


The logo for Social Ventures Australia (SVA), consisting of the lowercase letters 'sva' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font.A photograph of a young man with a beard, glasses, and a black beanie, wearing a blue and black jacket. He is looking slightly to the right. The image is overlaid with a large, stylized graphic of a blue and orange triangle. The text 'Voices on Work: Young People with Disability in Greater Melbourne' is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

Voices on Work:

Young People with Disability in Greater Melbourne

Cover image:

ID1: A photo of a person with glasses, a black beanie and a blue jacket. In the foreground there are the logos for Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA). There is a graphic of a blue and orange triangle overlaying the image. The text below reads: "Voices on Work: Young People with Disability in Greater Melbourne".

Acknowledgements

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) acknowledge and pay respect to the past and present traditional custodians and elders of this country on which we work.

We would like to acknowledge the young people with disability who contributed their insights and lived expertise to this work.

This project has been funded by the Australian Government through the Local Jobs Program, along with the Paul Ramsay Foundation and the Macquarie Group Foundation.

About Social Ventures Australia (SVA)

SVA was created to solve challenging social problems. We speed-up innovation in the social sector so more people in Australia can live their best life. As Australia's most innovative social impact organisation, we help solve challenging social problems. Putting our extensive know-how to work re-designing systems. Helping institutions think differently. Working hand in hand with our partners and communities to take real action on social change.

SVA Consulting are Australia's leading not-for-profit consulting team. Each year, we help more than 120 clients tackle their most difficult challenges and do more for the people they serve. With over 17 years' experience working across the social sector, we understand the sector like no other group of consultants. That's why we have become long-term trusted partners to so many of our clients.

About Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA)

CYDA is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability aged 0 to 25 years. CYDA has extensive national networks of young people with disability, families and caregivers of children with disability, and advocacy and community organisations.

Our vision is that children and young people with disability are valued and living empowered lives with equality of opportunity; and our purpose is to ensure governments, communities, and families, are empowering children and young people with disability to fully exercise their rights and aspirations. We do this by:

- Driving inclusion
- Creating equitable life pathways and opportunities
- Leading change in community attitudes and aspirations
- Supporting young people to take control
- Calling out discrimination, abuse, and neglect.



This report has been prepared by SVA Consulting, aside from background research (pages 6-7) prepared by CYDA.

For more information contact careerladder@socialventures.org.au

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ID2: A photo of a person who is smiling and sitting on a chair. They have short brown hair and are wearing a black shirt with a rainbow pin. There is a graphic of an orange and a blue arrow overlaying the image.



Executive summary

Young people with disability are one of the most disadvantaged cohorts in the labour market.

They experience discrimination and exclusion due to their status both as young people and as people with disability. This disadvantage may be compounded by additional factors such as ethnicity, gender or sexual identity, and socio-economic status.

Listening to the voices of these young people with disability can help employers ensure that their workplaces are set up to enable them to succeed. This report shares findings from a qualitative study of the experiences of looking for work and working from young people with disability in Greater Melbourne. Twenty young people were interviewed for the study. None had university degrees, and all had past or current experiences of paid employment.

Young people with disability often face multiple challenges before they even start to search for work. Finding work is an additional challenge. The lack of accessibility in most recruitment processes makes applying for work difficult for many, and the interview stage – if they get through – can be a minefield.

The young people with disability in this study, for the most part, did not find paid work that they found meaningful.

For young people with disability who do find paid work, it can be hard to retain. While most young people with disability in the study had not disclosed their disability during the recruitment process, many encountered situations once they started working that led them to ask for accommodations related to their disability. Some young people received positive responses to this. On the whole, however, the young people with disability in the study had negative experiences, with discriminatory and unfair work practices not being uncommon, and many workplaces being reluctant to make even small accommodations for their disability.

Employers are key to enabling young people with disability to find, retain, and thrive at work. The young people with disability in this study offered several recommendations for how employers can do this:

- **Encourage young people with disability to apply and ensure they feel safe and supported throughout recruitment.** This includes proactively signalling accessibility through offering different options for submitting applications, offering different communication options throughout the application process, explicitly mentioning workplace accessibility in the job posting, and being transparent about the details of the job. If a young person chooses to disclose their disability, proactively open a discussion on what accommodations they might need.
- **Ensure managers know what ‘good’ looks like and are supported to learn new behaviours.** Many of the helpful behaviours identified by interviewees align with leading practice for good people management. These include regular check-ins, asking for feedback and taking it on board, in addition to giving constructive feedback, being approachable, and treating people as people rather than resources. The most important characteristics are being open to difference, and having the reflex to ask when unsure, instead of making assumptions. Interviewees describe good managers as those that make them feel supported, trusted, and cared about. Management is a skill, and people in manager roles need to be trained and supported to become better managers.
- **Proactively address ignorance in the workplace culture about people with disability.** In addition to training individual managers, this includes raising awareness more broadly across the team about the diversity of disability, to start to break down misconceptions and stigma surrounding people with disability. Other recommendations include raising awareness of employers’ obligations towards employees with disability with clear guidelines on what that looks like both legally and in practice, as well as proactively consulting with people with disability, for example, through the creation of youth advisory, lived experience positions, and access and inclusion employee reference groups.



Background to the study

This study was initiated as part of a project by Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) to support employers to create good quality jobs for young people with disability who are at risk of employment exclusion. In particular, the focus is on young people with disability who do not have university degrees – as this group is most at risk of unemployment or poor quality work. The ‘Employer Innovation Lab – Young people with disability’ involves assisting employers to identify exclusionary practices within their own workplaces and to pilot practice changes that can lead to better outcomes. Funding from the Commonwealth Government will enable SVA and CYDA to deliver a Lab with 8 employers in Melbourne. This research is designed to provide these employers (and others who might seek to open up opportunities) with insights into the lived experience of young people with disability as they try to access good quality work.

Background research

There is a strong evidence base highlighting barriers to meaningful workforce participation faced by people with disability in Australia^{12,34}. While some research specifically addresses barriers facing young people with disability^{5,6} – including university students with disability⁷ – there is a gap in our understanding of the employment experiences of young people with disability from non-university backgrounds. This study seeks to address this gap, and further contributes to the growing evidence base on barriers to workforce participation for young people with disability. This approach accounts for the impacts of intersectionality, or when intersecting identities and factors (in this case, youth, disability, and education level) compound barriers into employment.

