



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Improving Disability Employment Study (IDES)

End of Study
Report



Contents

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Thank you first and foremost to all of the participants who offered their time and shared their experiences with us. Thank you also to our industry partners on this project including disability advocacy groups and disability employment peak bodies. Finally, thank you to the Disability Employment Service (DES) providers who assisted us with recruitment.

Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ARC	Australian Research Council
CATI	Computer Assisted Telephone Interview
DES	Disability Employment Service
DSP	Disability Support Pension
HILDA	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia
IDES	Improving Disability Employment Study
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme

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Executive Summary



This report documents key findings from the Improving Disability Employment Study (IDES). Funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage grant (LP150100077), the IDES project aimed to progress evidence on factors that promote sustainable and meaningful employment outcomes for people with disability who are participants in Disability Employment Services (DES).

The IDES project was undertaken by researchers from the University of Melbourne, UNSW and Deakin University, in partnership with disability advocacy groups, disability employment peak bodies, and 10 DES providers in five Australian states (QLD, NSW, VIC, TAS and WA).

The project involved a two-wave survey (12-months apart) between April 2018 and January 2020 with jobseekers engaged with the Australian government-funded DES program. Respondents were asked about disability, health and wellbeing, socio-economic conditions, and engagement with employment services and work. A total of 369 respondents completed Wave 1 of the IDES survey, with 197 also completing Wave 2. The results from the Wave 1 report have been published previously.

In this report we present key findings and make recommendations for policy and future research.

Key findings

Employment outcomes

The proportion of respondents in paid work increased from 26% in Wave 1 to 39% at Wave 2. Almost half (49%) of respondents were unemployed at both Waves. Twenty percent of respondents who were not in paid work in Wave 1, were employed at Wave 2. Levels of underemployment were high with 40% of respondents in paid work in Wave 2 reporting they wanted more work.

Ways of finding work

Responding to a job advert was the most frequently reported way of finding paid work, followed by assisted or referred through a DES provider.

Who was in work?

Males, younger people, Australian-born and DES participants who had completed Year 12 were more likely to be employed at Wave 2. Respondents who specified financial reasons as important for finding and maintaining paid work in Wave 1 had higher levels of employment at Wave 2. Employment outcomes were similar between voluntary DES participants and those compulsorily engaged through income support obligations.

Factors influencing capacity to find and maintain work

Having a disability impacted on capacity to find a suitable job, the type of job and the number of hours a participant could work. Unsurprisingly, participants who reported these difficulties were less likely to be in paid work.

At Wave 1 we asked participants about barriers to work including vocational barriers such as qualifications, non-vocational barriers such as access to transport and structural barriers related to lack of jobs. We looked at whether these barriers were associated with whether someone was in paid work at Wave 2. Participants who reported vocational barriers including not having required qualifications, experience or skills, as well as lack of confidence were less likely to be in paid work at Wave 2. Non-vocational barriers that were associated with employment status included disability as a barrier to work and lack of transport. Lack of jobs was more commonly cited as a barrier to paid work for those who were unemployed at Wave 2.

Discrimination on the basis of disability was commonly reported when looking for a job, applying for work, and at job interviews with these experiences being more frequently reported among those who were not in employment at Wave 2.

Participant experiences of the DES program

Respondents reported on a range of supports that they wanted from DES providers. Key areas of supports identified included suggestions about suitable work, support once in a job, support to feel confident in their capacity to work, and help to apply for jobs. Wave 2 respondents who reported that they had good or very good support from their DES were more likely to be employed.

Mental health benefits of paid work

At both Waves, respondents who were in paid work reported better mental health and personal wellbeing than respondents who were not employed. Mental health and wellbeing scores also improved between Wave 1 and Wave 2 for the group of respondents who were employed compared to those that were not in paid work.

Strengths and limitations

This is the first longitudinal study that we know of that has investigated the experiences of DES participants. That said, the study has a number of limitations. Due to privacy issues, we did not have access to DES participant contact details. Direct recruitment of DES participants through DES job consultants was not successful. We had better success when services emailed participants with survey details however the sample size is still relatively small. We had a modest retention rate. This means that our findings should be interpreted as provisional. The relatively small sample size limited the analyses we could do in terms of identifying which cohorts of participants fared better in the DES program.

Policy considerations

On the basis of these findings, we make a number of recommendations for policy that relate to DES services as well as broader structural reforms.

1. DES should focus on providing individualised supports to build the capacity of DES participants for paid work through improving access to skills and qualifications, supporting positive mental health and wellbeing and improving confidence in their capacity to work
2. DES have an important ongoing role in supporting people with disability once they are in paid work to maintain work
3. Non-vocational barriers to finding and maintaining work such as having a disability or health condition need to be addressed through improved inclusion within recruitment practices and reasonable adjustments within the workplace such as enabling flexible working conditions
4. Whole-of-government approaches to addressing widespread discrimination experienced by people with disability must occur alongside DES reforms
5. DES have an important role to play in contributing to whole-of-government approaches to generating jobs that are suitable for DES participants and in matching participants to those jobs and supporting them and employers in being successful.

Recommendations for future research and evaluation

IDES has demonstrated the importance of seeking the perspectives of DES participants, however, considerably more investment is needed so that future policies are informed by the experiences of people with disability. Given the enormous investments in employment services and the obvious benefits of employment for people with disability and broader society there is an urgent need to improve the evidence base. In terms of future research and evaluation, we recommend:

1. Establishment of a larger cohort study of people with disability using employment services including NDIS supports, DES services and other employment programs (e.g., *jobactive*/Workforce Australia) to identify what supports are most successful and test innovative approaches
2. Qualitative studies to investigate key issues with different participant groups
3. Interrogation of DES data linked to other administrative data such as Medicare, income support, housing data through the newly established National Disability Data Asset to investigate the impacts of employment services on non-employment outcomes.

Background



Employment for people with disability has been demonstrated to have numerous social, health and economic benefits including greater likelihood of secure housing, reduced poverty, social inclusion as well as better physical and mental health (1,2). Previous research also demonstrates that the mental health benefits of employment are greater for those with disability than those without (1). Furthermore, there is a clear economic incentive to promote labour market participation among those with a disability as economic inactivity has significant societal costs (3).

Yet, just over half (53%) of the working age population of Australians with disability are in the labour force, compared to 84% of those without disability (4). Not only are Australians with disabilities less likely to be in paid work (5), analyses of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey show that, relative to Australians without disability, people with disability are also more likely to be over educated for their jobs, have lower earnings and poorer job satisfaction (6). Research also suggests that those with disability tend to have lower quality jobs (which can result in worse mental health outcomes than unemployment) (7) and are more likely to perceive their pay as unfair (8).

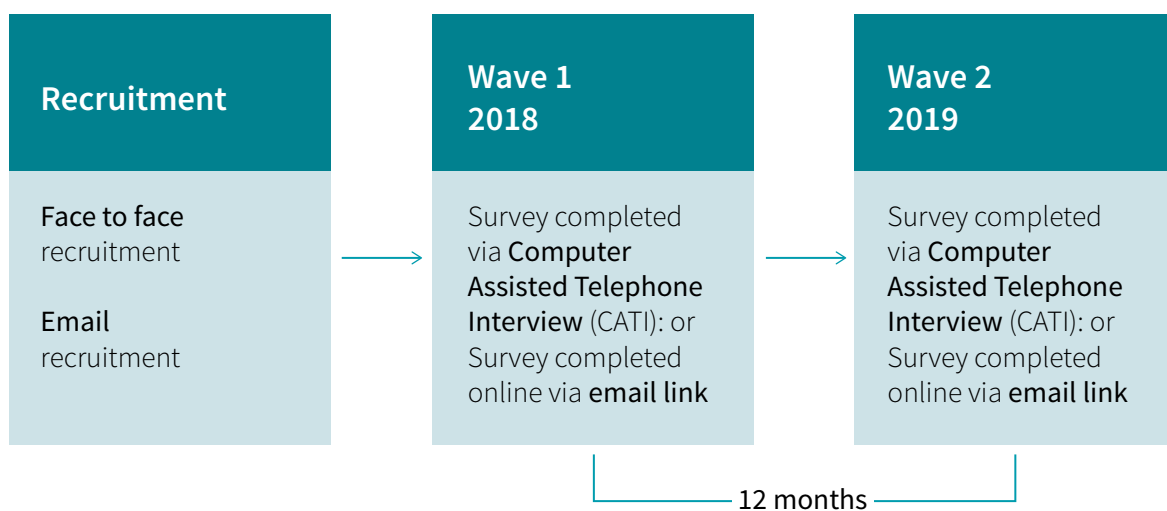
The Australian Disability Employment Services (DES) program is the federal government's main employment program for people whose disability is assessed as their main barrier to work. DES providers (alongside their mainstream equivalent, *jobactive*, providers) aim to support people with disability find and maintain employment in the open labour market (where people with disability work alongside those without disability)(9). Given the significant investment in DES (estimated to rise from a forecasted AUD \$1.25 billion in 2019-2020 to AUD \$1.6 billion in 2022/2023), research on the effectiveness of the DES programs is critical to informing continual debate on its design (10).

