

NDS Skills Project

Environmental Scan

The disability workforce needs to grow

- The NDIS has grown at a rapid rate, with more than 610,000 participants with approved plans as of June 2023[1].
- The occupation of Aged and Disabled Carer has the largest projected employment growth (28%) of all occupations in Australia in the five years to November 2026[2].
- Within the next three years, it is estimated that an additional 385,000 workers will be required to meet demand by June 2025[3]
- In order to address this rapidly growing demand, the disability sector workforce needs to grow at an equally fast pace.

But working conditions are precarious

- Around one in four disability workers leave their job in any given year, which amounts to a 'churn' rate that is roughly three times higher than the overall Australian workforce [4].
- Some of the key drivers that lead to staff turnover include a lack of permanent positions, availability of better working conditions in other sectors, and staff burnout [5].
- Regarding burnout, workers have reported that caring for complex clients too early can deter them from staying in the sector or with their employer, and that they either leave the sector or look for alternative roles or employers to address this.
- In 2023, 82% of disability service providers received requests for services that they could not fulfill. The reasons they gave for turning down services include not enough staff (45%), not enough qualified staff (21%), or not enough organisational resources or money (15%) [6].

NDIS Pricing is at the root of the problem

- The cost modelling that underpins NDIS pricing allows for little or no training and supervision cost recovery.
- Disability service providers have reported that the issue was not as much about covering the cost of training courses, but about the periphery costs around training such as backfilling of shifts to allow workers to attend training, direct supervision of new skills acquisition, and shift allocation to support skills implementation in a manner that is consistent with individual participant needs and preferences [7].

NDIS Pricing is a key barrier

- Many workers have expressed feeling that opportunities to undertake training had diminished since the roll out of the NDIS, and that funding pressures and commercial imperatives played a large part in this [8].
- Workers have reported receiving less than one day of training in the last year. Importantly, many workers reported covering the costs of training themselves or undertaking training out of paid time; particularly in home care settings [8].
- In addition to this, in its Interim Workforce Report, the Joint Standing Committee on the NDIS stated that ‘the disability workforce is often required to self-fund training, as employers are unwilling or unable to deliver training under current price settings. In the absence of proper training, workers will have difficulty providing safe, quality services to participants, and may experience increased health and safety risks’.

Skills required by the disability workforce

- The NDIS has produced several resources that articulate best practice in disability work.
- These include the NDIS Code of Conduct [9], the NDIS Practice Standards [10], and the NDIS Workforce Capability Framework [11].
- The resources highlight the standards and capabilities required by the disability workforce to ensure the provision of safe, quality services.

Skills required by the disability workforce

- The NDIS Commission's resources reveal that the key skills required by the disability workforce are less comprised of 'technical' skills and knowledge and more closely aligned with 'people' skills.
- Employers also ranked personal qualities as more important than both qualifications and experience[12].
- Employers rated good personal qualities as the most important factor for recruitment (37%), followed by experience (32%) and relevant qualifications (31%) [13].
- However, existing research suggests that people with disability, employers, and trainers are not confident that they can train for values-based work or 'people' or 'soft' skills, and instead seek to recruit these capabilities. 81% of employers did not hire workers based on a lack of personal skills, with 58% specifying a lack of communication skills and 44% a lack of 'people skills' [13].

Skills required by the disability workforce

- Previous research has also highlighted the importance of health-related skills and knowledge for the disability workforce.
- Workers have stated that the health-related training they received was minimal; often only comprising first aid and CPR. They have also expressed a desire for more in-depth training in mental health first aid, and how to support people with complex needs or challenging behaviours[14].
- Despite the fact that health-related skills are considered to make up 30.5% of the skills required by disability support workers according to the Jobs and Skills Australia Occupation Profile, these skills are currently not reflected in the NDIS Capability Framework's core skills and thus, represent an existing gap in terms of crucial knowledge [15].