Though numbers are increasing, young people with disability are still much less likely to complete high school or to gain higher education degrees than young people without disability⁸. Among young people with disability (20-24 years old), 68 per cent have completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared to 85 per cent of young people without disability⁹. University enrolments are increasing steadily for people with disability, progressing from 5 per cent of university enrolments in 2011 to 7.7 per cent in 2019 and 11.6 per cent in 2022¹⁰. However, many young people with disability are still not gaining higher education degrees. This impacts upon their opportunities for meaningful workforce participation, with evidence showing that having a bachelor’s degree increases the chances of people with disability being employed by 34.4 per cent¹¹.

There are clear economic, social and health benefits to engaging young people with disability in the workforce, both for young people themselves and wider Australian society¹². Young people with disability are also willing and ready, with 15-19 year olds alone accounting for 20 per cent of the 253,000 potentially job ready people with disability¹³.

Despite this, young people with disability remain far more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than people without disability, as well as when compared with older Australians with disability (over 25 years old)¹⁴. This has detrimental economic effects by artificially reducing the workforce through a lack of engagement with young people with disability, as well as negative mental health effects that have been proven to disproportionately impact young people who are already marginalised^{15,16}.

There are several known barriers to young people with disability entering the workforce. These include poor transition planning, inaccessibility of education and training programs and pathways, competitive labour markets, insufficient support or opportunities to build skills and confidence, and negative employer attitudes – with other systemic issues such as social isolation, homelessness and family caring responsibilities as compounding factors^{17,18}. Young people with intellectual disability report that despite undertaking unpaid work experience and volunteer roles in the hopes of securing paid employment, they feel limited in choice and control and are often funnelled back into disability services¹⁹.

Barriers and obstacles occur at both the recruitment and retention stages of employment. During recruitment, most people with disability fear disclosing disability and/or asking for reasonable workplace adjustments due to fear of facing discrimination, which can then impact their performance capacity²⁰. Once in the workforce, young people with disability encounter harassment and discrimination, a lack of support and supervision, are less likely to be included or treated fairly, and experience less flexibility and job security compared to people without disability^{21,22}.



ID3: A photo of a person sitting on a chair with long brown hair who is wearing a pink shirt with yellow embroidery.

In addition to issues with workplace supports, employees with disability also report fewer opportunities to meaningfully contribute to their organisation or provide information and recommendations to their managers and senior leaders²³. There is also a lack of specific organisational policies, programs or initiatives supporting the employment and/or retention of people with disability. Awareness of such policies among employees and managers is low, as is confidence among employers in their ability to provide reasonable adjustments²⁴. Organisational barriers are even more pronounced in small to medium size businesses, who have been largely missing from the discussion on creating inclusive workplace cultures for people with disability²⁵.

Young people with disability themselves identify clear enablers to mitigate these workplace barriers, informed by their lived experience²⁶. These include the need for improved education and training across the board (for young people with disability, their potential employers, and employment services staff), and strengthened, connected pathways for young people with disability to gain meaningful employment²⁷.

Transition approaches such as the Ticket to Work program that apply place-based, collaborative and relationship-driven strategies offer evidence that involving and connecting young people, their families and carers, and employers in career planning and pathways can lead to more impactful outcomes²⁸.

In particular, young people with disability emphasise the importance of openness, transparency about access and inclusion, clear communication, and a growth mindset from employers during the recruitment process²⁹. In terms of workplace culture, young people with disability point to the employer’s responsibility to create an environment safe enough for disclosure of disability. Most employees with disability choose not to disclose³⁰, and if they do it is generally directly to a manager rather than during the recruitment process or to human resources staff, which speaks to the necessity of relationship building in creating a safe environment.

Building on the strength of lived expertise, this study ensures that the Employer Innovation Lab detailed in this Study will be grounded by timely insights from young people with disability from non-university backgrounds. This forms part of the capacity-building and support provided to the participating employers, which in turn has the potential to lead to long-term and impactful systemic changes within their organisations that will support increased inclusion of young people with disability in the workforce.

The young people who participated

Twenty young people aged between 18 and 25 who are living in Greater Melbourne were interviewed for this study. None had university degrees, and all had past or current experiences of paid employment. There was representation from a range of visible and invisible disabilities, including sensory, physical, intellectual, psychosocial, and neurodivergent disability, with several participants disclosing more than one 'type' of disability. Participants included LGBTQIA+ people and people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Our approach to the study

Twenty one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted between July and September 2024 by two different interviewers. Most interviews were conducted online, via video call or audio call, with a small number conducted via telephone and in person. All participants provided written and/or verbal consent for the interview, confirming their understanding of the purpose of the study, how their data would be used, and confidentiality.

The aim of this research was to give voice to the lived experiences of young people with disability. The interview was designed to encourage young people with disability to share their experiences of finding work and working, and their suggestions for what employers could do to help young people with disability to find meaningful work. The interview guide was structured around three main themes: transitioning from school into work, finding work, and their experiences of work and work culture.

We have done our best to preserve the integrity of what was voiced in the conversations, while synthesising and rewording some perspectives in the interests of flow and clarity, as well as to respect the anonymity of participants. We recognise the diversity of opinions and experiences across young people with disability and do not intend for individual perspectives to be interpreted as being universally accepted across this cohort.