Previous research on employment services for people with disability has focused on the experiences of service providers and employers. Less is known from the perspective of jobseekers themselves. The IDES project aimed to address this gap, surveying DES participants to understand, from their perspectives, factors that promote sustainable and meaningful employment outcomes for people with disability. Specific research questions underpinning this research include:

1. What are the employment aspirations and outcomes of DES participants?
2. What are the key factors that influence the capacity of DES participants to find and maintain work?
3. What are participant expectations and experiences of DES services?
4. What is the impact of employment and unemployment on socio-economic and mental health outcomes of DES participants?

Methods

The IDES project comprised two Waves of survey data collection, 12-months apart. The recruitment design and data collection at each wave is described in detail in the following sections.



Survey development

Surveys were developed by the research team in collaboration with industry partners. Survey content was developed around domains relevant to employment and disability: 1) Demographics; 2) Disability; 3) Employment; 4) Experiences of DES; 5) Health; 6) Finances; 7) Housing; 8) Transport. The format of questions was mainly multiple choice or Likert-type (where participants were given a choice of responses on a continuum, e.g., from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree')

Survey items were drawn from existing population measures; were adapted from previously conducted surveys; or, specifically developed by the research team (11). The Wave 2 survey included the same questions as Wave 1 with the exception of baseline demographic information (such as date of birth and country of birth) and previous work experience. The Wave 2 survey also asked about: whether respondents had obtained a job since Wave 1, had lost a job since Wave 1; any change in functioning and disability; mental health; and questions related to experiences of DES in the past 12-months.

Survey implementation

Survey pilot testing with 32 DES participants was conducted in February 2018, with Wave 1 implemented between April and December 2018. Pilot and Wave 1 respondents were recruited directly through DES provider partners, either face-to-face or via email. All respondents were invited to complete Wave 2 of the survey approximately 12-months after completing Wave 1.

Across both Waves, the majority of respondents completed the survey online, with a smaller proportion completing the survey via Computer-Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI). Respondents took approximately 30-45 minutes to complete the survey. Descriptive analyses were undertaken to describe the findings from Waves 1 and Wave 2.

Findings



This section begins with a description of the IDES cohort. Employment outcomes are then described including reasons for wanting work and how people obtained paid work. Factors influencing capacity to find and maintain employment are explored, including analysis of vocational, non-vocational and structural barriers to work. This is followed by respondent expectations of the supports they would like from DES providers and their perceptions of the DES supports received. Relationships between mental health and wellbeing and access to work are then presented. Where relevant and sample size allows, we present a comparison of these variables across the two waves by Wave 2 employment status (i.e., currently employed vs not employed).

IDES respondent demographics

A total of 369 people completed Wave 1 with 197 respondents also completing Wave 2. Demographics such as gender, age, disability type and location remained stable across the two Waves. Compared to the general DES population, the IDES cohort were more likely to be female, younger, voluntarily engaged with DES, and identify their main condition as psychosocial in nature (See Table 1) Across both Waves:

- + More females participated than males
- + Most were living in metropolitan locations
- + Half the sample had completed Year 12
- + The majority had completed post-school qualifications.

Respondents lost to follow-up at Wave 2 were similar in socio-demographic characteristics to the overall sample, with the exception of education whereby a greater proportion lost to follow-up were less likely to have completed year 12. Respondents lost to follow-up were also similar to the overall sample with regards to employment status.

Table 1. Demographics of IDES respondents compared with DES population

		Wave 1 N=369 n (%)	Wave 2 N=197 n (%)	DES population N= 217,550 As at January 2019* n (%)
Gender	Male	154 (42)	88 (45)	116,386 (54)
	Female	212 (58)	107 (54)	101,164 (47)
	Non-binary	3 (<1)	2 (1)	-
Indigenous status	Indigenous	10 (3)	4 (2)	13,666 (6)
	Not Indigenous	359 (97)	191 (98)	-
Age	18-24 years	45 (12)	25 (13)	32,007 (15)
	25-34 years	87 (24)	45 (23)	35,397 (16)
	35-49 years	106 (29)	54 (27)	60,534 (28)
	>=50 years	130 (35)	73 (37)	89,612 (41)
Location	Metropolitan	234 (64)	127 (65)	-
	Regional	128 (35)	66 (34)	-
	Remote	4 (1)	3 (2)	-
Year 12 completion	Completed	182 (50)	103 (53)	-
Post-school qualifications	No additional qualifications	80 (22)	40 (21)	-
	Apprenticeship or trader certificate (Cert III or IV)	62 (17)	28 (14)	-
	Other certificate level (Cert I-IV)	117 (32)	60 (31)	-
	Associate degree or diploma	51 (14)	28 (14)	-
	University degree	56 (15)	39 (20)	-
Country of birth	Australia	317 (86)	171 (87)	-
	Elsewhere	52 (14)	26 (13)	40,526 (19)
Disability type	Physical	122 (33)	66 (34)	91,713 (42)
	Psychosocial	177 (48)	92 (47)	84,963 (39)
	Cognitive	36 (10)	20 (10)	34,632 (16)
	Sensory	13 (4)	7 (4)	5,822 (3)
	Other/multi	21 (6)	12 (6)	420 (<1)
DES status	Compulsory	280 (77)	-	170,641 (78)
	Voluntary	86 (24)	-	46,909 (22)

Note. Not all items were asked at both waves.

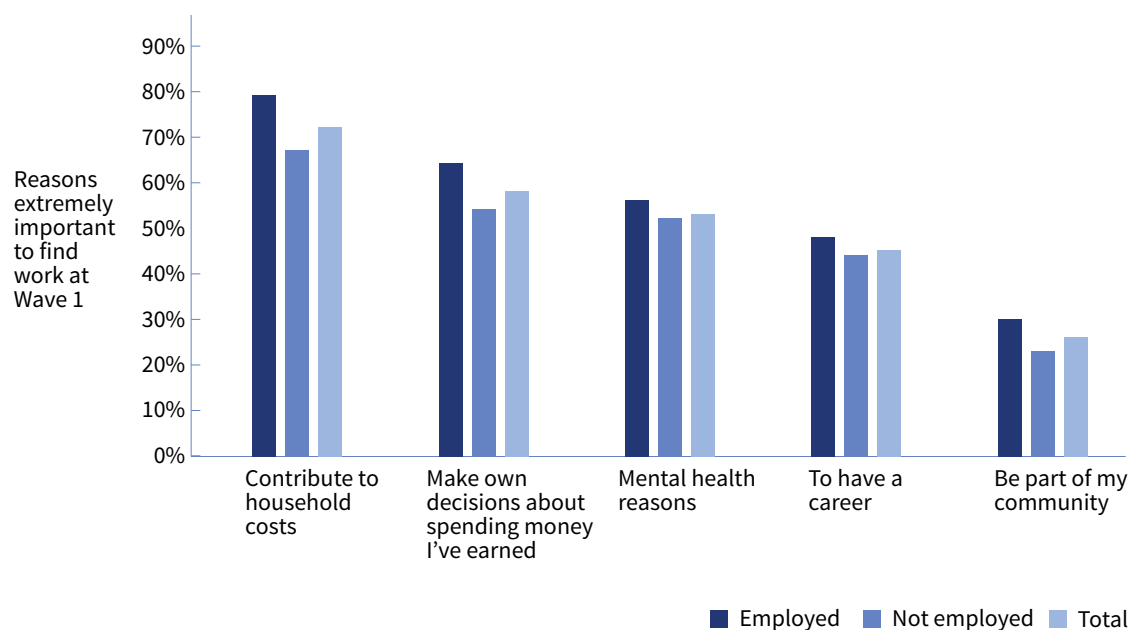
*DES population data is not publicly available for all demographics of interest.

Reasons for seeking employment

Wave 1 respondents were asked about their reasons for seeking paid employment. Financial drivers, such as contributing to household costs and making decisions about how earnings are spent, were the most frequently reported reasons. This was generally in combination with a desire to promote self-determination and wellbeing.

Wave 2 respondents were not asked about reasons for seeking paid work. However, comparisons were made between what respondents reported at Wave 1, and their Wave 2 employment status. A higher proportion of respondents who were in paid work at Wave 2 reported financial drivers (such as contributing to household costs and making their own decisions about money) as extremely important reasons for finding work (see Appendix A).

