

# Pathways to Possibilities: Supporting Rights-Based Employment for Young People with Disability

Children and Young People with Disability  
Australia's Submission to the Department of  
Social Services "Next Steps in Supported  
Employment: Consultation on the Way  
Forward" Discussion Paper

*"We need to change attitudes and perceptions - look case by case based on how someone works. Not all people with intellectual disability need to work in certain industries, we can work in the mainstream, we don't need to be segregated. I want to build skills, connections, and friendships – that's not going to happen if I'm dumped in a place where I'm not happy"*  
(Young person with disability, Voices on Work 2024 Report)

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Children and Young People  
with Disability Australia

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**A note on terminology:**

Throughout this submission, Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) uses person-first language, e.g., person with disability. However, CYDA recognises many people with disability choose to use identity-first language, e.g., disabled person.



**Content warning: This submission references ableist, discriminatory and abusive practices towards people with disability.**

**Acknowledgements:**

Children and Young People with Disability Australia would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the Lands on which this report has been written, reviewed and produced, whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this Land since the Dreamtime. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present. This is, was, and always will be Aboriginal Land.



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## Summary of recommendations

The government's Disability Employment Strategy<sup>1</sup> vision is, "Inclusive workplace cultures where people with disability thrive in their careers". Young people with disability (YPWD) must be prioritised as one of the most disadvantaged cohorts in the labour market. YPWD are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as their same aged peers without disability, with only 58 per cent employed compared with 73 per cent of young people without disability.<sup>2</sup> 49 per cent rely on income support payments as their main income compared to 14 per cent of those without disability.<sup>3</sup> Only 20 per cent of NDIS participants aged 15-24 years are employed.<sup>4</sup> YPWD need early support and opportunities, as segregation negatively impacts employment outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

CYDA envisions a future where YPWD, including those with high support needs, have the same opportunities as their peers to access meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable employment. This aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Australian Disability Strategy 2021–2031, and the Disability Royal Commission, which called for phasing out segregated employment and supporting people with disability into open, inclusive employment. For YPWD, this requires structural reform—not just of employment settings, but also of the pathways, mindsets, and systems that influence their futures.

Drawing on the lived experiences of YPWD, CYDA's submission puts forward three recommendations to transition to open employment in a phased and supported way:

**Recommendation 1: Develop a co-designed and rights-based Youth Disability Inclusive Employment Strategy as part of a National Roadmap for Inclusive Employment. This Strategy should be adequately resourced, measurable and embedded within disability, education, and workforce policies. It should include:**

- a. Co-design by young people with disability, including with high support needs
- b. Expansion and tailoring of existing evidence-based employment programs to young people with disability with high support needs, by:
  - Extending the DREAM Employment Network model.
  - Adapting the SVA Employer Innovation Labs approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Services (2021) [Employ My Ability](#).

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) [Children and young people with disability](#).

<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) [People with disability in Australia 2019: in brief](#).

<sup>4</sup> AIHW (2025) [Young NDIS participant employment - Employment and financial security](#).

<sup>5</sup> Disability Royal Commission (2023) [The association between segregated education and employment](#); Cocks and Harvey (2008) [Employment/Day Options Research Project](#), Curtin Uni of Technology; Wilson and Campain (2020) [Fostering employment for people with intellectual disability: the evidence to date](#), Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology.

- Establishing local, co-designed employment hubs as incubators for place-based inclusive employment innovation.
- c. Incentives for employers to employ YPWD and high support needs, by:
- Developing dedicated, co-designed Disability Standards for Employment, to sit alongside the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.
  - Providing capability-building support, certification and recognition to employers, linked to access to federal tenders and employment subsidies.

**Recommendation 2: Implement a national Wage Equity Transition Plan that ensures YPWD in supported employment are paid at least the minimum wage, with tailored supports and transition funding. This phased Plan should include:**

- a. Appointing a Ministerial Implementation Working Group to oversee the design, implementation and rollout of the Plan.
- b. Funding the Centre for Inclusive Employment to conduct research into innovative, best practice and evidence-based modelling and approaches.
- c. Creating a Wage Transition Innovation Fund to support employers and businesses to transition to wage equity.

**Recommendation 3: Implement a gradual transition towards open employment that retains the benefits and supports of supported employment settings, by:**

- a. Providing early intervention through wraparound support, mentoring and training to support the transition to open employment, through:
  - Expanding support for open employment pathways through the NDIS Youth Employment Assistance (formerly Student Leaver Employment Support) program, informed by the 2025 NDIS blended employment trial outcomes.
  - Guaranteeing a ‘Right to Try Open Employment’ pathway, a structured, funded trial of open employment for YPWD with tailored supports and the option to return without penalty to DSP and income support payments.
- b. Investing in youth- and disability-led alternatives to supported employment, by:
  - Establishing a youth-led social enterprise employment innovation program to fund, mentor and promote youth- or disability-led social enterprises that employ YPWD, especially with high support needs.
  - Creating a youth disability peer mentor network for connection and learning.
- c. Supporting open employment settings to become more inclusive, by:
  - Embedding supports within mainstream workplaces to mirror the structured support offered in supported settings.
  - Funding the Centre for Inclusive Employment to provide resources for employers to build universal inclusive design into workplace systems.

# Introduction

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability (YPWD) aged 0 to 25 years. CYDA has extensive national networks of YPWD, families and caregivers of children with disability, and advocacy and community organisations.

Our vision is that children and YPWD in Australia will fully exercise their rights, realise their aspirations and thrive in all communities. We do this by:

- Raising community attitudes and expectations
- Championing initiatives that promote the best start in the early years for children with disability, and their families and caregivers
- Leading social change to transform education systems to be inclusive at all points across life stages
- Advocating for systems that facilitate successful life transitions to adulthood
- Leading innovative initiatives to ensure the sustainability and impact of the organisation and the broader sector.

CYDA welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Department of Social Services' (DSS) discussion paper on Next Steps in Supported Employment: Consultation on the Way Forward.

This submission draws on and amplifies our previous submissions related to YPWD and employment: the Disability Employment Services Quality Framework 2023,<sup>6</sup> and New Disability Employment Support Model in 2022.<sup>7</sup>

The submission also incorporates evidence from recent projects on employment and rights-based decision making for YPWD where CYDA has played a key role, including:

1. **The DREAM Employment Network** (September 2023 to September 2024). A disability youth leadership network and online hub designed to support YPWD aged 15-25 years with careers and leadership and build inclusive employer capacity. It was led by CYDA, funded by a Disability Youth Leadership Grant from DSS, and independently evaluated.<sup>8</sup>
2. **Employer Innovation Lab - Young People with Disability Lab** (August 2024 to March 2025). A Lab focused on enabling and supporting employers to enhance inclusion and economic mobility for YPWD from non-university

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<sup>6</sup> CYDA (2023) [Submission on the Disability Employment Services Quality Framework](#).

<sup>7</sup> CYDA (2022) [Submission to the consultation of the New Disability Employment Support Model](#).

<sup>8</sup> CYDA (2024) [DREAM Employment Network](#).

backgrounds in the Greater Melbourne area.<sup>9</sup> It was designed and delivered by Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and CYDA, funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), and independently evaluated.

3. **Voices on Work: Young People with Disability in Greater Melbourne Report** (2024).<sup>10</sup> A study as part of a project to support employers to create quality jobs for YPWD at risk of employment exclusion. It involved twenty interviews with YPWD in Melbourne aged 18-25 without university degrees, sharing experiences of finding work, working, and suggestions for employers. It was led by SVA and CYDA, and funded by DEWR through the Local Jobs Program, the Paul Ramsay Foundation and the Macquarie Group Foundation.
4. **Lived X Employment and Financial Security Report** (2022).<sup>11</sup> A report based on YPWD perspectives and experiences on employment, identifying barriers and solutions to improve employment outcomes. It included a consultation with nine YPWD, and co-design by an internal working group of YPWD. The report was led by CYDA, written by YPWD, and funded by the Youth Advocacy Support Grant from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment.
5. **Growing Up Making Decisions Report** (2022).<sup>12</sup> A report examining how to support young people with cognitive disability in ways that respect and support their evolving capacity. Based on interviews with 17 young people with cognitive disability, 13 parents and 22 key stakeholders, the research aimed to support transitioning from a “best interests” child-based decision-making framework to a “rights, will and preference” framework providing more agency in adulthood. It was led by the Social Policy Research Centre, with CYDA and Inclusion Australia, and funded by the National Disability Research Partnership.