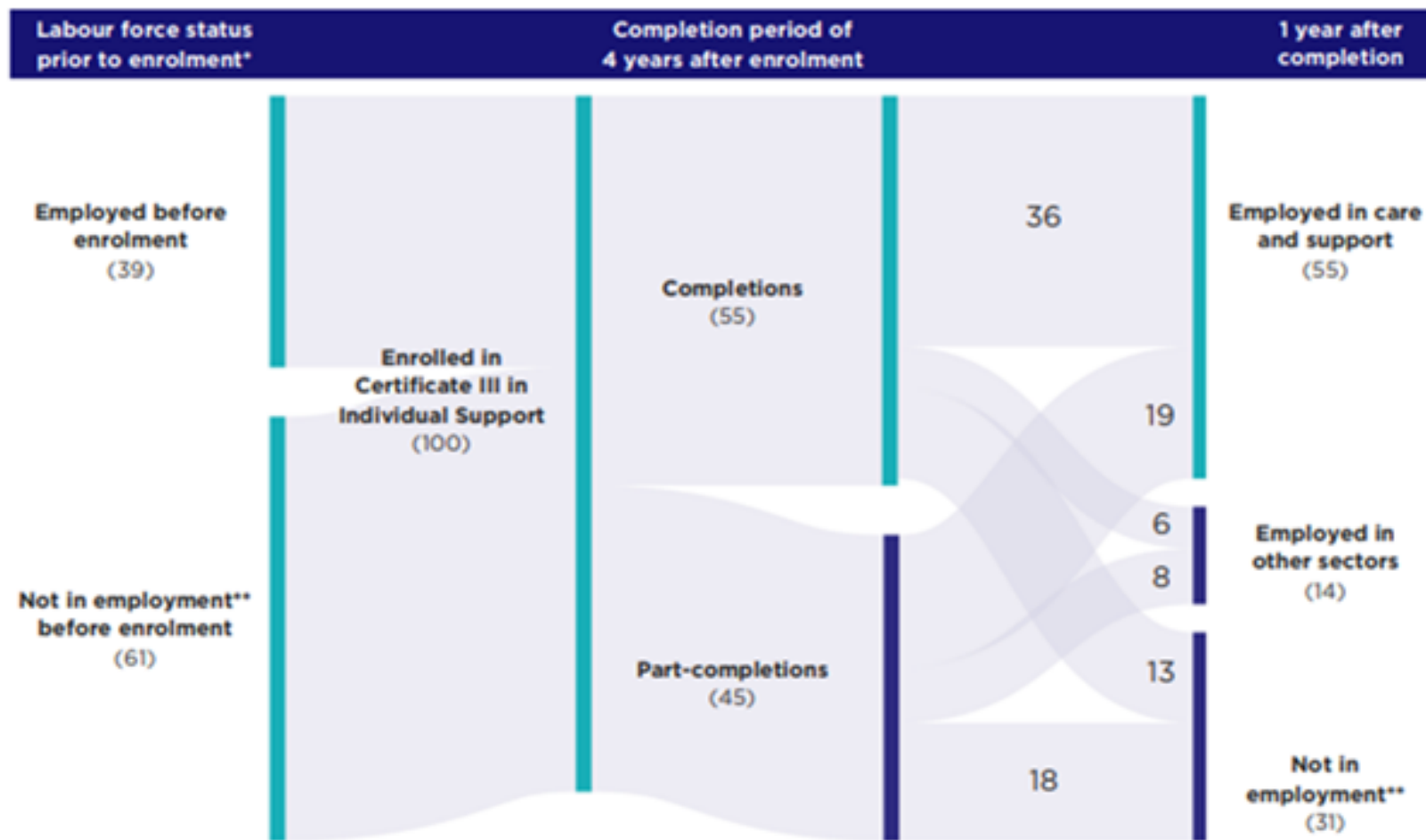
Training pathways: accredited training

- There are no minimum mandated qualifications in disability; a factor that has been raised in previous research as a disincentive for enrolment in accredited training pathways [16].
- The most common qualifications for disability support workers are the Certificate III in Individual Support and Certificate IV in Disability Services.
- In 2019, the total number of enrolments in these two qualifications and Certificate IV in Ageing Support represented over 39% of all enrolments in care and support qualifications; evidencing the high popularity of these courses as an upskilling mechanism for the sector [17].

Training pathways: accredited training

- The Certificate III in Individual Support is one of the VET Courses with the highest employment rate change over the last 20 years, with a 34.5% increase between 2002 and 2021.
- Approximately 55% of enrolled students complete the qualification within four years.
- 55% will find employment in the care and support workforce, 14% in other sectors, and 31% will be unemployed in the first year after completion.
- 65% of people who completed the course obtained employment in the care and support workforce compared to 19% who did not – indicating a positive correlation between course completion and employment in the sector.

