



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

Appendix to evidence synthesis

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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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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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Appendix A: Methodology, Resources, Analysis

Synthesis design and scope

A structured narrative evidence synthesis approach was used to reflect the nature of the available evidence and the aims of the review. The screening workbook demonstrated that direct evaluative evidence on employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability is limited, while relevant knowledge is dispersed across qualitative studies, policy and practice reports, workforce studies, disability service research, Indigenous-authored scholarship, and adjacent evidence (Avery, 2018; Gilroy et al., 2016, 2023; Veli-Gold et al., 2023; D'Aprano et al., 2024). Much of the available evidence is context-specific and explanatory, rather than outcome-focused or experimental in design. A narrative synthesis approach was therefore appropriate because it enabled diverse forms of evidence to be brought together without flattening context, privileging a single type of evidence, or forcing artificial comparability between studies.

The synthesis was designed to identify recurring patterns, mechanisms, barriers, and enabling conditions shaping employment participation, rather than evaluate the effectiveness of a single intervention or program model. Consistent with Indigenous-led evidence principles, the focus was not only on whether approaches worked, but how, for whom, and under what conditions employment participation was supported for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Petticrew et al., 2006; Popay et al., 2006).

The scope of the review included evidence relating to employment services and supports, workforce participation, job retention, workplace conditions, service delivery and governance, and broader system settings shaping access to work. This included education and training pathways, disability supports, employment preparation, workplace participation, and retention. Evidence was included where it directly addressed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability or provided strong contextual insight into conditions shaping participation, including racism, cultural safety, service design, workforce capability, relational practice, and system accessibility. Literature focused more broadly on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment was excluded unless disability was substantively addressed.

Australian evidence was prioritised throughout the review. Selected international Indigenous evidence was included only where it offered



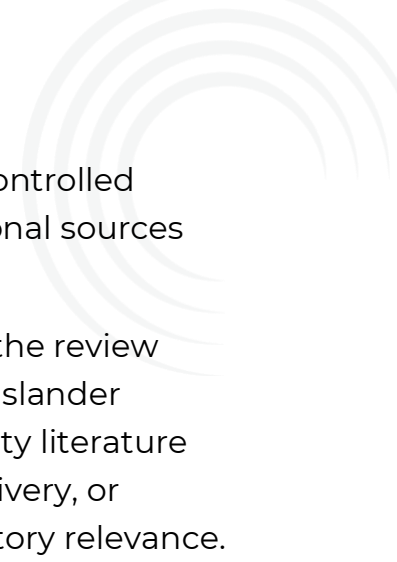
conceptual or explanatory value and did not override Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges, lived experience, or community priorities (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Nakata, 2007; Rigney, 1999).

Identifying evidence: literature search methodology

The research used a staged and culturally informed search protocol to identify evidence on what works in employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. Searches were structured around four connected areas: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, disability in its lived and diverse forms, employment and workforce participation, and strengths-based or Indigenous-led approaches. This structure reflected the interdisciplinary and fragmented nature of the evidence base, where relevant knowledge is dispersed across disability, employment, education, workforce, Indigenous studies, and policy literature.

Academic database searching was combined with targeted identification of grey literature, policy reports, community-informed materials, and Indigenous-authored sources. This recognised that important evidence on Indigenous disability, employment participation, cultural safety, and service effectiveness is not consistently indexed in mainstream academic databases and is often located in Indigenous-led publications, practice evidence, and policy resources (Avery, 2018; Gilroy et al., 2016; MNWIDSC, 2018; Walter & Suina, 2019). Databases searched included Informit, the Lowitja Institute collections, EBSCOhost, PubMed, PublicHealth+, and Scopus, supplemented by citation tracking, targeted website searches, reference list review, Connected Papers, and materials recommended through Indigenous sector networks and community-controlled organisations.

Sources were included where they were relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, with either a direct focus on this population or extractable findings for them. Australian evidence was prioritised, although some international material could be retained separately as contextual comparison. To be included in the main review set, sources also needed clear disability relevance and a clear employment or service focus, such as employment outcomes, pathways to work, job retention, workplace support, service delivery, workforce development, or employer practice. The review accepted diverse forms of evidence—including empirical studies, evaluations, organisational and program reports, reviews, theses, and substantial grey literature—where they offered useful explanatory, cultural, or practice-based insight. Particular weight was given to Indigenous-led, culturally responsive,



strengths-based, self-determined, co-designed, or community-controlled approaches, and Indigenous-authored or Indigenous-organisational sources were prioritised where possible.

