



Family Advocacy/Resourcing Inclusive Communities,
Community Resource Unit, Imagine More

Four Years of School to Work – 2020-2024

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July 2025

Good thinking

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Key Findings

The School to Work project is a project run by Family Advocacy Inc./Resourcing Inclusive Communities (RIC), Community Resource Unit Ltd (CRU) and Imagine More. This project aims to inspire and equip students with disability, through the support of families, to seek meaningful community-based employment. 99 Consulting progressively evaluated the School to Work project over a four year period, from July 2020 to June 2024. This report summarises the findings over the four years and highlights their implications for the future of the project and the broader work of employment for people with disability.

This project is based on two key premises:

- That anyone can work in regular employment, including people with multiple, complex challenges.
- That the support of families is vital in making this happen.

Hence it focused on up-skilling and empowering families to support their family members on the path to employment.

The project delivered a series of high-quality webinars, workshops, conferences, training and discussion groups, and provided resources which were highly valued by participants. Participants in the project included family members (approximately 55-60% of all participants) young people with disability (5%) and workers in the education sector (15%), and in the employment and disability support sectors 20%). Many participants attended multiple events, building their knowledge and confidence over the course of the project.

The key findings of this evaluation are as follows.

1. The project helped participants to strengthen or confirm their commitment to supporting young people into employment and helped them to see that this is a realistic and possible goal for young people with disability. Some may have been introduced to the idea of employment for their young person for the first time after many others telling them this would be impossible.
2. It equipped people with a unique set of tools and strategies to use in helping young people on their employment journey, and participants reported that these tools were highly valuable in opening up inspiring possibilities for young people and providing steps for them to turn their vision into reality. Participants reported that these tools gave them greater confidence to work with their young people on employment.
3. Over the four participant surveys conducted annually for this evaluation, the proportion of young people in employment increased steadily from 2% in 2021 to 37% in 2024. Among the post-school cohort engaged with the project, the employment rate increased from 45% in 2022 to 55% in 2024 with a further 23% actively looking for work. Many more had completed work experience, started a discovery process and otherwise begun thinking about their employment options.
4. Project participants commented on a sense that they are pioneering new ways of undertaking transition to employment alongside the young people, focused on employment that is not in segregated workplaces. This is particularly the case for the project activities focused on customised employment. This is not widely understood or practiced in Australia and the School to Work project is new in supporting families as the leaders in this employment process. As pioneers, families find it hard work at times because they find limited understanding in the

community of what they are trying to achieve, and limited skills and knowledge among professionals who could be their supporters. However, the rewards of employment for young people are worth the effort, and they work in the expectation that it will become easier for themselves and others over time.

The School to Work project is highly valued by its participants, and many expressed the hope and desire for it to continue and grow over time as it is the only opportunity they have found to learn and be supported to achieve employment.

1. Introduction

The School to Work project commenced in July 2020 with funding from the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Program, administered originally by the National Disability Insurance Agency and later transferred to the Department of Social Services. Run by a consortium between Family Advocacy Inc./Resourcing Inclusive Communities (RIC) in NSW, Community Resource Unit Ltd (CRU) in Queensland and Imagine More Ltd in ACT, with Family Advocacy leading the project. This project aims to inspire and equip young people, through the support of families, to seek meaningful paid employment in the community. The project was initially funded for three years to June 2023 and has since been extended to June 2024 and then June 2025.

This project is based on two key premises:

- That anyone can work in regular employment, including people with multiple, complex challenges, and that access to employment is a fundamental human right.
- That the support of families is vital in making this happen.

The project partners assume that all people have the right and capacity to participate in employment, and that nobody should be considered ‘unemployable’ because of disability. By ‘employment’ the project partners mean employment in a regular workplace or business rather than a segregated setting such as Australian Disability Enterprises. Where the words ‘employment’ or ‘job’ are used in this report, they should be understood in this way.

99 Consulting has been engaged to evaluate this project over its first four years of operation. At the end of each of the first three years we conducted a detailed evaluation that included a review of post-event feedback, an online survey of project participants, and a set of one-on-one interviews. In late 2024 we conducted a further online survey. The purpose of this annual evaluation was to capture critical learnings from the previous 12 months and make the necessary changes for the 12 months ahead.

This current report aims to bring together the key findings of these four years of evaluation, informed by the data collected over these four years and also by two short reflection sessions conducted in July 2025 with personnel involved in implementing the project. We summarise why the program was created, what it did and what the outcomes were for its participants. We then conclude with some reflections on what needs to happen next.

2. The Challenge

People with disability, including young people, consistently have lower employment rates than other people in the community. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reports that in 2018 39.6% of people with disability aged 15-24 were employed, and 22.5% of 15-24 year olds with a ‘severe or profound disability’, compared to 63.5% of 15-24 year olds without disabilities¹. People with disability were also more likely to be working part-time than those without.

Employment is a key aspect of social inclusion. People who are employed, whether in a workplace or in their own business, have access not only to income and resources which allow for independence, but also to a network of relationships and to a key source of meaning and self-worth.

Australian governments recognise the importance of employment for people with disability, as reflected in various formal strategies. *Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031* includes goals to ‘increase employment of people with disability’ and ‘improve the transition of young people with disability from education to employment.’ The NDIS also has its own employment strategy which aims to improve the way NDIS supports are used to support people to achieve their employment goals.²

The Australian Government puts considerable resources towards supporting people with disability into employment, both through funding a network of Disability Employment Services, and through NDIS-funded supports used to help people achieve employment goals. The government also puts considerable resources into funding Australian Disability Enterprises.

However, progress towards achieving these goals is slow at best. The NDIS Participant Employment Strategy 2019-22 aimed to have 30% of working age NDIS participants in employment by 2023³ but at the end of 2022 this rate was still below 20%, including people in Australian Disability Enterprises⁴.

Family members who provided input to this evaluation provided plenty of insights into the challenges they and the young people face in seeking employment. They find themselves dealing with a system in which actions on the ground often don’t match the strategic intent of high-level policy documents. They frequently report that the services established to help people with disability into employment are ineffective, and these systems are in a state of flux with ongoing reviews to both the NDIS and DES’s. Family members commented that schools and disability services frequently tried to steer them into segregated settings and that these represented the ‘path of least resistance’, with well-

¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment/employment-rate-and-type>, accessed 29 November 2024

² NDIS Participant Employment Strategy 2024-2026, sourced from <https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/strategies/participant-employment-strategy#ourprogress>

³ <https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/strategies/participant-employment-strategy>. The 2024-26 strategy does not seem to retain the numerical goal.

⁴ Employment outcomes for NDIS participants, 31 December 2022, sourced from <https://dataresearch.ndis.gov.au/reports-and-analyses/outcomes-and-goals/employment-outcomes-participants-their-families-and-carers>

resources services and easy access. On the other hand, if they and the young person they supported aspired to something other than a segregated option, support was hard to find. As one parent commented:

The School to Work project has been the only space where I've not felt coerced to put my son into a sheltered workshop post-school.

Or another told us:

I have frequently been told from teachers and professionals that my son will be best placed with an organisation such as (a provider of segregated employment).

Families who participated in this project recognise the importance of employment for young people's wellbeing and economic security but struggle to find support to achieve this goal. Hence, they feel that they are playing a lone hand. They are often not sure where to start or how to go about supporting the young person to achieve this goal and find that the supports they can get through the NDIS or DSS funded employment programs are of limited use.

This is the complex set of challenges that School to Work set out to address.

3. The Project

School to Work attempts to break new ground in supporting young people with disability to achieve their employment goals. It has had a budget of approximately \$1m per annum over its five-year duration so far. This budget supports a small team working across NSW, Queensland and the ACT as well as paying for the development and production of webinar and workshop materials, resources for participants, conference costs and the costs of running the project.

