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Road to Employment

Short baseline report

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Executive summary

People with disability of all ages experience many barriers to finding and staying in work. Most people want to and can work when they receive the support and opportunities they need.

JFA Purple Orange is a non-government, social profit organisation. The majority of its governors live with disability, as well as a number of the JFA Purple Orange staff working in policy and projects. The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) funded JFA Purple Orange through the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program to run a project to address barriers to employment for people with disability called the Road to Employment project.

This short baseline report is about the start of the project. It was written by researchers at UNSW Sydney and Flinders University, Adelaide. The management of the ILC program and this grant transferred to the Department of Social Services in 2021.

Road to Employment

Road to Employment is a 3-year project until March 2023. It uses a lifecycle approach from childhood to adulthood to change work expectations about people living with disability. The project works with school communities, employers and workplaces.

Raising the Bar Workshops. Co-designed workshop materials and content will be developed for five different audiences: parents, teachers, and young people at key points in their lives. Tailored Raising the Bar workshops will be delivered to parents of pre-school aged children to raise the expectations about pre-schoolers participating in mainstream schools and classrooms. The workshops for year 6 and year 9 students, their parents and teachers endeavour to raise expectations about employment. A mentoring program will also be developed for year 9 students to connect young people living with disability to training and work opportunities as they transition out of school.

Employers and workplaces. As part of an earlier project, JFA Purple Orange established two industry-based Communities of Practice. These groups of people with lived experience and employers come together to drive change in their industry, workplaces and organisations. The Community of Practice groups continue under Road to Employment. The goal is to increase the capacity of employers to address barriers in their work practices to create work opportunities and inclusive cultures. Employers in the Communities of Practice will also have access to one-on-one mentoring support from JFA Purple Orange.

Impact of Road to Employment to date

Road to Employment is in its establishment and design phase where project activities, goals, outcome measures, and relationships with key partners and stakeholders are being developed and refined. The project is identifying new key stakeholders for the Community of Practice groups and stakeholders in school communities – students, teachers, and parents. As part of this early work, the project is conducting co-design workshops with schools and other relevant stakeholders to ensure they have input into how the project will work with school communities.

Important parts of the Road to Employment project

Three parts are critical for the success of the project now and into the future.

Schools. The Road to Employment activities with schools aim to set and reinforce high employment expectations at key points throughout the lives of people with disability. The aim is to also influence the attitudes of key people who support young people, including parents and teachers. Road to Employment builds from another successful JFA Purple Orange project, the Inclusive School Communities Project. They work together with an experienced workshop provider, Enabled Youth Disability Network, which will assist the project to deliver high-quality and timely information and support as part of their work within schools.

Employers and workplaces. Building the capacity of employers, through the Community of Practice and individual mentoring support, is a promising way to break down barriers and create workplaces and work cultures that are more diverse and inclusive. An important condition that emerged from an early project was that people with disability need to be strongly represented in the Community of Practice. They ensure that actions remain informed by lived experience in the workplaces and industry and focused on their priorities.

Evaluation and research. Research is an important part of the Road to Employment project. Together, the researchers and service providers delivering the project, will document the successful processes and stories of significant change, so that future projects can learn from this project.

Structure of the report

This short baseline report presents preliminary findings about the Road to Employment project; it discusses what Road to Employment is (Section 1) and how it intends to achieve its goals (Section 2); and raises questions about the possible challenges ahead and how they can be addressed (Section 3). The report ends with Section 4, the developmental research framework and methods to evaluate Road to Employment.

The research team and project website

The research is conducted by a team of researchers at UNSW Sydney and Flinders University, Adelaide in partnership with the team at JFA Purple Orange implementing the project. For more information about the research team and project please visit the website: www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sprc/our-projects/road-employment-evaluation

1 Road to Employment

The project

Road to Employment is a 3-year NDIA funded project that takes a lifecycle approach to address barriers to employment. It commenced in April 2020. The project recognises that attitudes towards and of people with disability can have influence during childhood and adulthood. Action to support workforce participation can start with supporters during childhood and extend to support in workplaces during high school and adulthood to influence long term change. Road to Employment applies several **processes** to increase employment opportunities, improve employment practices, and influence work expectations for people with disability.