Sources were excluded where they did not meaningfully inform the review question. This included literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment that did not substantively address disability, disability literature that did not address employment, work participation, service delivery, or workforce issues, and material with minimal practical or explanatory relevance. Sources were also excluded if they were not relevant to the Australian context, unless retained separately for limited conceptual comparison, or if they addressed Indigenous populations in ways that could not reasonably inform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts. Duplicates, fragmentary records, and sources lacking sufficient detail for screening or coding were also excluded.

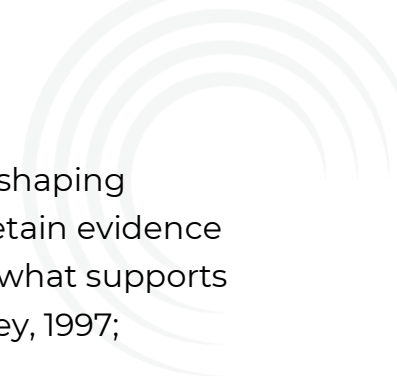
Using this protocol, 181 documents were identified and screened by the Indigenous research team in batches recorded in the Search_Log sheet, using Windows scripting tools and Adobe Reader executable files with the refined search strategy in Annexure A. This process narrowed the set to 59 documents for the next stage of evidence alignment.

Evidence consideration and alignment

Following screening, evidence was considered according to how directly it informed the synthesis question, rather than being excluded solely on the basis of study design. Consistent with the structured screening process documented in the screening workbook, Controlled_Lists, and associated fields, sources were classified as strong fit, aligned fit, or no fit based on their relevance to employment services and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability.

This approach reflected the character of the evidence base, where relevant knowledge is distributed across qualitative research, Indigenous-authored scholarship, policy reports, workforce studies, disability service research, and community-led practice rather than formal program evaluations alone. Sources were therefore assessed for their explanatory contribution, contextual relevance, cultural grounding, and practical usefulness, alongside methodological quality (AIATSIS, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020).

Strong fit evidence spoke directly to Indigenous disability, employment participation, or service design in Australia. Aligned fit evidence did not always report employment outcomes, but offered important explanatory insight into



system conditions, service access, workforce practice, or barriers shaping participation. Together, these categories enabled the review to retain evidence that was not outcome-focused but still critical to understanding what supports or limits participation (Avery, 2018; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Rigney, 1997; Nakata, 2007).

Screening, document processing and handling

Screening was conducted in stages, including initial title and abstract review (where applicable), full-text screening and final alignment classification. To support consistency and accountability when handling a large volume of full-text documents, the Indigenous research team used a structured technical workflow.

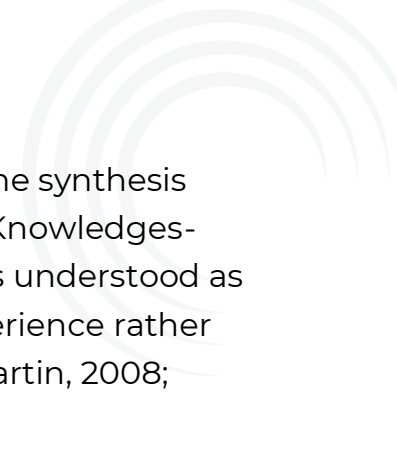
As recorded in the methodology notes, batch document processing was undertaken using a Windows PowerShell script alongside a command-line PDF reading utility (*pdfreader.exe*) to support systematic review of the final 59 documents. This process enabled consistent assessment of each document's relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, disability, employment, and service contexts, and supported transparent categorisation of sources as strong fit, aligned fit, or no fit.

Screening decisions and rationales were documented in structured workbook fields to support traceability and consistency across the review process. This approach strengthened transparency by enabling decisions about inclusion, relevance, and evidence fit to be tracked and reviewed. Maintaining this level of traceability was considered important for the ethical and accountable handling of Indigenous-related evidence, consistent with contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research ethics guidance (AIATSIS, 2020; NHMRC, 2018).

Knowledge weaving and qualitative analysis

Documents categorised as strong fit or aligned fit progressed to qualitative analysis (4 strong fit and 25 aligned fit sources). NVivo was used to support this stage, reflecting both the qualitative nature of much of the evidence base and the need to identify patterns across heterogeneous sources. Theme-based and word-based searches were conducted across included documents to support identification of recurring concepts, service conditions, enabling factors, and barriers relevant to employment participation.