The project was based on the idea that employment outcomes for young people with disability could be improved by investing in their families, and so family members (particularly parents) were the primary target audience. It particularly aimed to reach people with higher support needs for whom the involvement of family would make a great difference to what was possible. As it eventuated, there was also strong interest from others supporting young people, including workers in the education, employment and disability support sectors. The project aims to take families, and those who support them, on a journey into employment for the young person. It is based on a theory of change as shown in Figure 1 over the page.

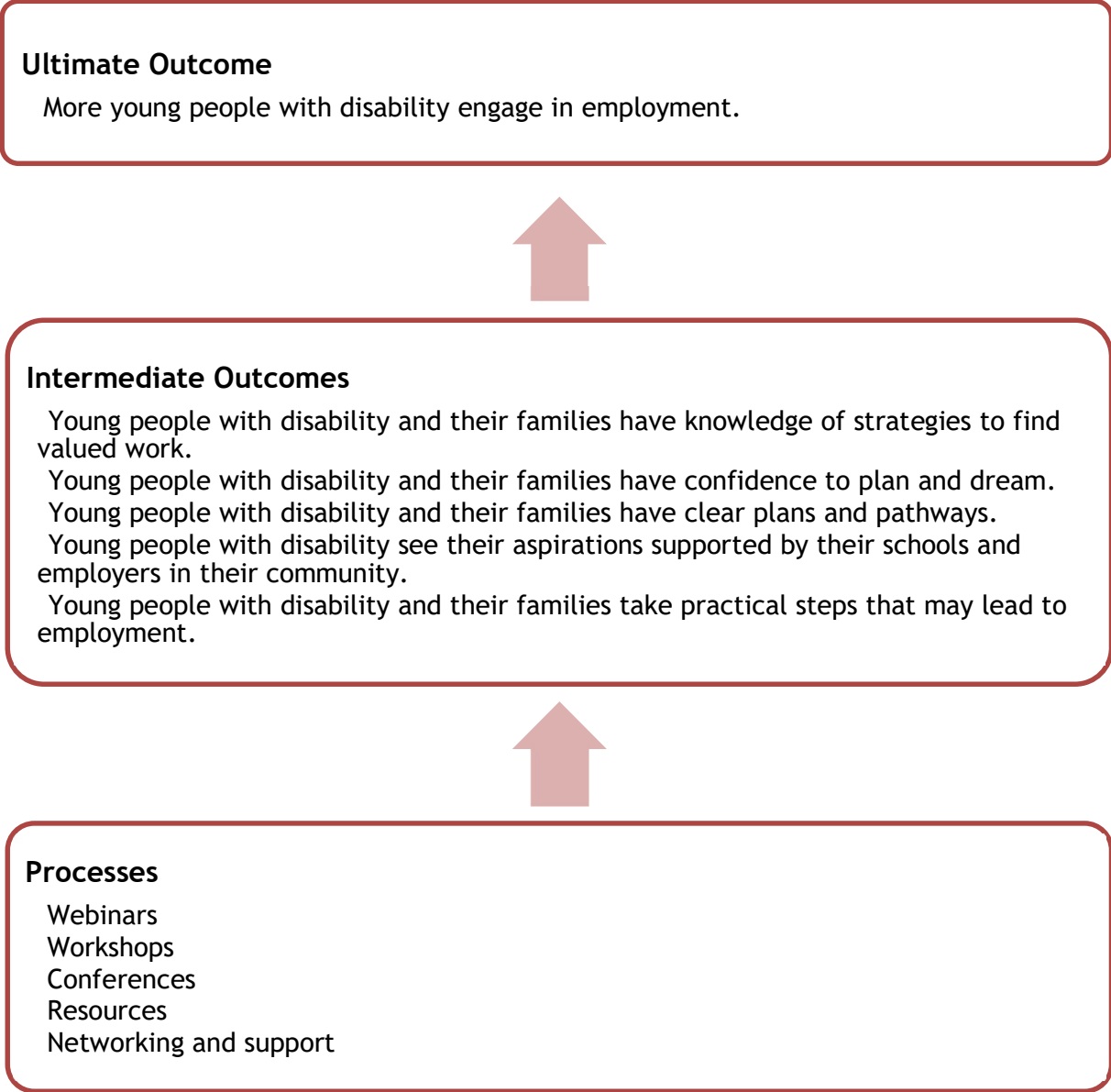
School to Work therefore helps families and others to work with young people to develop and clarify their vision, aims to increase their confidence and provides a set of tools they can use to achieve these goals. It primarily works through the provision of information and education - it aims to equip families and others with the vision, skills and tools they need to make this transition. Over time this has been extended through more hands-on activities, peer networking and one-on-one engagement.

It started out in 2020 with a set of foundational material about the transition from school to work. This was pitched at three different levels - 'Imagining Work' for people supporting young people in Years 7-8, 'Discovering Work' for Years 9-10 and 'Finding Work' for Years 11-12. The material was delivered online and as a single package in face-to-face workshops. These covered a set of basic material:

- The idea of a 'Good Life'.
- The process of developing a vision for the person to think about what they want from life.
- Discussion of the idea of 'meaningful employment' - what it is and why it's important.
- The process of brainstorming a young person's work options, starting with their passions, interests and talents and thinking about what sort of work fits them.
- Some ideas about how to help a young person present themselves positively to a potential employer.

Each of the webinars and workshops included concepts and tools families and other supporters could use to work with the young person, along with 'real life' stories from families and young people who have used this process.

Figure 1: School to Work Program Logic



This foundational material continued to be delivered multiple times over the course of the project, and as the project progressed this material was supplemented by more detailed activities focused on work experience, the Discovery process, developing visual resumes, using NDIS supports for employment and other relevant issues. Along with these broad employment-focused activity the project also developed a set of activities around Customised Employment which provides one pathway for people facing significant challenges. As the project developed in this way the participating organisations differed from one another in some of the material they delivered, while continuing to work together and support one another. The project also staged two conferences, in September 2022 and May 2023, which attracted people from all three participating jurisdictions as well as other parts of Australia and New Zealand.

The development of project activities is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Project Content

Foundational material developed 2020-21	Added 2021-22	Added 2022-23	Added 2023-24
<p>Imagining Work Webinar (Getting Started, Year 7-8)</p> <p>Discovering Work Webinar (Getting Started and The Next Steps, Year 9-10)</p> <p>Finding Work Webinar (Getting Started and The Next Steps, Year 11-12)</p> <p>Imagining, Discovering and Finding Work Workshop</p>	<p>Accessing Work Experience through School webinar</p> <p>NDIS Plan: Getting the most out of employment supports webinar</p> <p>Customised Employment Webinars</p> <p>School to Work Live Q&A Webinar</p> <p>Real Stories of Meaningful Work Webinar</p>	<p>School To Work Online workshop for School Staff & other Professionals</p> <p>Customised employment Workshops with Milton Tyree (various content).</p> <p>Customised Employment Working Group</p> <p>Work Experience: Think Outside the Gate for Families and for Professionals (2 different webinars).</p> <p>School to Work Conferences - Sydney September 2022, Canberra May 2023.</p> <p>Demystifying the Disability Support Pension (Services Australia, Webinar)</p> <p>Developing a visual resume for work workshop</p> <p>'A Journey to Meaningful Employment' webinars - Getting Started, Next Steps</p> <p>'A Real Job or Just Filling in Time? How Social Role Valorisation can help' webinar</p>	<p>Various detailed content on Customised Employment with Milton Tyree in all three locations</p> <p>Develop your own visual resume webinars</p> <p>Interactive discovery webinars for families</p> <p>Customised Job Development: Interactive follow-up sessions.</p> <p>Getting Started with Discovery: Interactive webinar</p> <p>Creating and using visual resumes for families of people with disability</p> <p>Co-creating Employment with Discovery</p> <p>Every Student Can Contribute</p> <p>Thinking About Work: Approaching employment for young people with disability workshop - 1-day conference in Townsville.</p> <p>Discovering Microenterprise - Exploring Possibilities workshop</p> <p>Employment Supporters Securing the Right Match webinar</p> <p>Discovery Discussion Group</p>

These events were attended over 1,500 times in 2020-21 and well over 2,000 times in each of the subsequent three years. This doesn't necessarily equate to 8,000 people since while some people only attended a single workshop or webinar, many engaged repeatedly over the course of the project, some attending more than five different events over the four years. Of those who completed post-event feedback forms around 55-60% were parents or other family members, around 5% were young people, 15% were workers in the education system and around 20% were other support workers including those who worked in employment agencies and those providing direct support for young people. Post event feedback is consistently positive about the quality of these events.