Training pathways: accredited training



Training pathways: accredited training

- While the number of enrolments in care and support qualifications has grown over recent years, the number of completions has declined.
- RTOs have stated that finding placement opportunities that could provide adequate supervision was one of the main barriers for completion [18].
- In response to this, employers have stated that supervising students is a challenge because it often stretches staff's limited resources.
- Reports from previous students demonstrate that Certificate III graduates wanting to work in disability often graduate with no experience in the disability sector, as their placements were completed in an aged care facility; which do not provide the adequate experience for their prospective area of work[19].
- Respondents in the study expressed that disability service providers often expected students to be work-ready on day one of their placement, when in many cases, this is the students' first time seeing the reality of work in the sector.

Training pathways: accredited training

- Employers have also expressed concerns regarding the consistency of training across registered training organisations (RTOs) given the variable degree of competencies they see in recent graduates.
- The Care Workforce Labour Market Study (2021)[20] revealed that employers did not feel they could rely on qualifications as evidence of a worker's skills as training often occurred mostly online with no to low face-to-face opportunities for applied practical skills development.
- They highlighted the length of work placements was insufficient, providing students with limited exposure to 'real world' work contexts by completion.
- Because of this, employers in the disability sector often rely on unaccredited training as a means to upskill their workforce.

Training pathways: unaccredited training

- 31% of disability service providers reported that they were willing to take on staff with no formal qualifications (compared with 9% in the Aged Care sector) [21].
- The rise of unaccredited training brings forth another set of challenges though; the main of them being the lack of portability of said training.
- Because unaccredited training is not standardised or assessed, workers changing jobs between organisations have to re-take training they may have already completed in the past in another organisation – creating duplication and inefficiencies.
- This trend may overshadow the potential of career development and career pathways available in the sector, limiting the workers' growth in the sector and potentially contributing to low retention rates.

What could we do differently?

- Improving worker retention and helping workers to build their skills in the sector would improve outcomes for participants and reduce pressure on scheme sustainability.
- Stakeholders must find ways to increase the attractiveness of the occupation through improved remuneration, good working conditions, professional development, and clearer career pathways.

Improved remuneration: financial considerations

- Under current pricing models, the addition of a worker in training on a shift (where approved by the service recipient) is essentially the addition of a supernumerary and does not add to the productivity of that shift, or produce any additional income for the employer, but rather is a direct additional wage cost.
- The inclusions for training and supervision for disability support workers in hourly price caps, when set at a sufficient level, may help ensure workers receive appropriate training and supervision to be able to deliver safe and quality supports.
- Pricing models could acknowledge the real costs of ongoing staff development for providers (including the cost of supervision, coaching, and mentoring), and ensure funding is identified for this.

Professional development: innovative training models

- In terms of professional development, three innovative approaches have been suggested in the existing literature as showing signs of promise: traineeships, micro-credentials, and a national skills passport.

Traineeships

- Traineeships address many of the major barriers identified in existing literature relating to the mismatch between training environments and the workplace.
- Previous research demonstrates that job outcomes from traineeships are strong, with 83% of trainees employed six months after training, compared to 77% for other VET graduates[22].
- Although costly, disability service providers that offer traineeships often see better retention rates in their workforce with a good organizational fit[23].
- Despite their value, traineeships are underutilised in the disability sector, with 66.4% of existing trainees enrolled in trades occupations[24].
- In response to this, disability service providers have raised the casualisation of the workforce and supervision requirements as a key barriers for the uptake of traineeships in the disability sector[23].