Community of Practice model and one-on-one support to employers

The project works with employers through the Community of Practice model. It is influencing change within sectors, such as Finance and accounting and Aged Care, to increase employers' capacity to support the employment of people with disability. Community of Practice members can receive one-on-one support, modelled on the Business Inclusion and Diversity Services (BIDS) program designed by the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations. The one-on-one support provides advice and recommendations to the organisation about changes to make their workplace more inclusive of people living with disability.

Affecting employment attitudes and expectations in schools

The project works with school communities to deliver workshops to families, teachers, and young people at key points in their lives. The goal is to raise employment expectations and increase awareness of employment pathways by supporters and people with disability involved in decisions about work. The project is establishing a mentoring program to support individual students as they explore their employment options. It is considering how to link students with employers for internships, work experience and potentially casual work and work placements.

Raising the Bar workshops. Co-designed workshop materials and content will be developed for five different audiences;

- Parents of pre-school aged children
- Year 6 students
- Year 9 students
- parents and teachers of year 6 students
- parents and teachers of year 9 school students.

A Mentoring program will be co-designed, developed and delivered to Year 9 students in up to 4 schools. The aim is to link students to employment opportunities, such as work placements and casual work, and to facilitate their employment discovery, identifying their own strengths and interests. EYDN will provide fortnightly group mentoring sessions for students living with disability throughout Terms 2, 3 and 4 of years 2 and 3 of the project. The people with disability who are mentors will connect with employers involved in the capacity building program, supporting young people to explore their goals and guiding them towards experiences of employment.

Project governance – staff and Steering Committee

The project has five staff members involved across the industry and school parts of the initiative. They have expertise and lived experience in disability employment and education. The project has a Steering Committee that meets quarterly. The group includes around 15 members. The Committee has diversity and representation from high policy levels, advocacy, and employment services. It includes government representative of the SA Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family businesses; representative of the Equal Opportunity Commission and the Disability Royal Commission, and representatives from employment services and national employer associations; as well as members of Purple Orange team and people living with disability. The Committee's interest in Road to Employment is to focus on attitudinal and systemic change by identifying change processes that are effective in workplaces and across industries.

Project outcomes

The intended outcomes from the project are the actions and change in attitudes and expectations about the employment of people with disability. In the long term, likely beyond the timeframe of the project, increases in the number of people with disability employed may be observed.

Impact to date

Road to Employment commenced in April 2020. The project is in its establishment and design phase where activities, objectives, outcome measures, and relationships with key partners and stakeholders are being developed, reviewed and refined. The project is continuously identifying new key stakeholders for the Community of Practice groups and stakeholders in school communities – students, teachers, and parents. These processes and relationships are critical to the success of the project. The processes for individualised support and mentoring to students and employers, and workshops in school communities are in planning stages. The process for linking these activities to sustainable change in employment expectations will evolve.

2 Effective processes

What processes are effective for the project to connect people to employment opportunities and to improve the expectations and practices of employers, schools, families and communities to employ people with disability?

Communities of Practice

Working with employers and industry disability champions in a Community of Practice approach is a promising activity in Road to Employment. Early findings suggest that it takes time and resources to identify interested stakeholders, develop and sustain relationships that can generate sufficient long-term interest and commitment to drive change within organisations and industries.

A central feature of the Community of Practice model is that people with disability are participants. The participation of people with disability ensures that the activities of the Community of Practice in the workforce and industry remain informed by lived experience, and that priorities for action are driven by people's perspectives from their lived experience.

Capacity building for employers and industry groups

The Road to Employment Project Plan sets out that the project intends to provide support to employers beyond the Community of Practice. The activities are to deliver individualised support and mentoring to employers who identify that they wish to further build their capacity to employ people with disability and improve their workplace and organisational practices and culture.

This project process is highly relevant to changing employment practices. It is also a challenging aspect of the project. It takes time to identify industry champions and generate sustained interest and momentum in the project and implement actions. Some change relies on factors outside of the projects' direct influence. Making change within organisations and industries hinges on the commitment of employers and organisations to identify and tackle access barriers. Previous research also demonstrates that knowing people with disability in the workplace is key to changing workplace practices and culture. When people have workplace contact with people with disability, they are more likely to understand the benefits of a diverse workplace and how to make reasonable adjustments.

Activities with students, teachers and parents

This school project activity aims to set and reinforce high employment expectations at key points throughout the lives of people with disability and influence the attitudes

of people who support them such as parents and teachers. Road to Employment builds from another successful JFA Purple Orange project, the Inclusive School Communities Project.