4. Vision, Confidence, Tools, Support

In evaluating this project, based on the theory of change described in Section 3 above, we firstly measured, in each of the four years of the project, whether families and others:

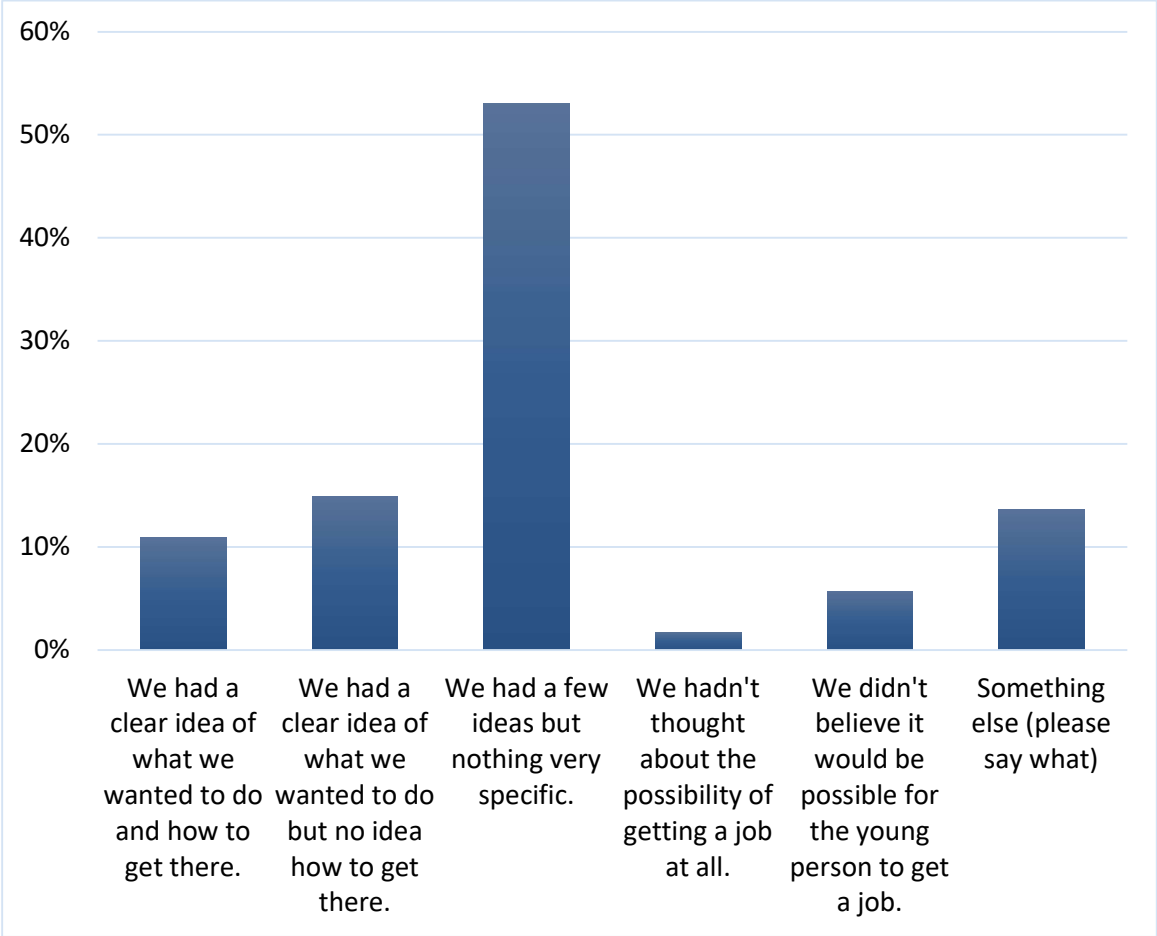
- Believed in the importance of employment.
- Could see a future in employment for the young person.
- Felt confident in the employment pathway the young person needed to take.
- Had a set of practical tools and ideas they could use to achieve this.
- Were well supported by family, school and others to help achieve these goals.

These five pre-requisites overlap and support one another rather than being separate issues.

4.1 Starting Points

The first thing we measured in each of the surveys was assumptions and mindsets they held before the commencement of the project. We asked, ‘Which of the statements below best sums up your thoughts and those of the young person you support about the possibility of getting a job before you went to a School to Work event?’ The answers for each survey are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Thoughts before they engaged with School to Work



Most participants had at least started thinking about employment, but only 11% entered the project with clear plans already in place. By far the most common response was that they had a few ideas but nothing specific, while some had a clear destination but no

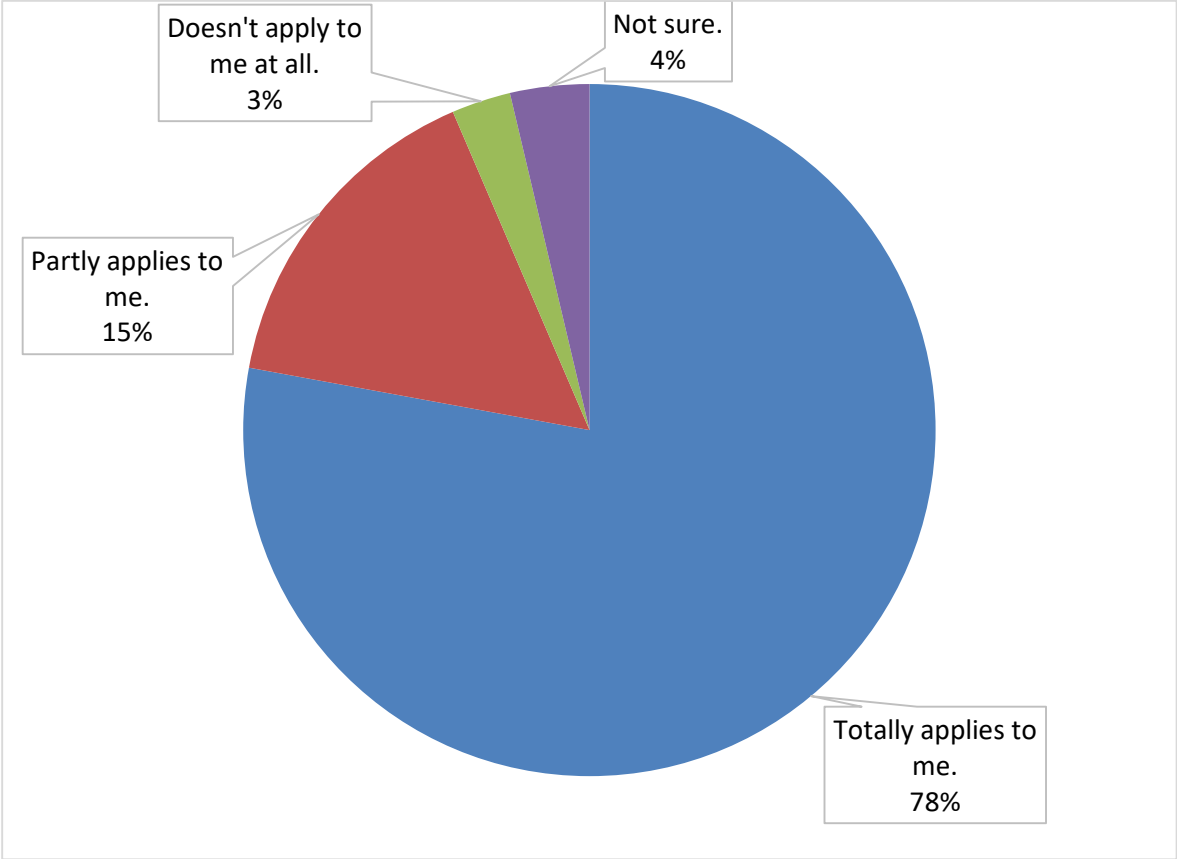
pathway to get there. Only 2% hadn't thought about it at all, and only 6% believed employment would be impossible for the young person.

