



Research Professor Stian H Thoresen &
Professor Angus Buchanan

Final Research Evaluation Report of Project Employment:

Vocational pathways for high school
students with disabilities in Perth

Curtin School of Allied Health
Faculty of Health Sciences
Curtin University
Perth, Australia

Diversity and Inclusion
Samfunnsforskning AS
Trondheim, Norway



Adresse: Dragvoll allé 38 b, 7049 Trondheim
Telefon: 73 59 63 00
Telefaks: 73 59 62 24

E-post: kontakt@samforsk.no
Web.: www.samforsk.no

Foretaksnr. NO 986 243 836

NTNU Samfunnsforskning AS
Diversity & Inclusion

Postal address: GPO Box U1987, Perth Western
Australia, 6845

Address: Kent Street, Bentley Western
Australia, 6102

Phone: 1300 222 888

Website: www.curtin.edu.au

ABN: 99 143 842 569

Curtin School of Allied Health
Faculty of Health Sciences
Curtin University

September 2024

ISBN 978-82-7570-767-1 (web)

Preface

This is the Final Research Evaluation Report for *Project Employment*, formerly known as Charged Up for Work (CUFW). It draws on two earlier interim evaluation reports. Project Employment was awarded to EDGE Employment Solutions (EDGE) as an Information, Linkages and Capacity Development (ILC) grant by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) in early 2020. The administration of the ILC grants has since moved to the Department of Social Services. CUFW changed name to Project Employment in 2024. The project included an external evaluation component, by Curtin University and NTNU Samfunnsforskning AS.

Project Employment is a 7-week targeted training program for students and young adults with disabilities to support vocational development and develop vocational pathways. Project Employment graduates received up to 12 months support to obtain and maintain suitable outcomes, such as paid or unpaid work experience; further education, training, or education; customised or self-employment, or paid employment. The training is provided in weekly workshops in small groups of up to 15 students with individual graduate job search and on-the-job support.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a great disruption with profound impact across the globe. Fortunately, there were less adverse outcomes in Western Australia (WA), compared to other places, due to strict border protection measures (both towards other Australian jurisdictions and internationally). Nevertheless, social distancing regulations and labour market dynamics impacted both individuals and local communities. Project Employment was also impacted and there have been substantial changes to project team members across the project.

We would like to thank all the Project Employment participants and all other informants who have contributed to the research. We would also like to thank all staff members at EDGE who have supported the project and research. Special thanks go to the EDGE CEOs during our research period, Sally Hollins and Pippa Cebis, as well as the Project Employment managers, coordinators, and team members: Ra Grimm, Samantha Skipp, Dal Sahota, Peter McFadyen, Jenny Fuller, Antoinette Shenstone, Joey Kessler, Denise Wan, Luke Houlbrook, Alan Evans, Caitlin Winyard, Nathan Smith, Ruby May, Zack Clark, Karen McKenna, Julie Stewart, and Holly Atkins-Miles. We would also like to thank the other researchers who have been involved: Emeritus Professor Errol Cocks, Brontë Walter, Megan Watts, and Emma Lewis. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions by Matthew McGlew in extracting data from EDGE's database and Li Lian Kim during the application process.

Research Professor Stian H Thoresen, Trondheim &
Professor Angus Buchanan, Perth
September 2024.

Table of content

Preface	iii
List of abbreviations.....	ix
Summary	xi
1. Introduction	1
2. Background.....	3
Transitioning from school to work	4
Australian disability and labour market characteristics.....	6
Australian disability policy context.....	6
3. Evaluation approach	12
EDGE administrative data records	12
Curtin data collection.....	13
4. Project Employment	15
Training program development	15
Participant recruitment	16
Employment pathways and outcomes	17
5. Project Employment outcomes.....	18
Participant characteristics	18
Participant outcomes.....	20
Summary.....	25
6. Survey outcomes.....	26
Pre-training survey	26
Training experience	30
Summary.....	31
7. Qualitative interviews.....	33
Students' experiences	33
Experiences of network and Project Employment staff	36
8. Conclusion and final recommendations	40
Curriculum development	40
Participant recruitment	40
Staffing	41
Project outcomes.....	41
Continuation of Project Employment	42
References	45

Tables

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics in per cent (n)	18
Table 2: Primary and additional disabilities in per cent (n=330).....	19
Table 3: First outcome in per cent (n)	21
Table 4: Second outcome in per cent (n).....	21
Table 5: Third outcome in per cent (n)	22
Table 6: Fourth outcome in per cent (n).....	22
Table 7: All recorded outcomes in per cent (n).....	23
Table 8: Highest level of completed education in per cent (n)	26
Table 9: Motivations for joining Project Employment in per cent (n).....	27
Table 10: Membership in clubs, groups, committees, or organisation in per cent (n).....	28
Table 11: Worry about expectations in per cent (n).....	28
Table 12: Having friends over to visit in per cent (n)	28
Table 13: Satisfied with social life and life overall in per cent (n)	29
Table 14: Prospects for the future in per cent (n).....	29
Table 15: Sources of income in per cent (n)	30
Table 16: Experiences during the Project Employment training in per cent (n).....	30

List of abbreviations

A&T	Apprenticeships and traineeships
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
ADE	Australian Disability Enterprises
ATE	Alternatives to employment
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CUFW	Charged Up for Work
Curtin	Curtin University
DES	Disability Employment Service
DSP	Disability Support Pension
EDGE	EDGE Employment Solutions
ILC grant	Information, Linkages and Capacity Building grant
NDIA	National Disability Insurance Agency
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAR	Participatory Action Research
SDAC	Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers
SLES	School Leaver Employment Supports
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WA	Western Australia

Summary

People with disabilities are less likely to be in the labour force and more likely to be unemployed than their non-disabled peers. This is the case in Australia, as elsewhere in the developed world. As employment is the main source of income for most people, it is not surprising that people with disabilities therefore are at greater risk of poverty than their non-disabled peers. Transition opportunities from school have been identified as important for positive vocational outcomes for young adults with disabilities. Vocational education and training (VET), particularly apprenticeships and traineeships (A&T) that incorporates work-based learning, is one strategy EDGE Employment Solutions (EDGE) has drawn upon over the past several decades to support persons with disabilities obtaining and maintaining meaningful work. EDGE has also developed and delivered other programs to support young adults with disabilities obtaining and maintaining meaningful work and Project Employment can be viewed as a continuation of EDGE's commitment to supporting young people with disabilities have positive vocational transitions into meaningful work.

Project Employment was awarded in early 2020 to EDGE and included an independent research or evaluation component carried out by Curtin University (Curtin) in collaboration with NTNU Samfunnsforskning AS. The award of the grant was just prior to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic transpired across the globe, with severe healthcare concerns and strict social distancing, testing, isolation and boarder control measures being implemented. Both specific COVID-19 preventative measures as well as socioeconomic contextual factors impacted the delivery of Project Employment. This included a slightly delayed start-up, with participants participating in the Project Employment training from 2021 onwards. Project Employment was a 7-week training program for high school students and young adults with disabilities and 12-month post-training job-search and on-the-job support. This Final Report reports on findings among Project Employment participants from 2021, 2022, and 2023. While EDGE was able to extend the funding and running of the project until mid-2025, this did not include the research component of the project.

The evaluation of Project Employment has drawn on several elements of Participatory Action Research methods. This included close collaboration with the project team at EDGE with regular meetings and informal feedback during the development of the Project Employment curriculum or training module, as well as the following stages of program delivery (participant recruitment, training delivery, and post-training job-search and on-the-job support). Data and findings presented in this Final Report have been sources from EDGE's administrative data records as well as surveys and interviews carried out by Curtin. Interviews were carried out with Project Employment participants, as well as additional stakeholders including teachers/schools, employers, and Project Employment staff.

About 300 high-school students and young adults with disabilities participated in Project Employment during the period the evaluation covered. About one-third of participants were females and about two-thirds of participants were males. There were a wide range of disabilities among the participants, both in terms of primary disability classification as well as a range and relatively large number of additional disabilities. Taking all disabilities into consideration (independent of it being the primary or an additional disability), more than half of the participants had autism spectrum disorder (ASD), about one-third had specific learning/attention deficit disorder (ADD), and about one-third had psychosocial disabilities. About one-fifth had intellectual disabilities, while there were smaller proportions of other disabilities groups among the participants.

Project Employment had a number of defined outcomes for participants prior to the commencement of the project, and two additional categories were added during the implementation of the project. These were: Non/no recorded outcome, Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE) (formerly known as sheltered workshops), Community Service (added), Work experience (unpaid), Work experience (paid), School Leaver Employment Supports (SLES) (added), Further education or study, Registering with Disability Employment Service (DES), Customised/self-employment, Paid employment, and A&T.

Among all Project Employment participants with recorded outcomes (2021-2023), 56 per cent obtained outcomes (44 per cent with no recorded outcome). However, this varied substantially across the different years, with 68 per cent obtaining outcomes in 2021, 83 per cent obtaining outcomes in 2022, but only 25 per cent obtaining outcomes in 2023. It is important to note that for many of the Project Employment participants from 2023, their 12-months of post-training job-search support had not been fully consumed when the outcome data was extracted from EDGE's database in April 2024. It is likely that a proportion of participants would have achieved outcomes following the data extraction. Noting that participants may have achieved multiple outcomes, and reviewing all Project Employment participants collectively, 21 per cent gained paid employment, 19 per cent gained unpaid work experience, and 9 percent gained SLES, further education or study, or registered with a DES. In addition, 8 per cent commenced an A&T. Only a small proportion of participants (about 1 per cent or less) obtained outcomes across the other categories.

Most participants were still in school when they commenced Project Employment (91 per cent). Participants joined to get a job (71 per cent), increase skills (56 per cent), try something new (49 percent), and because of their own interests (37 per cent). Participants rated the Project Employment experience as very positive, with 95 per cent indicating that they would recommend the program to a friend, and more than 90 per cent agreement (strongly agree or agree) with statements related to enjoying the training, learning new skills, improving chances to find work, increasing knowledge of work options, increasing interest in obtaining work and making new friends.

While some of the students indicated some uncertainty prior to commencing the training during the interviews, they highlighted that the actual training experience was fun, interesting,

easy to understand, and very informative. Students highlighted different aspects that they found particularly useful, including specific elements of the training such as mock-interviews, and well as gaining more confidence and self-belief. It was evident that interpersonal relationships with Project Employment staff was a major factor in their positive experiences during and following the training.

Stakeholders highlighted the need for Project Employment, in terms of skills development and providing vocational pathways for students and young adults with disabilities. Project Employment staff highlighted the importance of working with students and the ‘mindset’ of the participants – both in terms of vocational expectations and acknowledging vocational achievements. Teachers and employers also emphasised the importance of Project Employment in filling an unmet need and the importance of the support provided to the participants through the Project Employment program and staff.

The evaluation recognises the challenges in delivering Project Employment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the differences in outcomes across the different time periods (as well as that 2023 participants were still receiving job-search support when the data for this final report was extracted from EDGE’s database). The conclusion and final recommendations of the evaluation team are articulated around five themes: Curriculum development, participant recruitment, staffing, project outcomes, and continuation of Project Employment:

- EDGE and the Project Employment team invested significant time and resources into developing and refining the training program and delivery format. There was a strong sense of engagement with the program and the trainers among Project Employment participants, which was a strength of the program. The engagement of schools with Project Employment, with referrals to the program, also attested to the suitability of and need for this program. It is the view of the evaluators, however, that the value of the Project Employment program was more than the curriculum and content delivered during the training component, with the post-training job-search and support integral to the relevance and utility of the training. We therefore encourage EDGE to continue pursuing avenues to deliver the full Project Employment program beyond the funded period, including the post-training search and support.
- Participant recruitment required substantial resources during the initial stages of the project and included close collaborations with schools and educational providers. As Project Employment developed and became better known among schools and other stakeholders, the recruitment process eased and there was even a waitlist of participants for some semesters. This suggests that there were both a need and a market for this program. If EDGE continues to deliver Project Employment in the future, it would be beneficial to streamline the onboarding process with information packages for potential participants and perhaps interview screening. This could be supplemented with more publicly available information, both for recruitment but also as preparation for participants. These resources could be made available on multiple platforms, including YouTube and/or TikTok videos, electronic and physical

information packs, and physical and/or digital Q&A pre-program information sessions, in addition to the face-to-face meetings with potential participants that were implemented towards the end of Project Employment.

- There has been a complete turn-over of all Project Employment staff over the project (i.e. none of the original staff members recruited or assigned to the project at commencement remained connected to the project at the completion of the pilot). While this, unfortunately, was a characteristic of the labour market context in WA generally, as well as the disability sector specifically, it also entailed some challenges to the continuity of the project as the relationships between the Project Employment staff and participants were among the most important factors in giving the participants a sense of continuity and providing confidence. While the evaluation team recognises the challenges in retaining highly sought after staff, we also encourage EDGE to continue to explore and develop strategies to retain staff.
- There were differences in employment outcomes among participants. There were some strong and positive outcomes noted among Project Employment participants from 2021 and 2022, while outcomes were lacking for a large proportion of participants from 2023. Even if participants did not achieve vocational outcomes, the program has through developing skills given participants hopes and confidence for the future and vocational ambitions that they may not have had previously. Both the Project Employment curriculum and staff adopted and relied on individualised approaches – drawing on participants’ individual interests, strengths, vulnerabilities, and needs. This is also known as person centredness which is argued to be a crucial component to quality service delivery and rights-based approaches. It is both commendable that Project Employment was able to deliver person-centred services to the participants, but also a prerequisite for the project to be successful, given EDGE’s values-based approaches and premisses of the project proposal. It is also important to note that the study design and outcome data did not allow for determining causal effect – there were no comparison group or randomisation of participants for instance. Nevertheless, we encourage EDGE to continue to develop vocational ambitions among students and young adults with disabilities, preferable prior to leaving school as the supports and structures in the school environment may be additional resources that can assist in making meaningful vocational transitions for this group.
- Project Employment illustrated that there was a major unmet need for supporting vocational transitions for high school students and young adults with disabilities in Perth. It is probable that this was also the case for other areas in WA as well as in other Australian jurisdictions. The program was developed specifically to produce a vocational outcome, not just increase skills. It provided for tangible translation of skills and training into genuine employment outcomes for participants: Vocational transitioning into employment from school with support. We believe the success and attractiveness of Project Employment were the integration of each component with a specific purpose – both the 7-week training and the 12-months post-training follow-up job-search and on-the-job support. We therefore encourage maintaining this format if Project Employment continues beyond the pilot stage.