Additionally, this submission has been reviewed by a young person with lived experience of disability, and informed by the **lived and professional expertise of CYDA’s staff**, including:

- a 30-minute thought shower session attended by five staff to discuss key themes and the title of the submission
- targeted meetings with three key staff involved in delivering employment programs to young people with disability and employers.

**Direct quotes** in this submission are indented from main text, italicised and in inverted commas, anonymised (or pseudonyms used) to protect privacy and minimally modified for brevity and/or clarity.

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<sup>9</sup> Social Ventures Australia (2025) [Employer Innovation Lab - Youth Disability Lab](#).

<sup>10</sup> Social Ventures Australia (2024) [Voices on work: Young people with disability in Greater Melbourne](#).

<sup>11</sup> CYDA (2022) [LivedX Series: Financial security and employment](#).

<sup>12</sup> Bates et al. (2022) [Growing up making decisions](#). Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW.



## Barriers to employment for young people with disability

According to the government's Disability Employment Strategy<sup>13</sup> the social, health, economic and wellbeing benefits of creating inclusive workplaces where people with disability engage in meaningful and suitable jobs and careers are numerous and compelling. The vision of this strategy is, "Inclusive workplace cultures where people with disability thrive in their careers".

Young people with disability must be prioritised in this vision, as they comprise one of the most disadvantaged cohorts in the labour market. The systemic oppression on account of their age and disability identity, is further compounded by intersecting factors such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, or regional/rural postcodes, to create additional barriers in finding quality and stable work.

Young people with disability are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as their same aged peers without disability, with only 58 per cent participating in the labour force, compared with 73 per cent of young people without disability.<sup>14</sup> Nearly half of YPWD aged 15 to 24 years (49 per cent) rely on income support payments as their main source of income compared to 14 per cent of those without disability.<sup>15</sup> Only 20 per cent of NDIS participants aged 15-24 years are employed.<sup>16</sup>

Almost three quarters (74.3%) of YPWD aged 20-24 years have completed year 12, compared with nearly nine in ten young people without disability (87.4%).<sup>17</sup> While numbers are increasing, only 23 per cent of 20-24 year olds with disability are enrolled in university or other higher education, and 9.6 per cent in TAFE.<sup>18</sup> This impacts upon workforce participation, with evidence showing that having a bachelor's degree increases the chances of people with disability being employed by 34.4 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

## Young people with disability in supported employment

Supported employment refers to enterprises that employ a majority of people with disability, such as Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs). However, CYDA acknowledges the breadth of supported employment settings since the transition of 16,000 ADE employees to the NDIS in 2020. Supported employment can now occur in private enterprise, not for profit or public sectors, family business or self-employment, social enterprises or a supported employment service.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Department of Social Services (2021) [Employ My Ability](#).

<sup>14</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) [Children and young people with disability](#).

<sup>15</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) [People with disability in Australia 2019: in brief](#).

<sup>16</sup> AIHW (2025) [Young NDIS participant employment - Employment and financial security](#).

<sup>17</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) [Children and young people with disability](#).

<sup>18</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) [Children and young people with disability](#).

<sup>19</sup> Buckland et al. (2024) [Employment and disability in Australia](#). Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre.

<sup>20</sup> NDIS (2025) [Supported Employment Survey Report](#).



As of December 2023, a total of 15,153 employees were reported in supported employment services.<sup>21</sup> Supported employment is most common for NDIS participants with Intellectual Disability, with 70 per cent employed in ADEs.<sup>22</sup> Younger NDIS participants (15-24 years) are less likely to be in supported employment, with only 22 per cent in ADEs.<sup>23</sup> For younger NDIS participants with Intellectual Disability, 30 per cent are in ADEs, with only a third in open employment on full award wages and a quarter paid less than award wages.<sup>24</sup> Further, wider discrimination in the job market for YPWD mean that all employment settings can present challenges and barriers.

Tailored support is essential in both supported and open employment settings especially for young people with high support needs. This support should begin early and be responsive to the diverse experiences of disability. It is also important that terms such as "disability" and "high support needs" are not narrowly defined, but understood in a person-centred and inclusive way that recognises the full range of individual experiences and support requirements.

Evidence shows that early segregation impacts employment outcomes. NDIS participants who previously attended special/segregated schools were significantly less likely to transition into employment in any setting, and more likely to transition into employment in ADEs, than those from mainstream classes.<sup>25</sup> Further, early placement into segregated employment reduces later economic participation,<sup>26</sup> with only around 1-5 per cent of participants transitioning to open employment.<sup>27</sup>

## **Submission structure**

**The submission has three parts.** Each part leads with a recommendation, followed by a detailed response to the Next Steps in Supported Employment discussion paper.

**Part 1** outlines CYDA's vision for rights-based employment for YPWD and those with high support needs. It responds to Questions 2, 3 and 4 and draws on findings from CYDA's disability employment work (see Appendix).

**Part 2** proposes a transition plan for wage equity by 2034, addressing Question 5.

**Part 3** advocates for a gradual phase-out of segregated employment and promotes tailored support, choice and control for young people with disability. It responds to Questions 6 and 7.

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<sup>21</sup> NDIS (2025) [Supported Employment Survey Report](#).

<sup>22</sup> NDIS (2019) [People with an intellectual disability in the NDIS](#).

<sup>23</sup> NDIS (2023) [Employment outcomes - participants, their families and carers](#)

<sup>24</sup> NDIS (2019) [People with an intellectual disability in the NDIS](#).

<sup>25</sup> Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) [The association between segregated education and employment](#).

<sup>26</sup> Cocks and Harvey (2008) [Employment/Day Options Research Project](#). Curtin Uni of Technology.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson and Campaign (2020) [Fostering employment for people with intellectual disability: the evidence to date](#). Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology.



## Part 1: CYDA's vision for rights-based employment

### Recommendation 1: Develop a Youth Disability Inclusive Employment Strategy as part of a National Roadmap for Inclusive Employment

**Recommendation 1: Develop a co-designed and rights-based Youth Disability Inclusive Employment Strategy as part of a National Roadmap for Inclusive Employment. This Strategy should be adequately resourced, measurable and embedded within disability, education, and workforce policies. It should include:**

- a. Co-design by young people with disability, including with high support needs
- b. Expansion and tailoring of existing evidence-based employment programs to young people with disability with high support needs, by:
  - Extending the DREAM Employment Network model to young people with high support needs.
  - Adapting the SVA Employer Innovation Labs approach to focus on inclusive employer engagement for young people with high support needs.
  - Establishing local, co-designed employment hubs as incubators for place-based inclusive employment innovation.
- c. Incentives and Standards for employers to employ young people with disability and high support needs, by:
  - Introducing Disability Standards for Employment alongside clear targets for employing young people with disability.
  - Providing capability-building support, certification and recognition to employers, linked to access to federal tenders and employment subsidies.

**Part 1** responds to Questions 2, 3 and 4 of the discussion paper by presenting CYDA's vision for a rights-based approach to employment for YPWD.

CYDA envisions a future where YPWD, including those with high support needs, have the same opportunities as their peers to access meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable employment. This future is grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)—particularly Article 27, which affirms the right to work in an environment that is inclusive, accessible, and free from discrimination.

This vision aligns with the Australian Disability Strategy 2021–2031 and echoes key findings from the Disability Royal Commission, which called for the phasing out of

segregated employment and the urgent need to support people with disability into open, inclusive employment. For YPWD, especially those with high support needs, this requires structural reform—not just of employment settings, but also of the pathways, mindsets, and systems that influence their futures.