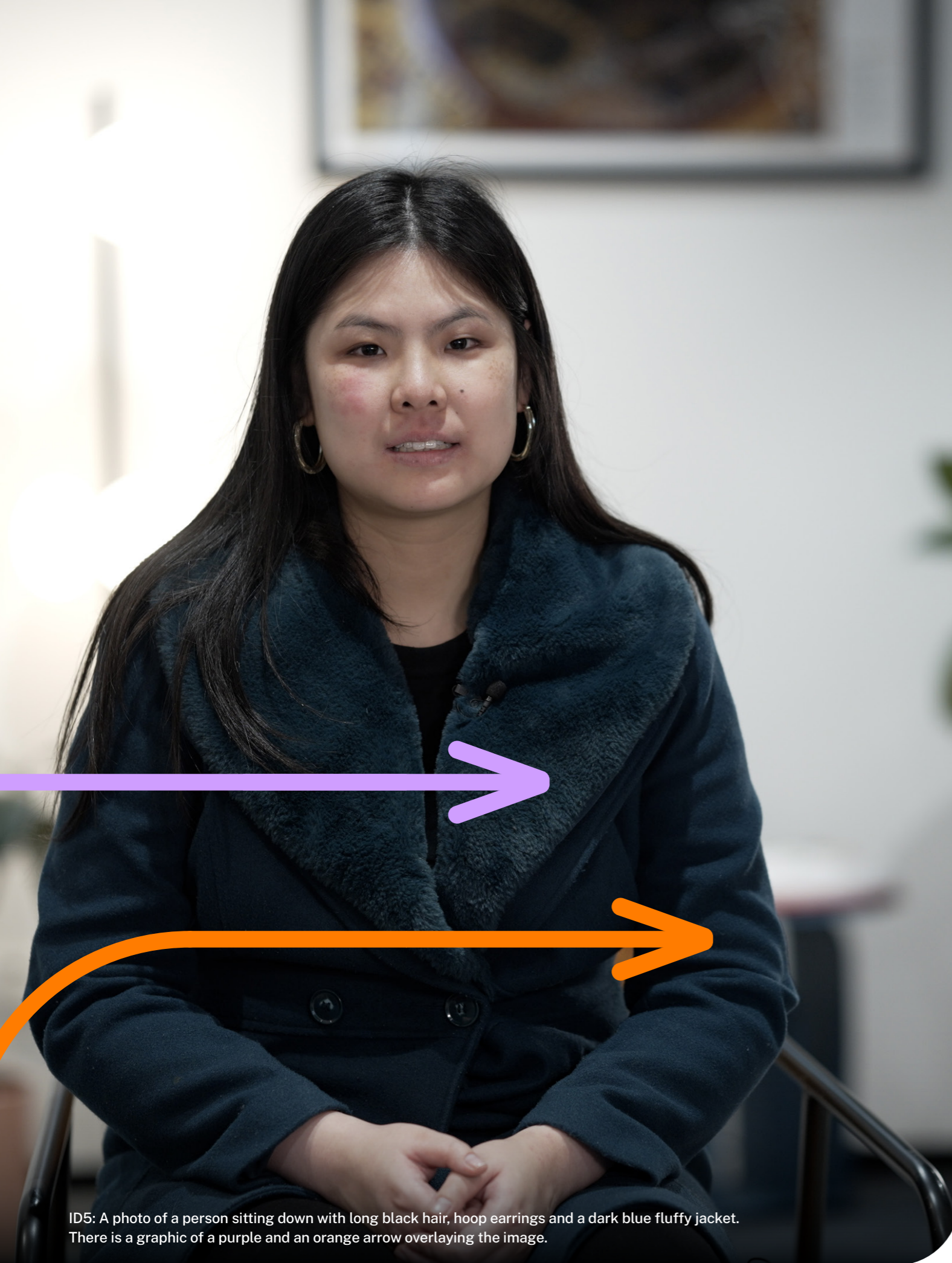
Strengths and limitations

The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided an opportunity to collect rich, qualitative data from each of the young people with disability. They offered enough flexibility for the interviewer to tailor the conversation to the young person's specific context, to open up a space for them to feel comfortable to share sensitive experiences, and to affirm sources of strength where needed.

The small sample means the findings cannot be generalised to reflect the experiences of all young people with disability in Greater Melbourne without university-level education, however, the experiences shared closely reflect historic and recent research and what CYDA regularly hears from their community. Recruitment of interviewees through organisations including employment services providers means that the group was more likely to include those who had faced challenges in finding and sustaining meaningful employment.



ID4: A photo of a person with glasses, a black beanie and a blue jacket who is sitting down behind a table.



ID5: A photo of a person sitting down with long black hair, hoop earrings and a dark blue fluffy jacket. There is a graphic of a purple and an orange arrow overlaying the image.



Challenges in finding work

Young people with disability often face multiple challenges before they even start to search for work. Finding work is an additional challenge. The lack of accessibility in most recruitment processes makes applying for work difficult for many, and the interview stage – if they get through – can be a minefield. The young people with disability in this study, for the most part, did not find paid work that they found meaningful.

Young people with disability are often already grappling with multiple challenges

Transitioning from school to work can be difficult for many young people with disability, as it can be for young people without disability.

During the end of school, it just felt very overwhelming. It felt like everyone was getting pushed to either go to uni or TAFE. This just wasn't working for me. Because I couldn't choose or really understand what I would even want to do.

It hit me when I was 18 – I was on my own, needed to work to provide for myself to survive in this world. Made me realise just how important having money is.

This can be compounded by intersectional factors such as ethnicity, gender or sexual identity, or socio-economic status.

It was a difficult experience. I didn't have much family support because of my LGBTQIA+ identity, I wasn't talking to my family. . . I needed to make ends meet, the hospitality sector wasn't accessible, but I continued to push myself, and made my baseline worse for my chronic illness.

When the onset or diagnosis of disability occurs during adolescence, a young person may have already experienced discrimination or exclusion prior to leaving school. They face this alongside adjusting not only to their new and evolving physical reality, but also to different aspirations for their future.

School itself was complicated . . . I was in and out of hospital because of my disability. They told me I missed too much so I couldn't sit VCE exams. That made it tricky for what to do next. Before I got chronically ill, I thought I would be a lawyer or doctor . . . Not completing high school, not going to uni, was the worst-case scenario for me. I felt rejected and excluded by institutions.

Young people with disability may also experience invalidation from healthcare professionals, especially in the case of hidden or invisible disability such as chronic illness, a mental health condition, or neurodivergence.

I have a lot of nerve pain, a lot of fatigue, the brain fog has gotten worse. I'm confused most of the time, nothing's clear, I can't make decisions, there's a lot I can't do. When I try to put that into words, people don't believe me. . . Before, when I was younger, I didn't know what was wrong with me. Even now that I do have the diagnosis, I'm still being invalidated by health professionals.

