



Autism, disability, and the National Disability Employment Strategy

Awaiting lift from a rising tide.

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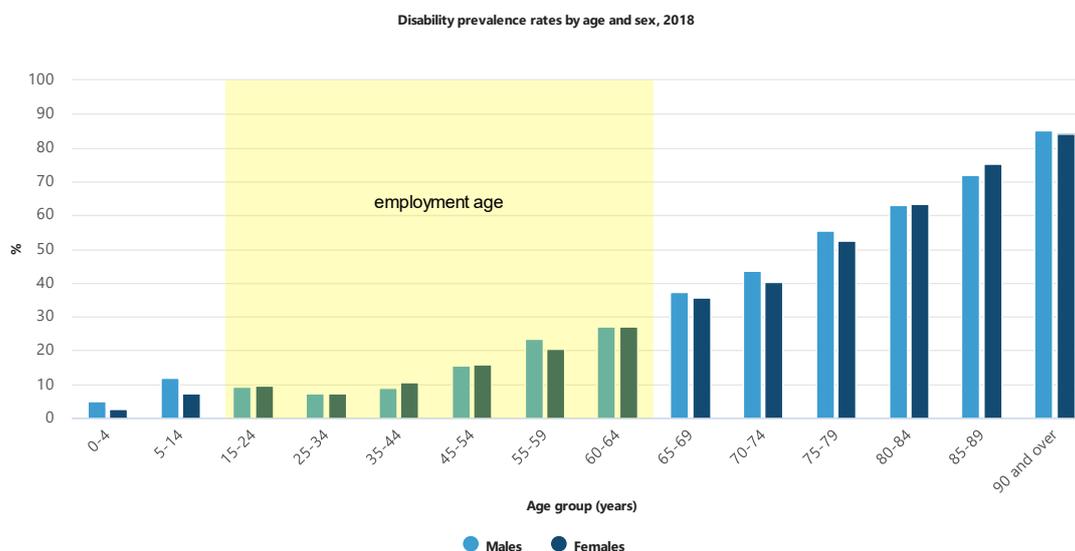
AUTISM, DISABILITY AND THE NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY

Introduction

[DSS's Consultation Paper](#) points to national statistics saying, “one in five Australians, around 4.4 million people, live with disability”. This statistic is spectacularly useless in the context of employment. It includes many people for whom employment is not an issue in their lives, particularly the high proportion of people with disability who are past retirement age.

The ABS goes on to say “17.7% of the population, down from 18.3% in 2015”.

Disability rates vary in many ways. People with disability are a much smaller proportion of working age people compared to the level of disability in the retired or aged part of the community: The rate is lower for younger people, rising with age from 7% in 25-24-year-olds to 26.9% of 60-65-year-olds, and increasingly higher for people over 65 years of age.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2018

The Consultation Paper says, “It will take a holistic approach to disability employment ...”. We could not find a reason for taking this approach, and we are aware of numerous reasons why it has not been successful in the past. We feel that different approaches are needed for different types of disability. Unless the diversity of the disability sector is recognised and addressed in a national disability strategy, parts of the disability sector will not benefit.

The paper says, “employment and financial security continues to be an important issue for people with disability”. Government and its strategy should recognise that “employment and financial security” are part of social and economic rights, positive rights for all people, including people with disability. It is more than “an important issue”: social and economic rights are among the earliest and most fundamental international human rights in Article 12 of the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). The

NDS is meant to take a human rights approach: it should do so in relation to “employment and financial security”.

The discussion paper indicates that government will persist with its holistic disability employment strategy so the disability sector can expect the results will be the same, that is ongoing poor employment outcomes with little or no discernible improvement for people with disability.

Disability employment is not a holistic challenge. The disability sector is complex and distinct issues in different parts of the sector, and for distinct disabilities need to be recognised. Respected and addressed separately.

Sadly, the holistic approach described in the Consultation Paper is overly simplistic.

The strategy has already achieved its goals since there are no actual targets or quantifiable outcomes.

The priority should be increasing actual employment of people with disability across the disability sector in Australia.

The Consultation Paper has far too much talk about things they “think” will increase employment of people with disability. A ten-year strategy or plan needs to roll out evidence-based programs that achieve measurable outcomes. If it can’t do that, its initial steps need to create the evidence it needs to develop evidence-based plans and programs.

In 2018:

- 53.4% of people with disability were in the labour force, compared with 84.1% of people without disability.
- Just over one quarter of people with profound or severe disability were participating in the labour force, compared with just over half of all people with moderate or mild disability.
- Of people with disability in the labour force, there was no significant difference in the employment rate between those with profound or severe disability and those with moderate or mild disability.

...

In 2018, there were 1.1 million Australians with disability (53.4%) aged between 15-64 years participating in the labour force, compared with 84.1% of people aged 15-64 years without disability. Just under half (47.8%) of people with disability in this age group were employed, compared with 80.3% of people without disability.

While the proportion of people with disability in the labour force hasn’t changed over the past ten years, the proportion of those who were employed decreased from 50.0% (1.1 million people) in 2009 to 47.8% (984,200 people) in 2018.