CYDA supports the 12 Guiding Principles developed by the disability community and sector to ensure people with disability have genuine choice and control in employment, and support which meets their individual needs (Appendix 2 of the discussion paper).

CYDA further emphasises the importance of a rights-based, co-designed approach for YPWD, based on:

1. **Genuine Choice and Agency:** YPWD have real and supported options—not just ‘choices within limits’—about the work they do, who they work with, and where they work. It also upholds each individual’s right to pursue employment on their own terms, should they choose to work.
2. **Inclusive Design, Not Afterthoughts:** Employment systems, programs and policies are designed from the start to include young people with high support needs
3. **Equity in Pay and Opportunity:** No young person with disability should earn less or have fewer prospects simply because they require tailored support
4. **Connected, Flexible Pathways:** Education, training, supported and open employment are linked by clear, supported transitions that are tailored and responsive
5. **Co-Design as Core Practice:** YPWD are partners in shaping employment policy and practice—not passive recipients.

This approach draws on the rights-based decision making model proposed in the Growing Up Making Decisions report, which emphasises that making decisions is both a right and a *learning process* that requires adequate capacity building and support, especially for YPWD with high support needs.<sup>28</sup>

CYDA calls for our vision to be realised through **a National Roadmap for Inclusive Employment, as recommended by the Disability Royal Commission.**

Similar to the Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education’s National Roadmap for Inclusive Education,<sup>29</sup> the National Roadmap for Inclusive Employment should put forward short, medium and long term goals, clearly delegated responsibilities across government portfolios, and measurable outcomes to support a gradual transition away from segregated employment.

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<sup>28</sup> Bates et al. (2022) [Growing up making decisions](#). Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW.

<sup>29</sup> Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education (2021) [Driving change: A roadmap for achieving inclusive education in Australia](#).

The Roadmap should include a **Youth Disability Inclusive Employment Strategy, co-designed with young people including those with high support needs and grounded in human rights**. This Strategy should be adequately resourced, measurable and embedded within disability, education, and workforce policies.<sup>30</sup>

This proposed Youth Disability Inclusive Employment Strategy must include:

### **a. Co-design with young people with disability, including with high support needs**

Ensuring children and young people with disability are at the front and centre of the decisions that affect them is a key priority for CYDA. We strive to ensure policy makers and organisations uphold the human rights of children and young people—recognising them as the agents and experts in their lives, capable of making informed decisions as they grow, and placing them at the centre of decisions that are meaningful to them.

YPWD have long been calling for their involvement in policies that affect them:

*“Young people in particular ... are not part of the conversation about what should be in those supports or plans or policies [that affect us]. ... People think, ‘I know all about young people so I can put this policy together without talking to them’, but there are so many stories, bits of information that you miss because you are not talking to the affected person” (YPWD, National Youth Disability Summit 2020).<sup>31</sup>*

*“Getting more lived experience involved is important. Getting different people coming together to hold discussions. Making sure people with lived experience not only have a seat at the table, but the capacity to influence what’s on the menu. That’s what drives progress” (YPWD, Voices on Work 2024 Report).*

Genuine co-design also reflects and aligns the international disability rights movement core principle of “nothing about us without us.”

As part of this approach, **CYDA calls for the development of the Youth Disability Inclusive Employment Strategy to include genuine and meaningful co-design with YPWD, including with high support needs**. Genuine and meaningful co-design entails more than consultation with YPWD. It is about involving them in the whole life of the Strategy, from inception through to implementation. It entails clear directions and roles for co-designers from the start, opportunities to shape the Strategy and offer

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<sup>30</sup> See CYDA (2021) [Submission to National Disability Employment Strategy consultation](#) for a similar proposal for a Youth Disability Employment Strategy.

<sup>31</sup> CYDA (2021) [Submission to National Disability Employment Strategy consultation](#).

input throughout its life, and clear examples of how their strategic input is incorporated.<sup>32</sup>

Co-design must also be implemented in an accessible manner that enables participation of all YPWD, including with high support needs. This may include access needs such as providing materials in accessible formats and/or Auslan interpreters.

## **b. Expand existing evidence-based employment programs by tailoring them to YPWD with high support needs**

### **Extend the DREAM Employment Network**

CYDA has been centrally involved in the development of co-designed and evidence-based employment programs for YPWD.

The Disability Representation, Accessibility and Employment Mission (DREAM) Employment Network (2023-24) is a disability youth leadership network and online hub designed to support YPWD aged 15 to 25 years in their career and leadership aspirations and build employer capacity towards inclusive employment practices.<sup>33</sup> The Network was co-designed by groups of employers and YPWD across Australia.

The DREAM Network developed online capacity building events, resources and other outputs, such as podcasts, videos, written stories and project websites. Within one year, 224 YPWD and 299 employers and organisations registered as members.

Key barriers to employment identified by YPWD show that employers and employment services play a key role, influencing outcomes through low expectations:

*“The Disability Employment Services, I found that they were just happy to give me money. For a long time after I finished Uni, I was looking for a job. I wasn’t really encouraged to keep pursuing for a job, [or] see what is current. I had to push myself” (YPWD, LivedX 2022 Series).*

Equally, employers can be enablers if they take a proactive approach:

*“With [my employer], I found that they were very open [...]. They say, ‘If you need any help, just let us know. We’re happy to accommodate for you’” (YPWD, LivedX Series).*

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<sup>32</sup> Examples of best practice in co-design can be found at: Orygen Youth (2023) [Co-designing with young people: The fundamentals](#); Purple Orange (2021) [Guide to co-design with people living with disability](#); DSS (2023) [Good practice guidelines for engaging with people with disability](#).

<sup>33</sup> CYDA (2024) [DREAM Employment Network](#).

The DREAM Network offered YPWD an opportunity to build leadership skills and careers as well as connect with employers, identify their access needs and learn about rights and obligations as employees. Employers had the opportunity to connect with YPWD, learn about the benefits of YPWD in the workforce and in leadership roles, and how to support YPWD to thrive including learning about reasonable adjustments and accessing funding and support to make workplaces accessible.

The interim independent evaluation of the DREAM Network by the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre and Flinders University noted young people reported:

- feeling better informed, knowledgeable and more confident about taking practical steps towards applying for paid work
- feeling clearer and emotionally resourced, with a better understanding of next steps and employment outlook from seeing other YPWD in employment
- increased capacity to improve their work situation and leadership, including a better understanding of their work rights and feeling empowered to ask for reasonable adjustments and support in their current and future employment.

*“I feel more grounded in my ideas & able to see better how I can take the next steps” (YPWD, DREAM Network Evaluation)*

*“Being involved, ... opened my mind about the possibilities that are out there in employment. The possibilities we have as people with disability ... You can hit a wall thinking, “what do I do now”? ... Practical skills of how to work with other people, navigate webinars, manage break-out rooms, facilitate groups, I learned [through DREAM] ... they can help me in my future work” (YPWD, DREAM Network Evaluation)*

*“I feel more confident in my speaking skills and learned about some of the steps I can take to improve” (YPWD, DREAM Network Evaluation)*

*“Understanding my workplace accommodation needs and articulating them in a plan” (YPWD, DREAM Network Evaluation)*

Employers reported gaining:

- valuable knowledge about inclusion awareness
- practical tips on how to discuss and enact change in their workplace, and
- becoming influenced by lived experience stories and the leadership of people with disability delivering and hosting the events and information sessions.