Where themes were identified, wider contextual extracts were reviewed rather than isolated sentences to retain meaning and avoid separating knowledge from its relational and cultural context. Relevant extracts were compiled into a



summary working document, which informed development of the synthesis and findings sections. This process aligned with the Indigenous Knowledges-weaving approach underpinning the review, in which evidence is understood as relational and connected across sources, contexts, and lived experience rather than treated as isolated findings (Graham, 2014; Kovach, 2009; Martin, 2008; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012).

Thematic analysis

The analysis used a thematic approach at the interface of Indigenous and Western Knowledge systems. Rather than treating thematic analysis as only a coding exercise, it was used alongside Indigenous Storywork, yarning, and the Herringbone Stitch Model to hold multiple forms of evidence in relation to one another (Andrews, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This included yarning among Cooms, Leroy-Dyer, Beetson, and other members of the Indigenous Business Hub, whose existing Knowledges were central to the process. As shown in Figure 1, the analytic process moved through six linked stages: immersion in relational data, pattern noticing across sources, relational mapping of meaning, thematic clustering and formation, interpretive grounding, and relational representation of findings. This enabled patterns across policy, practice, and experiential accounts to be brought together in ways that showed convergence, divergence, and relational meaning across the evidence base.

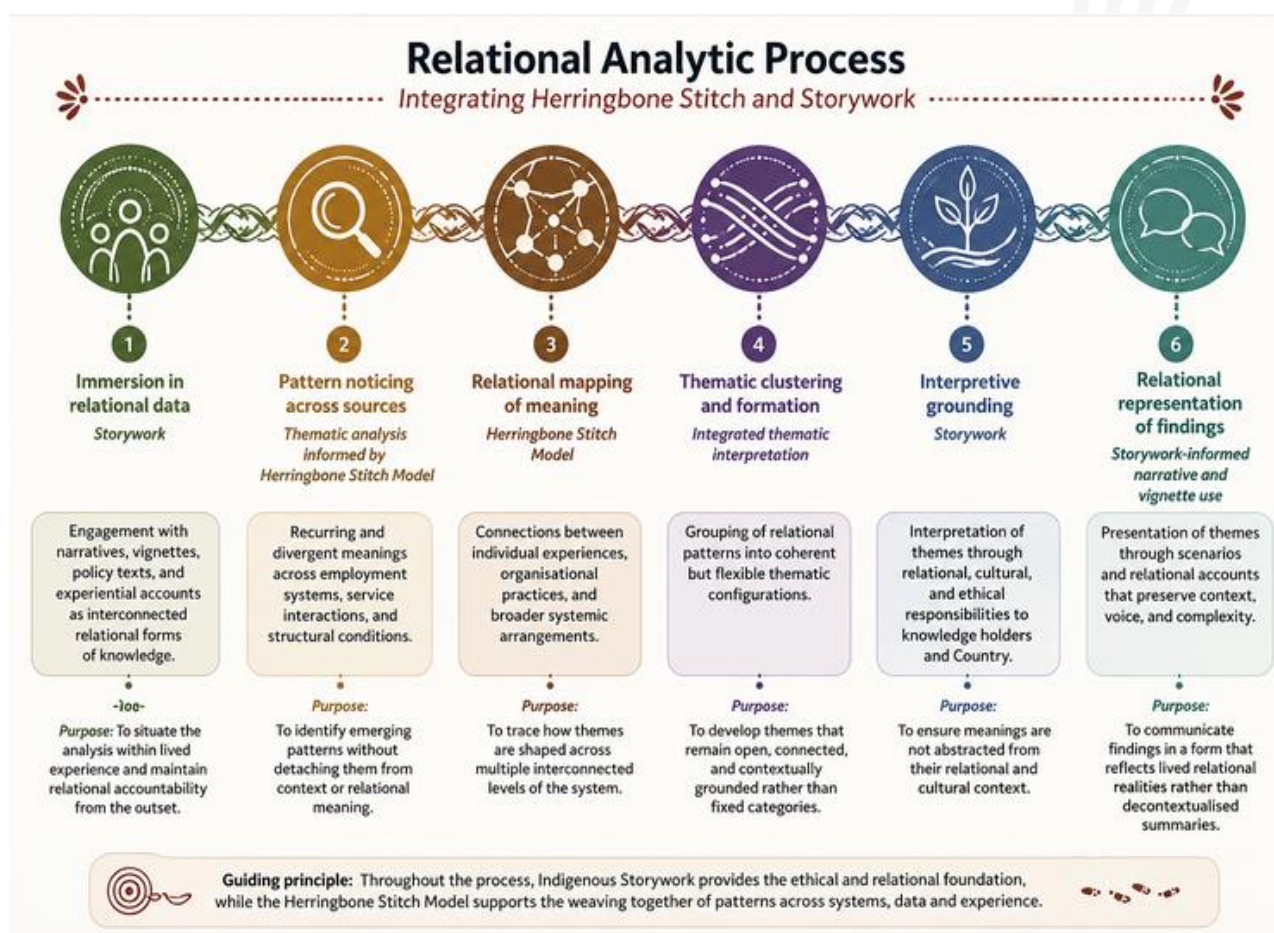


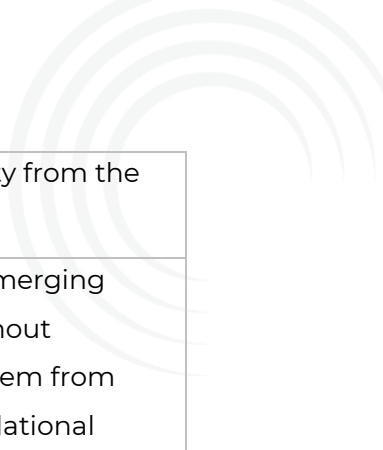
Figure 1. Relational analytic process: integrating Herringbone Stitch and Storywork

Figure 1 shows how Indigenous Storywork provides the ethical and relational foundation for the analysis, while the Herringbone Stitch Model assists with weaving together patterns across systems, sources and experience. The process begins with immersion in relational data and moves through pattern noticing, mapping, clustering, grounding and representation. This ensured that the themes were not abstracted from context, but remained connected to lived experience, relational accountability and cultural meaning.

Table 1 provides further detail about how each stage contributed to the synthesis.

Table 1. Relational analytic movement across the thematic synthesis

Relational Analytic Movement	Methodological orientation	What was attended to	Purpose within the analysis
Immersion in relational data	Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008)	Narratives, vignettes, policy texts and experiential accounts as	To situate the analysis within lived experience and maintain relational



		interconnected relational forms of knowledge	accountability from the outset