1. Introduction

Completing school, starting work, and establishing one's own home or household are among the most significant markers of becoming an adult and transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. While this transition phase may look slightly different in different contexts, it is a universal process across the globe. However, for persons with disabilities, this process may look very different than the transitions peers without disabilities undertake. While persons with disabilities are increasingly completing upper secondary education, whether that is in an inclusive setting, special support unit, or even in special schools, they are less likely to obtain open employment (with or without specialist support), and many enter various forms of day programs, such as Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) (previously known as sheltered workshops) and alternatives to employment (ATE) or post-school options (previously known as day centres). In fact, an analysis of research in Norway has indicated that for young adults with intellectual disabilities who complete secondary education, much of this has been 'preparation' for a lifetime on the Disability Support Pension (DSP) rather than vocational preparation (Gustavsson et al., 2021). As such, it may be necessary to have a greater vocational emphasis in school for students with disabilities, to support vocational transitions and expectations.

Many people with disabilities in Australia complete secondary education, and the proportion persons with disabilities who leave school early is the fifth lowest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the timeframe prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 2016-2019 (OECD, 2022). As such, the conditions for young adults with disabilities to obtain work in Australia should be better than among most other comparable countries. However, the proportion of young Australians with disabilities not in employment, education or training, is higher than the secondary education completion rate would suggest (ibid) and many Australians with disabilities face challenges in the school-to-work transition (OECD, 2022; Stafford et al., 2017; Winn & Hay, 2009).

EDGE and Curtin University (Curtin) have had multiple collaborations over the past several decades, including in the disability employment research area. A collaborative Information, Linkages and Capacity Development (ILC) grant application was therefore developed and submitted by EDGE to the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) in late 2019, which included an external evaluation component. Both EDGE and the researchers were involved in the development of what was at the time referred to as the Charged Up for Work (CUFW) project, later rebranded as Project Employment. The ILC grant was awarded in early 2020, just prior to realisation of the severity of the COVID-19 and national and international measures to limit the impact of the pandemic with subsequent introduction of social distancing rules and other restrictions.

This is the Final Research Evaluation Report of Project Employment, drawing on two earlier Interim Evaluation Reports. The overarching aim of this Final Report is to account for vocational outcomes among Project Employment participants, as well as their experiences during the training and subsequent job-search and on-the-job support phases. It is hoped that this report will contribute knowledge on both the implementation of similar vocational development programs in the future, as well as identify key learnings for EDGE in supporting young adults with disabilities transitioning from school to employment.

This report presents a summary of key trends, statistics, and research on transition from school to work for young people with disabilities, the Australian disability and labour market characteristics, and recent changes in the Australian disability policy context. This is followed by an account of the evaluation approaches and data sources for this report, prior to the presentation of the study findings – socioeconomic characteristics and vocational outcomes as recorded by EDGE, Project Employment participants’ experiences of the training, and other stakeholders’ experiences with the project (including EDGE staff, employers, and teachers or others from the school context).

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a great disruption with profound impact across the globe. Fortunately, there were less adverse outcomes in Western Australia (WA), compared to other places, due to strict border protection measures (both towards other Australian jurisdictions and internationally). Nevertheless, social distancing regulations and labour market dynamics impacted both individuals and local communities, including Project Employment, and there have been substantial changes to the project team members across the project. These may be viewed as important contextual impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Project Employment was awarded just prior to the realisation of the severity of COVID-19 and classification as an international pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic may have played a role in staff change-over, the development of the training curriculum, program development, and the evaluation processes. The General Manager Job Support, who led the submission of the Project Employment proposal to the NDIA, left EDGE after substantial time with the organisation just prior to the award of the grant. At the same time, the appointment of Research Professor Stian H Thoresen at Edith Cowan University was discontinued, and the evaluation component was transferred to Curtin University in mid-2020. While Emeritus Professor Errol Cocks, who played a central role in the grant application, remained connected with the project, he subsequently had to reduce his involvement with academic work and withdrew from the project towards the end of 2020. Professor Angus Buchanan, Head of Curtin School of Allied Health at Curtin University took over the leadership of the evaluation component together with Research Professor Stian H Thoresen, who relocated to NTNU Samfunnsforskning AS in Norway.

These changes, including social distancing rules and uncertainties during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, caused several adjustments to the project compared to what was initially outlined in the grant application. This included a ‘truncation’ of the delivery of the project, with more time required to develop the workshop training curriculum given both the staff changeovers and the social distancing requirements caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Background

Both international and Australian research and official statistics identify poor employment outcomes for persons with disabilities. Despite being in the forefront of disability employment innovation and practice historically, Australian disability employment outcomes have stagnated. According to the OECD, Australia ranked 21st out of 29 OECD countries on disability employment just over a decade ago (Productivity Commission, 2011). Poor employment outcomes, combined with low social security benefits, including the DSP, place persons with disabilities at risk of poverty, and Australians with disabilities had the highest poverty risk among all OECD countries and the second highest poverty rate, after the USA (OECD, 2010). This is disconcerting as there is a significant and bidirectional association between disability and poverty: disability leads to poverty and poverty leads to disability (World Health Organization & The World Bank, 2011). While the latest OECD report on disability employment suggests there have been little movements in disability employment rates in Australia since the preceding report, there have been some movements in the relative ranking among OECD countries as disability employment outcomes have deteriorated in other countries (OECD, 2022).

Persons with disabilities in Australia are almost twice as likely to be unemployed and are much less likely to engage in the labour market compared to their non-disabled peers. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) regularly administer a Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC), which provides a regular snapshot of disability prevalence in Australia, as well as intermittent data on specific outcomes, such as employment. While updated SDAC data will be released later in 2024, the most recently available SDAC data is from 2018 and indicated that 17.7% of the Australian population had disabilities (ABS, 2019). This was a slight decrease from 18.3% identified in the preceding SDAC from 2015¹. The Australian Census also includes some disability statistics, framed around ‘a core activity need for assistance’ (ABS, 2022d). The proportion of Australians with core activity need for assistance increased from 5.1% to 5.8% between the 2016 and 2021 censuses (ibid), constituting 1,464,415 persons in 2021 (ABS, 2022b). While the numbers are small, younger age groups reported substantial increases in core activity need for assistance between 2016 and 2021, from 3.3% to 4.4% for persons aged 5-14 and from 2.2 to 3.0 for persons aged 15-24 (ABS, 2022d).

While employment is an important source of income, it also contributes to a range of additional social and economic benefits and outcomes related to valued social roles, social inclusion, community participation, and quality of life in addition to economic contributions

¹ There has been a slight decrease in the Australian disability prevalence identified over the past several SDACs, although the absolute number of persons with disabilities has increased. While the SDACs does not provide an explanation for the decrease in the disability prevalence, and reductions between measuring points are often within the individual statistical margin of error, it is possible that this trend is a result of the Australian skilled migration policies, with most of the reduction of the disability prevalence rate from the 2015 to the 2018 SDAC related to persons of working age (15-64), particularly persons aged 60-64 which saw a reduction from 31.5% to 26.9% (ABS, 2019).

to society (ACOSS, 2013; Australian Government, 2011; Cocks et al., 2015; National People with Disabilities and Carers Council & FaHCSIA, 2009; Thoresen et al., 2021). Exclusion from employment and the labour market may therefore have a greater impact on people's lives than just financial consequences.

Transitioning from school to work

The 2021 Census of Population and Housing presents core activity need for assistance by level of highest educational attainment for person aged 15 years and over (ABS, 2022b). These are presented as number of persons, noting that it includes persons aged 15 years who are unlikely to have completed secondary education, not to mention higher education or further education and training. Nevertheless, it provides a useful benchmark on educational attainment among persons with disabilities. While 57% of persons without core activity need of assistance had a non-school qualification (university degrees and certificate level qualifications), only 28% of persons with core activity need of assistance had a non-school qualification (ibid). Among those with only secondary education, 83% had completed year 10 and above among persons without core activity need of assistance compared to 59% among persons with core activity need of assistance (ibid).

The Australian Human Rights Commission's Inquiry *Willing to Work National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability* identified transition from school to work as a critical time and number of challenges with regards to access to support, including DES (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016). In addition, there have been a number of initiatives, or pilot projects, to support school to work transitions for young Australians with disabilities. EDGE has also been involved in a number of pilot projects and initiatives to support younger persons with disabilities transition from school to work over the years. Initiatives include: Provider of National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) services – Finding a Job, Keeping a Job and School Leavers Employment Support; school-based apprenticeships and traineeships (A&T); and Passport to Employment in addition to Project Employment (at the time known as CUFW) (EDGE Employment Solutions, 2020). EDGE has also been providing DES for Eligible School Leavers and School Leaver Employment Support initiative². It is likely that the recommendations and the report by the Australian Human Rights Commission strengthened the DES for Eligible School Leavers and School Leaver Employment Support initiative funding streams, as there was very limited access to DES funding for students with disabilities at the time of the Inquiry.

Among the initiatives EDGE has undertaken over the years to support students with disabilities obtaining and maintaining sustainable employment, A&T programs are probably the most long-standing with the strongest evidence-base. From 1999 onwards, EDGE initiated three sequential research and practice projects to support persons with disabilities commence and complete A&T. It commenced with a WA pilot in mid-1999 to place and support

² See <https://www.edge.org.au/school-leavers/our-services-school-leavers/>

apprentices and trainees with disabilities, was then expanded to a national project to identify best practices in 2002, and was expanded further into a national project in 2003 for DES and Group Training Organisations to jointly place and support apprentices and trainees with disabilities (Lewis et al., 2011b). Combined, these projects place more than 150 apprentices and trainees with disabilities and achieved completion rates comparable or superior to apprentices and trainees without disabilities (ibid).

Research has also identified positive outcomes for persons who commence but did not complete their A&T. A retrospective matched-pair analysis of outcomes was carried out among EDGE registrants who completed, or commenced but did not complete, an A&T matched to EDGE registrants who never commenced an A&T (Lewis et al., 2011a). Outcomes were analysed across 253 pairs related to hourly wage, hours worked, and job durability. Graduates, particularly persons who completed apprenticeships, had good outcomes, as did persons who commenced, but did not complete apprenticeships. Hourly wage was statistically significantly higher for apprenticeship graduates (but not among other cohorts) and weekly wages was statistically significantly higher for apprenticeships graduates, traineeships graduates, and persons who commenced but did not complete their apprenticeship (ibid). This suggests that while the hourly wage and weekly hours of work was not significantly higher than their matched pairs for traineeship graduates and persons who commenced but did not complete their apprenticeship, the multiplying effect of these two variables when combined into weekly wage was significant. Apprenticeship graduates achieved particularly positive outcomes, including weekly wages 143% higher than the weekly income of working-aged persons with disabilities and 25% higher than the general population. The study concluded that completing a traineeship, as well as commencing even if not completing an apprenticeship led to significantly better outcomes while persons who commenced but did not complete their traineeship were not significantly worse off than their matched pairs.

Inspired by these findings, additional research was carried out nationally to identify barriers, facilitators, and outcomes among A&T graduates with disabilities compared with graduates without disability. A three-year longitudinal study of graduate outcomes for Australian apprentices and trainees with and without disabilities commenced in 2011 with support from EDGE. The study identified barriers and facilitators for course completion (Cocks & Thoresen, 2013a), outcomes for persons who completed their training as part of vocational education and training (VET) while in high school (VET in Schools) (Cocks & Thoresen, 2013b), graduate experiences (Thoresen et al., 2015), quality of life (Cocks et al., 2015), and employment and related economic outcomes (Cocks et al., 2013; Thoresen et al., 2021). In summary, this substantial study identified positive outcomes for A&T graduates with disabilities, which narrowed over time compared with peers without disability. A caveat was, however, relatively poor outcomes among DSP recipients. While noting further research was warranted, it may have reflect both DSP eligibility criteria as well as conservative attitudes towards obtaining open employment including a fear of losing the DSP.

Australian disability and labour market characteristics

Prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic which hit Australia late in the first quarter/early in the second quarter of 2020, Australia had experienced decades of continuous economic growth, with a high labour market participation rate³ and low unemployment. In 2018, the labour force participation rate for working-aged Australians with disabilities was 53.4% compared with 84.1% of Australians without disabilities (ABS, 2020). These rates are comparable to those reported in the 2012, with labour force participation rates of 53.4% and 83.2% for persons with and without disabilities respectively (ABS, 2013). With regards to the unemployment rate, 5.5% of persons with disabilities were unemployed in 2018 compared to 3.9% of persons without disabilities (ABS, 2020), substantial reductions from rates identified in the 2012 SDAC, when the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities was 10.0% compared to 5.3% for persons without disabilities (ABS, 2013).