*“I have more confidence to ask the right questions to enable accessibility within my workspace” (Employer, DREAM Network Evaluation)*

*“Have conversations with people at my workplace about what we could be doing better” (Employer, DREAM Network Evaluation)*

*“Sharing lived experience of young people with disability is so important to listen to!” (Employer, DREAM Network Evaluation)*

*“DREAM enabled me to have the confidence to advocate within our large hierarchical organisation for changes and adjustments. It enabled me to present a business case to the HR team about why the employment of people with disability is an asset and strength. [...] Since, I have mentored hiring managers to become more inclusion aware and understand disability” (Employer, DREAM Network Evaluation)*

**CYDA proposes that the DREAM Employment Network model be scaled up and tailored for young people with high support needs.**

This would entail modification to ensure that it is tailored to the specific needs, backgrounds, and individualised supports that young people with high support needs require. Potential modifications could include:

- Connecting and networking opportunities between employers and young people with high support needs
- Providing information and support to young people with high support needs on finding and starting a job, rights in the workplace, disclosing disability and asking for reasonable adjustments
- Providing tailored information and support to employers on inclusive workplace practices, including working with young people with high support needs, making reasonable adjustments, and addressing the specific resource challenges faced by small businesses in rural and remote areas.

## **Adapt SVA Employment Innovation Labs**

Another co-designed, evidence-based employment program for YPWD that CYDA has been part of is the Employer Innovation Lab - Young People with Disability (2024-25), focused on enabling and supporting employers to enhance inclusion and economic mobility for YPWD from non-university backgrounds in the Greater Melbourne area.<sup>34</sup>

The Lab focused on building employer’s capability to employ YPWD and support them to achieve potential in the workplace. It included a two-day workshop for employers

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<sup>34</sup> Social Ventures Australia (2025) [Employer Innovation Lab - Youth Disability Lab](#).



and ongoing coaching sessions. SVA also partnered with CYDA to undertake research with YPWD in Melbourne where the employers were based, to embed lived experience and local issues.<sup>35</sup> Commitments were secured from employers to create quality employment opportunities and hire YPWD within 12 months.

Lab Workshops were designed to provide an interactive applied learning experience for employers, providing the opportunity to learn about the challenges faced by YPWD and develop the knowledge, skills and abilities to build a more inclusive workplace capable of facilitating employment of YPWD. A key aspect of the Workshops was the inclusion of YPWD as 'youth consultants', to provide their insights and lived experiences on the development of Pilot programs for workplaces.

An independent evaluation of the Lab by the Australian Catholic University and the University of Sydney noted that all outcomes had been achieved.<sup>36</sup> The eight medium and large employers who participated all reported an increased understanding of the labour market challenges that YPWD face, and how they could build "an inclusive employment pathway" to better attract and/or retain YPWD. Additionally, employers created or re-designed specific job roles to suit YPWD, adjusting/modifying their recruitment, selection and onboarding processes, and supporting and developing the YPWD who joined their organisation. Six employers made changes to their recruitment and selection process, workplace adjustments, and/or provided training to existing employees to be able to support YPWD more effectively. Three employers hired at least one YPWD and another three employers were working towards this. The outcome of supporting at least five employers to implement changes to increase recruitment, retention and/or advancement of YPWD was achieved.

*"We were provided with a great number of valuable tools and ideas. For example, filming 'a day in the life' video, which was provided to 14 employment partners to share with potential candidates to be able to give a sense of what the role we were recruiting for actually is, rather than just a position description. It was a really good experience for both our team, but also a visual tool for our potential candidates. And hosting an information session - so candidates had the ability to come to our site, learn about the project, meet the team in which the role would be sitting, have a walk around the actual facilities, and network with our team and ask any questions. And then some actual physical resources around workplace adjustments and some of those more informative tools to be able to support practical implementation on an ongoing basis"*  
(Participating employer, Employer Innovation Lab)

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<sup>35</sup> Social Ventures Australia (2024) [Voices on work: Young people with disability in Greater Melbourne](#).

<sup>36</sup> Social Ventures Australia (2025) [Employer Innovation Lab - Youth Disability Lab](#).

Having youth consultants for employers to “test” their ideas was a valued feature:

*“I did also really enjoy the youth consultants. It was a really good way to immediately test some of the ideas that we had just put on paper and get some real world, lived experience to see if that’s the kind of thing that people with disability would be looking for or that would make a difference to them in applying for a job or feeling welcome or included in an organisation.” (Participating employer, Employer Innovation Lab)*

*“When we got to sit with I guess the young people that have disabilities and got to pitch different ideas with them. That was very, very powerful and they were brave to be able to say that’s not going to work for us. So I really took away a lot from that and have reprocessed it many times in my mind.” (Participating employer, Employer Innovation Lab)*

The evaluation found that the Lab structure, process and content were robust and effective, and suitable for adoption and/or adaptation in other labour market locations across a range of sectors, industries and workplace sizes. They also found that implementation of Pilot projects was more straightforward in medium-sized organisations and/or when senior leadership commitment was secured.

**CYDA proposes that the SVA Employment Innovation Lab model be adapted for inclusive employer engagement with young people with high support needs.**

This would entail providing employers with an interactive applied learning experience to facilitate the employment of young people with high support needs in their workplaces. Potential modifications could include:

- Coaching, training and information on the specific challenges that young people with high support needs face in the workplace
- The development of workplace Pilot Programs to support employers to design inclusive employment opportunities for young people with high support needs
- The involvement of “youth consultants” with high support needs to provide real-time feedback and testing of the Pilot Programs.
- Upfront commitments from participating employers to targets and outcomes.

**Establish local, co-designed employment hubs**

As part of expanding existing employment programs to young people with high support needs, CYDA recommends the establishment of local, co-designed employment hubs to act as incubators for place-based inclusive employment innovation.

The hubs should be co-designed with both young people with high support needs as well as employers. This would entail remunerating YPWD to participate in co-design

groups from the start of the process, providing them a leadership role in the design and development of the hubs. Co-design of hubs will ensure that they are:

- tailored to individualised and place-based needs
- imbued with a positive sense of ownership, belonging and pride for YPWD
- welcoming, accessible spaces for connection
- designed to meet the needs of both YPWD and employers
- have actionable objectives and outcomes built into their design.

Adapting programs such as the DREAM Employment Network and SVA Employment Innovation Labs to young people with high support needs could be delivered independently of, or as part of such employment hub/s.

Hubs would offer a range of supports to young people with high support needs as well as employers, including:

- training and information sessions for young people with high support needs and employers about disability, employment and rights
- access to career services and training providers
- networking sessions and tailored job matching between employers and young people with high support needs
- peer mentoring and coaching, where young people share their experiences and insights with each other and with employers (similar to the “youth consultants” in the SVA Employment Innovation Labs)
- connecting young people with disability to peers and professionals who share similar lived experiences, such as common access needs or disability-related experiences
- microenterprise start-up support and information for young people and employers, and
- accessible co-working spaces for YPWD.

### **c. Incentivise employers to employ young people with disability**

#### **Develop dedicated Disability Standards for Employment, co-designed with YPWD**

Another component of a Youth Disability Inclusive Employment Strategy entails incentivising employers to employ YPWD.

CYDA endorses calls by YPWD for the development of dedicated Disability Standards for Employment, to clarify the rights of disabled employees and obligations of employers under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.<sup>37</sup>

*“They need something that’s going to be accountable for decision-makers [...] make it an obligation within workplaces to meet accessibility requirements or anti-discrimination policies for hiring. [...] Build in the culture on top of that, but I do think we need that legal accountability as a starting point” (YPWD, LivedX 2022 Series).*

*“The bare minimum is having awareness of the discrimination act, your legal obligations as an employer, the reasonable adjustments that disabled people can expect of employers. There is a gap between legal obligations and what employers will actually do. Knowing that employers are aware of their obligations and willing to put time and effort to make accommodations accessible would make finding work less frustrating and burdensome. I’m always positively surprised when they say they will make things happen” (YPWD, Voices on Work 2024 Report).*

Implementing Disability Standards for Employment will entail a larger coordinated effort across government, including funding an oversight body such as the Australian Human Rights Commission to support greater accountability and consequences for cases of employment discrimination.

Similarly to the Disability Standards for Education,<sup>38</sup> the Standards would outline the obligations of employers in terms of recruitment, inclusion, participation, reasonable adjustments and provision of supports, and upholding rights of employees. These Standards should be supported by practical guidance materials, to improve understanding and implementation of inclusive employment practices.