Figure 1: Wave 1 reasons for finding work reported as ‘extremely important’ by Wave 2 employment status



Note: Employed n=77; Unemployed n=120; Total n=197

Employment outcomes

Around 90% of Wave 1 and 92% of Wave 2 respondents had 'ever' been in paid work (i.e., receiving a wage), with 26% of Wave 1 and 39% of Wave 2 being in paid work at the time of the survey. Of the 197 Wave 2 respondents:

- + 26 respondents (13%) were employed in the same job as they were doing at Wave 1
- + 13 (7%) had been working at Wave 1 but were in a different job at Wave 2
- + 38 (19%) had been unemployed at Wave 1 and were now working at Wave 2
- + 23 (12%) had been in paid work between Wave 1 and Wave 2 but were not working at the time of the Wave 2 survey, 17 of these had not been in paid work in Wave 1
- + 97 (49%) remained unemployed at both Waves.

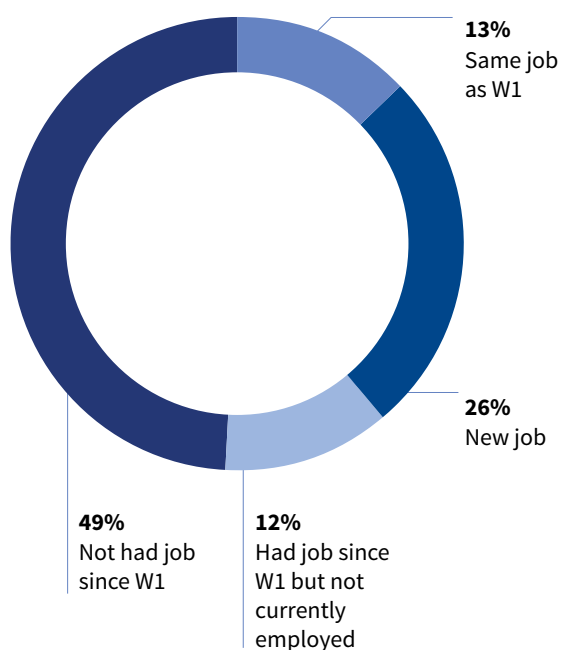
Employment outcomes by key demographics

We examined Wave 2 employment outcomes by Wave 1 demographics (see Appendix B). While numbers are small, we observed within the IDES cohort a greater proportion of:

- + Males employed compared to females
- + Younger people employed compared to older people
- + People born in Australia employed compared to people born elsewhere
- + People who had completed Year 12 employed compared to those who hadn't.

Employment in Wave 2 was more common among participants who had been in paid work previously and in people with psychosocial disability compared to people with other types of disability.

Figure 2: Employment outcomes at Wave 2



Satisfaction with hours of paid employment

Half of all Wave 2 respondents who were in paid work were satisfied with the number of hours they were currently working. However, 40% reported wanting to work more hours than they were currently employed for, with 9% wanting fewer hours.

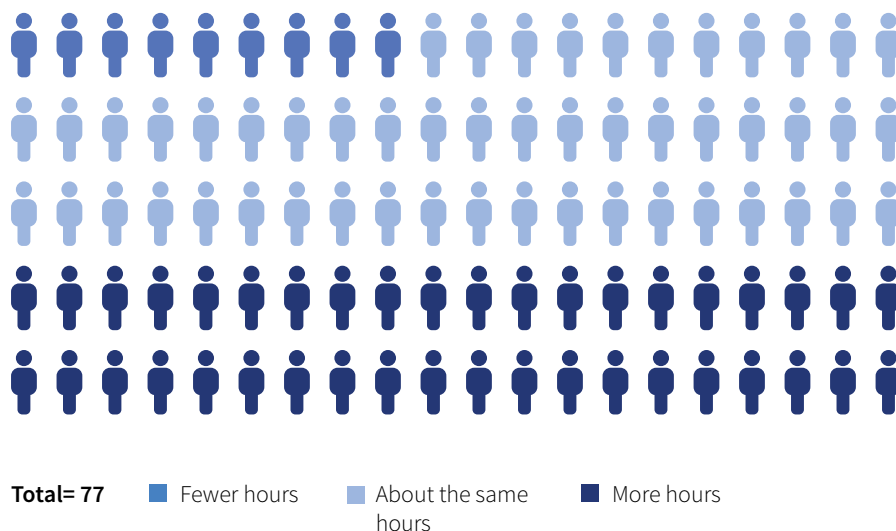
How people obtained their most recent job

Of the 97 IDES Wave 1 survey respondents who were in paid employment, 41% reported that their main job was obtained when they applied after seeing a job advertisement. This was followed by assistance/referral through their DES provider (28%) (see Appendix C).

Wave 2 respondents who were employed or who had a job between study waves were also asked how they obtained their most recent job:

- + Applying after seeing an advertisement remained the most common response (28%), followed by referral from DES provider (23%)
- + A *similar* proportion of respondents who were not employed at Wave 2 reported that they had applied for a job after seeing an advertisement (30% vs 28% of those employed)
- + A *greater* proportion of respondents who were not employed at Wave 2 reported that they had obtained their most recent job with the assistance of their employment service (39% vs 18%).

Figure 3: Hours preferences among employed individuals at Wave 2



Factors influencing capacity to find and maintain work

Factors influencing capacity to find and maintain work are often multifaceted and include socio-demographic and level of functioning as well as vocational, non-vocational and structural barriers.

Disability-related difficulties to finding and maintaining suitable work

At both waves, respondents were asked about the level of disability-related difficulty they experienced in relation to finding and maintaining suitable work. A much higher proportion of Wave 2 respondents who were not working reported experiencing difficulties across all domains when compared to respondents who were working at Wave 1 and Wave 2 (see Figure 4 and Appendix D).

Key vocational, non-vocational and structural barriers to work

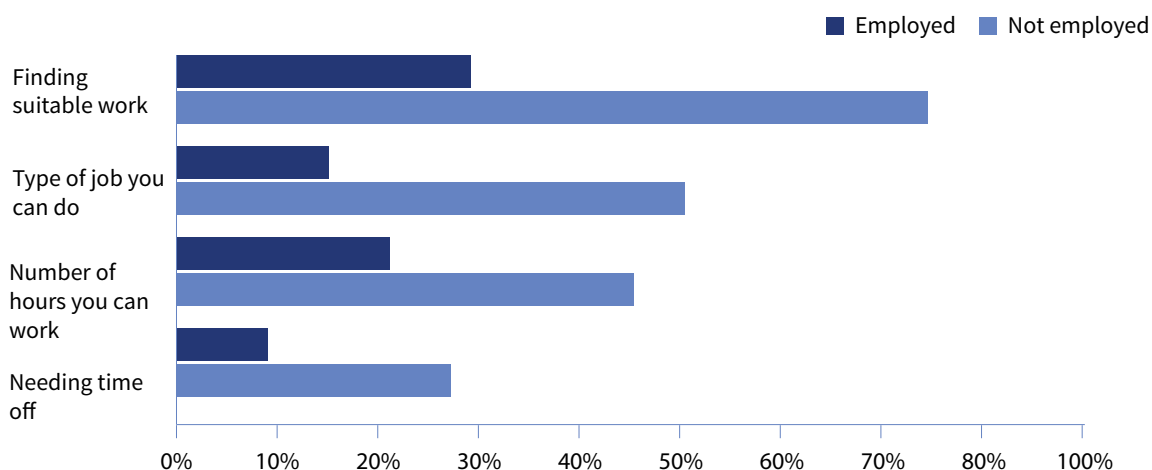
Across the two waves, employed and unemployed respondents were asked about the extent that various factors affect their ability to find and maintain work. Overall, the most common barriers reported across the Wave 2 cohort were having a health condition or disability; limited confidence; and limited availability of jobs (see Appendix E). Compared to those employed at Wave 2, those not employed were more likely to report:

- + A greater number of barriers 'greatly affected' their ability to find and maintain work
- + Not having qualifications, experience or skills and lack of confidence as vocational barriers
- + A health condition or disability as a non-vocational barrier (reported by 62% of Wave 2 participants who were not employed compared to 33% of participants who were employed at Wave 2)
- + Were more likely to report a lack of jobs as a structural barrier.

There were differences in the experiences of barriers reported by respondents with different types of disability; however, the interpretation is greatly impacted by the small number of participants categorised as having cognitive, sensory or other disability. We limit our interpretations to those with physical and psychosocial disability (see Appendix F). Notably:

- + Health condition or disability was a more common barrier for people with physical (62%) than psychosocial (46%) disability
- + Lack of jobs was more commonly cited by people with physical (47%) than psychosocial (36%).

Figure 4: Wave 2 respondents reporting 'a lot of difficulties' by Wave 2 employment status



Note: Responses reported here (%) are amongst participants who were not employed at Wave 2 (n=120)

Reasons for leaving most recent job

Wave 1 and Wave 2 respondents who had previously had a job but were no longer employed were asked about the main reasons they had left their last job (see Table 2).