The lifecycle approach is novel as few employment projects have applied this concept in practice. It is also backed by policy and the academic literature (Meltzer et al., 2016; NDIA, 2019; Stokes, Turnbull, & Wyn, 2013).

Working together with an experienced workshop provider, Enabled Youth Disability Network, will assist the project to deliver high-quality and timely information and support to the range of supporters within school communities.

Project governance

The Steering Committee contribute to the co-design of the evaluation. It is expected that the ToR will clarify the role of the Steering Committee and how the Steering Committee's decisions will guide the project management. The ToR will also clarify how they will make decisions between divergent views and priorities, considering the wide range of representation within the group. Examples are focus on one industry over another or directions and priorities for the project.

3 Future directions

This section raises questions for the ongoing implementation of Road to Employment. The questions are based on the review of project documentation, literature, observations of project activities which were part of the data collection for the baseline report. The questions are intended to highlight strengths and limitations, to promote reflective practice and assist in the projects' design phase.

Importance of relationships

Identifying and sustaining relationships is a priority for the project because of the evidence around relationships as a strong support in employment sustainability. Case studies which demonstrate significant change will be developed as part of the evaluation and include a focus on the role of relationships in Road to Employment.

People with disability are central to maintaining cultural safety and direction for the project

The project processes, the Steering Committee and the Community of Practice, are structured to have people with disability in key positions. This structure is a strength of the Road to Employment project and the processes. The structures need to ensure the processes support the voices and views of people with disability when they are in a minority of positions and provide adequate support and compensation for contributions.

The Steering Committee will presumably be guided by the participation and leadership of its members with disability, drawing on their professional expertise, as well as knowledge from lived experiences, with a particular focus on their views and priorities about employment strategies. This may include discussion around organisational culture, inclusive systems, effective drivers of attitudinal change in workplaces and systems level facilitators of change which move beyond reliance on individual champions for change.

People with disability, industry champions in the Community of Practice model need to be recognised in the critical role they play, within their organisations, but also the support they may require. Champions may feel individual responsibility to their employers who are less committed to building inclusive employment cultures and practices. The Community of Practice (COPs) need to explore how to build in cultural safety into their groups to ensure that people with disability feel supported (not pressured) to increase employment expectations and sustainable change and feel supported during the COPs discussions (it may be taxing on a person with disability to hear how other members speak about their people with disability).

Aligning project goals, resources and timelines

During the establishment phase, Road to Employment is further defining and clarifying its objectives and intentions for each of the activities – mentoring to students, workshops in schools, one on one support to employers, and working with and establishing new Communities of Practice. The ambitious variety of potential activities will need to be assessed as a whole and separately to examine the strengths and weaknesses in each of the projects' processes from a project logic and management perspective. Options may be to reduce the number of activities; to reduce the number of times they are replicated (in new industries, workplaces or schools); or to stage the implementation from pilot activities to expanded reach.

Working with school communities and involving key stakeholders

The diverse activities proposed for working with school communities is novel and promising, as few employment projects have employed a lifecycle concept. Its strength is that it builds from prior relationships and experience of working with stakeholders in schools. JFA Purple Orange has worked with school communities in a 'whole school' approach in the past which is helpful to engage central stakeholders, such as principals, career advisors, mentors, and get their buy in.

A challenge may be to manage the tension between changing supporters' expectations about work, while also valuing the voice and preferences of children and young people with disability. The project will focus on the capacity and attitudes of school communities and workplaces to expect that school graduates will participate in the workforce. This approach will complement the work aspirations of children and students.

4 Research design

Research questions

The mixed-methods evaluation is designed to inform improvements to the projects as they are implemented. The evaluation is conducted by researchers at UNSW Sydney and Flinders University in Adelaide. The research is designed to inform project delivery and create knowledge about the impact of the projects, identify effective strategies and remaining challenges, and lessons for future similar projects that seek to address barriers to employment for people with disability in Australia.