The Standards should include a clear definition of what constitutes a reasonable adjustment, with examples for employers of varying scope and across different industries. They would also include ways to measure compliance with the Standards.

For YPWD, the Disability Standards for Employment must include clear targets and quotas (scalable to small, medium and large-sized employers) for employing YPWD with high support needs. Quotas would ensure a commitment from employers to employ YPWD with high support needs and foster a diverse workforce.

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<sup>37</sup> CYDA (2022) [LivedX Series: Financial security and employment](#).

<sup>38</sup> Department of Education (2005) [Disability Standards for Education](#).

CYDA supports the targets proposed in the National Blueprint for Economic Justice for People with Disability, a joint proposal endorsed by eleven DROs including CYDA:<sup>39</sup>

- Require employers with 100+ staff to track and report disability employment figures
- Set a 15 per cent disability employment target for the public sector with specific targets for marginalised people with disability
- Ensure a minimum of three per cent of roles within the public sector disability employment target are designated specifically for, and filled by, people with an intellectual disability
- Include disability employment requirements in the new foundational supports program
- Increase the Job Access program budget and better promote it to employers and people with disability.

Alongside quotas and targets, the Standards would include evaluative tools such as regular accessibility audits of workplaces by independent bodies, and transparent reporting mechanisms to indicate outcomes. These tools would ensure compliance, but also allow for feedback mechanisms and continuous improvement.

*“Something that could be really valuable is regular assessments of Disability Employment Services [...] actually having the government paying a disabled person to enter and try to use the service. And then provide feedback on how it was” (YPWD, LivedX Series).*

## **Provide capability-building support, certification and recognition to participating employers**

As part of the rollout of the Disability Standards for Employment and to ensure workplaces are supported to implement them effectively, the government must engage in capability-building activities to support employers to provide inclusive workplaces.

These activities could act as an incentive to employers by providing opportunities for innovation, capacity building and upskilling of their workforce. These activities should be free or subsidised by the government, and include at a minimum:<sup>40</sup>

- access to a suite of disability awareness and inclusion training modules for employers and staff. These should be codesigned with YPWD and customisable, allowing employers to choose content based on their current stage of understanding and progress towards inclusive workplace practices.

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<sup>39</sup> Joint DRO Election Platform (2025) [Economic justice for people with disability: A National Blueprint](#).

<sup>40</sup> See CYDA (2025) [Submission to the Jobs and Skills Australia Workplan 2025-26](#) that proposed similar features in a National Employer Readiness Framework.

- information on the Disability Discrimination Act and the rights of disabled employees
- targeted resources, training, and incentives to support employers in hiring and retaining YPWD, focusing on leadership commitment and career progression opportunities
- guidance and support for businesses to create physically and digitally accessible workplaces by removing barriers such as inaccessible office spaces, providing reasonable adjustments, and offering tailored, individualised supports. This should include active promotion of existing tools and resources, such as those developed by the Australian Human Rights Commission.<sup>41</sup>
- opportunities for employers to participate in programs with YPWD (such as the SVA Employment Innovation Labs)
- embed disability inclusion into workplace policies as a core requirement for certification, ensuring that inclusion is not optional but integrated into organisational practices and accountability frameworks
- opportunities to connect and form communities of practice with other employers and YPWD.

In addition to such capability building activities, employers who are meeting or exceeding the Standards and targets should be offered formal government certification, that can be displayed publicly as a form of recognition.

Public visibility and recognition is a strong incentive for encouraging inclusive behaviour in organisations. Initiatives that enable organisations to benchmark against best practice, achieve accreditation or awards, have been shown to incentivise uptake and lift standards through positive role modelling and recognition.

For example, Diversity Council Australia's (DCA) 'Inclusive Employer Index' assesses participating organisations, and announces the list of Inclusive Employers who exceed the National Index Benchmark. DCA celebrates their achievement through media promotions, and the designation extends over a two-year period. Inclusive Employers are also able to display the 'Proud to be an Inclusive Employer' logo.

Certification would undergo regular review, with a process for removing certification if organisations do not comply.

Employers should also be offered incentives for meeting targets, including access to federal tenders and employment subsidies to support them in providing inclusive workplaces and reasonable adjustments.

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<sup>41</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2025) [Disability resources for employers](#).





## Part 2: Transitioning to wage equity

### Recommendation 2: Implement a national Wage Equity Transition Plan

**Recommendation 2: Implement a national Wage Equity Transition Plan that ensures young people with disability in supported employment are paid at least the minimum wage, with tailored supports and transition funding. This Plan should take a graduated approach, including:**

- a. Appointing a Ministerial Implementation Working Group to oversee the design, implementation and rollout of the Plan.
- b. Funding the Centre for Inclusive Employment to conduct research into innovative, best practice and evidence-based modelling and approaches.
- c. Creating a Wage Transition Innovation Fund to support employers and businesses to transition to wage equity.

**Part 2** responds to Question 5 of the discussion paper by proposing a model to transition to wage equity by 2034, in line with Disability Royal Commission Recommendation 7.31.

Wage equity is a critical issue of justice, dignity, and human rights. Young people with disability, including those with high support needs, must not be paid less than their peers for equal or comparable work.

Australia is currently one of only three countries in the world implementing a Supported Wage System.<sup>42</sup> Australia has an obligation under Article 27 of the UN CRPD to uphold the right to fair and equal pay. Wage reform must not come at the cost of job losses—especially for those who already face significant barriers to employment. It requires system-wide support, innovation, and investment to ensure both fair pay and secure, meaningful jobs.

People with Intellectual Disability are disproportionately represented in ADEs, and have spoken out against wage inequity and the lack of choice and control they feel:

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<sup>42</sup> Inclusion Australia and People with Disability Australia (2022) [Wage equity and more choices in employment for people with an intellectual disability: Research review](#).



*“As a person with intellectual disability, I’m often only offered jobs that pay less than minimum wage.” (Person with Intellectual Disability, Inclusion Australia Equal Pay Campaign 2022)*

*“The award wages, I think that, it needs to be a big issue around people with disabilities getting proper wages because what they receive now is absolutely ridiculous. They don’t get a fair go...It’s not right. This is Australia. It’s not fair.” (Person with Intellectual Disability, Inclusion Australia study 2022)<sup>43</sup>*

*“The other people were getting normal wages and there’s things they can’t do that I can do...If I did not agree with it I would have lost my job, so that’s pretty rough.” (Person with Intellectual Disability, Inclusion Australia study 2022)*

In order to implement wage equity in supported employment settings, **CYDA joins calls by leaders in the disability sector, including Inclusion Australia (IA), who recommend a phased transition to wage equity by 2034.**<sup>44</sup> This would be implemented through a Wage Equity Plan, as part of the National Roadmap to Inclusive Employment proposed in Part 1 of this submission.

## **a. Appoint a Ministerial Implementation Working Group**

The first step in designing a Wage Equity Plan is the establishment of a Ministerial Implementation Working Group.

Inclusion Australia have put forward a detailed proposal for setting up such a Working Group to provide evidence-based policy advice and options relating to Recommendation 7.31.<sup>45</sup>

In IA’s vision, the Working Group will:

- be made up of senior representatives from peak organisations, government agencies, employers, unions, and people with an intellectual disability and will have Ministerial involvement and support
- work collaboratively with government to develop sustainable solutions and a detailed implementation roadmap for transitioning to fair wages while ensuring

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<sup>43</sup> Inclusion Australia and People with Disability Australia (2022) [Wage equity and more choices in employment for people with an intellectual disability: Research review](#).

<sup>44</sup> Inclusion Australia (2025) [Federal Election 2025: What it means for people with disability](#).

<sup>45</sup> Inclusion Australia (2025) [Federal Election 2025: What it means for people with disability](#).

that employment opportunities, especially for people with high support needs, are maintained.