Both the 2012 and 2018 SDACs indicate that labour force participation rates decrease markedly as person's level of support needs (severity of disability) increases, however, the unemployment rates fluctuates (ABS, 2013, 2020). For example, the 2018 SDAC indicates that only 27.2% of persons with profound or severe core activity limitations participated in the labour force, compared to 55.0% of persons with moderate or mild core activity limitations and 64.1% of persons with schooling or employment restriction only (ABS, 2020). The 2018 SDAC also illustrates that persons with sensory and speech disabilities are more likely to participate in the labour force, while people with psychosocial disabilities (mental illness), head injury, stroke, or acquired brain injury are least likely to participate in the labour force. Furthermore, the unemployment rate of persons with psychosocial disabilities is higher than that of persons with intellectual disabilities, at 7.9% and 6.9% respectively, highlighting the vulnerability of this group (ibid).

The labour force participation rates influence these figures substantially. However, a more simplistic and intuitive way to summarise this data is to note that 80.3% of working-aged Australians without disabilities work compared to 47.8% of Australians with disabilities (ibid).

Australian disability policy context

The current disability policy environment in Australia is dynamic and has significantly changed in recent years with a growing focus on human rights, service delivery, and an expectation of tangible and sustainable outcomes for people with disabilities. The Disability Strategy 2021 – 2030 (Australian Government, 2022) sets out a plan for continuing to improve the lives of people with disabilities in Australia over the 10 years and provide

³ In Australia, labour force participation encompass i) persons who are employed (worked a minimum of one hour in the reference week) or who is normally employed (but away from work during the reference week), and ii) persons who are unemployed but had actively looked for work in the four weeks preceding the reference week (ABS, 2018).

national leadership towards greater inclusion of people with disabilities focussing on how mainstream services and systems can improve outcomes for people with disabilities.

National Disability Insurance Scheme

The NDIS commenced in 2013 to provide reasonable and necessary supports for people with disabilities under the age of 65 years to live an included and meaningful life on an equal basis with other Australians. The mechanism for this is individualised support plans underpinned by personal budgets that are spent on services purchased from a social care market. The NDIS is a very significant social policy innovation and its importance for people with disabilities in Australia cannot be underestimated. For many people with disabilities, the supports provided through the NDIS have been essential to living an included life. This includes the funding of employment support primarily through DES. Supports in employment funding is available to anyone who meets NDIS access requirements, has a goal to work and who, due to the nature and impact of their disabilities, will require ongoing, frequent on-the-job support to pursue and achieve their employment goals. The NDIA considers the participant's employment goals, the number of hours the participant is working (or would like to work), the impact of the participant's disabilities and the level of support or supervision the participant requires to engage in work and complete their work tasks. The NDIS funds reasonable and necessary supports that help a participant to reach their goals, objectives and aspirations. Specifically, SLES is an early support for Year 12 school leavers, to assist them transition from school and into employment. Supports may include work experience generally in open employment, job site training, travel training and activities that contribute to achieving an employment outcome and linkages to ongoing employment support

Australian Human Rights Commission's inquiry into disability employment discrimination

Persons with disabilities face multiple challenges in obtaining and maintaining employment, in Australia and internationally. Despite Australia, together with Canada, the UK, and the USA, being among the first countries in the world to implement employment programs to support persons with significant developmental disabilities to obtain and maintain mainstream employment (Lewis et al., 2011b), substantial challenges remain. Recognising the fundamental right to work, free from discrimination on any basis, the Australian Attorney-General tasked the Age and Disability Discrimination Commissioner and the Australian Human Rights Commission to undertake the *Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination Against Older Australians and Australians with Disability* in 2015. This inquiry included 120 public consultations across Australia; meetings with more than 1,100 persons including older Australians, persons with disabilities, carers, advocates, community organisations, employers, businesses, unions, peak bodies, and academics; as well as 342 submissions (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016).

In the year preceding the Inquiry, the Australian Human Rights Commission received 3,529 enquiries and 742 complaints about disability discrimination, with more than one-third of these enquiries (35.4%) and complaints (41.0%) related to disability employment (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016). Among the key data the Commission reported, were findings from the 2015 SDAC, which identified that 8.6% of persons with disabilities reported experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment because of disabilities in the preceding year. However, this was substantially higher among young adults, aged 15-24, at 20.5%. Furthermore, according to the Commission's complaints data, WA had the highest proportion of disability discrimination complaints related to employment at 52.7% compared to the national average of 41% with the lowest reported for the Australian Capital Territory at 10.3% (ibid, p. 171).

The Inquiry also reported on the lack of confidence, skills, and knowledge regarding disability employment and available support among businesses and employers. While DES may support persons with disabilities obtaining and maintaining work, 'employers expressed dissatisfaction' with DES, including poor understanding of the needs of businesses, most DES being small and limited to a geographical location which is inconvenient for large and national employers, and a complex system with multiple compliance and regulatory requirements (ibid, p. 191).

While the Report by the Australian Human Rights Commission included 56 recommendations, the most pertinent within the context of Project Employment are:

- "Recommendation 33: That the Australian Government collect and make publicly available national data regarding post-school outcomes for students with disability in order to provide a clearer picture of post-school outcomes" (p. 240).
- "Recommendation 34: That the current restrictions on access to employment services for school leavers be removed to allow all students with disability in their final year of high school (either Year 10 or Year 12) to access employment services support" (p. 241).
- "Recommendation 35: That the Australian Government allocate funding to enable a collaboration between state and Commonwealth education authorities and relevant agencies to develop guidance materials for teaching staff about supporting students with disability to transition from school to work" (p. 241).
- "Recommendation 42: That in order to improve access to reasonable workplace adjustments for people with disability, the Australian Government [should] ... expand the Employment Assistance Fund to support work experience and internships in order to enable greater job readiness for people with disability" (p.257).

Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (<https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/final-report>) has made 222 recommendations on how to improve laws, policies, structures, and practices to ensure a more inclusive and just society that supports the independence of people with disabilities and their right to live free from violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The Commissioners stated:

In conducting our inquiry and developing our recommendations, we aimed to translate human rights into practical and sustainable policies and practices that change the values and standards the community expects to be upheld for people with disability (Royal Commission into Violence Abuse Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, n.d.:4).

Volume 7 of the Royal Commission focussed on Inclusive Education, Inclusive Employment and Inclusive Housing. The opportunity to work, earn a living and participate as an economic citizen was identified as a key component of an inclusive Australia. Access to employment was identified to have flow-on effects on a person's ability to access services, support themselves and their family, and achieve financial security. Having a rewarding occupation was seen to give people a sense of purpose and personal development, foster social connection and community, and create opportunities. Consistent with the vision for inclusion, it was clearly identified that people with disabilities should have genuine choice and control over where and how they work. The Commission made recommendations to increase open employment and for the Australian Government to develop a plan to transition Australia away from segregated forms of employment and the payment of subminimum wages to people with disabilities. Commissioners held a shared commitment to inclusive employment for people with disabilities. The relevant recommendation for Project Employment was within inclusive education:

State and territory educational authorities should implement a careers guidance and transition support service for students with disability to aid transition from all educational institutions to further education and/or open employment (Recommendation 7.5 Careers guidance and transition support services).

Covid-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had wide ranging effects, across the globe, directly and in-directly, and Australia and WA, were not unscathed, with varied impact on youth and DES. Australia's first recorded COVID-19 case occurred in January 2020, with cases increasing to 6,058 by the end of March 2020 (Colon-Cabrera et al., 2021). In an attempt to control further outbreaks, an emergency response was implemented across all levels of Australian government (ibid). As an isolated country, Australia responded to the crisis with each State and territorial jurisdiction

governing a local area-based response (Parliament of Australia, 2020). The WA government initiatives were focused on stricter border controls and social distancing measures and the WA experience was unique in comparison to that of the other states, some of which experienced extended shutdowns (ibid).

Nationally, ABS (2022c) found that those aged 15-24 year experienced a significant drop in employment rates. In turns of number of persons, the drop was more than double the decrease in any other 10-year age brackets. The unemployment rates rose across all Australian states and territories during the 2020 June quarter: New South Wales, Queensland, and Tasmania recording 1.2% a decrease in number of employed persons; followed by Victoria with a 1.1% decrease; South Australia, WA, and the Northern Territory with 0.9% decrease; and the Australia Capital Territory with a decrease of 0.8% (ibid).

Research found youth with disabilities featured as an ‘at risk’ group within the COVID-19 environment, particularly in an employment setting due to structural barriers and bias practices (Smith et al., 2023). Dickinson and Yates (2020) surveyed responses from Australian youth with disabilities over COVID-19 and noted participants were worries over losing work or need to cease work due to the pandemic, and subsequent impacts on household income. The general consensus, according to those surveyed, was that there seemed to be limited information about the pandemic targeted to youth with disabilities across Australia (ibid).

Federal government measures targeted towards the disability employment sector were set in place over this period and including modification to and the provision of additional funding for employment services for people with disabilities. Enhanced flexibility to social security payment ‘jobactive’ and DES providers was also introduced to enable social distancing protocols, including delivery of services via telephone, adjustments to operating hours, and allowing staff to work from home (Royal Commission into Violence Abuse Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2020:2).

The Disability Reform Council publicly recognised concern and disquiet that a significant number of people with disabilities felt concerned about their health and welfare during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted negative impacts from changes to support networks (NDIS, 2020). Colon-Cabrera et al. (2021) adopted a framework analysis to study Australian state and territory government legislation and policies in response to COVID-19 between February and August 2020. The study found that a majority of resources aimed at carers and disability workers rather than people with disabilities. They also noted that the community and government response to COVID-19 gave rise to the formation of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. The Commission produced a ‘Statement of Concern.’ Which set out criteria for a government response to COVID-19 that aimed to be more inclusive of people with all abilities (Colon-Cabrera et al., 2021).

In WA, a State of Emergency was declared on March 15, 2020 (Government of Western Australia, 2020). On 24 March, cases peaked at 35 and the state introduced Stage 1, 2 and 3 restrictions. On 22 March 2020 the McGowan Government announced the introduction of border controls to protect WA (Parliament of Australia, 2020). These included border closures; travel restrictions and arrival requirements for travel to WA from other countries, states, territories and intra-state regions; and self-isolation and social distancing requirements (ibid). In WA, control, measures were at their peak from March through to May of 2020. From late May, onwards measures became more relaxed due to small amounts of active cases and no community transmission incidents (Government of Western Australia, 2020). The WA Minister for Education and Training announced changes to TAFE college programs on March 28, 2020. Face to face course delivery was paused until the end of Term 1 (ibid). In Term 2, program delivery models transitioned to both online and face-to-face modes and on March 3, 2022 an easing of restrictions took place, with hard border closures being lifted and thus the end of a two year period of isolation for the state (Government of Western Australia, 2020).

The WA State government's focus on tough border control policies allowed WA to experience reduced periods of shutdown and much less significant impacts from the pandemic. Nationally, ABS (2022a) notes a co-relation between the removal of COVID-19 government led responses to economic growth returning to pre COVID-19 patterns (ABS, 2022). Whilst in the WA context, local impacts and adjustments tended to be regionally specific in nature. Pre and post pandemic economic climates will no doubt have had both direct and indirect disruptions impacting on Project Employment.

3. Evaluation approach

The evaluation team has drawn on principles and elements of Participatory Action Research (PAR) to evaluate Project Employment. The PAR approach functions on the philosophy that participants have a central place in all phases of the research process, both design and implementation phases for the purposes of enacting lasting fundamental and transformational change (Canlas & Karpudewan, 2020). This core PAR philosophy has informed the study but combined with both COVID-19 impacts and staffing issues, the evaluation has not adhered to conventional PAR cycles and cycle meetings with Project Employment stakeholders. Instead, there were regular digital meetings between the project and evaluation teams, with members of the evaluation team attending different Project Employment activities.

In this final report, we draw on various program and outcome data collected by EDGE, survey and interview data with Project Employment participants collected by Curtin, and additional interviews with EDGE staff and the networks of Project Employment participants, including employers and school staff. In addition, Curtin staff has been able to attend several Project Employment activities, including observing some of the training activities and graduation events. Prior to the commencement of data collection, and before any adjustments to the data collection protocol or instruments, the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee reviewed and approved the study (approval number HRE2021-0190).

EDGE administrative data records

Project Employment participants' sociodemographic characteristics and vocational outcomes were extracted from EDGE's database, EDEN, in mid-April 2024. This was carried out by EDGE staff in close consultation with a member of the evaluation team to ensure compatibility and completeness of the data. This means that the EDGE data has a 'census date' of approximately April 10, 2024, and all data entered onto the system after this date has not been included in this report. This was the agreed approach between EDGE and Curtin to facilitate the completion of the final research report for Project Employment in July 2024. While EDGE has been able to extend the project until mid-2025, this did not include an extension to the research component of the project. The information extracted from the EDGE database is that collated and stored in the EDEN system for all EDGE registrants and workers, and some Project Employment data was initially stored elsewhere and had to be entered retrospectively. Different Project Employment staff may have taken different approaches to data entry over the duration of the project, and there may therefore be some inconsistencies in some of the data. The data presented from EDGE's administrative records may therefore be somewhat incomplete, but a quick manual review of project outcomes by Project Employment staff in April 2024 indicated that overall outcomes and trends were aligned with their expectations and experiences.

The EDEN data was exported into Microsoft Excel 365 and as the findings presented in this report are mainly descriptive, most of the data cleaning and analysis was also carried out in Microsoft Excel 365, with additional descriptive statistical analysis carried out in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0.1.1. Microsoft SharePoint and Microsoft Teams were also used for sharing and storing the data in a secure and access-restricted place and format.

Curtin data collection

The evaluation team designed a mixed-methods study approach to gather experiences and views from Project Employment participant. It consisted of:

- A pre-training survey, to be completed preferably in the first week of training
- A post-training survey, to be completed preferably in the last week of training
- Interviews with a small number Project Employment training graduates following training completion
- Follow-up interviews with training graduates approximately a year after initial interview

The evaluation team also carried out interviews (both individual interviews and group interviews) with Project Employment staff, employers, and teachers/school staff.

