

Employment

People with intellectual disability were concerned about employment. Many saw a connection between their poor education their limited options in the economy. All believed that more needed to be done to secure open employment for people with intellectual disability. All believed that people with disability were chronically underpaid because of the instruments such as the Business Services Wage Assessment Tool. All wanted Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) reformed.

People with intellectual disability have nuanced views on ADEs or sheltered workshops.

Ted is 56.

He said ADEs should be reformed rather than shutdown — and focus on helping people with intellectual disability transition to open employment by operating more like TAFEs and certifying clients for employable skills.

Ted completed a six-month TAFE course over two years. He said: ‘Every person can pass most things; they just need to be given more time.’

Ted also wants people with intellectual disability to be paid at least the minimum wage.

He lives independently, drives a car and has worked at an ADE for many years. A decade ago, a new manager decided to reassess Ted’s work capacity and cut his wages by \$10 an hour.

Ted felt trapped: ‘The other people were getting normal wages and there’s things that they can’t do that I can do. ... If I did not agree with it, I would have lost my job, so it was pretty rough.’

The manager who cut Ted’s pay has since left, but he has continued to work for the reduced wage. ‘I can never get back up,’ he said.

People with intellectual disability said they wanted more opportunities to break into open employment — and more support to move to other jobs once they gained open employment.

Nick is 32.

He said he wanted mainstream employment opportunities ‘cracked open’ for people with disabilities — and believed that forums should be held to promote the benefits of employing people with intellectual disability. ‘I think we need to put a big investment into getting people with disabilities into the workforce and into proper paid jobs,’ he said.

Nick said working outside the confines of an ADE or day program had made him independent: ‘It gives me a lot of freedom to do what I need to do.’

The underpayment of people working in ADEs also concerned Nick.

He said:

'The award wages, I think that, you know, 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.'

Calum, 22, wanted to train as a cabinet maker, but wasn't able to access pre-apprenticeship classes in his special school. He tried to catch up in TAFE, but, without support, fell further behind and dropped out. He made food deliveries on his electric bike for an online platform until they discovered he didn't drive a car and sacked him.

Calum said:

'They need to change the system because ... we can still work normal. We're different, but we still got the capacity to be working like other people.'

Penny is in her late 30s and works in open employment.

She said people with disability could only access an employment agency if they worked more than eight hours a week.

Penny works less than eight hours a week, but is having problems at work and, without alternative employment, does not feel she can afford to raise the issue with her employer.

She explained: 'It's not as easy to change [a job] ... because it's hard to get past the interview stage.'

Family members said it was extremely difficult for their relatives with disability to find work.

Jane said her adult daughter, Ava, who lives at home, had spent three years of work trials in an ADE, packing cutlery, but was not offered ongoing employment after leaving school. Jane has now helped Ava start a micro-enterprise.

Wendy's daughter, Kate, who is in her 20s, does not have a job.

'She'd love a job. But we haven't been able to [find one],' Wendy said.

Wendy said Kate spent four days a week in a day program:

'If she didn't have that ... She doesn't really have any other interests. She's got no friends, ... she did have one really good friend ... but the girl died about a year after she started going to high school because of a heart condition and, you know, that's actually quite a common occurrence for children with a disability, that their friends die because they are not necessarily well. Not many other kids have to deal with that.'

Advocates reported that most ADEs failed to teach people with intellectual disability the skills they needed to transition to open employment.

Stephen cited a South Australian review of day programs that was funded with three aims: give participants new skills; let participants meet new people; move participants towards employment.

He said:

'There was no requirement from the [government] department that funded these organisations for them to report on what was happening for their clients. And in that environment, basically, what happens is that whatever you do is good enough. Who cares? As long as you don't get beaten, raped, or have your money stolen, that's all that matters. Again, a pretty low floor of involvement. ... I haven't seen much evidence that it's better anywhere else.'

Vicky said ADEs were 'just segregation'

She said:

'I supported a man with Cerebral palsy. He had some issues with speech and was in a wheelchair and had a poor education because he went to special school ... but he had a lot of capacity.'

Vicky said that when her client went to a disability employment agency, they referred him straight to an ADE. She went to the agency and complained, demanding that they find job placements in open employment.

'Over the next six months, he had a range of job placements, including Bunnings,' she said. 'Then he did another job placement at an early learning centre. That led to a job. He's now been there for six years, and he's a very valued employee.'

Amy is an advocate. She said there was a need for cultural change to pave the way for employment.

She said:

'It's a genuine surprise to most people that someone with intellectual disability could have not just a job, but a career and have different jobs. ... It's not even discrimination, necessarily. It's just total lack of awareness that that's a possibility.'

'I think there are [ADE] places from what I hear that do a better job than others. And, so, probably like any of these issues it's about acknowledging the fact that we don't have great options for people with intellectual disability in pretty much any area of life. And, so, it's not about throwing everything out and starting everything from scratch, because that's never going to happen and it would be problematic anyway, but ... you must have a sense of the future and you must have a sense of: how do you get there ... in disability enterprises and other employment.'

'If you want people to be included in the workplace then what are the concrete steps that you're going to take to make sure that that happens? And not just kind of hide behind the way that

things have always been. And if you really feel that things are worth hanging onto, then you have to have some kind of measurement for it. ... With a disability enterprise, like, what are they doing that's so great? How are you measuring that?'

Case Study: The not-so-sheltered workshop

This is the story of a sheltered workshop.

Most but not all Australian Disability Enterprises or ADEs—the rebranded names of sheltered workshops—are charities.

Some are businesses.

Advocates became involved with one ADE that wanted to sell its business to a mainstream employer. That meant all of the employees with disability had to either move to another branch of the ADE or remain there and transition to open employment.

‘We were brought in to work with each of the employees to decide whether they wanted to stay and move to another ADE or stay at this business and move into mainstream employment,’ said Kelly, an advocate.

‘But what it meant for that [mainstream] employer was they couldn’t pay them \$3-an-hour and even less in some instances. They actually had to pay the award wage. So, they all had to be assessed. ... [Assessing the capacity of the employees] just highlighted how discriminatory that existing process was because these people were assessed on the job that they were doing and every one of them came out much higher than they were being paid. ... There were six people who were earning \$7-an-hour assessed as being able to work at 100 per cent capacity.’

Is that workplace typical of ADEs?

Kelly: ‘Yes.’

How many employees were in that workplace?

Kelly: ‘35.’

And six of the 35 were 100 per cent. What proportion were being paid less than their capacity?

Kelly: ‘Ninety-nine per cent. They were highly skilled. Some of them had forklift licences. Some of them had warehousing certificates. They were actually doing the work. One of the forklift drivers was being paid less than \$10-an-hour.’

The advocate said:

‘We need a national disability employment strategy. ... There needs to be a transition away from segregated employment. ADEs were actually supposed to be a transition for people into mainstream employment, proper employment, but that never happened. ... Once they’re in there it’s a life sentence.’

In 1985, the Hawke Government released *New Directions: Report of the Handicapped Programs Review* – a policy document committing the Commonwealth to phasing out sheltered workshops and transitioning people with disability into open employment.

Nothing happened.