Given that most were either just beginning to explore the idea, or were looking for help in getting where they wanted to go, how did the project help them along their way?

4.2 Belief and Vision

If you want to support a young person from school into employment the obvious pre-requisite is that you believe that this is a desirable and possible goal. In each annual survey, we asked people to nominate how much this statement applied to them: 'I believe in the importance of getting work in an ordinary workplace, not a workplace just for people with disability.' Results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Belief in the Importance of Employment



Across the project, over three quarters of participants said that this statement totally applied to them, and most of the rest said it partly applied. Given that (as outlined in 4.1 above) people had already at least started thinking about their employment options, this may reflect the mindset they already had, rather than being something they developed through their involvement in the project. However, the staff engaged in the project believe, based on their experience and contact with families, that at least some people adopted this mindset because of their engagement with the project.

In response to open-ended questions, many participants commented on how the project had opened their eyes to new ideas or possibilities for the young person. Below are some examples.

It highlighted to me that there are a lot more opportunities out there that we hadn't thought of or considered.

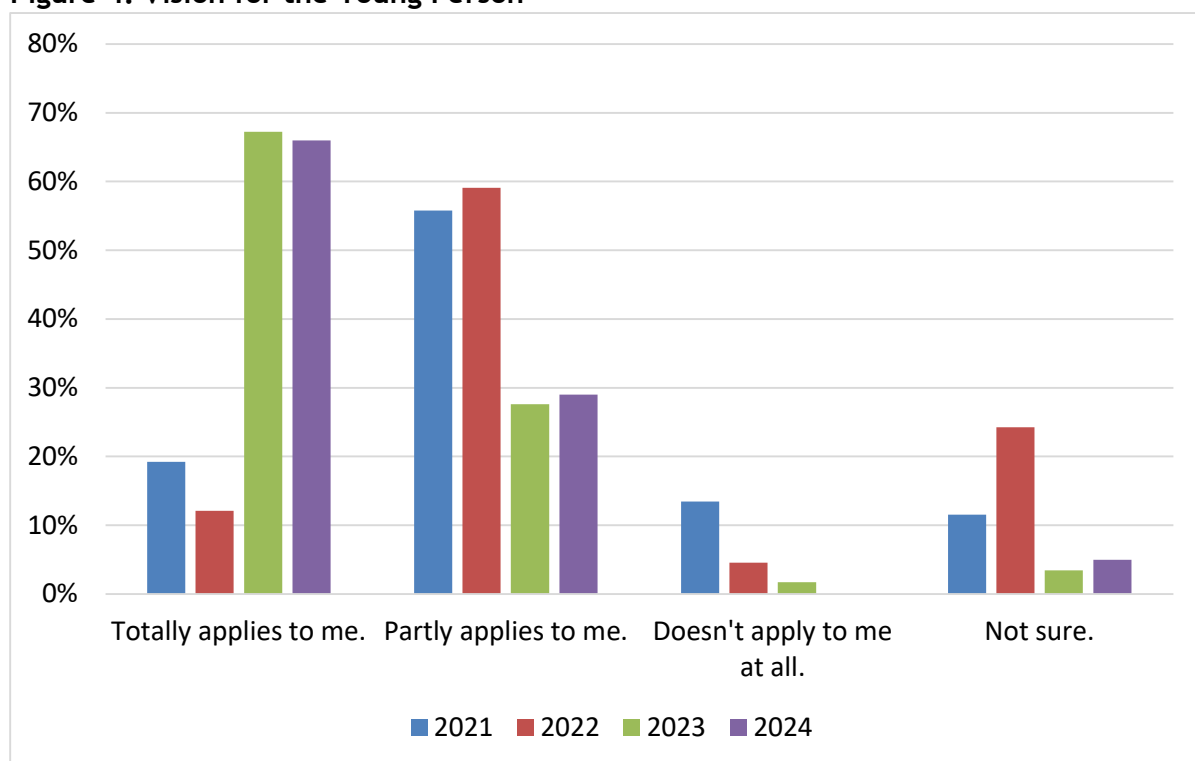
There are a lot broader range of options than I would ever have thought.

The path to an ordinary life starts with an ordinary/meaningful employment and not disability specific employment.

(I learned that) anyone is capable of finding meaningful employment.

Along with this basic level of belief, people need to have a vision for what is possible for the young person, and for what the young person wants to, or could possibly, achieve. In the different surveys, we tested out this vision through two different questions. In 2021 and 2022, we asked a very concrete question, asking how much this statement applied to them: 'I know what sort of job he/she wants to do and what it involves.' In 2023 and 2024 we changed this to a broader statement: 'I can see a future in employment for the young person I support.' The first question involves the young person having a very clear, definite plan for the part of their life directly after school, while the second is more open to a number of different possibilities that might emerge from their work with the young person. Results are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Vision for the Young Person



Asking the question in these two different ways reveals how the process of discerning the young person's work future develops. When we frame the statement in a very concrete way - knowing what sort of job the young person wants to do - only a small percentage say this totally applies to them, with a majority saying it 'partly applies'. On the other hand, when it is worded in a more general way - being able to see a future for the young person in employment - a substantial majority say this totally applies. This reflects very closely the discovery process that the School to Work project has worked through with parents,

which encourages them to help the young person to think widely, explore possibilities and identify their strengths and interests. Staff reflected that over the course of the project they sharpened their own focus on this way of thinking and devoted more resources to helping families engage with the discovery process. This doesn't necessarily result in a linear path into a single job or career (although it may for some young people) but may result in a number of options and ideas leading to potential employment which the young person may try out over time.

In the surveys and interviews, participants commented on how the project had opened up new ideas and possibilities for them and the young person, encouraged them to be creative and think more broadly. Below are some examples.

The school to work project has been so important to let families know what the possibilities are for their family member, that it's okay to dream for something better in their lives and how to make the needed changes not only in the families' mindset but that of future employers as well.

There are a lot broader range of options than I would ever have thought.

(I learned) that it is possible to achieve work related goals for people with disability if initiative and perseverance are used.

The project was well designed, and the real-world examples certainly opened my eyes to what is possible with the right support and attitude.