Many of the young people with disability in the study were undertaking or had completed vocational training after leaving school. For some of them, their first experience of work was via an unpaid vocational placement, where they had their first professional experience of discrimination.

I was doing a mental health support placement in a school. They knew I had a disability. . . I didn't get the same opportunities as another student. They told me that I can't work with a student who is high risk because I have a disability. It's interesting – a person with disability working alongside people with disability, and I got ignored. I would have thought they would be more open.

The recruitment process can feel like an obstacle course

Some of the young people with disability in this study have benefitted from support around them in finding a job.

I'm lucky that I have family who can help me with my resume, contract, and so on. But where do you go if you don't have those people around you?

I wish I could still go to the flexible learning school. I knew there were people there that actually cared about me, wanted to see me do well . . . They helped me so much with life as well, getting on Centrelink, getting my first job.

I had help from a career advisor at TAFE to do my resume, just sat there and did it with me. Pity I've never found anyone as good as her since.

My support worker from Vision Australia goes through jobs together with me every two weeks and asks me if I'm interested. She sometimes sees things that I don't see online. It's helpful.

Others, however, have felt disheartened by services that they had expected to help them.

I've looked at Disability Employment Services before. They just tick a box. Not tailored to my needs. Not sitting down to accompany me. They say I'll get you a job in retail. But that's not my qualification.

Sometimes I apply for work using the Workforce Australia app. In the application process right at the very front, there will often be questions like: What are your availabilities? How late can you work? Can you drive? I understand that that's necessary for an employer to ask, but if you can't drive and that completely bars you from working at a place that you might really want to work at, it's tragic. . . You're speaking to a machine, and if the machine deems you unnecessary, then you'll never get in, no matter how hard you try, and no matter how good your resume is.

Many of the young people in the study expressed their frustration at the lack of accessibility of the recruitment processes they had encountered. What accessibility looks like can be very different across the diversity of disability, and they highlighted the need for options to meet different access needs.

I know that phone calls are generally preferred in the workplace. But with my hearing difficulties, this is my biggest weakness—the audio can be unclear, and I can't see faces. This has been my pet peeve. They need to give different options, say, to be contacted by phone, SMS, or email. I will always pick the last two.

Applying has not been as accessible as what I wanted, there have been technical things to navigate. Some applications took a really long time . . . I've seen some employers being open to receiving CVs and responses

to interview questions in different ways, like video recordings. I prefer to express myself verbally, rather than in writing.

Once they get through to the interview stage, some of the young people with disability in the study, especially those with invisible disability, have generally chosen not to disclose their accessibility needs due to their experiences of being discriminated against or treated differently when doing so.

Even now that I have the diagnosis, I still don't feel comfortable disclosing, as that just gives them another reason to not give me the job. I feel like there's a lot of ignorance. They just wouldn't give me the job.

Some places will require me to work 38 hours a week . . . I've got a certificate that says I can't do more than 25 hours. I think some places are not as forgiving of mental health, and don't understand how it's not like a physical disability, but it really does hinder your life a lot. . . I don't show this certificate because I know I won't get the job.

I don't disclose, because I feel like people hear about that and think straight away that I'm flaky or not reliable. I can't share without being judged.

Several of those who have disclosed their disability in interviews have received negative responses, leading them to decide not to disclose in the future.

They don't know how to respond to it. There's an awkward silence, then they move on to the next question. . . It makes me feel sad and frustrated. They're not wanting to find accommodations. It's in the 'too hard' box.

I've preferred to be upfront. . . I'm always reassuring around limitations, on what the impact will be. But being a young person and naïve has backfired on me. They see my openness as excuses, they're misinformed about my condition, they don't believe me. Now I don't blurt, I only disclose when necessary.



ID6: A photo of a person sitting behind a table wearing a light pink shirt which reads 'Don't Stress' with an image of a black cat wearing pink sunglasses. Their curly hair is tied up and they are wearing sunglasses on top of their head.

Finding meaningful paid work in the mainstream sector is a struggle

The young people with disability in this study, like many other young people, want to work at a place where they can, at a minimum, earn enough money to pay the bills, and where they can experience a sense of belonging, opportunities for growth, and encouragement. Many of them are also seeking a career dedicated to service, using their lived experience so that others don't have to go through the same difficulties that they have.

I have the mindset that if I'm an x amount of burden on the healthcare system and my loved ones, then I need to offset that by helping other people. . . Maybe if I help others to not have to go through what I've gone through, to not feel as alone, it would be enough for me. Giving back to community and outweighing the costs.

There are a lot of passionate people in this kind of lived experience work who want to be the adults they needed when they were kids. It's a good motivating force.

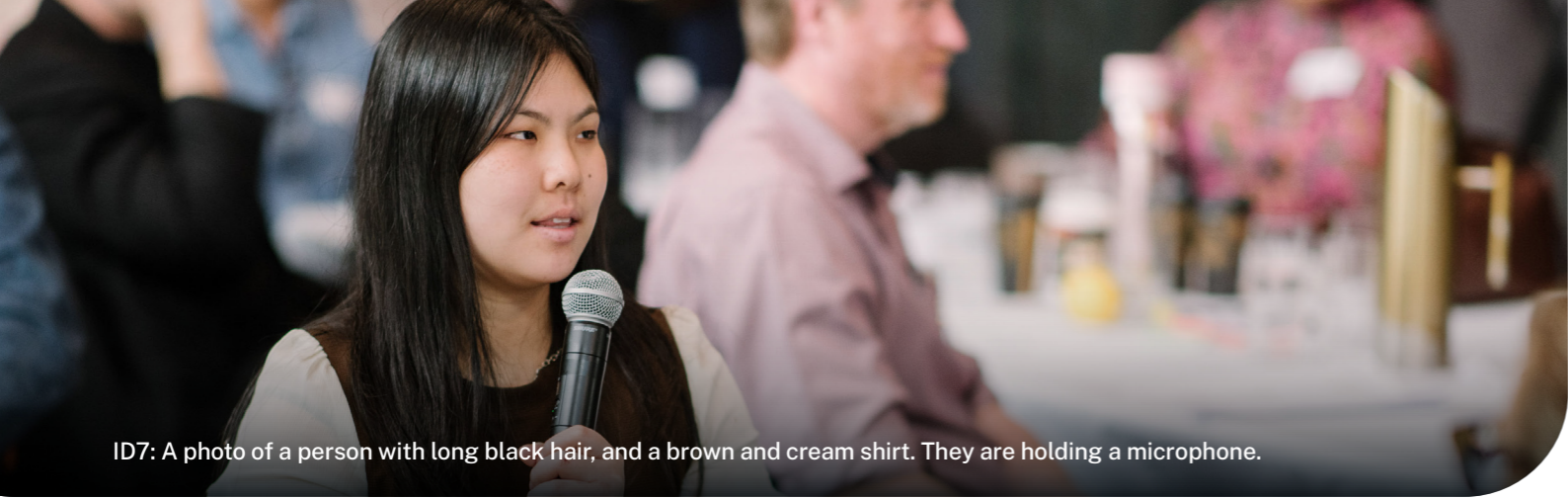
Without any barriers, I would love to be a police officer or something similar. I haven't had the easiest life—it wasn't rough, but it wasn't a good childhood. I've always looked up at those kinds of people, thinking how good it would be to have someone like that in my life. Being that person I never had.