- + Across both waves, the most commonly reported reason was because of 'health reasons' (34% at Wave 1 and 30% at Wave 2)
- + Around a quarter (26%) of Wave 1 respondents reported 'other' reasons such as workplace bullying and discrimination; business closed; moving interstate; caring responsibilities; and workplace injury
- + 16% of Wave 1 and 18% of Wave 2 respondents also reported they had been 'let go by employer'.



Table 2. Main reason for leaving last job at Wave 1 and Wave 2

Reason for leaving last job	Wave 1 (n=235) n(%)	Wave 2 (n=33) n (%)
Health reasons	80 (34)	10 (30)
Other*	62 (26)	2 (6)
Was 'let go' by employer	37 (16)	6 (18)
Contract ended/made redundant	40 (17)	9 (27)
Quit: unsatisfied or wanted a better job	13 (6)	5 (15)

Note. * Diverse reasons provided by participants included workplace injury, family reasons, business closed down, poor working conditions (poor pay, bullying, working hours), jobs too demanding, domestic violence, and/or, not given any more shifts.

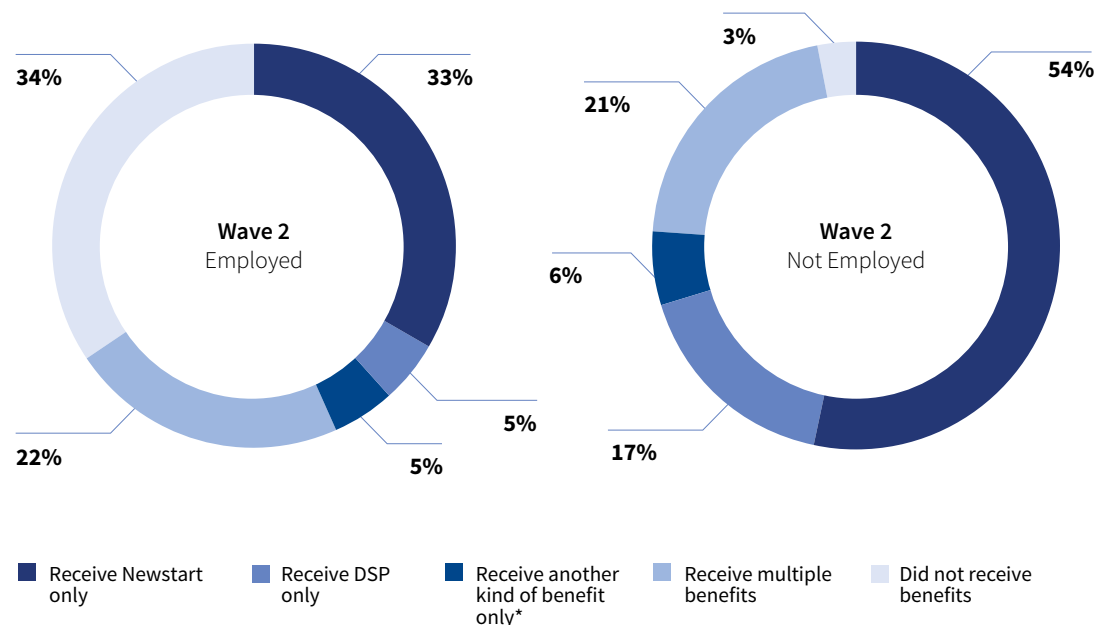
Financial Circumstances

Most respondents were receiving some form of income support at the time of both surveys. When examining income support at Wave 2 by Wave 2 employment outcomes, we found:

- + A higher proportion of those employed did not receive benefits when compared to those who were not employed (34% vs 3%)
- + Unsurprisingly, Newstart (now referred to as JobSeeker) was more commonly reported in both waves among those who were not employed
- + Similarly, while numbers were small, the Disability Support Pension (DSP) was more commonly reported by those not employed.



Figure 5: Income support at Wave 2 by employment status at Wave 2



*Other benefits include youth allowance, family tax benefit, aged pension, carer's allowance, parenting partnered benefit, single parenting payment, veteran affairs disability.

Respondents were also asked about any financial stressors they may be experiencing, such as paying bills and covering the cost of social participation.

While the small numbers limited generalisability, when examining financial stressors across the surveys by Wave 2 employment outcomes (see Table 3), we found financial hardship persisted across both employed and unemployed groups (see also Appendix G).

Albeit at Wave 2:

- + The most commonly reported stressors included limited social participation, could not travel, had to ask for financial support and difficulty paying bills
- + Among participants who were employed at Wave 2, slightly fewer reported one or more financial hardship at Wave 2 (compared to Wave 1)
- + Among those unemployed, over 80% reported one or more financial hardship at both waves
- + Most participants, regardless of employment status, reported one or more financial hardship at Wave 2 (74% of those employed at Wave 2 and 82% of those not employed at Wave 2).

Table 3. Financial hardships experienced over the past 12-months at Wave 2 by employment status

	Employed n(%)	Not Employed n(%)
Experienced 1 or more financial hardship in past 12-months	57 (74)	96 (82)
Limited your social life or ability to go out with family or friends	50 (67)	88 (78)
Could not travel when you wanted to	38 (51)	72 (67)
Asked for financial help from friends or family	42 (55)	65 (59)
Could not pay a bill on time	31 (41)	62 (56)
Could not fill car with petrol	29 (45)	50 (57)
Could not get a medical test, treatment or follow-up as recommended by a doctor	23 (32)	48 (44)
Ran out of food and could not afford to buy more	19 (25)	47 (42)

Geography

We examined if there were any differences in employment outcomes between respondents living in metropolitan areas compared to those living in regional or remote areas (see Appendix H). Again, noting small numbers limited our ability to generalise, few differences were found between metropolitan and regional respondents. Some key findings at Wave 2 include:

- + There was a similar proportion of metro and regional respondents employed
- + 'Not having qualifications, experience or skills', 'lack of confidence' and 'lack of transport' were commonly reported barrier across metro and regional groups
- + Slightly more people living in metro areas reported 'poor quality employment program supports' as a barrier when compared to those living in regional/rural areas
- + A higher proportion of metro respondents reported 'lack of access to mental health services', 'family responsibilities' and 'welfare benefits' as greatly affecting access to work, when compared to regional respondents
- + 'Lack of jobs' was consistently reported as a key barrier by a higher proportion of regional/remote respondents across both waves
- + Health conditions and disability were nominated by about half of respondents in metro and regional/rural areas as barriers.

Access to transport

At Wave 2, 16% of respondents who were currently employed and 26% of those who were not employed reported lack of access to transport as greatly impacting on their ability to find and maintain paid work (see Figure 7 and Appendix E). Respondents were also asked about any difficulties they experienced in relation to using public transport. We found that when compared to respondents who were employed, respondents who were unemployed were:

- + More likely to experience difficulties with public transport (48% no difficulties compared to 71%)
- + More likely to report difficulties 'getting to or from a station' (21% vs 9%), issues with 'accessibility' (17% vs 5%), and 'experiences of harassment whilst on public transport' (6% vs 0%).

Experiences of discrimination

Wave 1 and 2 respondents were asked about any discrimination they experienced because of their disability or health condition whilst looking and applying for work (see Figure 8 and Appendix I). While both employed and unemployed respondents experienced discrimination, those who were unemployed were slightly more likely to report experiences of disability-related discrimination at Wave 1 and 2 when looking for work, applying for a job and when going for an interview.