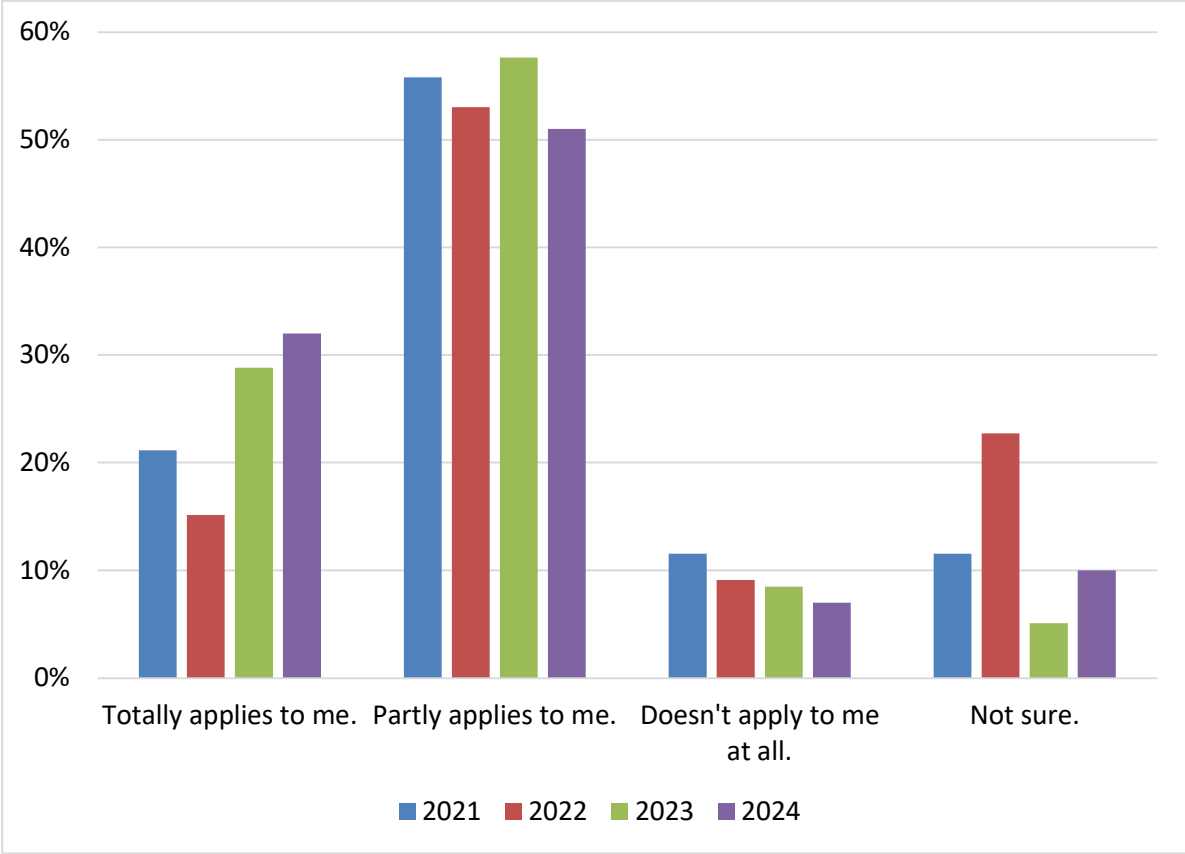
Informative, gave me fresh ideas and insight, more hopeful of avenues that have not been considered in the past as to future opportunities.

4.3 Confidence

Along with a vision, the project proceeded on the basis that families and other supporters needed to be confident that they would be able to do what is required to support the young person to achieve their vision, and that the young person would be able to achieve at least something of what they wanted. Confidence is tricky to assess because too much confidence can shade into arrogance or over-confidence, and often when you lack confidence you can 'fake it till you make it'.

To assess participants' confidence, we asked two different questions. In 2021 and 2022 we asked people to rate their agreement with the statement, 'I feel confident that they will be able to get a job'. In 2023 and 2024 we made this a little more general: 'I feel confident about the pathway the young person I support needs to take to attain employment'. The latter formulation reflects the fact that over time it became clear that 'a job' was not the only pathway since many young people were setting up their own businesses, and that there are a number of steps prior to employment. This change responds to the same line of thinking as that which prompted the change in the previous question. The results on these questions are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Confidence



This shows that a majority of people felt ‘partly confident’ rather than completely so, while not many felt this statement didn’t apply to them at all. The level of doubt probably reflects the fact that engagement with the world of work can be daunting for a young person with disability (or indeed, for many young people in general) and that parents often felt unsupported in this task as shown in 4.5 below.

Participants commented that engaging with School to Work had made them more confident and determined to pursue a pathway to employment with the young person, and to resist the pressures they felt to steer the young person into segregated employment options. The quotes below provide a flavour of this change.

It gave me some courage to go out and start the transition from school to work by organising some work experience for him. Which was a great success.

Feeling more confident.

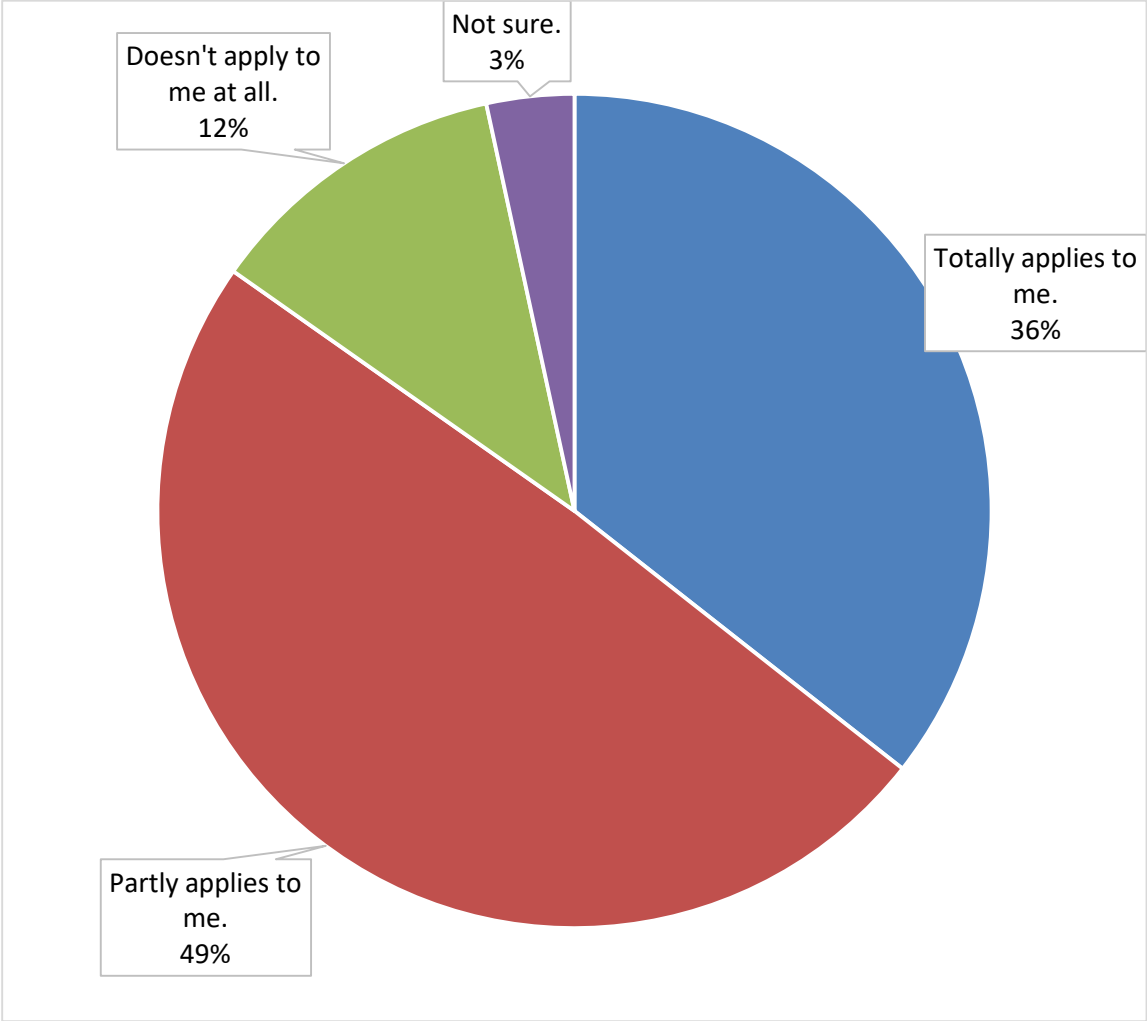
Thank you! This project has and will be very beneficial for our son & our family. We are filled with optimism, strategies and ideas and feel much more confident about his life post school.