- ensure a collaborative and inclusive process that will lead to an outcome that is practical, supported and beneficial to all stakeholders, and avoids any unintended consequences.
- codesign a roadmap with government to identify a staged process to achieve these goals - including conducting consultations, considering different policy options, providing government with evidenced-based options, overseeing the piloting of different approaches, and supporting implementation
- operate over a four-year timeframe, with a budget of less than \$5 million including operations, administration, coordination, stakeholder engagement; pilot program design, implementation, and evaluation; and capacity building for employers and workers, to support the transition.

CYDA supports IA's proposal to appoint a Ministerial Implementation Working Group to codesign the development and implementation of a Wage Equity Plan.

CYDA recognises the importance of prioritising people with Intellectual Disability as they are the most impacted by supported employment wages. However, we also suggest **broadening the composition of the Working Group to ensure intersectional representation** of people with disability affected by wage inequity, including YPWD, and people with disability from diverse backgrounds/ priority equity cohorts (First Nations, multicultural, LGBTIQA+, low socioeconomic, and regional/remote areas). This will ensure the Plan is informed by and responsive to the diverse needs and options required by the disability community as a whole.

## **b. Fund the Centre for Inclusive Employment to research innovative, best practice and evidence-based modelling and approaches**

CYDA recommends that a Wage Equity Plan be informed and developed by a robust evidence base, including extensive research into modelling and approaches.

As a case in point, CYDA notes that the Next Steps discussion paper mentions research and modelling by Taylor Fry, commissioned by the Royal Commission, as evidence of the possibility of job losses for people with disability if a minimum wage was introduced. While the discussion paper does note that the modelling was uncertain and that it is difficult to estimate job losses, CYDA cautions against basing any forecasting or projections of job losses on a single source.

**CYDA recommends that the government funds extensive research into evidence-based modelling and approaches to transitioning to wage equity.** This research should include reviews of best practice approaches domestically and

internationally, and across sectors and industries to gain the best understanding of current innovations.

Research by Inclusion Australia<sup>46</sup> and Down Syndrome Australia<sup>47</sup> has already shown that there are viable alternative models to segregated employment in other countries. Economic modelling based on these viable international models would seem a logical next step to understand how their governments and economies are innovating, supporting and adapting to such approaches.

Research into innovative, best practice models for implementing wage equity should be funded through the Centre for Inclusive Employment, as the national hub for providing best-practice, evidence-based information for employment service providers assisting job seekers with disability.

Funding such research would occur concurrently with the creation of the Ministerial Implementation Working Group, providing information and capacity-building to support the Working Group to propose and implement evidence-based solutions.

### **c. Create a Wage Transition Innovation Fund**

While transitioning to wage equity will need to be driven and regulated by government, the transition will also require buy-in and support from employers and businesses. Like other systems level changes, it will also necessitate a change in mindset – a willingness to move away from the status quo and to test innovative new approaches.

To create favourable conditions and to kickstart such innovation, the government should create a national Wage Transition Innovation Fund. The Fund will be made available to supported employment providers, to enable them to gradually increase wages while redesigning roles, restructuring businesses, and retaining employees.

Such a Fund borrows from the just transition approach to energy reform, a relevant and current example of the need to adjust and adapt to new market variables that will invariably lead to some job losses in industries that are becoming outdated and redundant while creating new innovative jobs in emerging roles and industries.<sup>48</sup>

The Fund would provide cushioning and support to supported employers to run pilots, test and build their capacity and capability to transition to wage equity. Some examples of what the Fund could be used to support include:

- Job re-design, customised roles and job carving. Piloting partnerships between supported employment employers and inclusive employment specialists to redesign and customise roles that proactively meet both business needs and

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<sup>46</sup> Inclusion Australia and People with Disability Australia (2022) [Wage equity and more choices in employment for people with an intellectual disability: Research review](#).

<sup>47</sup> Down Syndrome Australia (2019) [Position Statement on Employment](#).

<sup>48</sup> UN Global Compact Network Australia (2019) [Leaving no one behind: Planning for a Just Transition](#).

the individual capabilities of people with high support needs, supporting transition to award wages.

- Microenterprise and co-operative employment pilots. Co-designed trials of supported microenterprises and worker co-operatives led by young people with disability, where they earn award wages or profit shares, supported by a network of peer mentors and business coaches.

Through pilots such as the DSS-funded WISE-Ability Model that provided tailored support to improve readiness for transitions from supported to open employment, such approaches have already been tested and shown to be effective as well as favoured both by employers and people with disability including YPWD.<sup>49</sup>

Customisation can involve adjustments that enable YPWD to work effectively and in a supported, sustainable manner:

*“I know a lot of the participants we work with are younger and they’ve come out of school and we tend to look at just starting out as shorter hours and then building them up slowly, because going straight into full-time work from school can be really overwhelming. In that sense, we definitely do consider that” (Staff member, WISE-Ability Report 2024)<sup>50</sup>*

Leadership and mentorship from other YPWD is also fundamentally important to ensure that jobs are tailored appropriately and to provide positive role modelling and raise expectations:

*“Representation for young people with disability can be lifesaving and life changing. It is a chance to emphasise that disabled people’s voices matter, that we can have equal opportunities and that our disability doesn’t change our value. When I finally discovered other young, disabled people in leadership roles advocating for people like me, my perspective became more hopeful” (YPWD, DREAM Network).*

The Wage Transition Innovation Fund would be part of the Wage Equity Transition Plan.

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<sup>49</sup> Campbell et al (2024) [Connecting Pathways to Employment with the Work Integration Social Enterprise \(WISE\) - Ability Model: Final Report](#). Swinburne: Centre for Social Impact.

<sup>50</sup> Campbell et al (2024) [Connecting Pathways to Employment with the Work Integration Social Enterprise \(WISE\) - Ability Model: Final Report](#). Swinburne: Centre for Social Impact.



## Part 3: Early intervention and tailored support

### Recommendation 3: Implement a supported, gradual transition towards open employment

**Recommendation 3: Implement a gradual transition towards open employment that retains the benefits and supports of supported employment settings, by:**

- a. Providing early intervention through wraparound support, mentoring and training to support the transition to open employment
  - Expanding support for open employment pathways through the NDIS Youth Employment Assistance (formerly Student Leaver Employment Support) program, informed by the outcomes of the 2025 NDIS blended employment trials.
  - Guarantee a 'Right to Try Open Employment' pathway, where YPWD are offered a structured, funded trial of open employment with tailored supports and the option to return without penalty to DSP and income support payments.
- b. Investing in youth- and disability-led alternatives to supported employment
  - Establish a youth-led social enterprise employment innovation program to fund, mentor and promote youth- or disability-led social enterprises that employ YPWD, especially with high support needs.
  - Create a youth disability peer mentor network to provide opportunities for connection and learning.
- c. Supporting open employment settings to provide tailored support
  - Embed funded job coaching, peer mentors, disability inclusion officers and community-building initiatives within mainstream workplaces to mirror the structured support offered in supported settings.
  - Fund the Centre for Inclusive Employment to develop resources to help employers build universal design of inclusive practices into workplace systems from the outset—such as task customisation, accessible environments, and reasonable adjustments.

**Part 3** responds to Question 6 and 7 of the discussion paper by proposing a gradual and supported approach to phasing out segregated specialist employment settings.

This approach should be undertaken as a part of the National Roadmap to Inclusive Employment recommended in Part 1 of this submission.

CYDA acknowledges concerns in parts of the disability community about the loss of support that may accompany phasing out segregated employment settings, especially for people with high support needs. CYDA also recognises that some features of supported employment—such as tailored supports, flexibility, and community-building—are valued by YPWD and their families.

However, CYDA also notes that there are significant issues with supported employment settings, the most concerning of which include high rates of bullying, physical assaults and sexual abuse.<sup>51</sup> There is also a lack of skill development in ADEs, leading to boredom and stagnation.<sup>52</sup>

There is clear international evidence of programs which successfully increase employment for people with high support needs, but examples in Australia are few and tend to be time-limited, despite good outcomes. Effective programs include:<sup>53</sup>

- high levels of job customisation
- support to proactively seek job opportunities
- on-the-job training mixed with work experience
- time un-limited support in the workplace
- employment brokers or vocational specialists working across services.