Surveys

The Project Employment staff assisted the Curtin team with distributing the evaluation surveys during the training. It became an integrated part of the training program which facilitated a high response rate.⁴ The surveys were distributed digitally using the Qualtrics Software, which is a cloud-based survey research tool. Participants were provided with a \$30 gift voucher as a thank you for completing both the pre-training survey and the post-training survey. EDGE provided iPads and/or laptops to allow the participants to complete the surveys during the training workshops.

Survey participants were also asked to indicate whether they were willing to participate in an interview with the Curtin researchers as part of the completion survey, and the vast majority of survey respondents replied positively to this request. Most of the survey data was

⁴ We are only able to estimate the response rate as there were a small number of Project Employment participants who withdrew from the program prior to completing the training. In addition, Project Employment participant data was entered retrospectively, and participants who withdrew during the early stages of the training may not have been recorded in the EDGEN system. This is reflected by the number of pre-training Curtin survey respondents from 2021 through 2023 were 304, while there were 296 Project Employment participants registered in EDGE's database for the same time. As such, it is likely that the Curtin survey had close to a 100 per cent response rate for the pre-training survey and around 80 per cent response rate to the follow-up survey, although it is unclear what proportion of the non-responses to the follow-up survey was due to participants withdrawing from the project.

categorical or quantitative responses, but the surveys also included some open-ended or qualitative questions. The data was exported from Qualtrics using Microsoft Excel 365 and most of the quantitative analysis was carried out in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0.1.1.

Interviews

A total of 30 Project Employment participants participated in interviews, of which five were interviewed twice. The low proportion of interview participants who participated in the follow-up interviews may have been influenced by Project Employment staff changes and a lack of rapport with the researchers (the researchers relied on project staff to liaise with participants to set up the interviews). There were also staff changes in the research team towards the end of the project. These factors are in addition to the general attrition which has to be factored into this type of study. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, apart from two instances when participants declined to be recorded and the interviewer instead took notes during the interview. All Project Employment participants who participated in interviews were provided with a \$30 gift voucher as a thank you (for each interview they participated in). Most of the interview transcripts were analysed thematically using NVivo, which is a computer software for qualitative analysis.

In addition, eight stakeholders were interviewed, including five EDGE staff, two informants from schools/educational providers, and an employer. These interviews were also analysed thematically, but given the small number of transcripts, this was carried out manually.

It would have been desirable to have interviewed more stakeholders. While there were ambitions of carrying out more extensive focus group interviews in April 2024, these ended up as individual interviews due to low participant responses and limited preparation time⁵. It would also have been desirable to have had more follow-up (second) interviews with Project Employment graduates. However, we believe that there would have been limited impact on the findings presented in this report. Despite a relatively low number of participants, interviews with Project Employment graduates reached saturation (experiences raised by participants were along the same themes as those already raised). It is possible that additional interviews with stakeholders would have provided additional contexts and descriptions of experiences, but unlikely that these would alter the overarching themes and experiences elicited from the qualitative interview material.

⁵ As the first author travelled to Perth to assist with data extraction from EDGE, this provided also an opportunity to carry out focus group interviews with stakeholders. Unfortunately, the combination of Easter and school holidays limited the lead-up time for recruiting participants which could only commence after the approval of an ethics amendment in March 2024.

4. Project Employment

Following the award of the ILC grant in early 2020, EDGE and Curtin worked closely together to organise the project implementation. For Curtin, this included the development of research instruments and obtaining ethical approval of the evaluation, recruiting research assistants, and organising contracts. For EDGE, this included recruiting project staff, development of the training materials, recruiting project participants, planning the post-training support, and organisation of contracts. It is important to remember that this all took place during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the community angst or uncertainties at the time, including with regards to shut-down of workplaces, businesses, and schools; limitations on face-to-face meetings; social distancing rules; public health measures; border closures; and broader societal impacts. In addition, the manager who had been the main driver at EDGE in developing the grant application had recently left her position.

Given the number of uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic following the grant award, the initial stages of the project included negotiating with the NDIA, the grant manager at the time⁶, adjustments to Project Employment to comply with contemporary social distancing measures, and contingency planning to allow for sudden adjustments due to pandemic impacts. This led to a slightly delayed start-up of training delivery, but an ambition to keep the number of Project Employment participants across the project period the same.

Training program development

A priority of the EDGE team during the initial stages of Project Employment was to develop the training curriculum and planning the format of delivery. With the changes to project delivery to address COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and other preventative measures, EDGE was able to invest more time and resources in the development of the 7-week training workbook and program. The first iteration of the curriculum was finalised in early January 2021, and the first round of training commenced in February 2021. The 7-week program was organised as one-day (repeat) workshops at two different sites. Project Employment was delivered from EDGE's Subiaco Office, with the second site changing from term to term due to availability of suitable venues in Joondalup except for a term when it was located at a school North of the River.

The first iteration of the training curriculum was referred to as the Charged Up for Work Manual. There was a separate topic for each weekly workshop, with specific sub-themes, exercises, and activities. The training program also included icebreakers and other activities to engage the participants, but it was framed according to a more typical professional development event rather than following a typical school schedule that has regular break and

⁶ The administration of the grant was later moved from the NDIA to the Department of Social Services.

a long lunch break. While this may have been a bit different to what the Project Employment participants were used to, it was also to model workplace expectations.

As the Charged Up for Work Manual is a comprehensive workbook, consisting of over 200 pages, only the weekly topics are listed here:

- Week 1 - Goal Setting
- Week 2 - Career Pathways
- Week 3 - A Winning Resume
- Week 4 - Get the Job
- Week 5 - Interview Preparation
- Week 6 - Get to Work
- Week 7 - Work Life Balance

Following the delivery of the training, feedback from participants, and interim evaluations, the EDGE team refined the Manual as the project progressed multiple times. This was to enhance the utility and usability of Manual as a Workbook for Project Employment participants. Towards the end of 2023, the topics of 7-week program remained the same, although refinements to the Manual had led to a slight reduction in the number of pages in the revised Manual.

Participant recruitment

The slight re-design of the Project Employment, with training delivered from 2021 onwards, led to an increase in number of participants for each session as the ambition for total number of Project Employment participants over the duration of the project was maintained. Overall, there were no major challenges with recruiting participants, although there were lower number of participants in some sessions mainly due to attrition or late withdrawals.

The main recruitment strategy of the project team was through the high schools EDGE had an existing relationship with, but there were also new partnerships and collaborations that emerged with new high schools because of Project Employment. While this was a successful strategy, the project team had to invest substantial time in recruiting suitable participants, through collaborating with schools as well as meeting with prospective participants and their families. There were multiple considerations that had to be balanced in the recruitment of Project Employment participants. For many potential participants and their families, this may have been their first encounter with adult disability services, which required relationship building and, in some instances, easing families into the disability services landscape that emerges after school. For some persons, future mainstream employment may have been a novel ambition. In addition, there were a range of practical issues related to transportation, level of support need, and literacy and numeracy among others. These are processes DES and

EDGE typically go through with new registrants, without the time pressures of the commencement of a school semester and the Project Employment training schedule.

The parallel processes, and responsibilities, with recruiting participants and liaising with schools, family members, and young adults with disabilities, combined with curriculum development, logistical arrangements of identifying and confirming suitable venues (within the COVID-19 specifications at the time) must have been strenuous for the project team. While participant recruitment was reflected upon as a potential challenge in the initial iteration of the Interim Evaluation Report of February 2022, drawing substantial project resources, this appeared to have been less of a challenge over the subsequent periods. At the end of 2022, a total of 189 youth had commenced Project Employment from a total of 43 schools or educational providers⁷, which increased to 330 youth from 68 schools or education providers when data was extracted in April 2024. The amount of work required to develop and maintain relationships with this many schools and educational providers would have been substantial, but it may have been a good investment as towards the end of the project, there were a substantial increase in number of schools with substantial number of participants. On the other hand, it was positive to have Project Employment participants from different schools to avoid grouping of participants with existing relationships during training delivery.

Employment pathways and outcomes

The main outcome of Project Employment was employment pathways, as reported to the project funder. These outcomes are reported on in the following chapter. Securing employment outcomes is a substantial task for any DES. Both Project Employment project staff as well as job search staff at EDGE were involved with securing outcomes for project participants. However, not all Project Employment outcomes are aligned to DES outcomes and for Project Employment participants, they knew and related to the project staff. As such, Project Employment staff were also central to most job searchers and on-the-job support provided to Project Employment participants.

⁷ These are students commencing Project Employment, not completions. Furthermore, it would be possible to classify different school campuses and units (e.g. educational support centres) as separate education providers, which would take the number of schools or educational providers up to 48 for commencements towards the end of 2022.

5. Project Employment outcomes

All findings presented in this chapter are according to EDGE's administrative data records, while the outcomes and experiences collected by the Curtin team are presented in subsequent chapters.

Participant characteristics

The socioeconomic characteristics of the Project Employment participants are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics in per cent (n)

	2021 (n=99)	2022 (n=87)	2023 (n=110)	2024 (n=34) ^a	Total (n=330)
<i>Gender</i>					
Females	35% (35)	26% (23)	30% (33)	38% (13)	32% (104)
Males	63% (62)	72% (63)	68% (75)	59% (20)	67% (220)
No answer/ non-specific	2% (2)	1% (1)	2% (2)	3% (1)	2% (6)
<i>Cultural background</i>					
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	7% (7)	3% (3)	2% (2)	6% (2)	4% (14)
Born overseas ^b	5% (5)	8% (7)	3% (3)	-	5% (15)
<i>Age (when training commenced)</i>					
14	1% (1)	2% (2)	3% (3)	3% (1)	2% (7)
15	33% (33)	40% (35)	27% (30)	24% (8)	32% (106)
16	35% (35)	24% (21)	33% (36)	29% (10)	31% (102)
17	29% (29)	26% (23)	34% (37)	44% (15)	32% (104)
18	1% (1)	6% (5)	4% (4)	-	3% (10)
Missing	-	1% (1)	-	-	<1% (1)
<i>Primary disability</i>					
ASD	43% (43)	52% (45)	49% (54)	50% (17)	48% (159)
Hearing	1% (1)	-	3% (3)	3% (1)	2% (5)
Intellectual	18% (18)	15% (13)	13% (14)	15% (5)	15% (50)
Neurological	8% (8)	9% (8)	5% (6)	6% (2)	7% (24)
Physical	5% (5)	6% (5)	7% (8)	-	5% (18)
Psychosocial	8% (8)	1% (1)	5% (5)	3% (1)	13% (42)
Specific learning/ADD	13% (13)	13% (11)	13% (14)	12% (4)	13% (42)
Speech	2% (2)	-	1% (1)	-	1% (3)
Vision	-	1% (1)	-	-	<1% (1)
Other	1% (1)	1% (1)	1% (1)	3% (1)	1% (4)
Non recorded	-	2% (2)	4% (4)	9% (3)	3% (9)

Notes: Sums of percentages may not total 100% due to rounding

^a Data for 2024 is incomplete and should be interpreted with caution

^b Includes four people born in New Zealand (n=2), United Kingdom (n=1), United States of America (n=1).

While there were minor fluctuations in the sociodemographic characteristics among Project Employment participants across the year groups, partly due to low participant numbers for some variables. About two-thirds of participants were males and one-third females, with a small number of individuals not providing an answer or were recorded as non-specific with regards to gender. A small number of participants were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander origin (n=14, 4 per cent in total) or born overseas (n=15, 5 per cent in total). There were only a handful of participants aged 14 (n=7, 2 per cent in total) or aged 18 (n=10, 3 per cent in total), with the remainder of participants evenly divided across the ages 15-17. With regards to disabilities, we have only provided the recorded primary disability in Table 1, noting that it may be difficult to differentiate between primary and secondary disabilities, and that Project Employment participants did not have to have any specific diagnosis to enter the program. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was recorded as the primary disability for half the participants (n=159, 48 per cent in total). Intellectual disabilities (n=50, 15 per cent in total), psychosocial disabilities (n=42, 13 per cent in total), and specific learning/attention deficit disorder (ADD) (n=42, 13 per cent in total) were other larger disability groups that featured among the Project Employment participants. A smaller group of participants had neurological disabilities (n=24, 7 per cent in total) or physical disabilities (n=18, 5 per cent in total) recorded as their primary disability. Only a handful of participants had sensory disabilities as their recorded primary disability (n=5, 2 per cent in total for hearing; n=3, 1 per cent in total for speech; and n=1, > 1 per cent in total for vision).