Figure 6: Employment status at Wave 2 by regionality

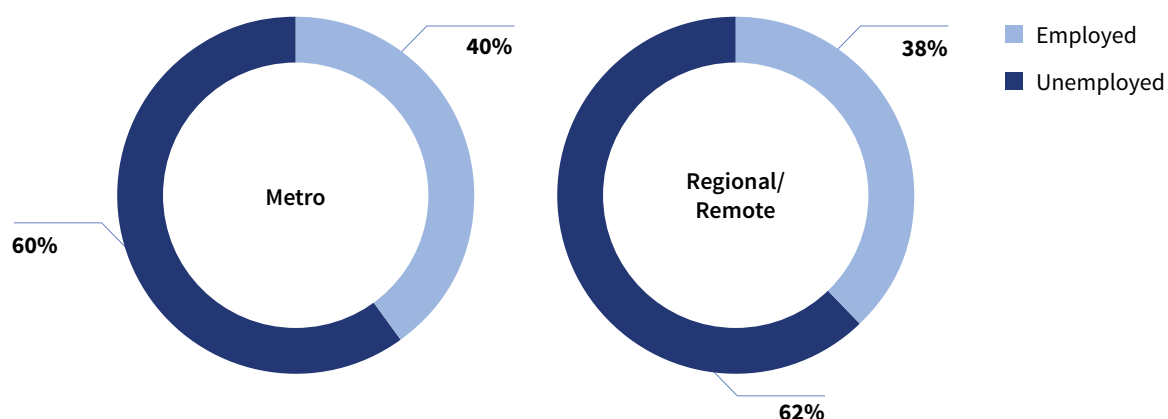


Figure 7: Barriers related to public transport by employment outcomes at Wave 2

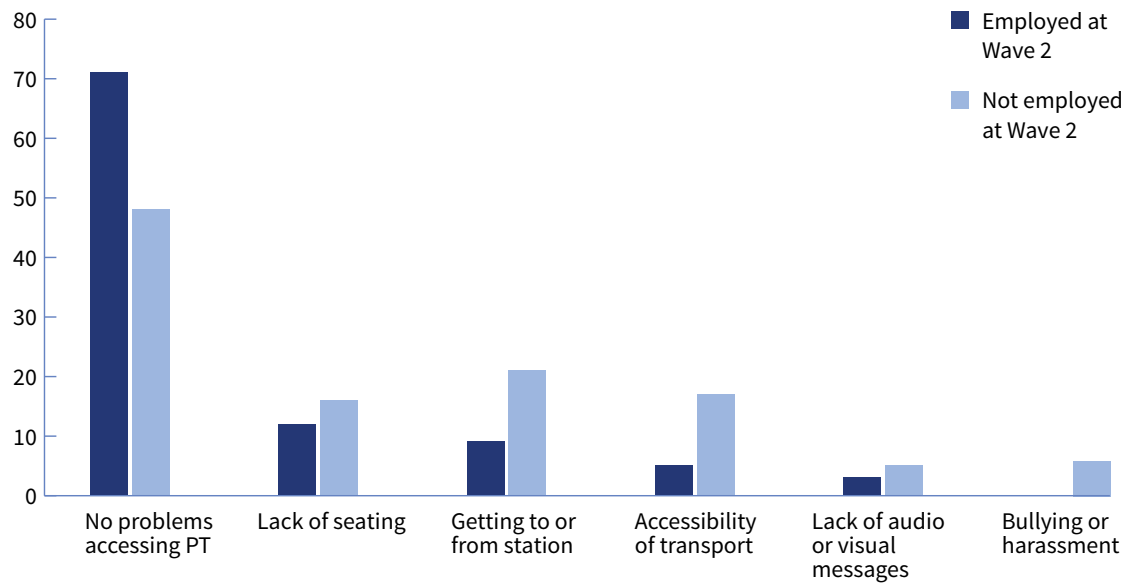
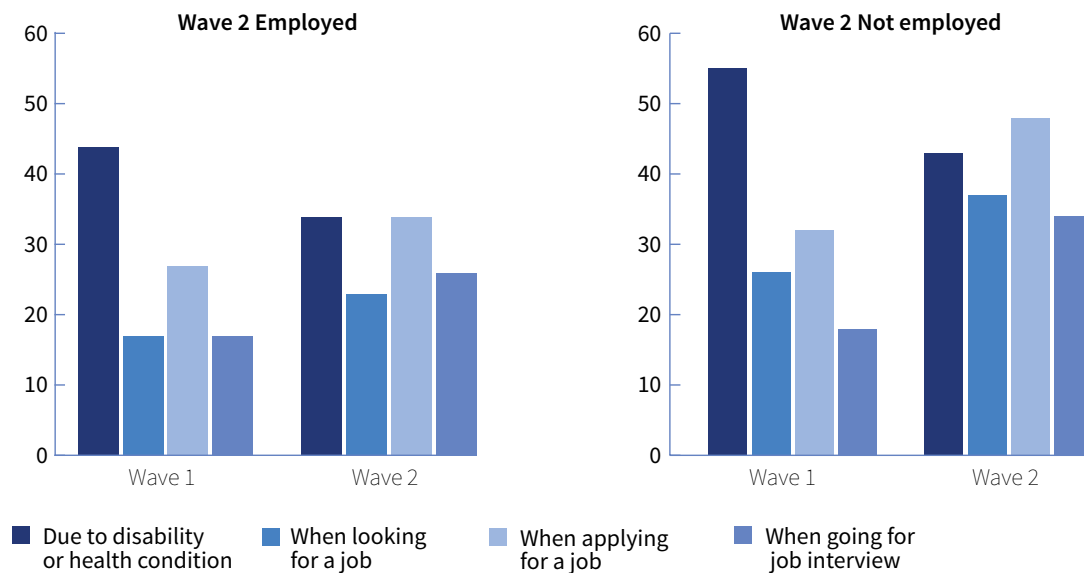


Figure 8: Experiences of discrimination at Wave 1 and Wave 2 by employment status at Wave 2



Participant expectations and experiences with the DES program

This section highlights key findings in relation to IDES respondents' expectations and experiences with the DES program.

Engagement with DES

Wave 1 respondents were asked whether they were compulsorily engaged with DES or voluntary participants and the length of time they had been engaged with a DES provider. At Wave 2 we asked whether they were still using a DES provider and if so whether it was the same provider. We found:

- + Whether or not someone was a voluntary or compulsory DES participant was not associated with employment status at Wave 2
- + A higher proportion of those with a provider for less than 6-months were employed at Wave 2 than those who had been with provider for greater than 12-months
- + Fewer people who were employed at Wave 2 remained with a DES provider (potentially indicating that people leave the program when they find work)
- + Around a fifth of all respondents (employed/unemployed) changed providers between Wave 1 and Wave 2
- + 61% of respondents who were employed at Wave 2 and 76% of respondents who were unemployed were no longer engaged with a DES provider.

Expectations of DES and perceptions on quality of supports provided

Table 5 highlights Wave 1 respondents' expectations of what DES services should do to help them overcome barriers to find and maintain work and Table 6 shows perspectives at Wave 2 on how DES providers actually performed in delivering on these expectations (see also Appendix J).

Wave 1 respondents were asked about what supports they wanted/expected from their DES provider (see Table 5). The most frequently reported responses were:

- + 'Suggestions about suitable work' (58%)
- + 'Support once in a job' (62%)
- + 'Support to feel confident' (60%)
- + 'Help applying for a job' (54%).



Table 4. Engagement with DES provider by employment status at Wave 2

Variable		Employed (n=77)	Not employed (n=120)
Engagement with DES	Compulsory	60 (79)	91 (77)
	Voluntary	16 (21)	28 (24)
Length of time already with DES provider at Wave 1	<6 months	28 (41)	27 (27)
	>=6 months and <12 months	14 (21)	18 (18)
	>=12 months	26 (38)	57 (56)
Using a provider at Wave 2	Yes	46 (61)	90 (76)
Still using same provider as Wave 1	Yes	36 (47)	66 (56)
Used any other DES provider since Wave 1	Yes	15 (20)	25 (21)

Note. Numbers may vary slightly due to missing responses for some respondents.

Table 5. DES participant's expectations of DES at Wave 1 (n=369)

	What participants wanted at Wave 1 n(%)
Suggestions about suitable work	214 (58)
Support once you have a job	229 (62)
Support to feel confident	223 (60)
Help applying for a job	199 (54)
Help preparing for a job interview	170 (46)
Assistance with Centrelink	168 (46)
Help finding a training course	175 (47)
Help me participate in decision-making	126 (34)

Wave 2 respondents were then asked about how well these supports had been provided (see Table 6) since Wave 1:

- + More than half to two thirds of respondents to each support type thought their DES provider had provided good or very good supports across all domains
- + The most frequently reported good/very good support was ‘support once in a job’ (68%), followed by ‘help to participate in decisions’ (65%), ‘support to feel confident’ (64%), ‘suggestions about suitable work’ (62%), and ‘help applying for a job’ and ‘preparing for an interview’ (both 62%).

Perceptions of supports by employment status

Respondents’ perspectives of supports received were examined by Wave 2 employment status. We found, overall, a higher proportion of those employed at Wave 2 reported DES services they had received as good or very good compared to those who were not in employment.