Supporting people with intellectual disability and helping them and their families advocate for themselves has helped me accept what's happened to me.

While a small number of young people with disability in the study have had jobs as part of the mainstream and open employment workforce that they considered 'good' experiences, most of the positive work experiences have been found either in the disability advocacy sector where their disabilities and access needs are understood and taken seriously and they are able to use their lived experience, or as a freelancer where they have full autonomy over their working conditions. The majority of the work experiences reported by the young people with disability were in the hospitality and retail sectors, with almost all being short-term casual positions. Several expressed that these were not jobs that they enjoyed, and for some these jobs were ill-suited to their disability and access needs even with reasonable adjustments, but they stayed in them because they were the only jobs that they could find.

It's quite difficult, I applied for a lot of places. Places that are available and get back to me are places like hospitality and retail jobs. I know I shouldn't work there for my health. But I need to make money to live. It's hard to find suitable work.

I've not had the most positive experiences with management in my retail job. I don't feel safe to disclose my disability there—I feel that it would be used against me. I'm only staying in it because it pays.



ID7: A photo of a person with long black hair, and a brown and cream shirt. They are holding a microphone.



Challenges in retaining work

For young people with disability who do find paid work, it can be hard to retain. While most young people with disability in the study had not disclosed their disability during the recruitment process, many encountered situations once they started working that required them to ask for accommodations and workplace adjustments related to their disability. Some young people with disability received positive responses to this. On the whole, however, the young people with disability in the study had negative experiences, with discriminatory and unfair work practices not being uncommon, and many workplaces being reluctant to make even small accommodations for their disability.

Disclosing disability can be a double-edged sword

Once in the workplace, young people with disability can sometimes encounter difficulties that lead them to disclose their disability. In the best cases, this can help to increase understanding of their response to a situation, or their inability to perform a task.

At [the fast-food chain], they regularly hire young people so they understand that there are going to be problems. Halfway through my time there, I got diagnosed. I told them about it, saying that sometimes the stress gets too hard to handle or I can't focus on Tuesdays when the shifts get really busy. I asked not to work on Tuesdays, and they stopped giving me Tuesdays. When I was overstimulated working out front or at the drive-through, they would swap me with someone else for an hour, then I would tell them when I was ok and we would swap back. Most of the time it worked.

When I brought it up, my manager [at a supermarket chain] was understanding, interested in figuring out how to cater for my needs, even came up with some suggestions of her own. Her attitude was: what do we need to do as a company to accommodate you.

However, many of the young people with disability in the study encountered a lack of understanding, or being excluded from development opportunities, once they disclosed their disability.

Yes I have a hearing disability but that shouldn't stop me from working with other people in customer service. I'd been working regularly there, they could have given me an opportunity to try it out, just for a few days, and see if I could do it well. I was

disappointed. I wanted to try that out, as that may have set me up well for future jobs. I did ask, but they said I wouldn't be able to do it.

I'd experienced so much bullshit around my gender in the hospitality space. But disability was a whole new can of worms. I would have to deal with my manager getting angry at me when I called in sick.

I gave copies of my diagnosis to the managers . . . they just stopped giving me shifts [at a supermarket chain]. I went from getting a lot of praise from managers – I'd often picked up other people's shifts because I was good at what I did and had a good work ethic – to a situation where it started being hard to go into work. I would go in and just get stared at and spoken about for 8 hours straight. There were rumours about why I was calling in sick. That stress made my illness worse, it impacted my body. I ended up quitting.

In addition, young people with disability can sometimes censor themselves from asking for accommodations due to the fear or internal doubt that they might be seen as asking too much or be treated differently.

As a person with disability, you can feel like you ask for too much sometimes, feel like if you're asking for accessibility needs, you can have a general fear of taking up too much space, even though you're someone trying to add value. You can have all these stigmatising thoughts: if I keep asking for more, the perception of me will change, people will treat me differently.

Discriminatory or unfair work practices are not uncommon

Beyond a lack of understanding, several of the young people with disability also reported experiencing discriminatory or unfair work practices related to their disability.

One disability agency I applied to said that I needed a GP to give me a fit-for-work certificate before I started, because they didn't accept my health declaration on its own. I went to my GP and asked for it. It was my GP who told me that it's illegal, that he could provide it for me, but that I might want to consider whether I want to work for this organisation...

They extended my probation period. I'd taken sick leave due to my illness but not more than what I'd accrued. I hadn't taken any unpaid leave. I found this unfair, as in every other way they were saying that I was great.

My manager texted me and asked me to come in in the morning for a meeting, on the day I was meant to be on night shift. I was asking for some context and she asked me to come in full uniform, bring my lunch and dinner and everything. I went into the meeting, and she fired me on the spot. I felt embarrassed and

belittled, having to go back into the staff room, visibly upset. Supposedly I failed my probation, but the only reason could have been due to attendance... it didn't feel right. I'd needed some days off, I'd had some stuff going on, I'd needed to stay home to help look after my mum. They told me I needed to put work life before social life – I didn't even have a social life.