Pattern noticing across sources	Thematic analysis informed by Herringbone Stitch Model (Andrews, 2021)	Recurring and divergent meanings across employment systems, service interactions and structural conditions	To identify emerging patterns without detaching them from context or relational meaning
Relational mapping of meaning	Herringbone stitch model (Andrews, 2021)	Connections between individual experiences, organizational practices, and broader systemic arrangements	To trace how themes are shaped across multiple interconnected levels of the system
Thematic clustering and formation	Integrated thematic interpretation	Grouping of relational patterns into coherent but flexible thematic configurations	To develop themes that remain open, connected and contextually grounded rather than fixed categories
Interpretive grounding	Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008)	Interpretation of themes through relational, cultural, and ethical responsibilities to Knowledge holders and Country	To ensure meanings are not abstracted from their relational and cultural context
Relational representation of findings	Storywork-informed narrative and vignette use	Presentation of themes through scenarios and relational accounts that preserve context, voice and complexity	To communicate findings in a form that is accessible to multiple ways of knowing to reflect relational realities rather than decontextualized summaries.

Together, thematic analysis, the Herringbone Stitch Model, Indigenous Storywork and yarning provided a complementary analytic approach. The thematic process supported coherence across diverse forms of evidence, while Indigenous Storywork and yarning kept interpretation grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. The themes presented therefore reflect both analytical patterning and relational meaning across the evidence base.

Assessing evidence strength and cultural authority

All included evidence was assessed for usefulness, relevance, and cultural integrity. As documented in the *Appraisal Coding* sheet, methodological rigour and relevance were recorded using adapted appraisal fields that reflected the type and purpose of each source, rather than applying a single evidence hierarchy across qualitative, policy, practice-based, and community-informed evidence.

Cultural authority was assessed alongside methodological considerations (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Nakata, 2007; Rigney, 1999; Walter & Suina, 2019). This included consideration of Indigenous authorship or leadership, evidence of community control or co-design, respect for Indigenous worldviews, and the extent to which sources avoided deficit or extractive framing (Rigney, 1999; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). This approach reflected a consistent pattern identified across the screening and appraisal process: culturally grounded and Indigenous-led evidence often provided critical explanatory insight into why services supported participation or caused harm, even where conventional outcome measures were limited or absent.