Table 6. Satisfaction with services received at Wave 2 among IDES participants who completed both waves of the survey

	What participants received at Wave 2 (%very good/good) n(%)
Suggestions about suitable work (N=165)	103 (62)
Support once you have a job (N=113)	77 (68)
Support to feel confident (N=180)	115 (64)
Help applying for a job (N=146)	91 (62)
Help preparing for a job interview (N=139)	86 (62)
Assistance with Centrelink (N=156)	88 (56)
Help finding a training course (N=121)	66 (55)
Help me participate in decision-making (N=162)	106 (65)
Help with financial costs of gaining work (N=136)	92 (68)
Support financial costs of training (N=117)	73 (62)
Help talk to employers about wages and conditions (N=91)	52 (57)

Note. Percentages calculated in relation to response rate to each item (refer to N in first column)

Table 7. IDES participant's perspectives on DES services provided at Wave 2, comparing participants by Wave 2 employment status

Supports	Wave 2 Employment status			
	Employed		Not employed	
	Good/ Very good n (%)	Neither good nor poor/Poor/ Very poor n (%)	Good/ Very good n (%)	Neither good nor poor/Poor/ Very poor n (%)
Suggestions about suitable work (N=165)	46 (70)	20 (30)	57 (58)	42 (42)
Support once you have a job (N=113)	47 (72)	18 (28)	30 (63)	18 (38)
Support to feel confident (N=180)	51 (71)	21 (29)	64 (59)	44 (41)
Help applying for a job (N=146)	40 (65)	22 (36)	51 (61)	33 (39)
Help preparing for a job interview (N=139)	42 (68)	20 (32)	44 (57)	33 (43)
Assistance with Centrelink (N=156)	40 (68)	19 (32)	48 (50)	49 (51)
Help finding a training course (N=121)	27 (55)	22 (45)	39 (54)	33 (46)
Help me participate in decision-making (N=162)	46 (73)	17 (27)	60 (61)	39 (39)
Help with financial costs of gaining work (N=136)	47 (75)	16 (25)	45 (62)	28 (38)
Support financial costs of training (N=117)	31 (66)	16 (34)	42 (60)	28 (40)
Help talk to employers about wages and conditions (N=91)	30 (63)	18 (38)	22 (51)	21 (49)

Note. For more information refer to: Devine et al. (12)

Mental health and wellbeing

Given evidence that highlights that good mental health can improve access to work and vice versa, respondents were asked a series of questions about their mental health and wellbeing to enable analysis in relation to employment status.

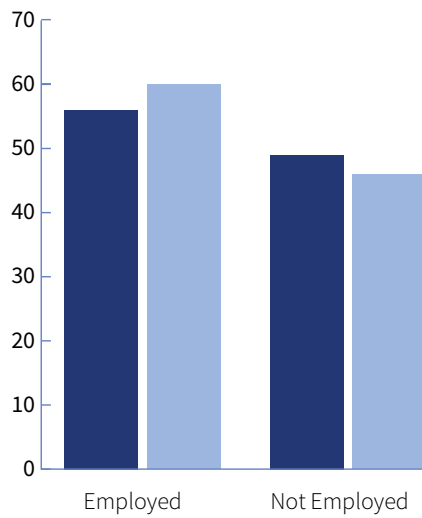
Mental health was measured using the five-item Mental Health Inventory (MHI-5), a subscale of the Short form-36 (SF-36) general health measure. The MHI-5 has been validated as a screening tool to detect symptoms of anxiety, depression, behaviour control, positive affect and general distress in the past 4-weeks. Our analysis used a generated continuous MHI-5 total score (1 to 100), with higher scores representing better mental health (13).

The seven-item Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) was included as a validated measure of subjective wellbeing. The PWI items elicit respondent satisfaction across the domains of standard of living, health, achieving in life, relationships, community connectedness and future security. The PWI total scores correspond to a continuous scale (1 to 100)(14,15) (see Appendix K).

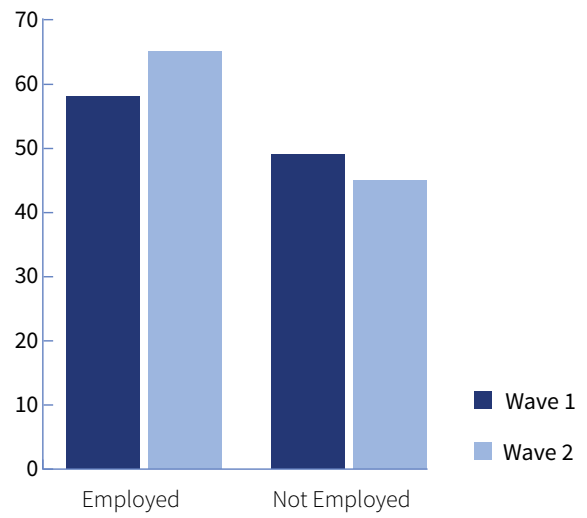
- + At both waves respondents who were employed had higher MHI-5 and PWI scores compared to respondents who were not employed (see Appendix K).
- + Mental health and well-being scores improved between Wave 1 and Wave 2 for the group of respondents who were employed compared to those that were not employed.

Figure 9: Mental health scores by employment status at both waves

Mean Mental Health Inventory (MHI-5) scores by employment status at both waves



Mean Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) scores by employment status at both waves



Reflections on key findings

We found an increase in employment between Wave 1 and Wave 2 and 20% of people not employed at Wave 1 were employed by Wave 2. However, nearly half of respondents were not employed at either wave. Levels of underemployment were also high with 40% of employed respondents indicating they wanted more hours of work.

The findings demonstrated the considerable barriers that DES participants face in finding and maintaining work including vocational barriers such as lack of qualifications as well as non-vocational barriers such as lack of transport and structural barriers related to lack of suitable jobs and widespread discrimination. The more unaddressed barriers people experienced, the less likely they were to find and maintain employment. Some of the key barriers, such as not having qualifications or lack of confidence in their ability to work, can be addressed by DES providers through targeted and individualised supports. Other barriers, such as the limited supply of jobs and high levels of discrimination are much more difficult to address without a whole of government approach.

Overwhelmingly, respondents reported their health condition or disability as their most common barrier to work. This underscores the influence of disability on career development and access to employment, and the importance of individualised support across the life course to help jobseekers with diverse disabilities find and maintain work that meets their needs and aspirations.

Key areas of support valued by DES participants in helping them find and maintain paid work was help to identify and apply for work that meets their needs and aspirations, particularly in relation to the type of job and the hours worked; build confidence to engage with the labour market; and, support to maintain paid employment. We also found little difference in employment outcomes between respondents who were compulsorily or voluntarily engaged with DES, highlighting that voluntary participants are benefiting from the program.

While more research is required to further understand the relationships between mental health, wellbeing and access to work, a greater proportion of respondents who reported they

were currently working at Wave 1, also reported better mental health and wellbeing when compared to those who were not working. At Wave 2, mental health and wellbeing scores had increased among the group of respondents who were employed, compared to those that were not employed. This is consistent with our previous research (1,2). It may be that those with better mental health and wellbeing to begin with are more likely to find and maintain work. Nonetheless, these findings highlight the importance of promoting mental health, wellbeing and confidence among DES participants as a potential facilitator to employment.

Regardless of employment outcomes, respondents commonly reported experiencing financial stressors. These financial stresses may impede peoples' ability to find and maintain work. Further research is needed to understand the relationships between the level of income support, financial stress, and ability to find and maintain work. This is particularly so to inform supports for people with disabilities who often experience greater financial disadvantage to begin with.

The IDES project provides important insights into relationships between socio-economic demographics, and barriers and facilitators to finding and maintaining paid employment. These relationships are worthy of deeper analysis by government of the larger DES program data including linkages with other datasets, alongside qualitative research with DES respondents and other relevant stakeholders such as providers, policy makers and employers. This is specifically important to informing current debate on how best to reform the current DES program and improve its effectiveness and efficiency.

Research Strengths and Limitations

To our knowledge, this is the first longitudinal quantitative survey of DES participants designed to understand the perspectives of jobseekers themselves and explore the influence of vocational, non-vocational and structural barriers on gaining and maintaining work. The project was, however, implemented during the 2018 DES reforms. This was a very challenging time for providers, making it more difficult for them to support recruitment and likely reduced the number of respondents participating in our survey. Given the smaller than anticipated size and modest retention rate, it is possible that our findings are less generalisable to the broader DES population. As highlighted above, we therefore encourage government to conduct a deeper analysis of the employment program data as part of ongoing reform to both mainstream and disability employment programs. The IDES project included qualitative research focused on DES participants with psychosocial disability (16–18). While not specifically reported in this report, qualitative findings helped inform the focus of the quantitative analysis. Finally, data was collected prior to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Findings therefore do not reflect the impact the pandemic has on the employment outcomes and experiences of jobseekers with disabilities. Again, further exploration of the impact of COVID-19 on DES outcomes through analysis of program data collected and held by the government – alongside qualitative research – is warranted.