Table 2: Primary and additional disabilities in per cent (n=330)

	Primary disability	First additional disability	Second additional disability	Third additional disability	Fourth additional disability	Any record of disability group
ASD	48% (159)	1% (4)	2% (7)	-	-	52% (170)
Hearing	2% (5)	-	1% (2)	-	-	2% (7)
Intellectual	15% (50)	3% (10)	3% (11)	-	<1% (1)	22% (72)
Neurological	7% (24)	5% (16)	3% (11)	<1% (1)	-	16% (52)
Physical	5% (18)	3% (10)	2% (5)	1% (4)	-	11% (37)
Psychosocial	13% (42)	12% (40)	5% (17)	2% (5)	-	32% (104)
Specific learning/ADD	13% (42)	22% (72)	1% (3)	-	-	35% (117)
Speech	1% (3)	2% (5)	1% (3)	-	-	3% (11)
Vision	<1% (1)	-	<1% (1)	-	<1% (1)	1% (3)
Other ^a	1% (4)	2% (7)	2% (5)	1% (3)	<1% (1)	6% (20)
Non recorded	3% (9)	50% (166)	80% (265)	96% (317)	99% (327)	3% (9)

Notes: Sums of percentages may not total 100% due to rounding

^a 'Suspicion' of specific diagnosis is recorded in the other category

Table 2 presents the primary disability and any additional disabilities among all Project Employment participants. Half the participants had an additional disability, 20 per cent had two additional disabilities, 4 per cent had three additional disabilities, and 1 per cent had four additional disabilities. The right-hand column of Table 2 presents the proportion of participants with the specific disability group recorded in any fields within the EDGE database. Sums do not add up to 100 per cent or 330 as participants had up to five disability classifications recorded. It is nevertheless a useful exercise to review this column to get a clearer idea of the various challenges Project Employment participants may face as it may be somewhat arbitrary what disability is recorded as the primary. The proportion of participants with ASD noted anywhere in their records increased only slightly from the proportion with ASD as the primary disability, indicating that if ASD was present for a participant, it was generally noted as the primary disability. The proportion of participants with sensory

disabilities (hearing, speech, and vision), shifted only slightly, noting a low proportion of Project Employment participants with sensory disabilities in general. There were more substantial increases in the proportion of participants with other disabilities, with a 50 per cent increase for intellectual disabilities, a doubling of participants with neurological and physical disabilities, and almost a trebling of participants with psychosocial disabilities and specific learning/ADD. There was also a large increase in participants with other disabilities, although this was from a low base and included ‘suspected’ challenges.

Participant outcomes

Tables 3 through 6 presents the program outcomes according to the year in which the Project Employment participants completed their training. No outcomes were recorded for 2024 graduates, and these 34 participants have therefore been excluded from the data provided in the following tables. Participants may have had multiple outcomes recorded. To account for the various outcomes among the almost 300 Project Employment participants, we are reporting the first outcome in Table 3, the second outcome in Table 4, the third outcome in Table 5, and there was one participant who had a fourth outcome, presented in Table 6. It should also be noted that there is an attempt to rank the outcomes in these tables, from the least substantial to the most substantial, although there may be different views on the ordering presented. It is important to note that Project Employment participants had up to four outcomes recorded and that these may not have been according to a ‘linear progression’ (e.g. from unpaid work experience to a paid job). To provide a more intuitive account for the outcomes among the participants, we present group outcomes sequentially (first, second, third, and fourth outcome) in Tables 3-6, before we aggregate all outcomes in Table 7.

As can be ascertained from Table 3, 44 per cent of all Project Employment participants did not have a recorded outcome⁸. However, the proportion of participants without any recorded outcome varied substantially from year to year and may also have been impacted by time specific circumstances. This includes circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic and circumstances related to changes in project staff. However, there are also substantial differences in the proportion of Project Employment participants who had no recorded outcomes across the different years. One-third (32%) of 2021 participants had no recorded outcomes, which was halved to one-sixth in 2022 (17%). However, three-quarters of 2023 participants had no recorded outcomes (75%). As outcomes were extracted from EDGE’s database in the first half of April 2024, a proportion of the 2023 participants would have been supported for a limited time to obtain work or other outcomes. It is therefore likely that the proportion of 2023 Project Employment graduates with recorded outcomes will increase, although it was also acknowledged by EDGE staff in April 2024 that there had been some challenges with staff turnover in 2023 that may have contributed to fewer outcomes than desired among these participants.

⁸ If participants did not have a recorded first outcome, they would not have any subsequent outcomes recorded either.

Table 3: First outcome in per cent (n)

	2021 (n=99)	2022 (n=87)	2023 (n=110)	Total (n=296) ^a
Non/no recorded	32% (32)	17% (15)	75% (83)	44% (130)
ADE	2% (2)	-	-	1% (2)
Community Services	-	-	-	-
Work experience (unpaid)	14% (14)	11% (10)	5% (6)	10% (30)
Work experience (paid)	-	1% (1)	-	<1% (1)
SLES	2% (2)	15% (13)	5% (5)	7% (20)
Further education or study	7% (7)	8% (7)	5% (6)	7% (20)
Registering with DES	3% (3)	10% (9)	-	4% (12)
Customised/ self-employment	1% (1)	-	-	<1% (1)
Paid employment	21% (21)	32% (28)	7% (8)	19% (57)
A&T	17% (17)	5% (4)	2% (2)	8% (23)

Notes: Sums of percentages may not total 100% due to rounding

'Community Services' and 'SLES' were not pre-determined outcome categories identified in the grant application, but it became clear during the progression of the project that these were legitimate outcomes and useful to differentiate from other recorded outcomes.

Participants did not achieve outcomes across all possible categories, but all outcome variables are included in the Table for completeness.

There are fluctuations in the types of outcomes across the different years. There were low number of persons registering with DES (n=12, 4 per cent in total), persons who registered with an ADE (n=2, 1 per cent in total), a person who undertook paid work experience (n=1, < 1 per cent in total), and a person who obtained customised/self-employment (n=1, < 1 per cent in total). Except for those who did not achieve any outcome, paid employment was the most frequent outcome (n=57, 19 per cent in total), with a fairly even distribution across the outcome categories (unpaid work experience, SLES, further education or study, and A&T).

Table 4: Second outcome in per cent (n)

	2021 (n=21)	2022 (n=29)	2023 (n=6)	Total (n=56)
ADE	-	-	-	-
Community Services	-	10% (3)	17% (1)	7% (4)
Work experience (unpaid)	24% (5)	45% (13)	50% (3)	38% (21)
Work experience (paid)	-	7% (2)	-	4% (2)
SLES	14% (3)	10% (3)	17% (1)	13% (7)
Further education or study	10% (2)	10% (3)	-	9% (5)
Registering with DES	43% (9)	14% (4)	-	23% (13)
Customised/ self-employment	-	-	-	-
Paid employment	10% (2)	3% (1)	17% (1)	7% (4)
A&T	-	-	-	-

Notes: Sums of percentages may not total 100% due to rounding

'Community Services' and 'SLES' were not pre-determined outcome categories identified in the grant application, but it became clear during the progression of the project that these were legitimate outcomes and useful to differentiate from other recorded outcomes.

Participants did not achieve outcomes across all possible categories, but all outcome variables are included in the Table for completeness.

Table 4 indicates that 56 participants (19 per cent) achieved a second outcome. Not surprisingly, they were chiefly among the participants from 2021 and 2022. The most common second outcome was unpaid work experience (n=21, 38 per cent in total of those

who achieved a second outcome) followed by registering with DES (n=13, 23 per cent in total of those who achieved a second outcome). No participants registered with ADE, obtained customised/self-employment, or A&T as a second outcome. Several participants (single digit numbers) obtained community services, paid work experience, SLES, further education or study, and paid employment.

As shown in Table 5, only eight participants obtained a third outcome: unpaid work experience (n=4, 50 per cent in total of those who achieved a third outcome), registering with DES (n=3, 38 per cent in total of those who achieved a third outcome), and further education or study (n=1, 13 per cent in total of those who achieved a third outcome).

Table 5: Third outcome in per cent (n)

	2021 (n=2)	2022 (n=5)	2023 (n=1)	Total (n=8)
ADE	-	-	-	-
Community Services	-	-	-	-
Work experience (unpaid)	100% (2)	40% (2)	-	50% (4)
Work experience (paid)	-	-	-	-
SLES	-	-	-	-
Further education or study	-	-	100% (1)	13% (1)
Registering with DES	-	60% (3)	-	38% (3)
Customised/ self-employment	-	-	-	-
Paid employment	-	-	-	-
A&T	-	-	-	-

Notes: Sums of percentages may not total 100% due to rounding
‘Community Services’ and ‘SLES’ were not pre-determined outcome categories identified in the grant application, but it became clear during the progression of the project that these were legitimate outcomes and useful to differentiate from other recorded outcomes.
Participants did not achieve outcomes across all possible categories, but all outcome variables are included in the Table for completeness. 1

Table 6 shows that a single person obtained a fourth outcome: unpaid work experience.

Table 6: Fourth outcome in per cent (n)

	2021 (n=0)	2022 (n=1)	2023 (n=1)	Total (n=1)
ADE	-	-	-	-
Community Services	-	-	-	-
Work experience (unpaid)	-	100% (1)	-	100% (1)
Work experience (paid)	-	-	-	-
SLES	-	-	-	-
Further education or study	-	-	-	-
Registering with DES	-	-	-	-
Customised/ self-employment	-	-	-	-
Paid employment	-	-	-	-
A&T	-	-	-	-

Notes: ‘Community Services’ and ‘SLES’ were not pre-determined outcome categories identified in the grant application, but it became clear during the progression of the project that these were legitimate outcomes and useful to differentiate from other recorded outcomes.
Participants did not achieve outcomes across all possible categories, but all outcome variables are included in the Table for completeness. 1

We have included all outcomes in Table 7, noting that participants may have had multiple outcomes recorded and that these may include outcomes in the same category as previously recorded. However, the pooling of outcomes illustrates clearer groupings of outcomes: The largest category is participants with no recorded outcomes (n=130, 44 per cent of all participants), as commented on previously. Paid employment (n=61, 21 per cent of all participants) and unpaid work experience (n=56, 19 per cent of all participants) are the other more prominent outcomes, with just under ten per cent of participants moving into SLES (n=27, 9 per cent of participants), further education or study (n=26, 9 per cent of participants), registering with DES (n=28, 9 per cent of participants), or obtaining an A&T (n=23, 8 per cent of participants). Around one per cent of participants obtained each of the remaining outcomes: ADE, Community Services, paid work experience, and customised/self-employment.

Table 7: All recorded outcomes in per cent (n)

	First (n=296)	Second (n=56)	Third (n=8)	Fourth (n=1)	All outcomes
Non/no recorded	44% (130)	-	-	N/A	44% (130)
ADE	1% (2)	-	-	-	1% (2)
Community Services	-	7% (4)	-	-	1% (4)
Work experience (unpaid)	10% (30)	38% (21)	50% (4)	100% (1)	19% (56)
Work experience (paid)	<1% (1)	4% (2)	-	-	1% (3)
SLES	7% (20)	13% (7)	-	-	9% (27)
Further education or study	7% (20)	9% (5)	13% (1)	-	9% (26)
Registering with DES	4% (12)	23% (13)	38% (3)	-	9% (28)
Customised/ self-employment	<1% (1)	-	-	-	<1% (1)
Paid employment	19% (57)	7% (4)	-	-	21% (61)
A&T	8% (23)	-	-	-	8% (23)

Notes: Sums of percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

‘Community Services’ and ‘SLES’ were not pre-determined outcome categories identified in the grant application, but it became clear during the progression of the project that these were legitimate outcomes and useful to differentiate from other recorded outcomes.

Certificate level qualifications

It can be challenging to differentiate between *further education and study* and A&T as A&T include both a formal qualification component and work-based training (with remuneration). In fact, this has been identified as one of the advantages of A&T, particularly for youth and young adults with disabilities who may have challenges in generalising skills learned in a classroom setting to a workplace setting (Lewis et al., 2011a, 2011b). Furthermore, A&T have been identified as successful vocational pathways for persons with disabilities in Australia, with the potential to reduce employment disparities among A&T graduates with disabilities compared to their non-disabled peers (Cocks et al., 2013; Cocks et al., 2015; Thoresen et al., 2021).

Noting that according to the outcomes recorded in Table 7, only 23 Project Employment participants commenced an A&T with a further 26 participants commencing further education and study, it is worthwhile exploring engagement with certificate level qualifications. According to the EDGE database, 44 individuals (15 per cent of participants) commenced a

certificate level qualification of whom 10 had completed. Among these 44 individuals, 4 commenced a certificate 1 level qualification, 25 commenced a certificate 2 level qualification, and 15 commenced a certificate 3 level qualification. Courses were across a broad spectre of industries, with *Warehousing* the most prominent (n=9) followed by *Retail* (n=4). While it is difficult to ascertain from the EDGE database (without going into client specific records), there are indications that commencing certificate level qualifications leads for further certificate level engagement, with seven participants commencing a second qualification and one participant going on to commence a third and fourth qualification (noting that some may have transferred across to a different qualification).

Paid work

A total of 81 Project Employment participants (27 per cent) were recorded with jobs in the EDGE database (which may include unpaid or paid work experience, customised/self-employment, paid employment, and/or A&T). When only considering the 48 participants with recorded hourly rates (greater than nil), their mean hourly rate was \$15.34 (range 8.00-30.00, standard deviation 5.07). The mean number of recorded weekly hours of work was 11.60 hours (range 3.00-38.00 hours, standard deviation 9.78) among the 47 Project Employment participants that had this recorded in EDGE's database. Among these 47 participants, 12 had no hourly wage noted (or it was noted as nil). Given the incompleteness of this data, as well as the likelihood that actual number of hours of work would fluctuate for some of the Project Employment participants, reporting the weekly wages (which is simply multiplying the hourly wage by weekly hours) will only exaggerate the range in outcomes among the participants. Rather, it is more important to emphasise that these outcomes suggest that the Project Employment participants who engaged in paid work were remunerated according to award/training wages, and for the those undertaking full-time remunerated work, this would equate to a full-time training wage.

The range in recorded number of weekly hours of work include several persons undertaking fewer hours than what is required to be eligible for DES funding (8 hours per week). Eleven of the 47 participants with recorded number of weekly hours were allocated between 3 and 5 hours per week according to EDGEs database (23 per cent) with an additional 11 participants with 7.5 or 7.6 work hours allocated per weekly (23 per cent). Nine of these 22 participants (41 per cent) were in unpaid positions. Given the target group of the Project Employment project, high-school students, it is unrealistic to expect all participants to aim for a full day of work per week on average (which is one of the DES eligibility requirements).

Of the 81 Project Employment participants with recorded jobs, 14 (17 per cent) had a second job recorded in EDGEs database – five obtain a new job with the same employer while the remaining 9 were employed elsewhere. Two persons had moved on to a third job.