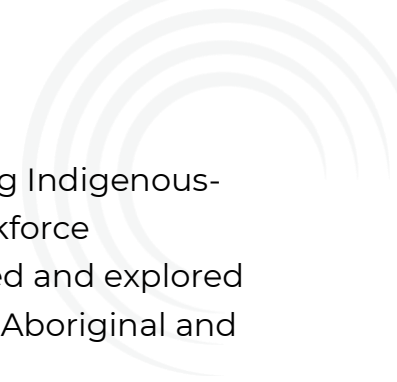
Application of the Centre for Inclusive Employment evidence model

The Centre for Inclusive Employment evidence model was applied to organise and interpret evidence for decision-making. Evidence was considered in relation to clarity of purpose, coherence between observations and conclusions, relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability, and usefulness for informing employment services, supports, and system reform.

Rather than treating evidence as a simple measure of effectiveness, the model was used to distinguish between evidence that directly informed what works, evidence that explained underlying conditions and mechanisms, and evidence that provided essential contextual understanding (Avery, 2018; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; Gilroy et al., 2023). This approach aligned with the evidence profile identified through screening and appraisal, where much of the most relevant knowledge was explanatory, relational, and focused on the conditions shaping participation and service effectiveness.

Bringing the evidence together

A narrative, theme-based approach was used to bring evidence together across



diverse sources and evidence types. Recurring themes—including Indigenous-led governance, cultural safety, relational practice, flexibility, workforce capability, anti-racism, and system accountability—were identified and explored as interrelated conditions shaping employment participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability.

Rather than focusing on single interventions, the synthesis reflects a consistent pattern across the evidence: *what works* emerges through combinations of culturally grounded authority, trusted relationships, flexible structures, workforce capability, and system-level alignment. This approach aligns with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of participation as collective, contextual, and relational, rather than individual or linear. Similar configurations are consistently reflected across Indigenous disability scholarship, qualitative research, and practice literature (Avery, 2018; Cooms & Muurlink, 2025; D’Aprano et al., 2024; Gilroy et al., 2023; Talbot et al., 2025; Veli-Gold et al., 2023).

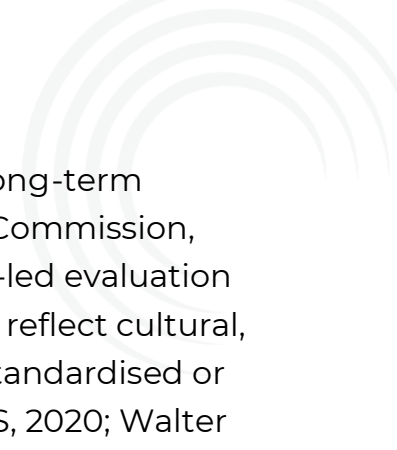
Limitations and resource gaps

The evidence base in this area is emerging, fragmented, and unevenly developed. While it provides consistent insight into the conditions that enable or constrain employment participation, much of this knowledge is qualitative, context-specific, and located across Indigenous-authored scholarship, grey literature, and community-led practice rather than formal evaluation studies (FPDN, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013; Lowitja Institute, 2017).

These gaps are reflected in how outcomes are measured, how systems are understood in an integrated way, and how effective approaches are resourced and sustained (ANAO, 2017; Productivity Commission, 2020). They should not be understood as an absence of knowledge, but as a consequence of research, policy, and funding structures that have limited the visibility, coordination, and evaluation of Indigenous-led and culturally grounded approaches (AIATSIS, 2020; Lovett, 2016; MNWIDSC, 2018).

Limited outcome-focused evaluation

There is a lack of longitudinal, outcome-based evidence examining employment trajectories for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. While the existing evidence provides strong explanatory insight into why approaches work, there is limited data demonstrating how these conditions translate into sustained employment outcomes over time. This



includes gaps in understanding job retention, progression, and long-term workforce participation (Hunter, 2014; Jordan, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2020). Addressing this gap will require investment in Indigenous-led evaluation approaches that are capable of capturing outcomes in ways that reflect cultural, relational, and contextual realities, rather than relying solely on standardised or compliance-driven metrics (Lovett, 2016; MNWIDSC, 2018; AIATSIS, 2020; Walter & Andersen, 2013).