4.4 Tools and Ideas

A third thing the project set out to achieve, particularly as it developed over time, was to give participants a set of practical tools and strategies they could use to support young people into work. We measured this in 2023 and 2024, once the project had developed to an extent that families and others had the opportunity to learn these, by asking them to

rate their agreement with the following statement: 'I have a set of practical tools and ideas we can use together to achieve the young person's employment goals.' Figure 6 shows their responses.

Figure 6: I have a set of tools and ideas



85% of project participants said this statement either totally or partly applied to them. In their comments they frequently mentioned one or more of a set of key tools that were the focus of the various project activities, including:

- Using the Discovery Process to help the young person work out what they wanted to do after they left school.
- Developing a visual resume.
- Using work experience while the young person was still at school.
- Creative use of NDIS supports to support the young person in work.
- The Social Role Valorisation (SRV) framework that underpins much of this work.
- Various strategies around Customised Employment.

They also talked about their appreciation for the use of 'real life' examples of what young people have achieved, which helped them to see what was possible and some potential pathways to get there.

Since these skills and strategies were a major content focus of the project, it is hardly surprising that a large number of comments focused on them. The following is a small sample of the comments we received.

Really love the Discovery process and think it's a very important shift in mind set for our family.

Learning the structures in detail of Customised Employment has been great for our family and also the supports our daughter employs.

How to craft a vision. That discovery is an ongoing process. To follow your family member's interests and dreams. How to create a visual resume. To connect with the greater community. Develop freely given relationships. Keep trying and good things will happen. To be brave and keep on the track of your vision. To use an SRV framework when making choices and decisions.

The practical tools really are a game changer. Have especially loved the Milton Tyree sessions (Milton is a US expert on customised employment). He has a wonderful way of presenting information through storytelling. I walked away with skills, rather than shame, from the stuff that I've not managed to get right (yet!).

It was great to hear real stories of people's experiences. I also really enjoyed hearing about the Discovery Process and about the idea of creating employment for the person with disability, rather than trying to fit them into existing employment opportunities.

The relevance of the Social Role Valorisation philosophy, the importance of starting job search with the Discovery process, the desirability of customised employment for the person with disability.

We really liked the 10 x 10 concept and we are using it.

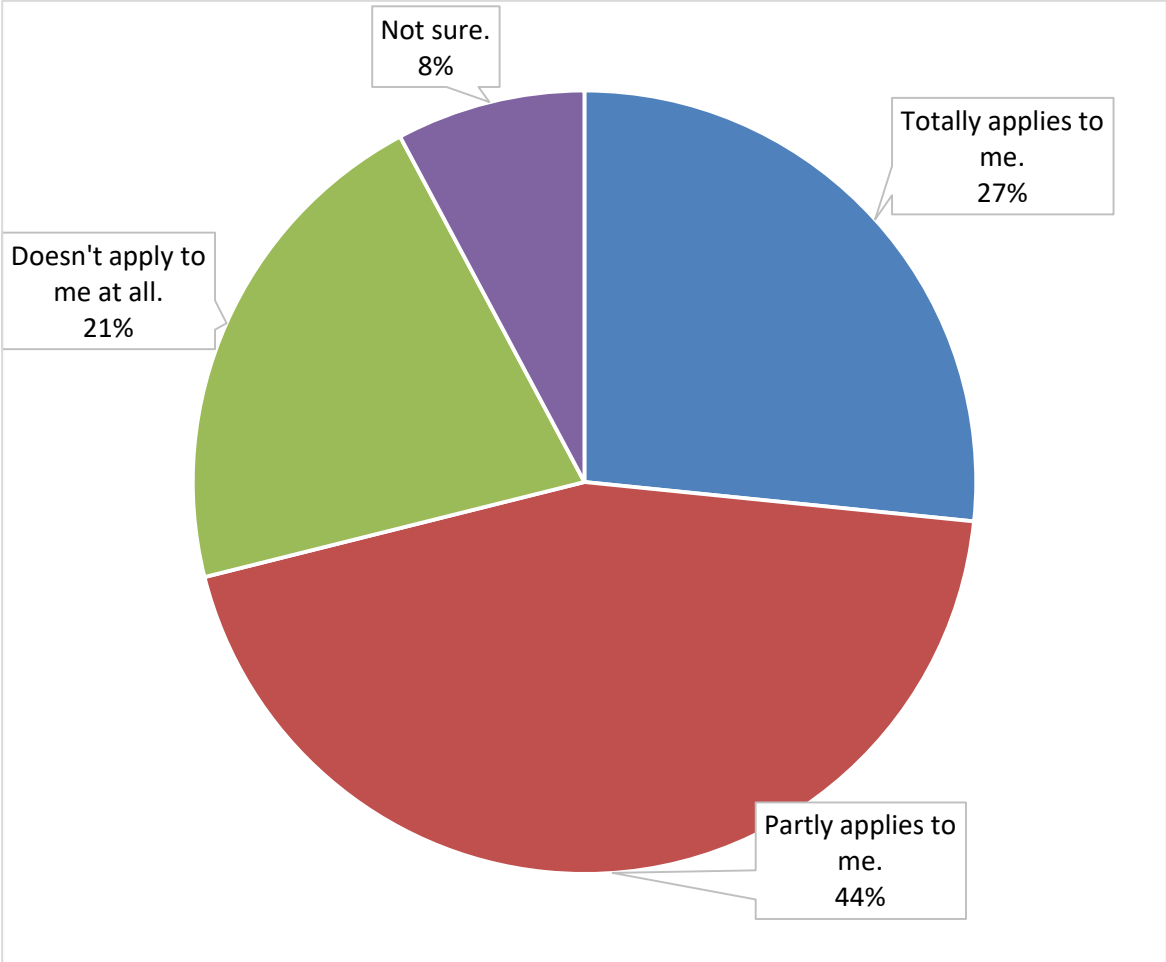
The customised employment approach provides a framework which breaks what I've always viewed as massive problems for my soon-to-be school leaver into a practical step by step process for success for employer and employee.

4.5 Support

Finally, the project acknowledges that while families need to lead the task of supporting their young person into employment, they often need help from others around them to make this a reality. The School to Work Project aims to influence this by discussing with families the supports that can be used, providing information on what good support looks like and discussing potential sources of support. It has also provided some opportunities to build peer support, both through involving families in complementary projects run by the project partners, and through opportunities provided through the project like the Customised Employment Working Group and face-to-face workshops. However, this measure is the hardest of the goals for the project to achieve, as much relies on the wider education, employment and support systems which are largely beyond the project partners' direct influence.

We measured this in all four surveys by asking people to rate the extent to which the following statement applied to them: 'We have really good support from family, school and others to help the young person achieve their goals.' Results are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: We have really good support



Across the four surveys, around three quarters of participants said this totally or partly applied to them, with the largest numbers nominating ‘partly’. This was also the question in relation to which the highest numbers indicated that the statement didn’t apply to them at all, although this was still a minority of participants.