There is also evidence that people with Intellectual Disability prefer employment in non-segregated settings and that open employment and social enterprises are viewed as less segregated than ADE settings by Australians with intellectual disability.<sup>54</sup>

**CYDA therefore recommends that rather than continuing to maintain segregated employment settings, investment is made in transitioning to open employment in a gradual, supported and tailored way that embeds the benefits of supported employment into open employment settings.**

During the transition phase, existing supported employment settings must adhere to minimum wage standards and inclusive employment benchmarks, with reporting on outcomes including transitions to open employment, satisfaction, and fair pay.

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<sup>51</sup> Frohmader and Sands (2014) [Fact sheet: Violence against people with disabilities in Institutions, WWDA and PWDA](#); Australian Cross Disability Alliance (2015) [Submission to the Senate Inquiry Into Violence, Abuse And Neglect Against People With Disability In Institutional And Residential Settings](#).

<sup>52</sup> Inclusion Australia and People with Disability Australia (2022) [Wage equity and more choices in employment for people with an intellectual disability: Research review](#).

<sup>53</sup> Wilson and Campaign (2020) [Fostering employment for people with intellectual disability](#).

<sup>54</sup> Meltzer et al. (2016) [What do people with an intellectual disability think about their jobs and the support they receive?](#). Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW; Wehman et al. (2018) [Toward Competitive Employment for Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities](#), *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* 43(3): 131 –144.



Additionally, CYDA recommends that participants in the incoming Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA) program should be exempt from the Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) and mutual obligation requirements. The TCF has been linked to serious issues, including unlawful payment suspensions and negative impacts on vulnerable individuals, particularly people with disability.<sup>55</sup> Applying the TCF to IEA participants would conflict with the program's intent to provide inclusive, supportive, and person-centred employment services. Exemption from the TCF would ensure alignment with these principles and prevent further harm.

It is crucial that a transition to open employment occur in a manner that is:

- co-designed with YPWD, with meaningful choice and agency embedded into their design (see Part 1 and 2 of the submission on how to embed co-design into a National Roadmap, Youth Strategy and Wage Transition Plan)
- invested in building skills and confidence on a supported pathway to open employment through early intervention and tailored support, as recommended by Commissioners with lived experience in DRC Recommendation 7.32.

### **a. Early intervention through wraparound support, mentoring and training**

There is currently a lack of support for YPWD in exploring their employment and career options.<sup>56</sup> It is imperative that YPWD are provided with early and supported opportunities to consider and test their employment options. In the current “polished pathway” model, from an early age YPWD and their families, especially those with high needs, are encouraged into sheltered settings through lack of viable supportive alternatives that meet their needs.<sup>57</sup> This is reinforced through low expectations:

*“A lot of people assume that kids with an intellectual disability are stupid. So they talk about them and I don't think people give kids with an intellectual disability enough credit” (Parent of child with Intellectual Disability, Growing Up Making Decisions 2022 Report)*

Early intervention needs to incorporate tailored, wraparound support beyond a focus on employment, to understand the importance of a rights-based decision making approach where YPWD learn to make informed decisions and understand their rights:

*“I have always tried to communicate to [my son] that he does have choice, to give some choice even if there wasn't much choice to make.*

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<sup>55</sup> DEWR (2025) [Assuring integrity in the Targeted Compliance Framework](#); Commonwealth Ombudsman (2025) [Ombudsman investigation into Targeted Compliance Framework](#).

<sup>56</sup> CYDA (2020) [Disability Royal Commission - Response to Employment issues paper](#).

<sup>57</sup> Inclusion Australia (2022) [The Polished Pathway](#).

*So that he was growing up understanding he has a right to choice”  
(Parent, Growing Up Making Decisions 2022 Report)*

*You just can’t pigeonhole people with intellectual disabilities into one  
pigeonhole, because it doesn’t work for everybody. Everybody is  
different. (Parent, Growing Up Making Decisions 2022 Report)*

Research on young people with an intellectual disability in the USA found that: “a good job contributes to a sense of accomplishment, self-worth, and independence; it gives young people a place to share their strengths and gifts in valued ways; it fosters new friendships and access to social supports; and it provides resources and connections that increase community involvement and contributions.”<sup>58</sup>

Early exposure to a variety of employment settings is important for YPWD to experience genuine choice and control, and the above-stated benefits of employment. This must occur in an inclusive, tailored manner to enable YPWD to explore options, develop skills and networks while feeling safe, supported and informed.<sup>59</sup>

### **Expand open employment pathways in the NDIS Youth Employment Assistance Program (formerly Student Leaver Employment Support)**

An existing channel for tailored employment support to YPWD is the NDIS Youth Employment Assistance program (formerly SLES), designed to support employment readiness of school leavers with disability. The Program is delivered through funded providers who help young people prepare, look for and gain employment.

Through consultation, the NDIS have identified a range of design issues with the former SLES including the need for more tailored, individualised supports; more performance accountability of providers; more information for YPWD; and support occurring too late for many YPWD.<sup>60</sup>

An independent analysis of the former SLES program found that while it has a slight positive effect on employment outcomes, participants also identified high levels of inadequate support.<sup>61</sup> A major gap was that SLES was time-limited and provided no support options beyond the two-year program. It also provided no employer-facing employment supports to meet the needs of young people with intellectual disability.

The analysis recommended that SLES adopt international best practice approaches for transition to work planning for participants with high needs that emphasise:

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<sup>58</sup> Carter et al. (2017) [The Tennessee Works Partnership: Elevating employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities](#). *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 3: 365.

<sup>59</sup> Joyce et al. (2025) [Organisational and policy barriers to transitioning from supported into open employment for people with an intellectual disability](#).

<sup>60</sup> Wilson et al. (2022) [Paper 3: School Leaver Employment Support \(SLES\) – Reshaping the Approach, Explaining the Evidence for Reform Series](#). Centre for Social Impact.

<sup>61</sup> Wilson et al. (2022) [Paper 3: School Leaver Employment Support \(SLES\) – Reshaping the Approach, Explaining the Evidence for Reform Series](#). Centre for Social Impact.

- support for youth and family involvement in transition planning
- early engagement in transition and employment planning (from age 14)
- paid and unpaid work experience
- life skills instruction and experience
- inter-agency collaboration
- work integrated learning opportunities.<sup>62</sup>

*“If there was work done from an early point it would make a huge difference. So many people with disability that we work with don't have the critical support they need to be able to adequately communicate – to understand information they're being provided and to clearly communicate their views. ... that capacity building work with individuals to understand, to maximise, to have experience in making decisions, to have information about different options available in order to be able to make a choice, or to know the consequences of the decisions” (Sector stakeholder, Growing Up Making Decisions Report).*

**CYDA recommends that the new NDIS Youth Employment Assistance Program be a viable, time un-limited channel for support to YPWD with high support needs in learning about employment options and securing employment.** This must include working with employers to develop open employment pathways including tailored opportunities for customised roles, work experience, and job carving. We also suggest expanding access to the program beyond NDIS participants—for example, by including it as part of the broader Foundational Supports system.

Expanding open employment pathways in the NDIS Youth Employment Assistance program should occur alongside, and be informed by, the outcomes of the 2025 NDIS blended employment trials, which aim to improve long-term employment outcomes for participants.<sup>63</sup> The outcomes of the 2025 trials should also be included in any audit of existing work undertaken by DSS (relating to Question 1 of the discussion paper).

Open employment pathways in the NDIS employment program could also incorporate wraparound elements of successful programs such as Ticket to Work, an evidence-based transition-to-work initiative for secondary school students with disability, which supports work experience and employment in award-wage roles through a joined-up approach that connects schools, employers and support services early.

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<sup>62</sup> Wilson et al. (2022) [Paper 3: School Leaver Employment Support \(SLES\) – Reshaping the Approach, Explaining the Evidence for Reform Series](#). Centre for Social Impact.