Fragmentation across policy and service systems

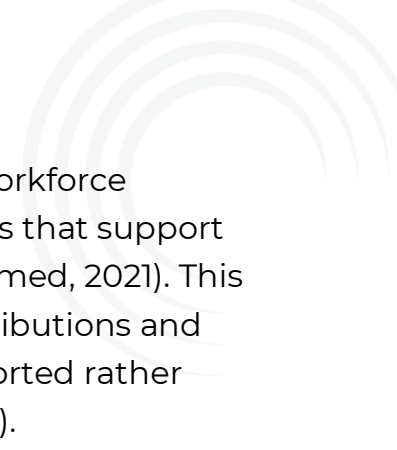
The evidence highlights a lack of integration between disability, employment, and workforce policy, resulting in fragmented service delivery and limited coordination across systems. This fragmentation constrains both practice and evidence development, making it difficult to assess how supports operate across the full employment pathway (Productivity Commission, 2011, 2020; Disability Royal Commission, 2023). Indigenous-led evidence further demonstrates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability often navigate multiple, disconnected systems that do not align with cultural and community contexts (FPDNA, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013). There is a need for resources that enable cross-system alignment, including integrated policy frameworks, shared accountability mechanisms, and funding models that support collaboration between services rather than competition or siloed delivery (NIAA, 2020; ANAO, 2017; Lowitja Institute, 2017).

Limited evidence on Indigenous disability leadership

While Indigenous leadership is consistently identified as a key enabling condition, there is limited evidence examining how Indigenous disability leadership operates within organisations, its influence on service design, and its impact on employment outcomes (FPDN, 2016; Gilroy et al., 2013). There is also limited evidence on how Indigenous disability leadership can be supported and sustained across different service contexts. Addressing this gap will require targeted investment in Indigenous-led research, leadership development initiatives, and organisational structures that recognise and resource leadership roles within systems (NIAA, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2017; AIATSIS, 2020).

Workforce and organisational capacity constraints

Workforce capability is constrained by high staff turnover, limited cultural capability, and insufficient organisational support for relational and culturally informed practice. These constraints reduce continuity of care, undermine trust, and limit service effectiveness (ANAO, 2017; Gilroy et al., 2013; NACCHO, 2021).



Addressing these challenges requires sustained investment in workforce stability, ongoing cultural supervision, and organisational systems that support learning, reflection, and adaptation (Lowitja Institute, 2017; Mohamed, 2021). This includes recognising and resourcing Indigenous workforce contributions and ensuring that cultural Knowledges and labour are formally supported rather than informally relied upon (FPDN, 2016; Walter & Andersen, 2013).

Training and resources

Current approaches to training and workforce development are often insufficient to support culturally informed and effective service delivery. Much of the training provided to staff is episodic, compliance-driven, and focused on stand-alone cultural awareness modules, rather than embedded, practice-based learning (Fredericks, 2008; NACCHO, 2021). This limits the extent to which staff are able to translate knowledge into culturally appropriate assessment, communication, and decision-making in real service contexts (Gilroy et al., 2013; Mohamed, 2021). Workforce capability challenges are not solely the result of individual skill gaps but reflect broader organisational and systemic constraints, including limited time for reflective practice, lack of ongoing cultural supervision, and high staff turnover (ANAO, 2017; Lowitja Institute, 2017).

There is also limited structured investment in resources that support culturally grounded practice, including access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mentors, community Knowledge holders, and locally relevant tools and frameworks (AHRC, 2019; FPDN, 2016). In many settings, cultural knowledge and labour continue to be relied upon informally or placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff without appropriate recognition or resourcing, contributing to uneven service quality and additional cultural labour burdens (Walter & Andersen, 2013; Lowitja Institute, 2017).

Current funding and commissioning models often prioritise efficiency, throughput, and short-term outputs, which are misaligned with the relational, long-term, and context-responsive practice identified in the evidence. This constrains services' ability to build trust, maintain continuity, and respond to community needs (Productivity Commission, 2018, 2020; ANAO, 2017). Indigenous-led evidence further indicates that rigid funding arrangements can limit community control and responsiveness to local priorities. More suitable funding structures would explicitly support relational engagement, flexible service delivery, community engagement, and iterative service design over time (Lowitja Institute, 2017; AHRC, 2019; NIAA, 2020; FPDN, 2016).

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