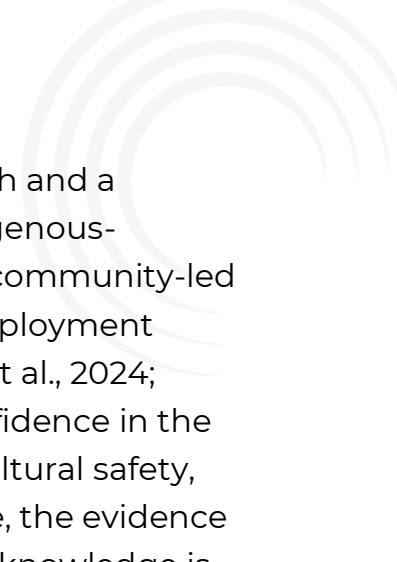
- Align policy and funding across disability, education, employment and community systems.
- Invest in Indigenous workforce development and Indigenous disability leadership pathways.
- Embed accountability mechanisms that recognise cultural governance and community priorities.

These shifts will better align system settings with the conditions consistently identified in the evidence as enabling participation, particularly where policy design treats disability, education, training and employment as connected systems rather than separate service silos (AIATSIS, 2020; FPDNA, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2020).

## Conclusion

The synthesis finds that employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability are influenced more by interconnected conditions within service systems than by standalone programs. This requires a broader understanding of work that includes both paid and unpaid contributions, recognising the central role of care for kin, community and Country alongside the importance of paid employment in supporting economic participation (Leroy-Dyer, 2022; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Walter & Andersen, 2013).

Across the evidence, the most consistently supported practices are Indigenous-led, culturally grounded and relationally organised. These include Indigenous-led and community-controlled governance, cultural safety as a precondition for engagement, relational and trust-based service delivery, flexible and context-responsive approaches, ongoing co-design, workforce capability supported at an organisational level, and trauma-informed practice (AIATSIS, 2020; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; FPDNA, 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2020; NACCHO, 2021). These practices do not operate independently. The evidence suggests that effectiveness emerges when these elements are aligned and sustained together, shaping how services are experienced and accessed over time. Where one or more of these conditions are absent, such as in standardised, compliance-driven models, services are less accessible, less trusted and less effective in supporting meaningful and sustained employment participation. This reinforces the central finding: what works is best understood as a configuration of system conditions, rather than a set of replicable interventions.



The evidence base underpinning these findings is both a strength and a limitation. There is strong and consistent agreement across Indigenous-authored scholarship, qualitative research, policy literature, and community-led practice on the key barriers and enabling conditions shaping employment participation (Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Gilroy et al., 2023; James et al., 2024; Temple et al., 2020). This consistency provides a high level of confidence in the identification of core elements such as Indigenous leadership, cultural safety, relationality, flexibility and workforce capability. At the same time, the evidence base remains fragmented and unevenly developed. Much of the knowledge is explanatory and context-specific, with limited longitudinal or outcome-based evaluation demonstrating how these conditions translate into sustained employment outcomes over time.

These limitations highlight the need for a shift in how evidence is generated, valued and resourced. Addressing current gaps requires investment in Indigenous-led research and evaluation approaches capable of capturing outcomes in ways that reflect cultural, relational and contextual realities (AIATSIS, 2020; Lovett, 2016; Lowitja Institute, 2020; MNWIDSC, 2018). Greater integration is also needed across disability, education, employment and workforce systems, alongside funding models that sustain long-term, relational and locally responsive service delivery. Strengthening the evidence base depends not only on producing new data but also on recognising and elevating existing Indigenous Knowledges, community-led practice and lived experience as central to understanding what works.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that improving employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability requires more than incremental reform. It calls for a reorientation of policy, funding and service design toward approaches that are Indigenous-led, culturally grounded and accountable to community (AIATSIS, 2020; FPDNA, 2016; NACCHO, 2021). The evidence is clear that when these conditions are in place, employment pathways become more accessible, meaningful and sustainable. The challenge moving forward is not identifying what works, but ensuring that systems are structured, resourced and governed in ways that enable it to occur. Without this shift, employment systems will continue to overlook key forms of contribution and remain misaligned with the realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' lives. This includes recognising that how services respond to moments of misunderstanding, bias, racism or harm is central to whether engagement is sustained or lost (Avery, 2018; Temple et al., 2020).

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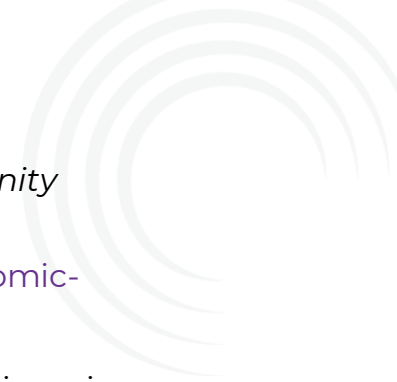
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