Policy considerations

On the basis of these findings, we make a number of recommendations for policy that relate to DES services as well as broader structural reforms:

1. DES should focus on providing individualised supports to build the capacity of DES participants for paid work through improving access to skills and qualifications, supporting positive mental health and wellbeing and improving confidence in their capacity to work
2. DES have an important ongoing role in supporting people with disability once they are in paid work to maintain work
3. Non-vocational barriers to finding and maintaining work such as having a disability or health condition need to be addressed through improved inclusion within recruitment practices and reasonable adjustments within the workplace such as enabling flexible working conditions
4. Whole-of-government approaches to addressing widespread discrimination experienced by people with disability must occur alongside DES reforms
5. DES have an important role to play in contributing to whole-of-government approaches to generating jobs that are suitable for DES participants and in matching participants to those jobs and supporting them and employers in being successful

Recommendations for future research and evaluation

IDES has demonstrated the importance of seeking the perspectives of DES participants, however, considerably more investment is needed so that future policies are informed by the experiences of people with disability. Given the enormous investments in employment services and the obvious benefits of employment for people with disability and broader society there is an urgent need to improve the evidence base. In terms of future research and evaluation, we recommend:

1. Establishment of a larger cohort study of people with disability using employment services including NDIS supports, DES services and other employment programs (e.g., *jobactive*/Workforce Australia) to identify what supports are most successful and test innovative approaches
2. Qualitative studies to investigate key issues with different participant groups
3. Interrogation of DES data linked to other administrative data such as Medicare, income support, housing data through the newly established National Disability Data Asset to investigate the impacts of employment services on non-employment outcomes

Concluding remarks

People with disabilities want to work and should be supported to do so through effective employment programs. Nonetheless, many people with disabilities experience multi-faceted vocational, non-vocational, and structural barriers to work, many of which are beyond the capacity of DES alone to respond to. While current debate on how to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the DES program, its ability to do so requires broader social policies and programs across the life course that build capabilities for work and helps prevent and address complex barriers to work more commonly experienced by jobseekers with disabilities.



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Appendices



Appendix A

Wave 1 reasons for finding work reported as 'extremely important' by Wave 2 employment status

Reasons extremely important to find work at Wave 1	Wave 2 Employed (n=77) n(%)	Not employed (n=120) n(%)	Total (n=197) n(%)
Contribute to household costs	61 (79)	80 (67)	141 (72)
Make own decisions about spending money I've earned	49 (64)	65 (54)	114 (58)
Do something for myself	43 (57)	66 (56)	109 (56)
Mental health reasons	43 (56)	62 (52)	105 (53)
To have a career	37 (48)	52 (44)	89 (45)
Pay off money I owe	30 (40)	51 (43)	81 (41)
Be part of my community	23 (30)	28 (23)	51 (26)
Meet other people	16 (21)	26 (22)	42 (21)
To avoid negative attitudes from others about being on income support	15 (20)	26 (22)	41 (21)
Family wants me to work	12 (16)	12 (10)	24 (12)
Have time away from caring responsibilities	6 (8)	11 (9)	17 (9)

Appendix B

Wave 1 characteristics of IDES participants by Wave 2 employment status (N = 197)

Wave 1 Characteristics		Wave 2 employment status		
		Employed (n=77) n(%)	Not employed (n=120) n(%)	Total (n=197)* n(%)
Gender	Male	37 (42)	51 (58)	88 (100)
	Female	38 (35)	69 (64)	107 (100)
	Other	2 (100)	0 (0)	2 (100)
Age category (years)	18–24	11 (44)	14 (56)	25 (100)
	25–34	19 (42)	26 (58)	45 (100)
	35–49	29 (54)	25 (46)	54 (100)
	>=50	18 (25)	55 (75)	73 (100)
Country of birth	Australia	70 (41)	101 (59)	171 (100)
	Elsewhere	7 (27)	19 (73)	26 (100)
Year 12 completion	Completed Year 12	48 (47)	55 (53)	103 (100)
	Did not complete Year 12	29 (31)	64 (69)	93 (100)
Ever been in paid work at Wave 1	Yes	75 (42)	102 (58)	177 (100)
	No	2 (10)	18 (90)	20 (100)
Post-school qualifications	No additional qualifications	11 (27)	29 (73)	40 (100)

Note. *Sample sizes vary slightly depending on available participant responses to each item. Source: Devine, A.; Shields, M.; Dimov, S.; Dickinson, H.; Vaughan, C.; Bentley, R.; LaMontagne, A.D.; Kavanagh, A. Australia's Disability Employment Services Program: Participant Perspectives on Factors Influencing Access to Work. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2021, 18, 11485. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182111485>

Appendix C

How people obtained most recent job at Wave 2, and by Wave 2 employment status

Wave 1 Characteristics	Wave 2 employment status		
	Employed (n=76) n(%)	Not employed (n=23) n(%)	Total (n=99) n(%)
Applied after seeing an advertisement	21 (28)	7 (30)	28 (28)
Referred by DES	14 (18)	9 (39)	23 (23)
Through connections from family or friends	11 (15)	4 (17)	15 (15)
Directly approach an employer	14 (18)	0 (0)	14 (14)
Employer approached you	4 (5)	3 (13)	7 (7)
Recommended by previous employer/colleague	3 (4)	0 (0)	3 (3)

Note. *Sample sizes are smaller for these items as only respondents who were currently employed at Wave 2 or who had had a job since Wave 1 were asked about the main thing that helped them get their most recent job.

Appendix D

Wave 1 and 2 respondents reporting ‘a lot of difficulties’ by Wave 2 employment status

	Wave 2 employment status			
	Employed (n=77)		Not employed (n=120)	
	Wave 1 n(%)	Wave 2 n(%)	Wave 1 n(%)	Wave 2 n(%)
Finding suitable work	30 (39)	22 (29)	82 (70)	86 (74)
Type of job you can do	13 (18)	11 (15)	54 (47)	60 (50)
Number of hours you can work	12 (16)	16 (21)	43 (37)	52 (45)
Needing time off	5 (7)	7 (9)	25 (23)	30 (27)



Appendix E

Wave 1 and 2 barriers greatly affecting ability to find and maintain work, by Wave 2 employment status.

Barriers	Employed (n = 77)		Not Employed (n = 120)	
	Wave 1 n (%)	Wave 2 n (%)	Wave 1 n (%)	Wave 2 n (%)
Vocational Barriers				
Not having qualifications, experience, skills	20 (26)	16 (22)	51 (43)	55 (47)
Lack of confidence	14 (18)	14 (18)	46 (38)	55 (46)
Poor quality employment support program	-	17 (23)	-	24 (21)
Non-vocational barriers				
Health condition/disability	-	25 (33)	-	74 (62)
Lack of transport	15 (20)	12 (16)	35 (30)	31 (26)
Welfare benefits	15 (20)	19 (25)	29 (25)	35 (30)
Family responsibilities	6 (8)	8 (10)	18 (15)	19 (16)
Caring for others	1 (1)	7 (9)	13 (11)	15 (13)
Financial difficulty/debt	-	15 (20)	-	27 (23)
Lack of access to mental health services	-	14 (18)	-	25 (21)
Lack of access to health services	-	8 (10)	-	19 (16)
Housing insecurity	-	11 (15)	-	18 (15)
Lack of family help	7 (9)	8 (11)	19 (16)	14 (12)
Structural barriers				
Lack of jobs	24 (31)	19 (25)	59 (50)	54 (45)

Note. Additional questions were asked at Wave 2. Source: Devine, A.; Shields, M.; Dimov, S.; Dickinson, H.; Vaughan, C.; Bentley, R.; LaMontagne, A.D.; Kavanagh, A. Australia's Disability Employment Services Program: Participant Perspectives on Factors Influencing Access to Work. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2021, 18, 11485. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182111485>

Appendix F

Barriers to employment greatly affecting ability to find and maintain work at Wave 2 by disability type

Barriers	Physical (n=66) n(%)	Psychosocial (n=92) n(%)	Cognitive (n=20) n(%)	Sensory (n=7) n(%)	Other or multiple (n=12) n(%)
Vocational barriers					
Not having qualifications, experience, skills	23 (35)	35 (39)	9 (45)	2 (33)	2 (18)
Lack of confidence	19 (29)	40 (44)	4 (20)	2 (29)	4 (33)
Poor quality employment support program	12 (19)	23 (26)	4 (20)	0 (0)	2 (18)
Non-vocational barriers					
Health condition/disability	41 (62)	42 (46)	9 (45)	1 (14)	6 (50)
Lack of transport	14 (21)	22 (24)	2 (10)	1 (14)	4 (33)
Welfare benefits	18 (28)	32 (36)	2 (10)	1 (14)	1 (10)
Family responsibilities	13 (20)	13 (14)	0 (0)	1 (14)	0 (0)
Caring for others	11 (17)	10 (11)	1 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Financial difficulty/debt	14 (22)	25 (27)	3 (15)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Lack of access to mental health services	8 (13)	23 (25)	6 (30)	0 (0)	2 (17)
Lack of access to health services	12 (19)	11 (12)	2 (10)	0 (0)	2 (17)
Housing insecurity	10 (15)	18 (20)	1 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Lack of family help	5 (8)	17 (19)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Structural barriers					
Lack of jobs	31 (47)	33 (36)	3 (16)	3 (43)	3 (27)