From <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/disability-and-labour-force>

The labour force participation rate was 38.0% among the 94,600 people of working age (15-64 years), living with autism spectrum disorders. This is compared with 53.4% of all working age people with disability and 84.1% of people without disability.

The unemployment rate for people with autism spectrum disorders was 34.1%, more than three times the rate for people with disability (10.3%) and almost eight times the rate of people without disability (4.6%).

From <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/2018>

In 2009, the labour force participation rate for people with autism was 34%. This compares with 54% labour force participation rate for people with disabilities and 83% for people without disabilities.

From
<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/4428.0main+features72009>

The following table is a summary of ABS SDAC labour force data for people with disability from 2009 to 2018.

	2009	2012	2015	2018
In the labour force		percentages		
Employed				
Full-time	31.0	28.8	18.8	28.3
Part-time	19.1	19.0	26.2	19.6
Underemployed		4.7	5.8	4.8
<i>Total employed</i>	<i>50.0</i>	<i>47.7</i>	<i>45.2</i>	<i>47.8</i>
Unemployed	4.2	5.0	4.1	5.5
<i>Total in the labour force</i>	<i>54.3</i>	<i>52.8</i>	<i>49.4</i>	<i>53.4</i>
Not in the labour force	45.7	47.3	50.8	46.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Unemployment rate (%)	7.8	9.4	8.3	10.3
Participation rate (%)	54.3	52.8	49.4	53.4

Basically, the participation rate hasn't changed, and the unemployment rate increased 32% over the 9 years.

The NDS 2010-20 was not successful in relation to improving employment for people with disability.

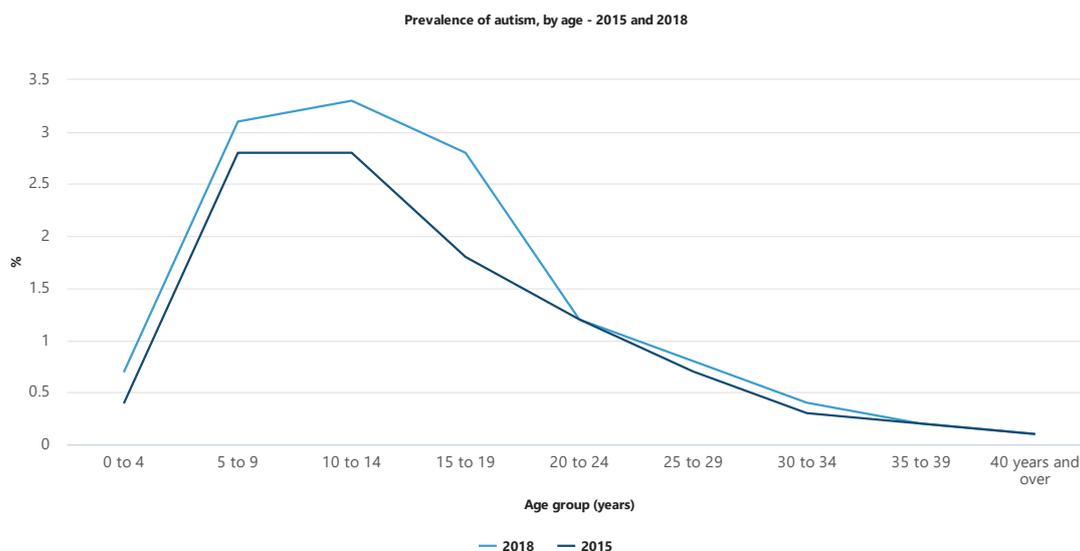
Employment and Autistic Australians

Autism is a distinct disability. The ABS reported

In 2018:

- there were 205,200 Australians with autism, a 25.1% increase from the 164,000 with the condition in 2015.
- males were 3.5 times more likely than females to have the condition, with prevalence rates of 1.3% and 0.4% respectively.

Among Australians with disability, Autistic Australians have an atypical age distribution: over 50% of Autistic Australians were aged under 15 years in 2018. A high proportion of Autistic Australians are not yet of working age.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2018

The age distribution of Autistic Australians varies considerably from disability in general (see above).

The ABS's figure shows the biggest growth in just 3 years from 2015 to 2018 was in the 15-24-year-old age group. This growth, the rising tide of Autism, will expand into the 15- to 24-year-old age group over the next decade: expect that the rate of Autistic young adults will rise from 1.2% to over 3% of 20-24-year-olds, more than a 2.5 times increase.

Further, 85% of working age Autistic Australians are under 35 years of age. Most working age people with disability generally are over 35 years of age.

The ABS reports abysmal education outcomes for Autistic students.

Almost half the young people with autism aged 5 to 20 years (45.9%) indicated they needed more support or assistance at school than they were receiving.

People with autism are less likely than others to complete an educational qualification beyond school and have needs for support that differ from people with other disabilities. Of those with autism, 8.1% had a bachelor degree or higher, compared with 16.1% of those with a disability and 31.2% of those without disability. All people with disability and those with no disability were also more likely to have an Advanced Diploma, Diploma or Certificate III or IV than people with autism.