In their comments on the survey and in interviews, people discuss their experiences, both good and bad, of seeking support from others in relation to their young person’s work future. The following are some examples.

Visions of the family, and voices from disability service provider try to keep them away from the mainstream. Hence, family's leadership becomes very important, however many families have very limited capacity.

More school support. A lot of what I was exposed to spoke about talking to the school and seeking advice from them, but as the school rep, I don't have any of the answers to questions people were posing.

I learned that there is a lot of help available and there are pathways for all people to have purpose and find work that suits their abilities, interests and needs.

(I would benefit from) more connection (face to face time) with other parents in similar situations. Got a lot from the working group last year.

Getting more providers educated and supporting customised employment approach (would help).

The workshops face to face are very valuable for networking.

I feel supported by the webinars and workshops and the skills I have learnt are valuable for helping me feel equipped to manage finding meaningful employment for my 2 young people.

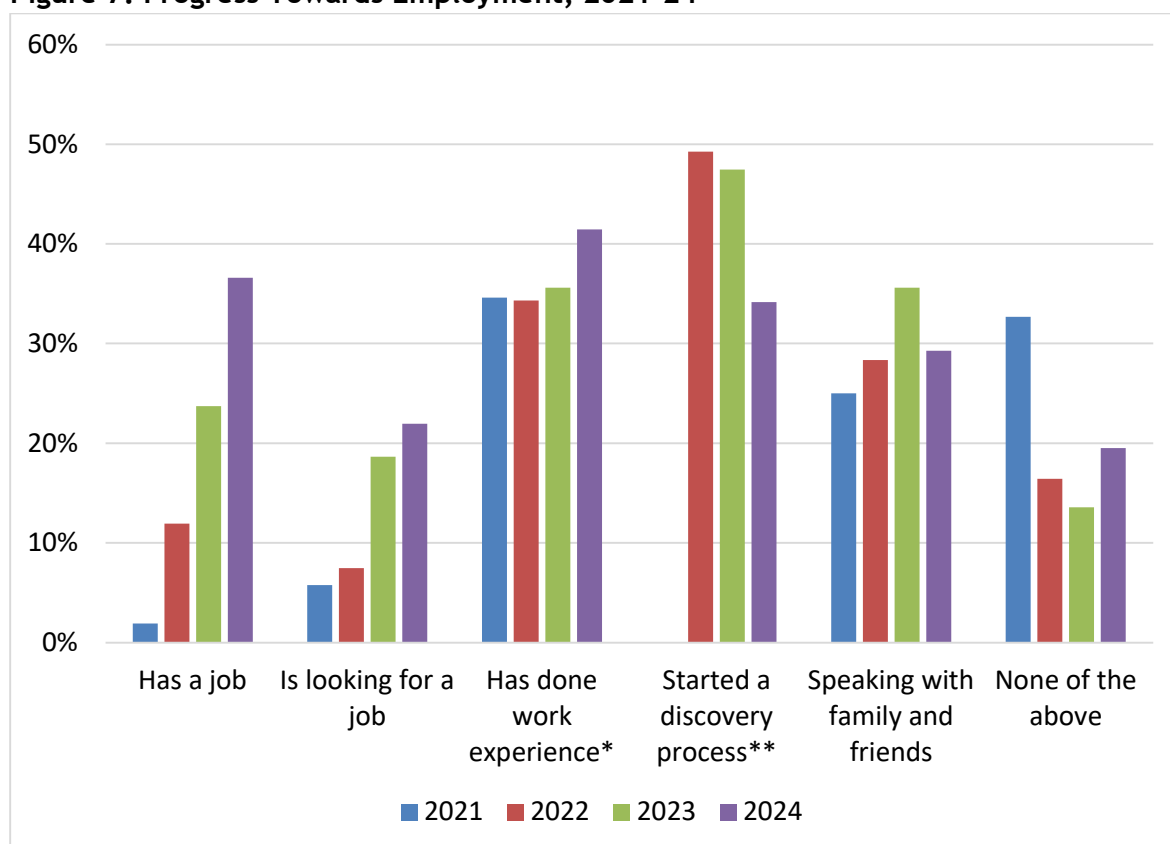
(Consortium partner) does a vital job in what they do and the staff are wonderful. I feel supported, valued and not so lonely when navigating the post-school world of employment.

5. Steps to Employment

The intended ultimate outcome of the project as envisaged in the program logic (Figure 1) is that more young people with disability engage in employment. We measured this in each of the four annual surveys, looking at both the number who were employed, and the number actively engaging in activities that lead towards employment. As noted in Section 2 above, only around 20% of working age NDIS participants are working, including those in segregated settings, and the AIHW reports that in 2018 39.6% of young people with disability were employed, and 22.5% of those with a ‘severe or profound disability’.

In each survey, we asked participants what steps their young person had taken towards employment. The results for each year are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Progress Towards Employment, 2021-24



*For 2021, this combines ‘has done work experience’ and ‘has made visits to workplaces to see what their staff do’.