Summary

Project Employment participants did not have the same rigid eligibility criteria as DES. The majority of participants were youth aged 15-17, with a few 14- and 18-year-olds. Two-thirds were male, and ASD featured significantly within the participant group, followed by specific learning/ADD and psychosocial disabilities. There were a variety of outcomes among the participants, with few outcomes recorded for participants in the 2023 group (partly due to the 12-month post-training support period still being underway when the outcome data was extracted). Among all the participants, 44 per cent had no recorded outcomes. Noting that participants could have achieved multiple outcomes, the most frequent vocational outcomes were paid employment (21 per cent) and unpaid work experience (19%). This was followed by SLES (9 per cent), further education and study (9 per cent), registering with DES (9 per cent), and A&T (8 per cent). It is encouraging that a proportion of participants achieved stronger outcomes such as paid work and A&T, and that 15 per cent commenced a certificate level qualification. It is also encouraging that for those who obtained paid work (independent of the outcome category), the wage data appears to be in accordance with award requirements (no noted Support Wage Scheme), although the number of weekly hours of work varied (as is reasonable given that the majority of participants were still in school and not all undertook work as part of their education and training).

6. Survey outcomes

In addition to the outcome data presented in Chapter 5, the evaluation team also distributed electronic pre- and post-training surveys to Project Employment participants at the beginning and towards the end of the 7-week training program. This was done with the assistance of EDGE staff during the training workshops, but collected independently, using Curtin University's access to the Qualtrics survey platform. Participants received a \$30 gift voucher. Distribution of the survey during the training workshops facilitated a high response rate, although it was completely voluntary to complete this and participants could choose not to answer individual questions. It is likely that participants who commenced but did not complete the Project Employment training were among the pre-training survey respondents, as pre-survey participant numbers vary slightly from those recorded in EDEN database (and these outcomes were presented in chapter 5). A total of 304 participants completed the pre-training survey and 244 participants completed the post-training survey, indicating that 80 per cent of pre-training survey respondents completed the post-training survey). Some of the findings presented in this chapter aggregate all Project Employment participants across all groups from 2021 through 2023 for ease of interpretation and presentation.

Pre-training survey

At the time when Project Employment participants completed the pre-training survey, 277 were still in school (91 per cent), while 17 had completed or withdraw from school (9 per cent). Table 8 outlines the highest level of completed education as reported by Project Employment participants. It is likely that these figures are inaccurate as it became apparent when reviewing the data that some participants reported what level of schooling they were currently undertaking, while others reported level of completed education. With this in mind, the figures in the table still provide a reasonable indication that the educational progression among the Project Employment participants are about at the same level as their peers without disabilities compared to their age (as reported in Table 1).

Table 8: Highest level of completed education in per cent (n)

	2021 (n=91)	2022 (n=98)	2023 (n=115)	Total (n=304)
Year 9 or below	4% (4)	5% (5)	8% (9)	6% (18)
Year 10	42% (38)	38% (37)	38% (44)	39% (119)
Year 11	27% (25)	22% (22)	22% (25)	24% (72)
Year 12	22% (20)	21% (21)	27% (31)	24% (72)
Higher than year 12	-	2% (2)	3% (3)	2% (5)
Missing	4% (4)	11% (11)	3% (3)	6% (18)

Notes: Project Employment participants were asked of their highest level of *completed* education. However, many responded with the year in which they were currently enrolled (adjusted when made explicit). The figures in this table should therefore be viewed as an estimate.

Sums of percentages may not total 100% due to rounding

Motivations for joining the program

Participants were asked to provide up to three main reasons for participating in Project Employment. This was a free-text response and 93 per cent listed at least one motivation while 75% listed three motivations. A total of 763 factors were listed, ranging from obtaining work at a specific business or industry, leisure activities associated with the program, gaining skills and confidence, and further education or training. Each participant listed on average, 2.5 reasons for joining Project Employment.

In addition, participants were asked to indicate whether any of six pre-determined reasons factored into their motivation to join Project Employment. As can be seen from Table 9, there were some minor differences with regards to motivations to join Project Employment across the groups. A larger proportion of participants in 2021 noted that they joined the program due to their own interests (37 per cent compared to 19 per cent and 22 per cent in 2022 and 2023 respectively). Fewer of the 2021 participants joined because it was suggested by others (24 per cent compared to 32 per cent in both 2022 and 2023). The majority of participants joined to get a job, between two-thirds and three-quarters across the groups, while a small proportion joined to have something to do (between 12 per cent to 17 per cent across the groups). More than half the participants joined to increase their skills and another substantial proportion of participants joined to try something new (between 38 per cent to 49 per cent across the groups). A small proportion of participants specified other reasons to join Project Employment (10 per cent).

Table 9: Motivations for joining Project Employment in per cent (n)

	2021 (n=91)	2022 (n=98)	2023 (n=115)	Total (n=304)
Own interests	37% (34)	19% (19)	22% (25)	26% (78)
Suggested by others	24% (22)	32% (31)	32% (37)	30% (90)
To get a job	71% (65)	66% (65)	77% (88)	72% (218)
Something to do	15% (14)	12% (12)	17% (19)	15% (45)
Increase skills	56% (51)	54% (53)	53% (61)	54% (165)
Try something new	49% (45)	38% (37)	38% (44)	41% (126)
Other	10% (9)	10% (10)	10% (11)	10% (30)

Note: Respondents were able to select multiple responses. Sums of percentages do therefore not total 100%.

Membership in clubs, groups, committees, or organisations

Previous research has identified positive associations between employment and social connections for young adults with disabilities in Australia (Cocks et al., 2015). To map this over the progression of the project, a query over membership in clubs, groups, committees, or organisations was included in the survey. As can be elicited from Table 10, not all participants responded to this question (in addition to the proportion of participants who explicitly responded that they were not a member of any clubs, groups, committees, or organisations). For simplicity, we are presenting the proportion of all Project Employment participants who were members of the respective groups at the various points in time in Table 10 below. There

were only slight variations across the different time periods and the most prominent category of membership was a sports club.

Table 10: Membership in clubs, groups, committees, or organisation in per cent (n)

	2021 (n=91)	2022 (n=98)	2023 (n=115)	Total (n=304)
Church or religious group	11% (10)	15% (15)	10% (11)	12% (36)
Social group	12% (11)	12% (12)	13% (15)	13% (38)
A sports club	21% (19)	15% (15)	32% (37)	23% (71)
A volunteer group	8% (7)	5% (5)	6% (7)	6% (19)
An animal or animal welfare group	1% (1)	2% (2)	1% (1)	1% (4)
A political organisation	-	3% (3)	1% (1)	1% (4)
Other	7% (6)	10% (10)	11% (13)	10% (29)

Note: Respondents were able to select multiple responses.

Expectations by others, social relationships, satisfaction with social life and life overall

Participants were asked to indicate whether they worried about what other people expected of them and whether they had friends over to visit their home. These two questions were sourced from the Quality of Life Questionnaire by Schalock and Keith (1993 and 2004) which has been widely used in research focusing on persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. While we reported on this according to the different time periods in the interim reports, there were only minor changes across the different time periods earlier (possibly a result of small number of respondents), and we are therefore reporting on all Project Employment participants collectively in Table 11 that relates to expectations and Table 12 that relates to having friends over to visit, below.

Table 11: Worry about expectations in per cent (n)

	All the time	Sometimes, but not all the time	Seldom	Never
Do you worry about what people expect of you?	20% (59)	46% (133)	14% (42)	19% (56)

Note: Fourteen participants did not respond to this question.

Table 12: Having friends over to visit in per cent (n)

	Fairly often	Sometimes	Rarely or never
Do you have friends over to visit your home?	20% (59)	42% (122)	38% (112)

Note: Eleven participants did not respond to this question.

In addition, the survey included questions regarding satisfaction with current social life and life overall. Responses to these questions are included in Table 13. Participants were overall satisfied with their ‘current social life’ and ‘life overall’ (less than one-fifth disagreed or strongly disagreed with either of these two statements).

Table 13: Satisfied with social life and life overall in per cent (n)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagreed
I am happy with my current social life	21% (60)	61% (179)	16% (47)	2% (6)
I am happy with my life overall	26% (77)	55% (162)	15% (45)	3% (9)

Note: Twelve participants did not respond to the first question and 11 participants did not respond to the second question.

Prospects for the future

Participants were asked to how they believed their lives would be in a year's time related to their working situation, social life, and life overall, as outlined in Table 14. While it is unclear how the contemporary COVID-19 situation in WA at the time of the dissemination of these surveys may have impacted these responses, it is interesting to note that the substantial majority rated future prospects for each area as either much better or a little better with only a handful indicated that they believed things could be a little worse or much worse in a year's time. While the different responses to these three questions only varied slightly, it is also interesting to note that participants rated prospects for the future to be better with regards to their working situation and life overall than their social life.

Table 14: Prospects for the future in per cent (n)

	Much better	A little better	A little worse	Much worse
In a year's time, I believe my working situation will be:	44% (129)	52% (150)	3% (8)	1% (3)
In a year's time, I believe my social life will be:	35% (102)	57% (166)	7% (21)	1% (2)
In a year's time, I believe my life overall will be:	44% (128)	51% (148)	5% (15)	1% (2)

Note: Fourteen participants did not respond to the first question, 13 participants did not respond to the second question, and 11 participants did not answer to the third question.

Participants were also invited to share what their individual goals were for the next few years in an open question. These were a total 273 responses (90% response rate), often centred on education and/or work prospects or obtaining a driver's licence, but also with regards to developing social relationships including with family members, financial independence, and leisure activities. Several participants listed multiple goals across different life domains, such as with regards to work and training, socially, and financially.

Sources of income

Participants were asked to indicate all their sources of income, summarised in Table 15. Given that most participants were high school students, it is not surprising that the majority of participants identified support from parents as a source of income. Given the small number of respondents for each source of income across the different groups, one should be careful when interpreting these figures. It is still interesting to note that a reasonable proportion of

participants specified Disability Support Pension as a source of income (third highest in total, following parental support and other sources), higher than the proportion of participants that indicated wage or salary from paid work as a source of income.

Table 15: Sources of income in per cent (n)

	2021 (n=91)	2022 (n=98)	2023 (n=115)	Total (n=304)
Disability Support Pension	7% (6)	17% (17)	15% (17)	13% (40)
Youth or New Start Allowance ^a	7% (6)	9% (9)	7% (8)	8% (23)
Support from parents/family	56% (51)	53% (52)	58% (67)	56% (170)
Wage or salary from paid work	10% (9)	16% (16)	7% (8)	11% (33)
Other	13% (12)	11% (11)	17% (20)	14% (43)

Notes: Respondents were able to select multiple responses.

^a JobSeeker Payment replaced New Start Allowance during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the wording of the question was maintained given the familiarity with these benefits (similar to Centrelink being more familiar than Services Australia at the time).

Training experience

As noted earlier, 244 Project Employment participants completed the post-training survey, which was framed around the training experience. The vast majority of Project Employment participants enjoyed the training as 95 of valid respondents replied “yes” to the query if they would recommend the training to a friend.

Table 16: Experiences during the Project Employment training in per cent (n)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I enjoyed the Project Employment training	54% (129)	43% (102)	1% (3)	1% (3)
The Project Employment training taught me new skills	45% (107)	50% (118)	4% (10)	1% (2)
The skills I learned through Project Employment training will improve my chances of obtaining work	40% (95)	57% (135)	2% (5)	1% (2)
I got a better understanding of different work options through the Project Employment training	46% (108)	51% (120)	3% (7)	1% (2)
The Project Employment training increased my interest in obtaining work	33% (79)	62% (148)	3% (7)	1% (3)
I made new friends through the Project Employment training	45% (106)	46% (108)	8% (19)	2% (4)

Note: Seven participants did not respond to the questions in this table.

There were little variations across the different groups with regards to participants' experiences during the Project Employment training, and we have therefore collated these answers across the different years in Table 16. The responses in the survey were overwhelmingly positive with regards to participants experiences, with all statements exceeding 90 per cent agreement (agree or highly agree). There were nevertheless some small differentiations in the responses to the different questions, with the most positive responses

related to having ‘enjoyed the Project Employment training’. High level of agreement was also indicated for having learned new skills through the training and having gotten a better understanding of different work options (similar response patterns across these two questions). There was also a high degree of confidence of having improved chances of obtaining work following the skills gained through the training (40 per cent strongly agreed and 57 per cent agreed). While Project Employment raised participants’ interests in obtaining work, this was more tempered (33 per cent strongly agreed and 62 per cent agreed). The question with the lowest proportion of agreement was with regards to having made new friends through the program, although more than 90 per cent indicated agreement towards this question (with 8 per cent disagreeing and 2 per cent strongly disagreeing).

Participants were asked to list up to three things that they enjoyed the most about the training. Although some participants replied: “I don’t know”, “N/A”, or skipped this question, 227 participants listed at least one specific thing they enjoyed with the training (93 per cent). A total of 639 items were listed (mean 2.6 items per participant), which ranged from specific aspects of the training (e.g. learning new skills, practicing interviewing, and visiting workplaces), the delivery format (e.g. Kahoot, mindfulness, and activities), as well as the learning environment (e.g. making new friends, the consultants, and the free food).

Participants were also asked to list up to three recommendations for improving the program. There were less suggestions provided by participants to this open question, and several explicitly stated that they did not have any specific suggestions (e.g. “nothing”, “I don’t know”, or did not provide an answer). Only 138 participants listed an explicit suggestion to improving the training (57 per cent), listing a total of 307 items (mean 1.3 items per participant). Some of this feedback, however, was also at times somewhat contradicting. For example, some participants would want the training to go for longer, while others would like it to be shorter. There were, however, some specific recommendations, such as using computers rather than iPads, that EDGE had already implemented. Other suggestions included a wider variety in resources (e.g. different mindfulness body scan videos), more and better facilitated group work (e.g. work desks to be grouped), more excursions and site visits, more “hands-on” exercises and activities, among others. Many participants also indicated that there were no specific area or content they believed it would be necessary to improve on.