Traineeships

- Three out of four NDIS workers are employed either part time or casually. The 2023 NDS Workforce Census reported 39% of all workers were employed on a casual basis, and that the average work hours for all disability workers were 22.6 per week. In this sense, the NDIS Review highlighted that training systems, regulation, and market settings are not aligned to support ongoing learning and career development for workers in non-traditional jobs, as traditional traineeships require 15+ hours or full-time employment.
- Furthermore, many service providers felt supervision requirements made traineeships unviable for two reasons.
- Firstly, small businesses may not have the financial capacity to meet supervision and administration requirements of trainees; and secondly, many of the experienced workers in the disability industry are unqualified, which makes them ineligible to supervise trainees[25].
- The combination of no mandatory qualification for the role and the requirement for on-the-job supervision of trainees, results in workers with no qualification and not in training being able to work unsupervised, but workers who are completing training being unable to work unsupervised. In combination with the direct costs of employing a trainee, this acts as a clear disincentive for employers to engage trainees.
- In addition, for many mature age workers, which make up the bulk of the disability workforce, traineeship wages would prevent them from taking up this pathway as they could not afford to support families, pay mortgages etc. Financial incentives should be considered for disadvantaged cohorts to uptake training.
- Finally, care and support services are highly personal, relationship-based services. Because of this, the human rights of service recipients cannot be subjugated to the requirements of the training system. This needs to be considered when designing suitable training arrangements in the disability sector.

Traineeships

- When asked about factors that might increase the likelihood of them taking on a trainee, disability service providers stated that incentives and payroll tax rebates ranked the highest out of ten possibilities [26].
- Conversations with those that do employ trainees further explained that the financial incentives were not the actual motivator for taking on a trainee, but that these helped to offset the costs of training and supervision.
- ‘Customisation of training content to their organisation’ and ‘flexibility in how, where and when the training was delivered’ rated third and fourth respectively.

Clearer Career Pathways

- Two of the biggest barriers to worker mobility are low skill levels and highly specific training [27].
- Prospective students are often unwilling to lock themselves into long, specific traineeships in a sector which they have not experienced.
- To address this, measures could be put in place to ensure that prospective applicants have a way of checking their fit before they commit to the profession. Measures include[28]:
 - Work experience
 - Volunteering opportunities
 - Exposure opportunities or ‘taster’ programs
 - Certificate II pathways that include work placements
 - Screening tools
 - Work trials
- Existing data suggests that these opportunities need to be considered an integral part of training pathways for the disability sector.

Micro-credentials

- The development of industry-recognised micro-credentials has been recommended as one way to efficiently address specific skill gaps in the existing workforce without workers having to undertake extensive training [29].
- To enable the sector to embrace accredited training more fully, public funding needs to be made available to an RTO so that they can access separate units of competency that cover discreet skills as a micro credential (rather than the credential, course, or skill set level as is presently the case).

National Skills Passport

- There are common skills required across aged, community, and disability care; allowing for a degree of transferability across sectors [30].
- Moving away from 'linear' ways of providing training to be able to improve their skills progressively would also benefit workers who often work below full-time hours or in casual and non-ongoing arrangements in more than one job.
- A National Skills Passport would enable this.

National Skills Passport

- For the scheme to be effective, the following key features must be clarified [31]:
 - System infrastructure: This would need to include a mechanism to link training credits to hours of work performed across multiple providers.
 - Eligibility criteria: including the threshold to establishing an account for workers, and whether accredited or non-accredited courses (or both) would be eligible.
 - Verification of skills: A key concern was determining who would be responsible for verifying the details on an individual's skills passport and what standards would be used to assess the information. Given the extent of informal in-house training and perceived variation in its quality, one possibility is to appoint industry accredited verifiers who have been trained to assess and approve employee evidence of skills, qualifications and experience. Accredited verifiers should operate under clear industry guidelines and codes of conduct and be independently monitored.
 - Funding approach: that is, if the scheme should be funded via industry, government, through participant/client funding packages or a combination.

Remaining lines of enquiry: skills

- Does the NDIS Workforce Capability Framework effectively capture the skills needed by the disability workforce from a sector perspective?
- Do disability workers continue to feel under-skilled during their employment, and if so, what skills do they think they need?
- Can you train for values-based work and 'people' or 'soft' skills? If so, what methodologies work? And what evidence would people with disability, disability employers, and trainers need to feel confident that these skills can be trained?

Remaining lines of enquiry: training pathways

- What is the comparative experience of workers with relevant qualifications to workers with no relevant qualifications?
- What motivated workers with a qualification to obtain said qualification? Do they feel more confident in their skills? Do they stay in the sector longer? Do they experience more career progression?
- What changes would need to occur to build disability employers' confidence in qualifications as evidence of worker skills?
- Is there any evidence on the scale, breadth, or focus of the unaccredited training purchased by NDIS providers?
- Are there any industry-led micro credentials developed by and for the disability sector?

Want to get involved?

Contact us at skillsproject@nds.org.au.

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