The questions guiding the evaluation are:

1. **What effect did the projects have on people** with disability seeking to be employed and employment opportunities?
 - extent to which the project achieves the intended outcomes (project logic, **Error! Reference source not found.**)
 - extent to which the projects meet the ILC grant outcome measures
 - impact on workplaces, industries, teachers, parents, children and adults with disability
2. **What processes were effective** for the projects to **connect people** to employment opportunities and to **improve the expectations and practices** of employers, schools, families and communities to employ people with disability: school-based workshops, mentoring, one to one support, communities of practice?
 - extent of and how the project built successful partnerships
 - impact of co-design and inclusive steering group on the project
 - impact on the people from participating in the co-design
 - how the project influences other workplaces and professionals
 - lessons learnt and good practice
3. **What barriers, challenges and opportunities were evident, resolved and remain** in the project process and how might these contribute to better ways of working with people with disability, families, teachers, schools and employers to increase employment opportunities?
 - unintended benefits or drawbacks of the project to participants, workplaces and professionals
 - strengths and weaknesses of the approach taken to build the capacity of employers, organisations, students, families and schools
 - what could be done differently

Our approach

The SPRC and Flinders University research team are undertaking the developmental evaluation of Road to Employment from September 2020 until March 2023.

Developmental evaluation is useful when projects such as these are breaking new ground with novel approaches (Patton, 2010). The approach is to incorporate the evaluation within the project, as a way of informing change during the project. One of its features is to use the existing information and processes of the project as the evaluation data, so as not to impose additional burden and activities on the project participants. This approach means that we will draw from the project, our research knowledge and iterative knowledge from the evaluation as it progresses to contribute to project improvement during the life of the evaluation. This method includes providing opportunities to share and reflect on learning with the aim of refining elements of the project.

Co-design occurs during the first part of the evaluation. The co-design process improves the evaluation approach and methods. The co-design includes collaboration between the evaluators and people from JFA Purple Orange, the Steering Committee and the Communities of Practice, including people with disability in all groups.

Methods

The evaluation uses mixed methods to assess the processes and outcomes of the projects.

Project documents and project data

The Project documents and project data from JFA Purple Orange each year will be analysed for descriptive analysis of the process and outcomes in the project logic for people with disability, employers and schools. The presentation of the analysis can inform the activities of the project.

Focus group co-design and baseline data

The researchers observed meetings of the JFA Purple Orange project staff, Steering Committee and two Communities of Practice. These groups include people with disability, as does the evaluation team. The groups incorporated discussion about the research into the usual business of their meetings to avoid time and cost burden to the participants. The discussions served four purposes: to seek their responses the preliminary evaluation design and project data collected by JFA Purple Orange and the evaluators; to hear their priorities for the evaluation and project; to gather baseline data about attitudes of staff in the participating workplaces of the Industry

Specific Disability Employment project; and to collect outcomes data about the first project.

Case studies of people with disability, families and communities, employers and schools

The research team together with JFA Purple Orange will collect case studies of significant change of people with disability, their family and communities, employers and schools to demonstrate the process and outcomes for each case study. The number of case studies will depend on the method and engagement of the participants and JFA Purple Orange. We suggest for each participant type of case study (person with disability, employer, school) at least one case with involvement of the research team (3), plus at least two collected by the participant or JFA Purple Orange staff ($3 \times 2 = 6$). Nine case studies are a sufficient sample to generate data for analysis for the research questions.

Interviews, observation and focus groups. Case studies mostly include semi-structured interviews or focus groups about the participant experiences of the project to address the research questions. For accessibility, we adapt interviews with other methods such as observation, art, photos and walk along discussions.

Selection and recruitment. Recruitment would be purposeful sampling through each project activity. We recommend most significant change sampling, that is seeking cases that demonstrate change over time. The benefit of this approach is that it emphasises appreciative inquiry (what works) and even within good outcomes, many process lessons can be learned, particularly about how people overcome difficulties. Recruitment would be voluntary participation, through informed consent with a trusted person, not associated with the evaluators or JFA Purple Orange.

Analysis. Combining data from the interview and observation sources to generate a strength based anonymised profile of change. The case studies will be presented as standalone output and as data for analysis to address the evaluation questions. Case studies are also suitable for accessible formats such as photos and videos.

Focus groups

In addition to data for the case studies, the focus groups in 2020 will be repeated in 2021-22 for each participant group, to generate reflective data about the evaluation questions as feedback data for project improvement is generated and available each year. We suggest incorporating these activities in their usual meetings to minimise burden. Analysis will be against the project logic elements to address the evaluation questions.

Reporting and publishing

The evaluation findings and reports are made publicly available throughout the research period. The first Interim Evaluation report is planned for November 2021 and published in early 2022. The Final Evaluation report is planned for March 2023.

The research team will also publish evaluation findings in academic journals to add to the international evidence base and quality assurance via peer review.

All our publications relating to the Road to Employment project are on the university's website: www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sprc/our-projects/road-employment-evaluation