Appendix G

Financial hardships experienced over the past 12-months at Wave 1 and Wave 2 by employment status at Wave 2

	Employed (n = 77)		Not Employed (n = 120)	
	Wave 1 n (%)	Wave 2 n (%)	Wave 1 n (%)	Wave 2 n (%)
Experienced 1 or more financial hardship in past 12-months	67 (87)	57 (74)	99 (83)	96 (82)
Limited your social life or ability to go out with family or friends	63 (84)	50 (67)	82 (75)	88 (78)
Could not travel when you wanted to	46 (63)	38 (51)	66 (64)	72 (67)
Asked for financial help from friends or family	47 (62)	42 (55)	63 (57)	65 (59)
Could not pay a bill on time	44 (61)	31 (41)	71 (63)	62 (56)
Could not fill car with petrol	31 (54)	29 (45)	39 (49)	50 (57)
Could not get a medical test, treatment or follow-up as recommended by a doctor	31 (43)	23 (32)	50 (46)	48 (44)
Ran out of food and could not afford to buy more	29 (39)	19 (25)	48 (41)	47 (42)
Could not pay mortgage or rent on time	22 (35)	22 (32)	17 (20)	21 (22)
Could not fill a prescription	24 (33)	20 (27)	45 (41)	38 (35)

Note. Additional questions were asked at Wave 2. Source: Devine, A.; Shields, M.; Dimov, S.; Dickinson, H.; Vaughan, C.; Bentley, R.; LaMontagne, A.D.; Kavanagh, A. Australia's Disability Employment Services Program: Participant Perspectives on Factors Influencing Access to Work. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2021, 18, 11485. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182111485>

Appendix H

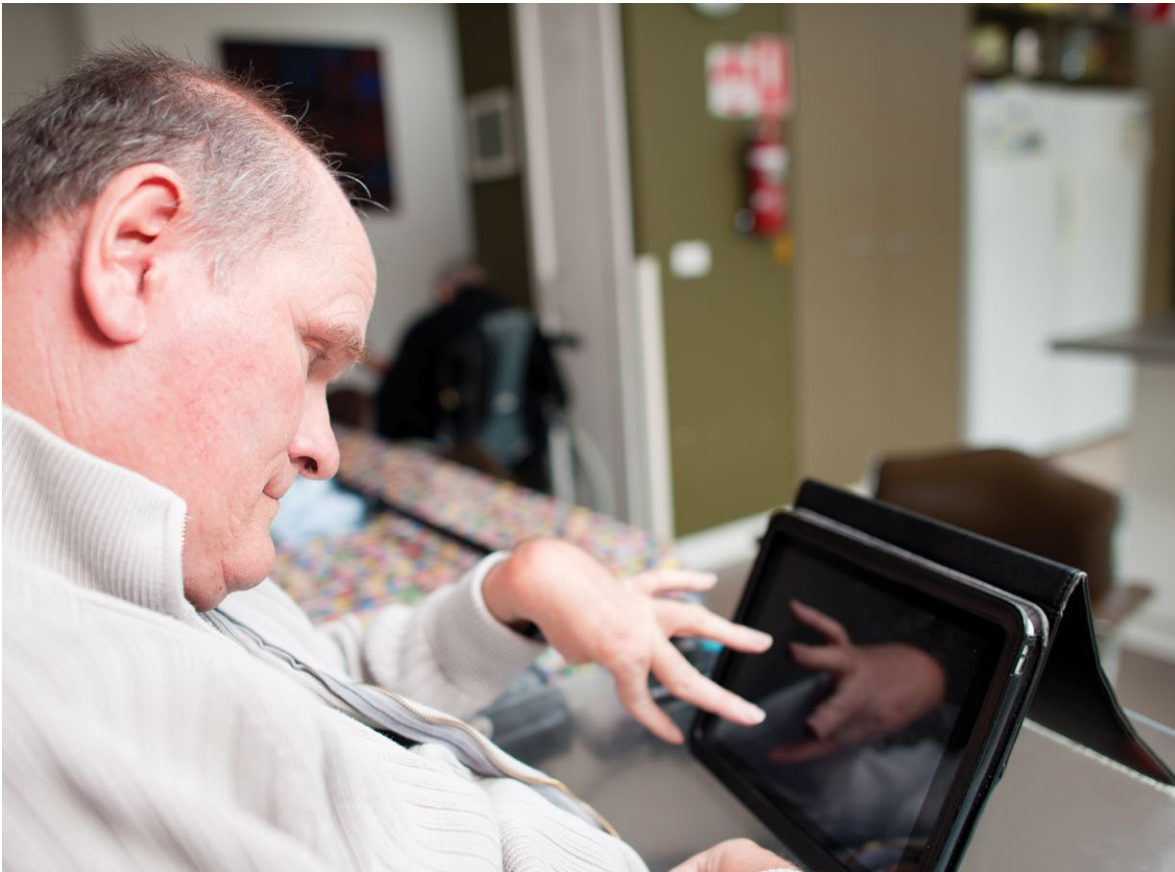
Barriers to employment at Wave 1 and Wave 2 by regionality

Barriers	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	Metro n(%)	Regional/ Remote n(%)	Metro n(%)	Regional/ Remote n(%)
Vocational barriers				
Not having qualifications, experience, skills	78 (33)	56 (43)	49 (40)	22 (32)
Lack of confidence	66 (28)	38 (29)	45 (35)	24 (35)
Poor quality employment support program	-	-	32 (26)	9 (14)
Non-vocational barriers				
Health condition/disability	-	-	64 (51)	35 (51)
Lack of transport	51 (22)	38 (29)	29 (23)	14 (20)
Welfare benefits	62 (27)	26 (21)	38 (31)	16 (24)
Family responsibilities	30 (13)	11 (8)	21 (17)	6 (9)
Caring for others	11 (5)	8 (6)	13 (10)	9 (13)
Financial difficulty/debt	-	-	29 (23)	13 (19)
Lack of access to mental health services	-	-	31 (24)	8 (12)
Lack of access to health services	-	-	19 (15)	8 (12)
Housing insecurity	-	-	18 (14)	11 (16)
Lack of family help	32 (14)	17 (13)	17 (14)	5 (7)
Structural barriers				
Lack of jobs	86 (37)	62 (48)	43 (34)	29 (42)

Appendix I

Experiences of discrimination at Wave 1 and Wave 2 by employment status at Wave 2

	Employed (n = 77)		Not Employed (n = 120)	
	Wave 1 n (%)	Wave 2 n (%)	Wave 1 n (%)	Wave 2 n (%)
Due to disability or health condition	34 (44)	26 (34)	65 (55)	51 (43)
When looking for a job	13 (17)	14 (23)	31 (26)	31 (37)
When applying for a job	21 (27)	22 (34)	38 (32)	43 (48)
When going for a job interview	13 (17)	18 (26)	21 (18)	30 (34)



Appendix J

What participants wanted from DES at Wave 1 and what participants received from DES at Wave 2 (good/very good) by disability type, among participants who responded at both waves

Barriers	Physical (n=66)		Psychological (n=92)	
	Wave 1 n (%)	Wave 2 n (%)	Wave 1 n (%)	Wave 2 n (%)
Suggestions about suitable work	41 (62)	27 (53)	55 (60)	54 (68)
Support once you have a job	37 (56)	24 (80)	54 (59)	36 (60)
Support to feel confident	34 (52)	34 (60)	56 (61)	58 (67)
Help applying for a job	39 (59)	27 (60)	49 (53)	44 (62)
Help preparing for a job interview	29 (44)	25 (61)	46 (50)	42 (61)
Assistance with Centrelink	33 (50)	27 (55)	43 (47)	44 (60)
Help finding a training course	29 (44)	20 (61)	45 (49)	33 (54)
Help me participate in decisions	19 (29)	32 (65)	30 (33)	52 (66)
Help with financial costs of gaining work	-	28 (62)	-	45 (69)
Support financial costs of training	-	24 (65)	-	34 (59)
Help talk to employers about wages and conditions	-	18 (67)	-	19 (42)

Note. Percentages differ based on number of responses to each item

Appendix K

MHI-5 and PWI scores by Wave 1 and Wave 2 employment status

Table K1. Mental Health Inventory (MHI-5) scores by employment status at both waves

	Employed		Not Employed	
	n	Mean	n	Mean
Wave 1	90	56	244	49
Wave 2	77	60	116	46

Table K2. Mental Health Inventory (PWI) scores by employment status at both waves

	Employed		Not Employed	
	n	Mean	n	Mean
Wave 1	95	58	246	49
Wave 2	75	65	106	45



Contact us

Improving Disability Employment Study (IDES)

Disability and Health Unit, Centre
for Health Equity Melbourne School
of Population and Global Health
The University of Melbourne Parkville
Victoria 3001

 ides-study@unimelb.edu.au