Some expressed the wish that they had had better knowledge about their rights at the time - what was allowed and not allowed, so that they could have better advocated for themselves in those situations.

I now know that they can't legally ask me to disclose my disability. I didn't have the awareness back then about how much I needed to share. I wouldn't have let them push me around if I had known. We need better information about what they can ask, what they can't ask, what to disclose, what not to disclose.

Workplaces can be reluctant to make even small accommodations

While the interviewees understandably focused in their comments on the relationship with their manager, managers are strongly influenced by their workplace culture and policies, and it is likely that their actions – or lack of actions – reflect the broader workplace context.

For a young person with disability, the relationship with their direct supervisor is especially critical. This is the person they will need to approach to request an accommodation or workplace adjustment for their disability. Several of the young people with disability in the study expressed bewilderment at how their managers seemed unwilling to make even small accommodations for their disability.

When I told my manager about my diagnosis, they didn't believe me. All I needed was a stool behind the bar to rest when I didn't need to be on my feet. They said they can't have me sitting down and looking lazy.

I had really bad sensory issues in the deli section with how cold it was. The way my body handled the stress was to instantly shut off, and this slowed production down. I couldn't focus on what I was doing. I explained this to my manager and asked if I could work somewhere else instead. They said no, go back to work, it's your problem. Not even "we can talk about this after". And because I was casual, they just stopped giving me shifts.

There was a hospitality job where we had to write on small notepads with skinny pens. So I brought my own pen grips and bigger notepads, as it made moving and writing so much easier for me. But my manager didn't like it because it looked weird, and he made me go back to using what everyone else was using. He didn't want to explore options on how to work in a way that will be less harmful for my body even if it's different from everyone else.



ID8: A photo of a person with long brown hair and glasses who is talking to another person in the foreground. They are wearing a green knitted cardigan.



What employers can do

Employers are key to enabling young people with disability to find, retain, and flourish at work. The young people in this study offered several recommendations for how employers can do this in the recruitment process and in the workplace. Note that many of their recommendations focused more on general attitudes and behaviour from their managers, including the willingness to understand what accommodations might be needed. Specific recommendations on addressing workplace accommodations can be found in the resources mentioned in the Appendix.

Encourage young people with disability to apply and ensure they feel safe and supported throughout recruitment

The young people with disability in the study had clear ideas about what attracts them to apply for jobs. Things that were rated highly by many of the young people with disability include: proactively signalling accessibility through offering different options for submitting applications, offering different communication options throughout the application process, explicitly mentioning workplace accessibility in the job position, and being transparent about the details of the job. Several said that they understand that not all jobs or workplaces would be suitable for them due to their specific disability, and that knowing what accommodations are or aren't possible upfront saves time not only for them but also for the employer.

You need to give people different ways of applying. Some people don't know they can request different ways of applying – you need to offer it.

Knowing about what you can ask for is important. A lot of people are desperate for jobs, want to succeed, want to seem agreeable, so won't question anything.

I want them to be open and transparent about payment, and about what the role involves. If the job description is super broad, it's unclear if they might expect me to do more than my body can handle. I'm also looking for the option to work from home, given my disability.

The more transparent an employer is, the more an applicant will feel safe to open up a conversation about what accommodations they might need. But the young people with disability also emphasised appreciating when it's the employer who proactively starts the discussion.

You need to be transparent on if there's room for disclosure. For example, mentioning that you have colleagues with disability. Most of the time, it's just about being transparent.

If someone discloses their disability in the interview process, if it's mentioned on job forms around medical history, don't be afraid to ask more questions. Obviously not invasive questions, but related to the work and the accommodations that you can make. 9 times out of 10, the person with disability has thought about the accommodations they need. They wouldn't be applying for the job if they didn't think it were feasible. Because I can do things. Obviously I can't do certain things. But I can do many things. I just might need another way to go about it. You shouldn't just assume people can't do it because we have a certain disability.

The good responses have been when they've said: what can we do. When they've really asked: what can we do to accommodate you, what kind of needs do you have that would be important in the workplace.

Ensure managers know what 'good' looks like and are supported to learn new behaviours

The young people with disability in the study who were thriving at work cited excellent relationships with their direct managers. Many of the behaviours they described align with leading practice for good people management. These include regular check-ins, asking for feedback – and taking it on board – in addition to giving constructive feedback, being approachable, and treating people as people rather than resources. The manager characteristics that were identified as being most important to the young people were being open to difference, and having the reflex to ask when they were unsure, instead of making assumptions.

Being able to manage people is a skill. You need empathy, compassion, being able to put yourself in other people's shoes, to understand that everyone is different.

Take the time to get to know your staff and give them a chance, especially if they are a good worker. Everyone goes through stuff, everyone handles stuff differently. You never know what someone is going through as soon as they leave the workplace. Be more considerate.

I want someone who understands, who doesn't put me down for stuff I can't control, but also doesn't go out of their way to make things easier for me. I want someone who can listen to what I'm saying and try to accommodate for me, but not make assumptions and go out of their way – this can make me feel worse sometimes. A lot of the time when they try to help, they need to actually first ask would this help, instead of just going ahead and doing it.

While the actions of good managers may be different, depending on circumstances, the young people with disability in the study know what it feels like to have a good manager. It feels like being supported, trusted, and cared about.

My manager is aware that people with autism have trouble processing info. He'll show me how to do something more than once, sometimes 3-4 times if I need it. He's very patient and consistent – I'm not being yelled at. He explains things in a way that makes sense. If I don't understand, he'll try to explain a different way. I don't understand jokes and sarcasm, so he doesn't make jokes with me. When other colleagues don't get it, he'll tell them it's about my disability, not just a preference.

I knew my manager didn't understand my mental health issues, he hadn't really been through something like that, but he tried his best to understand where I was coming from. When I needed days off, or something happened and I got really upset, he wouldn't press me with a million questions, he would say just take some time, go outside, go take a walk. He cared for me as a person.

If we have a meeting, my boss will text me if I'm not in the meeting straightaway, just to remind me in case I've forgotten, or gotten distracted with something. He understands my ADHD, and I know I'm not going to get yelled at because I'm late, and that makes me want to really try my best.