Summary

The overwhelming majority of Project Employment participants indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the training, with 95 per cent indicating that they would recommend the program to a friend. An even greater proportion of participants, 97 per cent, either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “I enjoyed the Project employment training”. Participants listed different aspects of the skills or content covered in the training, the delivery format, and the training environment as aspects they enjoyed. With regards to potential improvements, many indicated that there were no specific aspects for improvement, while

others indicated that they would have liked more of the specific activities they enjoyed during the training. EDGE has also implemented some of the suggestions for improvements listed for subsequent Project Employment cohorts.

7. Qualitative interviews

Students' experiences

Interviews were conducted with 30 Charged Up for Work participants from the four cohorts across 2021 and 2022 program delivery. Baseline interviews covered participants' expectations pre-training, registration, their experiences during the course, and expectations and experiences of follow-up support. The following findings have come out of a general inductive approach as described by Thomas (2006) for use in evaluative research. The inductive process of this approach is in supporting 'frequent, dominant, or significant themes' (p. 238) to emerge from the raw data and allowing the analysis to proceed 'goal-free' or without hypotheses (Scriven, 1991, p.56, as cited in Thomas, 2006). Furthermore, this approach is focused on establishing links between the emergent themes and the evaluations objectives.

Prior to training

The first cohort reported that the registration was simple and that the training was suggested to them either by the school or by a parent. Many of the students remembered having the training discussed with them before they agreed to attend. The registration process was changed after term one, where each student was met with and had the program discussed with them prior to registration. These changes are reflected in the subsequent interviews where students reported that they met either the consultants or the program manager. Some students described this as helping them to feel less nervous. Other students described this as being helpful when the consultant who registered them became their consultant in the support period as it was easier to discuss their work goals or dreams as they felt they knew the consultant well.

The expectations of the training have been strongly linked to work-related training and less students have reported having no expectations prior to starting the program. Other expectations that were expressed were learning about what post-school life would be like, that the program would assist in gaining '*more information about what life would actually be like outside of school*'. Across the cohorts, students have discussed expectations of developing confidence or independence through the program, one student '*thought it would be about developing independence and getting more skills to help you decide what you want to do.*' Another described expecting the program to help them '*get more confident applying for workplaces*'. Students have continued to express their nervousness and uncertainty of attending the program '*the first day, I was kind of nervous*', although this has been less significant in the data from subsequent interview cohorts. Feelings of uncertainty were expressed by several students, stating that they were unsure of what to expect on the first day, feeling nervous. One student expressed that they were unsure of how the training would help them with future job plans.

During the training

Students commented the program content was fun, interesting, easy to understand, and very informative: *'I found the seven weeks really informative'*, and *'It broadened my mind about other opportunities.'* A student from the second cohort stated, *'It actually helped me understand what life would be outside of school and what to expect when you're not'*. In terms of specific program content, students recalled learning about budgeting, occupational health, and safety, being responsible in the workplace and consequences, how to respond to stress, and resume writing *'work health and safety... basically how to be responsibly in the workplace, how to be safe of course in the workplace. Make sure you do things properly...'*. Some students from subsequent cohorts have described the emphasis on appropriate work wear *'I found out that we needed to wear a long pants, doesn't matter if was a 42 degree day, you just had to wear long pants. I always thought you could wear shorts'*. Other students noted the resume building and the mock interviews, a student reflected on their experience of working with a consultant on resume writing saying *'We did our resume writing and I told everyone what my experiences was when I was working for my past jobs and everything. It was pretty good. It was a pretty good day really.'* This statement describes that the training and support are building good experiences for the students.

Some students commented on the difference between the program and School. This is best capture by a student from cohort 2:

The program itself was very good. It actually helped me understand what life would be outside of school and what to expect when you're not. Obviously when you're at school you don't actually expect what you would expect, it's a bit of half and half.

Many of the students interviewed noted mock interviews being helpful as they were offered constructive feedback so they could improve, learn how to dress for an interview, and how to be themselves. However, one student noted they would have liked more information about what to do in an interview. Students spoke about the benefit of workplace visits. They enjoyed seeing different types of jobs, the requirements of each, and what employment was available locally. One student noted they had enjoyed hearing from people about their jobs as it gave them a sense of what the job was like. Some students have noted when asked about their favourite part of the program that it would be great to learn more about other types of jobs and not just retailer type businesses:

Definitely about being able to understand or being able to learn more about different jobs than just learning about a few. Obviously, Kmart and all those retailer stores, I would like to know a bit more, even about animal shelters or something like that, just learning some more of what they would actually do.

Other students suggested areas in which the program could improve, such as breaking up the talking with more activities, checking back with students that they had understood what had been said, and learning more about how to handle money and how to talk to people. Many

students, when asked if they could recommend any improvements to the program stated that it was great as it is *'there really isn't anything that they would have to change'*.

Overall, the class environment was supportive and friendly. Many students who at first felt nervous or shy were made to feel comfortable in the first few weeks by other students and by staff. One student noted *'I felt nerve wracking, are there older people or my age... but it was my age and I found, I got heaps of friends now from that'*. Recent cohorts have described adding each other on social media to keep in touch: *'We all became all friends and then we started following each other on social medias and stuff like that, so we'd always be talking to each other'*. Another student spoke about feeling nervous and uncomfortable on the first day but feeling better by the second. When asked what helped them to feel more comfortable, they noted the quiet environment, how everyone was learning, and the way the Project Employment staff were teaching.

Feedback about staff in the training has only increased in positive responses, the initial cohort noted their kind, caring and patient approach. Staff would walk with students when they needed a timeout or explained things when a student did not understand. A student stated that they felt the staff *'were helpful, they weren't mean at all. They were actually... they were genuine, happy people'*. They had liked the way the staff engaged with students: *'If you treat the staff correctly, they'll treat you back with respect'*. Students mostly reported people in the class getting along well and some were still in contact with others they had met through the training. Some students found described other students as being a bit loud *'some of them were... They weren't... They were all right, but some of them were... not nerve wracking, but... What word can I use? Just a little bit loud'*. Overall, when asked if they would recommend the program one student's quick response was *'100%... yeah, it's good'*.

Post-training

Most students interviewed reported expectations of follow-up support to be assistance with getting a job, this has been consistent across cohorts. When asked what kinds of support they were receiving, some talked about handing out resumes, others described support in interviews and assistance during employment. One student stated that the Project Employment team assisted them to find work that they were interested *'They're definitely a great team, they really helped me trying to find what I actually wanted to get into a job'*. Another stated that their employment was due to the program *'I wouldn't even have a job if it wasn't for Charged Up for Work'*. One student described their expectations and their experience differing in that they:

... thought the support would be hands-on... ...They were great at it, but they take long to reply with some of the phone calls and all that other stuff... ...But by all means, they honestly do a great job.

It is evident that the follow up support is generally appreciated which was reflected in comments from this participant. *‘Definitely the ongoing assistance I’ve had with looking for a job. That’s really benefited me a lot, I feel’.*

In relations to questions about their overall experience of this program, some students described the program as helping them develop more confidence *‘I have definitely got a little bit more confidence in myself knowing that I can be independent and have a job and be reliable for that job’*. Another commented *‘I would recommend Charged Up for Work, because there’s full potential you would reach your dream job’*. Other students discussed the program as a social and learning experience *‘it’s a great learning experience. You meet awesome people. You get to meet awesome consultants and how well they help you’*.

Summary

While students felt they were advised and/or directed to attend Project Employment, and were initially nervous about entering the program, the majority expressed they enjoyed the experience, learnt new skills and enjoyed meeting new people. Increased confidence is a major outcome expressed by the participants and the development of skills such as resume development and mock interviews. The importance of the positive relationships with EDGE staff is evident and how the expectation of follow up and job support was fulfilled. The translation of the program to actual experiences was a critical component of success for participants and their families.

Experiences of network and Project Employment staff

Project Employment staff interviews

The findings from the staff interviews are focusing on three significant themes that emerged from the data on analysis which are on the importance of emphasising ‘mindset’ to students in delivery of the program: Project Employment is about assisting students to take small steps, parents may be unsure about how their son or daughter may cope with work, and gender diversity across staffing can have a powerful impact.

In asking staff members what the most important element of the program content, staff described the importance of ‘mindset’ in reminding students that they need to start the day and training with the ‘right’ mindset. To combat the kinds of negative talk that the staff are seeing students engage with at times. One staff member described talking to a student who had started work, saying *‘I’ve done a three-hour shift, I’ve actually been in a work environment, under instruction from other people’* the staff member stated that it provides students with *‘a huge sense of achievement’*. This relates to a series of barriers that have come up in the staff interviews in relation to the Project Employment follow-up assistance. Parents were described as surprised at their child’s confidence in work experience or paid work. One staff member described a parent saying *‘we see some of the feedback we’ll get from teachers,*

or mainly parents to be... and yeah, I'll be frank, mainly parents who will say, "Oh, my child, oh, he won't be able to do that" and "Oh, this will happen, that will happen, he can't do this, he can't do that."' This sense of 'uncertainty' of these students' capacity for work is an emerging theme across these staff interviews and was also evident in the student interviews.

Parents can be unsure of how their child will cope in work environments and can at times be inadvertently discouraging. One staff member described that the key to Project Employment is in assisting students to learn how to take small steps towards achieving their work goals, particularly for students experiencing anxiety, they shouldn't place too much pressure on themselves *'don't start with the three-hour shift, you know what I mean? I know you want to do this, but yeah, that is going to put too much pressure on you. Let's start with these small things.'* Staff also described that although they may have a future long-term goal, there are multiple steps that they may need to take to reach for that goal:

... this is what we stated this year, your goal might be up here, you might want to be a rocket scientist, or whatever that ... But we all have a big goal, and you might need ... There might be training, and study, and things towards that. But also, being able to engage in, you're going to learn something from every single experience, and that's going to build capacity as well.

Finally, the staff have described that in terms of staffing level, two staff members delivering the training is enough to create a strong atmosphere but three or more makes it difficult to bounce off each other. Other commentary on staffing levels in delivery of program was that three or more staff made it difficult to get to know each of the students. This can influence the rapport building with the students that gets continued through the follow-up support periods. One staff member described that it was important to have gender diversity in the consultant team as some students may feel more comfortable with a consultant of the same gender, especially in being picked up to be taken to job interviews:

... a big part of it was the allocations, was of females. A female would take it... ... That's safety for everyone... ... So we did have one student, I found her work experience, but she didn't want to go because I had to pick her up, and she was female.

Gender diversity was also noted as an important issue in the evaluation survey tools, when Project Employment staff realised that some students may be struggling with their gender identity and require more inclusive language in the survey. Furthermore, this relates to rapport building and the role that gender can play in supporting young people in these pathways, one staff member asserted that *'in terms of gender, for young people, having someone that they can look at and that represents them, saying, "You can do this" is a really powerful thing'.*

Employers

Employers were supportive of Project Employment and the skills and support it provided students seeking work. There was a strong sense of the importance of preparation and getting it right. One employer stated: *'Yeah, especially someone so young. You want to make sure that you are setting them up for success.'* Employees were keen to recommend the program:

I would definitely recommend it. I just think making sure that you have the right team and the right supports around and that you probably have some tasks that you can give them which are important which do deliver value or have a purpose.

There was a sense of the program and work opportunities needing to be tailored and take the necessary time achieve positive outcomes. Employees felt they were making a genuine contribution:

... you actually feel like you're making a difference, so this is some of the feedback I had from (name). Yeah, it was. It was good to go through that process and he didn't feel like a, a burden. He felt like he was contributing. So, yeah, I'll definitely be keen to do it.

Teachers

Teachers/educators an important indicated that Project Employment filled a gap and offered a program that was not readily available to students. The feedback emphasized the confidence it provided students with basic skills such as resume writing and interview skills. The provision of the program by Edge/Employment agency was noted as a positive due to the advantage of having connections to potential future employers of the students.

Educators reported that their students found Project Employment a positive experience with one stating *"they said can we just go there now like we don't want to come to school anymore? Can we just go to charged up for work?"* Student motivation was noted to improve, including developing broader community skills including public transport. Educators indicated that students have become more goal focused such as working toward obtaining their driver license.

The direct involvement of Edge staff was highlighted as an important indicator of success including visiting and connecting directly with School and teaching staff.

Summary

The qualitative feedback has provided a positive perspective on Project Employment. What is encouraging is the level of consistency in the feedback between the participants, employers, Edge staff and educators on what were some of the outcomes and experiences. There was a strong emphasis on the levels of skills development on employment skills such resume writing and interviewing. There was also a strong theme around the personal development of participants, particularly their confidence and outlook. It was apparent through the feedback the importance of relationships, connection, and communication between the stakeholders.

The importance of the follow-up and ongoing connection was highlighted as critical for the Program's success and supporting participants to achieve their outcomes.

8. Conclusion and final recommendations

EDGE has been able to extend Project Employment until the middle of 2025, but the evaluation component ended in mid-2024. The conclusions and final recommendations provided here are therefore applicable to both the continuation of the project into mid-2025, and hopefully beyond the funded pilot-stage of Project Employment. It is also important to note that there have been a large number of Project Employment participants over the past three years, as well as other stakeholders who have engaged in the project, and individual experiences may have varied. With this caveat, we conclude and provide final recommendations around curriculum development, participant recruitment, staffing, project outcomes, and continuation of Project Employment.