Without effective education, Autistic Australians have extremely poor employment prospects. This is born out in the ABS's reporting that says:

The labour force participation rate was 38.0% among the 94,600 people of working age (15-64 years), living with autism spectrum disorders. This is compared with 53.4% of all working age people with disability and 84.1% of people without disability.

The unemployment rate for people with autism spectrum disorders was 34.1%, more than three times the rate for people with disability (10.3%) and almost eight times the rate of people without disability (4.6%).

Basically, a holistic approach to disability employment ignores Autistic Australians. It is likely to leave behind the smaller percentage of people who are born with life-long disability.

Crucial parts of Australia's government, notably education, employment, health, and legal systems ignore the needs of Autistic citizens. To some extent, the NDIS is left carrying the bundle. The NDIS Minister is concerned about growing numbers of Autistic NDIS participants, effectively refugees from mainstream government services, threatening the sustainability of the NDIS.

We can applaud the international organisation, [Specialisterne](#), and projects like [the Dandelion Project](#) for demonstrating the success and benefit that specialist (cherry-picked) employment for some selected Autistic skills bring, but this targeted approach is yet to be widely applied. Projects like this serve more to demonstrate the limitations of conventional practice in HR management rather than offer general solutions for disability employment.

They are just a beginning.

Basically, education systems in Australia fail to prepare Autistic students for adult life. Schools do not prepare most Autistic student for either tertiary education or transition to employment. Many Autistic school leavers lack the skills they need to occupy themselves through their day once they leave school. The NDIS becomes their "safety net" which is why the NDIS Minister is concerned about the impact that rapidly increasing numbers of Autistic school leavers have on the NDIS's bottom line.

Questions & Responses

The Consultation Paper asked the following questions. We provide a short response to each question.

- Are there barriers or concerns for jobseekers with disability (jobseekers) not covered in this consultation paper?

Yes.

- Are there barriers or concerns for employers not covered in this consultation paper?

We expect so.

- Do you have any feedback on the proposed vision or priority areas?

The "vision" in the consultation paper is disappointing. We discuss this in a section below.

- Which actions or initiatives would best create positive change for people with disability and employers?

There is no simple answer to this. There need to be many small trials, thorough data collection, and large-scale action based on sound evidence.

- How should we report against the Employment Strategy?

Reporting should include employment and participation rates for people with disability.

The impact on and benefit to the NDIS needs to be measured and reported, including how “informal carers” are affected.

The effectiveness of each trial strategy should be measured in detail and reported accurately so that larger scale implementation of strategies is evidence-based and measured against known baselines.

Different strategies are likely to vary in their efficacy for different parts of the disability sector. Reporting should identify and report on which disability employment strategies are efficacious for which parts of the disability sector.

- How do we measure success of the Employment Strategy?

Pretty conventional cost/benefit analysis provided it is done properly, that is all costs and all benefits are considered and measured as accurately as possible.

Proposed “vision”

The vision provided in the strategy paper is

An inclusive Australian society where all people have access to meaningful work opportunities.

This vision that limits itself to “access to meaningful work opportunities”, like [the Liberal Party’s Platform](#) that emphasises giving “people access to opportunities”, fails to recognise that “opportunities” for people with disability does not result in equitable outcomes. Turning lights on for blind people, ensuring they encounter at least as many photons as anyone else so they have *equal opportunity* to see, does not achieve an equitable outcome. Ensuring people who move around in a wheelchair have the same chance as everyone else to climb stairs does not provide equitable access to the top of the stairs and beyond.

Providing Autistic people with the same access to job interviews does not result in employment of Autistic people.

Our vision is that Autistic people enjoy appropriate social and economic participation in their community. Our vision is about realised outcomes, not just opportunities that are usually more perceived than actual.

The Consultation Paper has a couple of headings of “What we think could help”. We need to act on what we *know* helps, and if we don’t know what helps then the first crucial step is to find out what works. We need vigorous, persistent, and

adequately funded research to determine what actually works and delivers outcomes.

The vision provided in this strategy is inadequate and has no prospect of delivering equitable employment, or social and economic participation, for Autistic Australians.

The associated strategy lacks measurable goals.

The strategies are too vague. For example, a strategy to “change community attitudes” has already been achieved through the government’s talk of NDIS fraud: the public now has a changed, more negative, community attitude to people with disability. The number of Autistic people has increased substantially, and their employment rate has remained relatively constant, so it could be argued that community attitudes are changing so that numerically more Autistic people are now unemployed.

Conclusion

The Consultation Paper, with its holistic approach, does not recognise that different and distinct parts of the disability sector face their own challenges. Its holistic strategy does not address the varied needs of people with disability in their efforts towards economic and financial participation. Even if it works for some, many will be left behind ... especially many Autistic Australians.

Inadequate employment outcomes follow from the failure of Australia’s various education systems to prepare Autistic Australians for post-school life. And poor participation of Autistic Australians in employment and the labour force translate to concerns over NDIS sustainability.