<sup>63</sup> DSS (2024) [Working together to trial blended payments](#).

## Guarantee a “Right to try Open Employment” pathway

Support for YPWD also needs to occur along different stages of their employment journey. It is important that YPWD who are already employed in supported employment settings have opportunities to explore other options if they wish.

Some people employed in ADEs have said that they need more of a challenge, and want more variety.<sup>64</sup> However, some have also had negative experiences in open employment, or are worried about potential discrimination in open employment.<sup>65</sup>

CYDA recommends that the government offers a structured, funded trial of open employment to YPWD in supported employment. Such a trial would provide an alternative pathway for those who feel under stimulated within supported employment, yet do so in a supported way that would mitigate concerns with open employment.

The trial should include:

- tailored supports to support the transition
- the option to return to supported employment if preferred
- no penalties to DSP and income support payments in either supported or open employment settings to ensure an adequate income safety net.

## b. Invest in youth- and disability-led alternatives

### Establish a youth-led social enterprise employment innovation program

As part of enabling YPWD to take a leadership role in driving inclusive employment practices, the government should invest in initiatives led by YPWD themselves.

**CYDA recommends that the government establish an annual grant program** to fund, mentor and promote youth-led or disability-led social enterprises that employ young people with disability, especially those with high support needs.

A potential existing channel to fund such a grant program could be through the government’s Disability Advocacy Program.

This grant program would support and reward innovative social enterprises who are co-founded or governed by young people with disability. Such a program would enable leadership by YPWD and ensure that innovations for high support needs are being co-designed by YPWD, something that YPWD themselves view as vitally important:

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<sup>64</sup> Meltzer et al. (2016) [What do people with an intellectual disability think about their jobs and the support they receive at work? A comparative study of three employment support models: Final report.](#) Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW

<sup>65</sup> Meltzer et al. (2016) [What do people with an intellectual disability think about their jobs and the support they receive at work? A comparative study of three employment support models: Final report.](#) Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW.

*“[We should be] ensuring that all, as much as possible, employers and organisers of disability employment services, and disability specific roles are disabled.” (YPWD, LivedX Series)*

*“To ensure that it’s meaningful employment, there needs to be a commitment to disabled leadership at all levels of the organisation, not just casual contractors. There needs to be the ability for disabled people to move up and take on more responsibility.” (YPWD, LivedX Series)*

As part of the program, there should be opportunities for participating social enterprises to learn and share insights with each other, and to showcase innovations. This could potentially happen through the development of public resources such as video or podcast series, or showcasing the social enterprises at a special-themed government Disability Expo for social enterprises featuring YPWD.

There should be pathways for further progression provided after the grant funding concludes, including upskilling, networking and opportunities to connect with potential ongoing funding sources such as large-scale philanthropic funders, government bodies and/or businesses with corporate social responsibility portfolios.

### **Create a youth disability peer mentor network**

When asked what they liked about supported employment settings, people with disability said they valued the relationships, getting paid, having something to do and enjoyment from the work tasks.<sup>66</sup> Social connection, belonging and meaning are hence key components that should be retained from supported employment settings.

YPWD in the DREAM Network, SVA Employer Innovation Labs and Voices on Work projects also said that an important part of their experience was connecting with other YPWD in employment settings. They found it gave them a sense of possibility to see YPWD in employment and leadership roles, and more confidence in the future.

Peer support has already been proven to be an effective method employed by YPWD and their families to navigate the NDIS ecosystem, as a trusted channel to share information and make decisions.<sup>67</sup>

### **CYDA recommends that the government fund a youth disability peer mentor network, to support YPWD transitioning to open employment.**

A youth disability peer mentor network would connect YPWD in supported employment with peer mentors who are in open employment settings. These peer mentors would provide support to navigate open employment, including how to find a

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<sup>66</sup> Meltzer et al. (2016) [What do people with an intellectual disability think about their jobs and the support they receive at work? A comparative study of three employment support models: Final report](#). Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW.

<sup>67</sup> CYDA (2025) [Submission to Self-Directed Supports consultation](#).

role and navigate recruitment practices, advocate for rights and reasonable adjustments, and build connections in the workplace.

The network could also include opportunities for social connection and community-building outside of the peer mentor one-on-one settings, such as:

- online and in-person network events for YPWD to connect with each other and hear about workplace experiences
- smaller group activities to form connections and share interests.

### **c. Assist open employment settings to provide tailored support**

CYDA's final recommendation is that a transition to open employment will require assisting mainstream workplaces to provide tailored support. Reinforcing our earlier suggestions to support and incentivise innovative and inclusive practices, this is about ensuring that open employment settings offer tailored supports and safeguards to YPWD, to retain the benefits of and need for support received in supported employment. This requires both a remedial (funding existing workplaces to embed supports) and a transformative approach (changing how workplaces are designed).

#### **Embed funded supports within mainstream workplaces**

As more people with disability (including YPWD) transition to open employment settings, it is important that these open employment settings are adequately prepared to support their needs. In addition to the capacity building mentioned at Recommendation 1c of this submission, this transition will require government funding and training to embed tailored supports into mainstream workplaces.

For workplaces that are already established, this necessitates adapting existing structures and systems. Within existing systems, tailored supports should include:

- job coaching services to assist YPWD to find and secure open employment
- disability inclusion officers tasked to develop and implement disability action plans
- peer mentors within workplaces
- supports such as transport assistance, personal care, daily living support to ensure people with high support needs can fully participate
- community-building initiatives such as team-based work, workplace clubs, and other opportunities for social connection with colleagues.

#### **Fund the Centre for Inclusive Employment to develop resources to build universal design of inclusive practices into workplace systems**

A second, longer-term part of the transition to open employment entails a transformative approach – a rethinking of employment settings through the lens of universal design. In this approach, many of the innovations proposed throughout this



submission could be piloted, tested or trialled with a view to designing workplaces to be inclusive for YPWD from the outset.

For example, the employment programs and hubs proposed in Recommendation 1a of this submission provide channels to develop these designs.

CYDA also recommends that the government fund the Centre for Inclusive Employment to develop resources to assist employers to build universal design into workplaces. These resources could draw on existing pilots such as the WISE-ability model,<sup>68</sup> and would outline how to implement principles of universal design, including:

- Co-design with YPWD and employers
- Accessible and inclusive environments
- Reasonable adjustments
- Task and role customisation
- Flexible work models
- Job carving, allowing roles to be tailored to individual strengths, interests, and support needs.

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<sup>68</sup> Campbell et al (2024) [Connecting Pathways to Employment with the Work Integration Social Enterprise \(WISE\) - Ability Model: Final Report](#). Swinburne: Centre for Social Impact.



## Appendix: CYDA's disability employment related work

- CYDA (2025) [Submission to the Jobs and Skills Australia Workplan 2025-26](#)
- CYDA (2025) [Pre-budget submission 2025-26](#)
- CYDA (2024) [DREAM Employment Network.](#)
- CYDA (2024) [Submission to the Australian Disability Strategy Review](#)
- CYDA (2024) [Submission to the Select Committee on the Cost of Living](#)
- CYDA (2024) [Submission to the Australian Government on the Response to the Disability Royal Commission](#)
- CYDA (2023) [Submission on the Disability Employment Services Quality Framework.](#)
- CYDA (2023) [Joint submission on a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence](#)
- CYDA (2023) [Pre-Budget Submission 2024-25: Charting an Inclusive Path](#)
- CYDA (2023) [Submission to Australia's Youth Engagement Strategy](#)
- CYDA (2022) [Joint Submission Employment White Paper](#)
- CYDA (2022) [Submission to the Disability Employment Support Model consultation](#)
- CYDA (2022) [LivedX Series: Financial security and employment](#)
- CYDA (2021) [Submission to the Social Security Legislation Amendment Bill 2021](#)
- CYDA (2020) [Submission to the Disability Royal Commission Employment Issues Paper](#)

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