My current manager is awesome – despite the fact that she's older, more experienced, and in a higher position than me, she tries to redistribute power in our power dynamic. She's open to hearing her mistakes, she's humble, she's taken on critiques. She directly asks me what I need to make things more accessible for me with my chronic illness.

They also recognise that people in manager roles need to be trained and supported to become better managers.

You need to help managers learn about how to be disability inclusive. If you haven't given them any training or information on how to better support people with disability in the workplace, it can be hard. You need to help empower them, help them understand, make sure they're up to date.

Proactively address ignorance in the workplace culture about people with disability

Along with training individual managers, many of the young people with disability in the study also highlighted the need to proactively address ignorance about people with disability more broadly in workplace cultures, connecting it with themes of diversity, inclusion, and psychological and cultural safety.

One place to start is to raise awareness about the diversity of disability, to start to break down misconceptions and stigma surrounding people with disability.

We need to change attitudes and perceptions especially around intellectual disability. There are different levels of intellectual disability. You need to look at it case by case, based on how someone works. For example, I can work in a normal workplace with a little bit of support. 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.

We have to get rid of the stigma that comes along with disability, the idea that a lot of people have that when you tell them you have disability they kind of baby you, or do the opposite. Come on. Especially with invisible disability, the disbelief you get. Even with medical staff.

People need to understand that a lot of the tasks they can do, for people like me it can be harder to do that same task. It might take me a lot more energy to focus on that one task, it can make me work slower or faster depending on what it is. They need to understand that we tend to process things differently. Everyone is their own person and has their own issues outside of work. People just need to understand that and be considerate.

I need recognised mental health days and for people to not see that as an excuse. Training is required especially for people who might be older or from different backgrounds, who are less versed in mental health, or where there is cultural stigma associated with it.

When I'm inside a workplace, I don't expect to get along with people all the time. But I believe there should be ground rules like respect and how we treat each other, and those should be enforced.

Other ideas suggested by young people with disability in the study included raising awareness of employers' legal obligations towards employees with disability with clear guidelines on what that looks like in practice, as well as proactively consulting with people with disability in their workplace. Examples of the latter include the creation of youth advisory or lived experience positions, or access and inclusion employee reference groups.

The bare minimum is having awareness of the discrimination act, of your legal obligations as an employer, of the reasonable adjustments that disabled people can expect of employers. There is a gap between the legal obligations and what employers will actually do. Knowing that employers are aware of their obligations and are willing to put the 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.

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.

Create youth advisory positions or lived experience positions – it makes the organisation better and it also upskills people with disability. People with disability can get their foot in the door, then they can start making steps towards their career goals and really contribute to the sectors they want to be in. Organisations can benefit from it as well – they can sometimes get locked into these echo chambers of discussions. You need to bring fresh voices into the workplace. Youth advisors with lived experience do that. There is so much to learn from people with disability.



ID9: A photo of a person in a black shirt and skirt is sitting down and holding a microphone. They are wearing glasses and have long black hair with pink streaks in it. There is a graphic of an orange and a purple arrow overlaying the image.

Appendix: Employer resources from CYDA's DREAM Employment Network

CYDA'S DREAM (Disability Representation Employment & Accessibility Mission) Employment Network bridges the gap between young people with disability who want to work, and forward-thinking employers who recognise that diversity fosters creativity, innovation, and success. The aim of the Network is to build leadership skills, inclusive employment pathways, and opportunities for leadership positions for young people with disability.

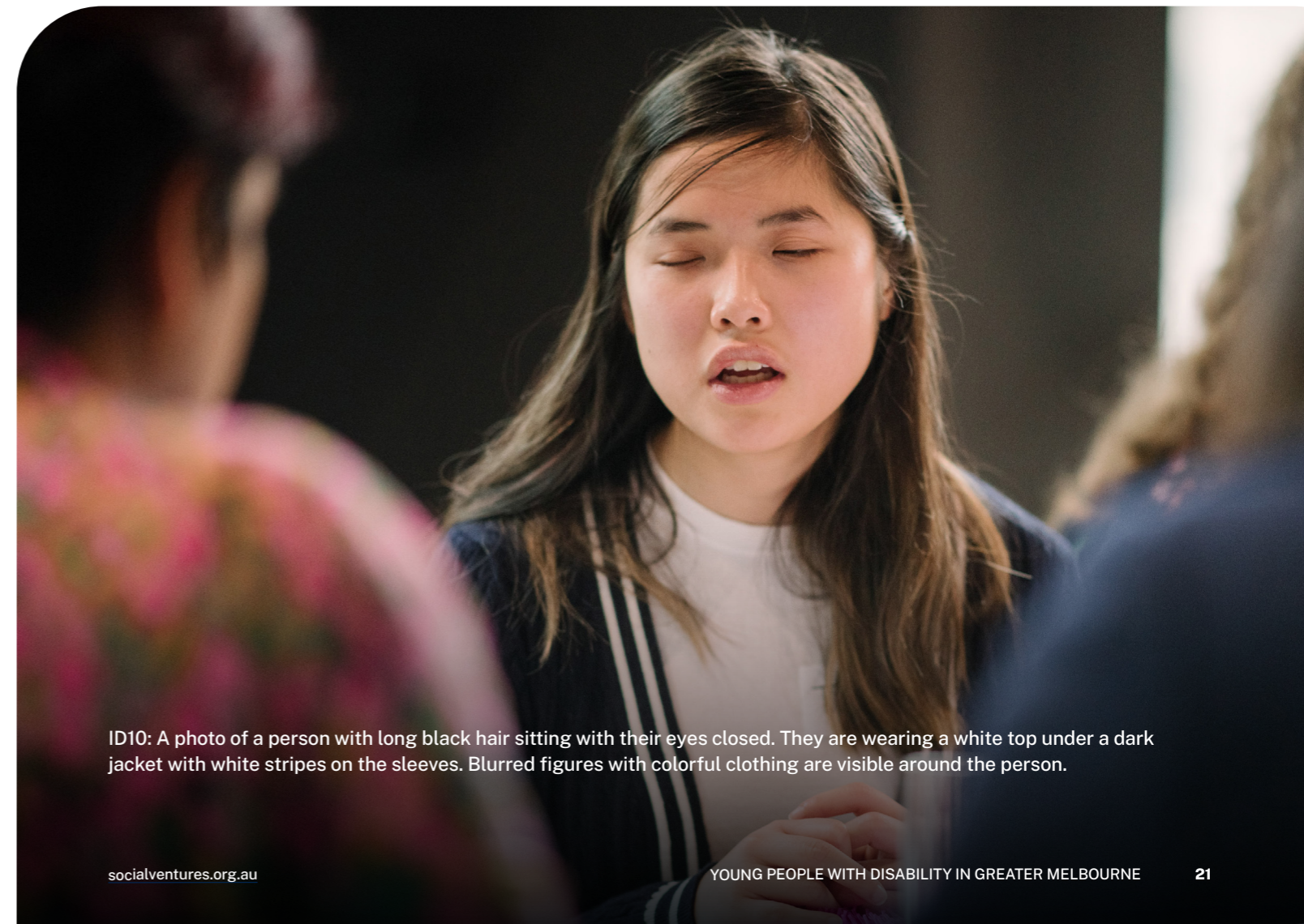
The Network aligns with the broader Australian Disability Strategy and was made possible by funding from the Disability Youth Leadership Grant.

