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Full summary

Background

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

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

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

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

Impact and outcomes

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

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

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

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

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

Lessons from Road to Employment

Identifying and maintaining partnerships was critical for the project. It took time, resources and connections to establish new relationships with employers and schools. Achieving stakeholder participation and sending (,)4 (o)-4 0 (d h)6 (c)4 (o)6 (m)-3 (m)-3 (i)1 to the establishment and sustainability of activities, implementing the planned actions and attracting pa(,)ticipants to the activities.

The commitment to the Road to Employment activities was greatest and grew in employers and schools where educators and leaders saw a direct benefit to themselves or the organisation. Examples included potential to help with engaging pa(,)ents in family-based car planning, thereby reducing teacher workload or tasks.

Building relationships from successes over time was evident in the schools. An

1 Road to Employment

1.1 Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 1: Road to Employment project logic

Road to Employment project		
Focus	Activities with employers	Activities with schools and families
Aims	Changing employment expectations with employers, inclusive workplace practices, attitudes and supports for employees	Changing employment expectations in schools and with families, mentoring year 9 students on their career goals
Activities	Aged care Community of Practice (COP) and Business mentoring	R 201.72 48 reW nBT-0.0weR 201.72 4(

1.3 Activities with employers

Community of Practice (COP)

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

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

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

demand' for the Road to Employment

Year 9 Student mentoring

In partnership with the Enabled Youth Disability Network (EYDN), Road to Employment implemented a co-designed student mentoring

- Review of program information collected by Road to Employment.

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

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

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

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

2 Impact and outcomes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tom s feeling

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

Some Year 9 and Year 10 students said that as a result of taking part in workshops and mentoring, their confidence grew. Some of them started to look for work experience or part-time jobs, using the information from the workshops and mentoring program. One student said, "I applied for my first job

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

2.2 Impact on families and schools

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

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

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

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

3 Effective processes

The Road to Employment project applies a range of processes to achieve its objectives

Project governance

Road to Employment

the tools and

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

Participant level adaptations

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

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

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

4.4 Celebrating small and big wins

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

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

employment in the community. These activities also highlighted the progressive achievements of the project activities and generated motivation for stakeholders, emp

5 Future directions for Road to Employment

Value of diversity at work

Barriers to inclusion at work include expectations,

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

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

Conclusion

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

References

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Appendix A. Methods in detail

The SPRC, UNSW and Flinders University research team undertook the developmental evaluation from September 2020

Project logic

People with disability employed	Employment opportunities available
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employers, educators in schools, other project stakeholders and staff – to demonstrate the impact and outcomes of the project and **the** processes driving