Curriculum development

EDGE and the Project Employment team invested significant time and resources into developing and refining the training program and delivery format over the project period. The Project Employment participants were very positive in their feedback on the training delivery and content, and other stakeholders have also highlighted the utility of the curriculum. It is a well-developed training program, with continuous and appropriate adjustments to the content and delivery format implemented through the project. There was a strong sense of engagement with the program, and the trainers, among Project Employment participants, which is a strength of the program. The engagement of schools with Project Employment, with referrals to the program, also attests the suitability of and need for this program. It will be important for EDGE and other stakeholders for this content to be available for students and young adults with disabilities into the future to assist with positive vocational transitions from school. It is the view of the evaluators, however, that the value of the Project Employment program is more than the curriculum and content delivered during the training component, with the post-training job-search and support integral to the relevance and utility of the training. We therefore encourage EDGE to continue pursuing avenues to deliver the full Project Employment program beyond the funded period, including the post-training search and support.

Participant recruitment

As may be expected, participant recruitment required substantial resources during the initial stages of the project and included close collaborations with schools and educational providers. As Project Employment developed and became better known among schools and other stakeholders, the recruitment process eased and there was even a waitlist of participants for some semesters or enquiries with regards to potential participants for later courses. This suggests that there is both a need and a market for this program. Although Project

Employment were delivered at two different sites across metropolitan Perth, not all schools or suburbs would have been within the catchment areas of the program, and there are potentially an even larger pool of students and young adults with disabilities who would like to and would benefit from participating in Project Employment or similar programs. With more than 300 participants participating in the training over the three-year period of the program, it is likely that good proportion of potential participants connected with Project Employment. However, relying on schools as the main or only source of recruitment may have limited the candidates that were put forward to the project team (i.e. only those connected to schools). These schools may also have other considerations in mind when referring potential participants to the program, which the project team needs to be conscious of. It was therefore appropriate for the project team to work closely with schools in the recruitment process to elicit more information about the potential participants put forward. If Project Employment emerges as a service EDGE provides to the general public in the future, it would be beneficial to streamline the onboarding process with information packages for potential participants and perhaps interview screening. This could be supplemented with more publicly available information, both for recruitment but also as preparation for participants. These resources could be made available on multiple platforms, including YouTube and/or TikTok videos, electronic and physical information packs, and physical and/or digital Q&A pre-program information sessions.

Staffing

There has been a complete turn-over of all Project Employment staff over the duration of the project (i.e. none of the original staff members recruited or assigned to the project at commencement were connected at the completion of the pilot). While this is unfortunately a characteristic of the labour market context in WA generally, as well as the disability sector specifically, it also entails some challenges to the continuity of the project. The relationships between the Project Employment staff and participants were among the most important factors in giving the participants a sense of continuity and providing confidence. It is also important to note that these inter-personal skills among the Project Employment staff are often personal traits, that are difficult capture in standard job descriptions but relate to the values and value-based approaches EDGE has built a reputation of over the past four decades. While the evaluation team recognises the challenges in retaining highly sought after staff, we also encourage EDGE to continue to explore and develop strategies to retain staff. This is not limited to Project Employment staff but is applicable across the organisation.

Project outcomes

Project Employment operated with several pre-defined vocational outcomes for participants. However, it is also important to reflect on some of the process-based outcomes for participants (and other stakeholders). This relates specifically to the training experience which

participants rated very highly and which the evaluation team attributes to the relationships that developed between Project Employment staff and participants. Both the Project Employment curriculum and staff adopted and relied on individualised approaches – drawing on participants’ individual interests, strengths, vulnerabilities, and needs. This is also known as person centredness which is argued to be a crucial component to quality service delivery and rights-based approaches. It is both commendable that Project Employment was able to deliver person-centred services to the participants, but also a prerequisite for the project to be successful, given EDGE’s values-based approaches and premisses of the project proposal. Positive relationships with staff were among the most prominent factors Project Employment participants highlighted in their feedback to the evaluation team, which attest to person-centred approaches.

There were also, as highlighted in the report, differences in employment outcomes among participants. There were some strong and positive outcomes noted among Project Employment participants from 2021 and 2022, while outcomes were lacking for a large proportion of participants from 2023. It should be noted that there 12-month follow-up period for 2023 participants was not completed at the time when employment outcomes were extracted from EDGE’s database for this report, and that these may change with time. Even if participants did not achieve vocational outcomes, the program has through developing skills given participants hopes and confidence for the future and vocational ambitions that they may not have had previously. It may have sparked a desire or ambition to both dream of a job, but also to pursue a dream job as obtaining work became a tangible goal or option that it may not have been previously. In other words, obtaining work was not some Project Employment participants necessarily considered an option prior to joining the project.

It is important to note that the study design and outcome data does not allow for determining causal effect – there were no comparison group or randomisation of participants for instance. Nevertheless, we encourage EDGE to continue to develop vocational ambitions among students and young adults with disabilities, preferable prior to leaving school as the supports and structures in the school environment may be additional resources that can assist in making meaningful vocational transitions for this group.

Continuation of Project Employment

A challenge with pilot projects is that they do come to an end and are only funded for a limited time period. Project Employment has developed and continuously adapted the training materials incorporating experiences of program delivery through the project. The continuous supply of participants, particularly from high schools, attests to both the need for but also the high quality in delivering the training. Project Employment has illustrated that there is a major unmet need for supporting vocational transitions for high school students and young adults with disabilities in Perth. It is probable that this is also the case for other areas in WA as well as in other Australian jurisdictions. The evaluation team believes it is the uniqueness of the

comprehensive nature, both the training course and post-training support, that made Project Employment attractive. It was a program specifically to produce a vocational outcome, not just increase skills. It provided for tangible translation of skills and training into genuine employment outcomes for participants: Vocational transitioning into employment from school with support). It made obtaining work tangible for participants and was not ‘more of the same’ which is often the case when providing services for persons with disabilities. We believe the success and attractiveness of Project Employment were the integration of each component with a specific purpose – both the 7-week training and the 12-months post-graining follow-up job-search and on-the-job support. Combined with the person-centred approaches that Project Employment staff employed, meaningful relationships, aspirations, hopes, dreams, and outcomes were obtained and developed among the Project Employment participants. We believe all these components are crucial in success of Project Employment and should be incorporated into any continuation of a future iteration of Project Employment.

References

- ABS. (2013). *Disability, aging and carers, Australia: Summary of findings 2012*. Retrieved 14 March 2014 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4430.0Main+Features12012?OpenDocument>
- ABS. (2018, May 25, 2020). *6102.0.55.001 - Labour Statistics: Concepts, Sources and Methods, Feb 2018* Australian Bureau of Statistics <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/6102.0.55.001~Feb%202018~Main%20Features~The%20Labour%20Force%20Framework~3>
- ABS. (2019, October 24, 2019). *Disability, ageing and carers, Australia: Summary of findings*. Australian Bureau of Statistics <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/2018>
- ABS. (2020, July 24, 2020). *Disability and the labour force*. Australian Bureau of Statistics <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/disability-and-labour-force>
- ABS. (2022a, September 7, 2022). *Australian National Accounts: National Income, Expenditure and Product. Quarterly estimates of key economic flows in Australia, including gross domestic product (GDP), consumption, investment, income and saving*. ABS. Retrieved June 25, 2023 from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/national-accounts/australian-national-accounts-national-income-expenditure-and-product/jun-2022>
- ABS. (2022b, June 28, 2022). *Disability and carers: Census*. ABS. Retrieved June 19, 2023 from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-and-carers-census/2021>.
- ABS. (2022c, November 8, 2022). *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee jobs and income, June quarter 2020. Experimental estimates of quarterly change in employee jobs and income due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the June quarter 2020*. ABS. Retrieved June 25, 2023 from <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/impact-covid-19-pandemic-employee-jobs-and-income-june-quarter-2020#:~:text=At%20the%20end%20of%20March,the%20quarter%20fell%20by%2085%2C000>.
- ABS. (2022d, July 27, 2022). *Profile of people with a core need for assistance in Australia. Information on need for assistance*. Retrieved June 19, 2023 from <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/profile-people-core-need-assistance-australia>
- ACOSS. (2013). *Poverty in Australia*. Retrieved March 23, 2013 from http://acoss.org.au/images/uploads/ACOSS_Poverty_Report_2012_Absolute_Final.pdf
- Australian Government. (2011). *Foundations for a stronger, fairer Australia*. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- Australian Government. (2022). *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021 – 2031*. Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.disabilitygateway.gov.au/document/3106>
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2016). *Willing to work: National inquiry into employment discrimination against older Australians and Australians with disability*. Australian Human Rights Commission.
- Canlas, I. P., & Karpudewan, M. (2020). Blending the principles of participatory action research approach and elements of grounded theory in a disaster risk reduction education case study. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920958964>

- Cocks, E., & Thoresen, S. H. (2013a). *Barriers and facilitators affecting course completions by apprentices and trainees with disabilities* (
- Cocks, E., & Thoresen, S. H. (2013b, 3rd - 5th April 2013). *Social and economic outcomes from VET in schools for people with disabilities: initial findings from an Australian national longitudinal study*. AVETRA 16th Annual Conference 3-5 April, 2013, Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, WA.
- Cocks, E., Thoresen, S. H., & Lee, E. A. L. (2013). Employment and related economic outcomes for Australian apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities: baseline findings from a national three-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 39(3), 205-217.
- Cocks, E., Thoresen, S. H., & Lee, E. A. L. (2015). Pathways to employment and quality of life for apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2015.1025714>
- Colon-Cabrera, D., Sharma, S., Warren, N., & Sakellariou, D. (2021). Examining the role of government in shaping disability inclusiveness around COVID-19: a framework analysis of Australian guidelines. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 20(1), 166. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01506-2>
- Dickinson, H., & Yates, S. (2020). *More than isolated: The experience of children and young people with disability and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic Report on CYDA's 2020 COVID-19 (Coronavirus) and children and young people with disability survey*. Public Service Research Group, School of Business, UNSW
https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/covid_report_compressed_1.pdf
- EDGE Employment Solutions. (2020). *Experience the power of diversity. Annual results 2019/2020*. EDGE. <https://www.edge.org.au/our-2019-2020-annual-report/>
- Government of Western Australia. (2020). *COVID-19 in Western Australia Bulletin 1: The impact on lifestyle*. Department of Health.
<https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/~media/Corp/Documents/Reports-and-publications/COVID19-in-Western-Australia/COVID19-in-WA-Bulletin-1-Impact-on-Lifestyle.pdf>
- Gustavsson, A., Wendelborg, C., & Tøssebro, J. (2021). Educated for Welfare Services--The Hidden Curriculum of Upper Secondary School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 49(4), 424-432.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12418>
- Lewis, G., Thoresen, S. H., & Cocks, E. (2011a). Post-course outcomes of apprenticeships and traineeships for people with disability in Western Australia. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 35, 107-116.
- Lewis, G., Thoresen, S. H., & Cocks, E. (2011b). Successful approaches to placing and supporting apprentices and trainees with disability in Australia. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 34, 181-189.
- National People with Disabilities and Carers Council, & FaHCSIA. (2009). *Shut out: the experiences of people with disabilities and their families in Australia: National Disability Strategy consultation report* (
- NDIS. (2020, April 9, 2020). *Disability Reform Council Update*. Retrieved June 25, 2023 from <https://www.ndis.gov.au/news/4729-disability-reform-council-update>
- OECD. (2010). *Sickness, disability and work: Breaking the barriers. A synthesis of findings across OECD countries* (
- OECD. (2022). *Disability, Work and Inclusion: Mainstreaming in All Policies and Practices*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1787/1eaa5e9c-en>

- Parliament of Australia. (2020, October 22, 2020). *COVID-19: a chronology of state and territory government announcements (up until 30 June 2020)*. Retrieved Jun 25, 2023 from https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2021/Chronologies/COVID-19StateTerritoryGovernmentAnnouncements
- Productivity Commission. (2011). *Disability care and support*. Productivity Commission.
- Royal Commission into Violence Abuse Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (2020). *Outline of steps taken by the Commonwealth of Australia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to people with disability*. Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability,. <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2020-04/Outline%20of%20steps%20taken%20by%20the%20Commonwealth%20of%20Australia%20in%20response%20to%20the%20COVID-19%20pandemic%20in%20relation%20to%20people%20with%20disability.pdf>
- Royal Commission into Violence Abuse Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (n.d.). *A brief guide to the Final report*. <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/A%20brief%20guide%20to%20the%20Final%20Report.pdf>
- Schalock, R. L., & Keith, K. D. (1993 and 2004). *Quality of Life Questionnaire manual. 1993 Manual and 2004 revision*.
- Smith, C., Tani, M., Yates, S., & Dickinson, H. (2023). Successful School Interventions for Students with Disability During Covid-19: Empirical Evidence from Australia. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 32(3), 367-377. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-022-00659-0>
- Stafford, L., Marston, G., Chamorro-Koc, M., Beatson, A., & Drennan, J. (2017). Why one size fits all approach to transition in Disability Employment Services hinders employability of young people with physical and neurological disabilities in Australia. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 59(5), 631-651. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185617723379>
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237-246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748>.
- Thoresen, S. H., Cocks, E., & Parsons, R. (2021). Three year longitudinal study of graduate employment outcomes for Australian apprentices and trainees with and without disabilities. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 68(5), 702-716.
- Thoresen, S. H., Cocks, E., Peterson, S., & O'Callaghan, A. (2015). *Graduate experiences among apprentices and trainees with disabilities: Supplementary report*. N. C. f. V. E. Research
- Winn, S., & Hay, I. (2009). Transition from school for youths with a disability: Issues and challenges. *Disability & Society*, 24, 103-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590802535725>
- World Health Organization, & The World Bank. (2011). *World report on disability*. World Health Organization.



Charged 
for Work



NTNU
Samfunnsforskning AS



Curtin University