CYDA has developed several co-designed resources with employers and young people with disability that you may find helpful in making your workplace more inclusive and attractive for young people with disability.

You can access the resources for employers here on CYDA's website.

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- ² Children and Young People with Disability Australia (2023). "[Submission to the consultation on the draft Quality Framework for the Disability Employment Services Program](#)", accessed 22 October 2024.
- ³ A Buckland, M Dockery, A Duncan, V Sanchez Arenas, P Sotirakopoulos, C Twomey, and L Loan Vu (2024). "[Employment and disability in Australia: Improving employment outcomes for people with disability](#)". *Focus on the States Report Series No. 10/24*, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, accessed 22 October 2024.
- ⁴ A Meltzer, S Robinson, and K.R. Fisher (2020). "Barriers to finding and maintaining open employment for people with intellectual disability in Australia" *Social Policy & Administration*, 54(1), 88-101, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12523>, accessed 23 October 2024.
- ⁵ L Stafford, G Marston, S Mitchell, A Beatson, and M Chamorro-Koc (2020). "[Insights into young people with disabilities' education to work journeys](#)", *Submission to Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability on Employment Issues*, accessed 23 October 2024.
- ⁶ D Rooney and K Young (2023). "[Whack-a-Mole?: Ecologies of young adults with intellectual disabilities as they transition from school to open employment](#)". *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 63(1), 9-29, accessed 23 October 2024.
- ⁷ D Eckstein (2022). "[Meaningful jobs for students with disability: From luck to business as usual](#)". *Equity Fellowship Report*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, accessed 23 October 2024.
- ⁸ National Disability Data Asset (2021). "[Summary of NDDA pilot findings -South Australian test case: Education to employment](#)", *Quantitative and Qualitative Reports*, accessed 29 October 2024.
- ⁹ Australian Human Rights Commission (2021). [IncludeAbility, Factsheet: Disability and employment in Australia](#), accessed 9 October 2024.
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- ¹¹ Buckland et al, "Employment and disability in Australia".
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- ¹³ Whetton et al, "Disability employment landscape research report".
- ¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024). [People with disability in Australia 2024](#), Australian Government, accessed 9 October 2024.
- ¹⁵ M Shields, M.J. Spittal, Z. Aitken, S. Dimov, A. Kavanagh, and T.L. King (2023). "Does employment status mediate the association between disability status and mental health among young adults? Evidence from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey." *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 80(9), <https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2023-108853>, accessed 23 October 2024.
- ¹⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024), [Suicide & self-harm monitoring data](#), Australian Government, accessed 9 October 2024.
- ¹⁷ K De Rose, A Devine, B White, R Jones, S Cassar, B McElroy, A McLennan, S Dimov, A Kavanagh, and C Vaughan (2023). "[I think all disabled people should have a job, regardless. It needs to happen because we are still people': Labour market experiences of young people with intellectual and/or psychosocial disabilities prior and during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)". *Youth Employment Study: Qualitative research report*, *The University of Melbourne*, accessed 9 October 2024.

- ¹⁸ Children and Young People with Disability Australia (2020) [National youth disability summit-What young people with disability said - Employment position paper](#), accessed 9 October 2024.
- ¹⁹ L.L. Mogensen, G. Drake, J McDonald, N Sharp (2023) "Young people with intellectual disability speak out about life after school: 'I want to do more in life than just...be a disability person'" *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, 49(2), 121-133. <https://doi.org/10.3109/13668250.2023.2245276>, accessed 23 October 2024.
- ²⁰ Australian Disability Network, *Getting workplace adjustments out of the "too hard basket"*.
- ²¹ Office of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (2020). [Voices of children and young people with disability report](#), accessed 23 October 2024.
- ²² Diversity Council Australia and Australian Disability Network (2024) [Inclusion@Work Index: Disability data at work -How organisations can capture disability data safely and respectfully](#), accessed 9 October 2024.
- ²³ Diversity Council of Australia and Australian Disability Network, *Inclusion@Work Index*.
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- ²⁷ C Polglaze, E Ganon (2022), [LivedX 2022: Policy paper -Financial security and employment](#), Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2022, accessed October 9 2024.
- ²⁸ J Crosbie, E Wilson, H Davis and R Campaign (2024). "[School to work transition for young people with disability, the current ecosystem, and the Ticket to Work approach](#)", *Research Report*, Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University, accessed 23 October 2024.
- ²⁹ Children and Young People with Disability Australia (2024) [DREAM Employment Network](#), accessed 23 October 2024. See Appendix for further details.
- ³⁰ De Rose et al, "I think all disabled people should have a job"; Diversity Council of Australia and Australian Disability Network, *Inclusion@Work Index*.



ID10: A photo of a person with long black hair sitting with their eyes closed. They are wearing a white top under a dark jacket with white stripes on the sleeves. Blurred figures with colorful clothing are visible around the person.



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