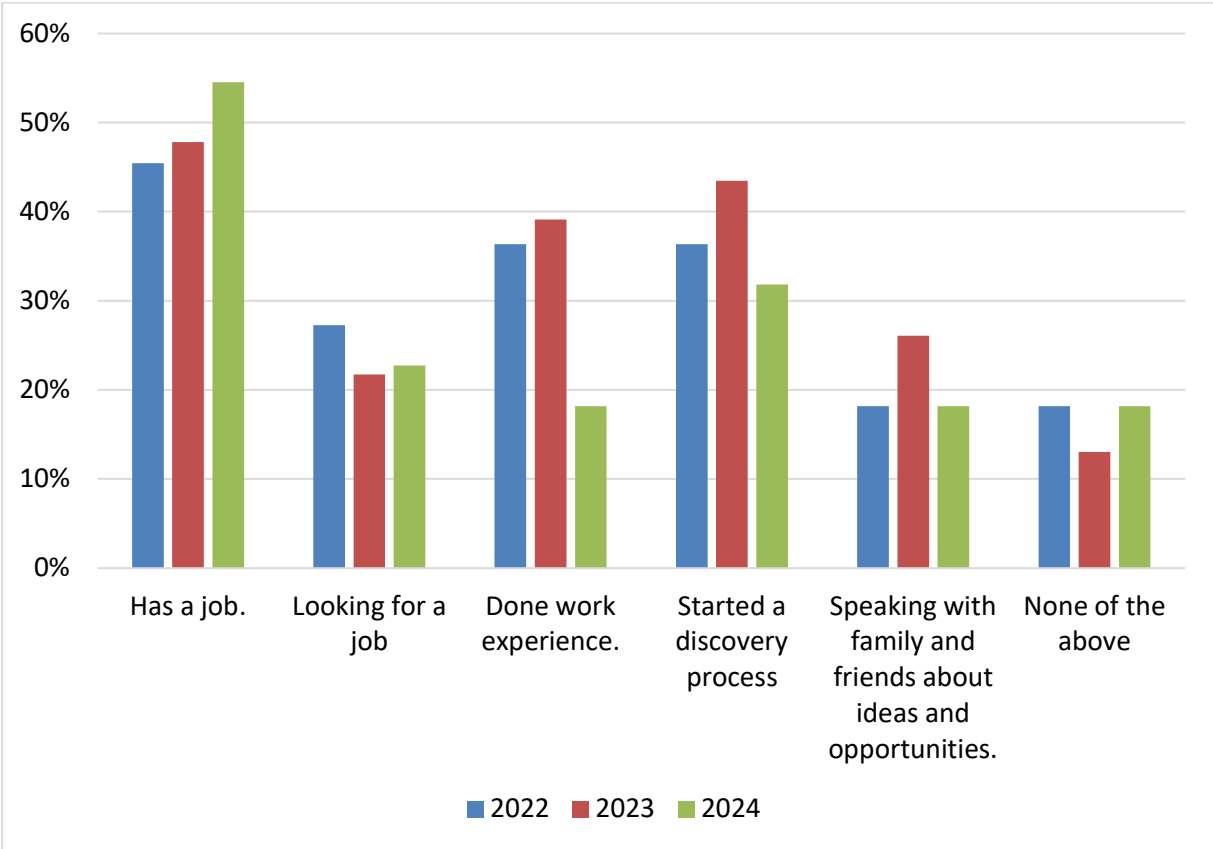
**Not asked in 2021

The headline number here is that over the course of the project the proportion of young people in work has increased from just 2% in 2021 to 37% in 2024. In addition, there has been a steady increase in young people looking for work and engaging in work experience. Substantial numbers have started a discovery process and are speaking with others about employment, and after the first year fewer than 20% of the relevant young people have yet to take any steps towards employment. These increases have come as families have better information, tools and skills to support young people along the steps to employment.

The young people who are being supported vary in age and life stage, from being in Year 7 (possibly as young as 11) to having already left school. As young people progress towards

adulthood, they are likely to get more engaged with the question of employment. Figures 8 and 9 separate out the results for those who had already left school and those who were still in school at the time of each survey.

Figure 8: Progress Towards Employment, 2022-24 - Post-school*

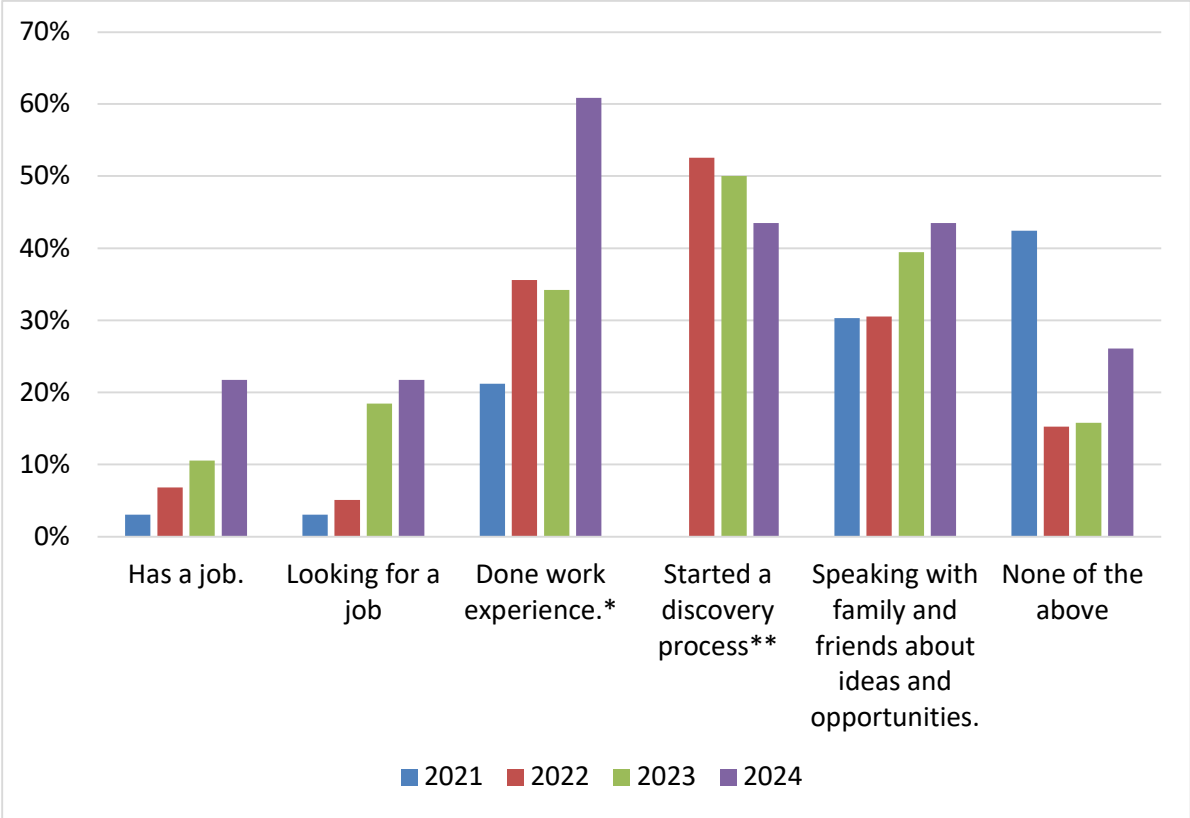


*There were only a small number of post-school young people represented in the 2021 survey, compared to 11 in 2022, 23 in 2023 and 22 in 2024

The proportion of this cohort in work has gradually increased from 45% in 2022 (the first survey in which this cohort was sufficiently represented to be meaningful) to 55% in 2024, with over 20% in each year looking for work and others engaging in other ways.

While the proportions in work and looking for work while still in school are predictably lower, there has been a more substantial increase in participation by this cohort over the course of the project, with numbers in work increasing from 2% to 22% and those looking for work increasing from 5% to 22%. The proportion who have done work experience has also increased substantially, from 21% in 2021 to 61% on 2024. This early engagement is critical to later success as it builds the confidence and identity of the young person as someone who can work and helps others to understand what is possible for them.

Figure 9: Progress Towards Employment, 2021-24 - school years



*For 2021, this combines ‘has done work experience’ and ‘has made visits to workplaces to see what their staff do’.
 **Not asked in 2021

Clearly, the project, within its limited resources, is making a significant contribution to helping young people with disability to make a successful transition from school into employment.

6. Staff Reflections

The staff reflection was carried out in July 2025 and took place in two groups, one with staff who had worked directly on delivering the project, and one with the CEOs/EOs of the three partner organisations. All three CEOs and most of the staff had been engaged with the project since its commencement in 2020, and all had read the evaluation material including an earlier draft of this summary report. Four key themes came out of these discussions.

The project's unique niche

They reflected that there is nothing new in supporting people with disability into employment. However, four things set this project apart.

- It operates on the basis that nobody is 'unemployable' and particularly seeks to work with the families of young people who face complex challenges.
- It is focused on empowering families to take leadership of the process of helping young people to make the transition from school to work. Most programs appropriately focus on the person with disability themselves without the input or involvement of their families. However, most people, especially young people, live within a supportive network of family and friends who are the first people they rely on when they need help, know them well and can more readily identify their interests and conditions for success. School to Work actively engages these and equips them to take a central role in supporting the transition to employment.
- It steadfastly rejects any approach which segregates or singles out people with disability, whether by channelling them into 'disability-only' workplaces or training programs or steering them away from employment altogether.
- The focus on customised employment as a pathway for some people is a strong point of difference for this project. Although customised employment is widely practiced in other countries and is not entirely new in Australia its approach is not widely understood here and few if any services are able to support people through it. This means that where in other nations people with disability and their families can rely on a network of services and an established set of practices, in Australia it falls to families to advocate for and lead this process.

Learning and Growth

While the intent of the project has remained the same throughout the five years of its delivery, they discussed having learned as they went along, expanding and improving what the project offered. This included the developments discussed in Section 3 of this report, moving from a single set of information workshops to a more diverse, focused set of workshops on specific topics with more hands-on content, including content around the discovery process, visual resumes, work experience, using NDIS funds, and customised employment. It also included shifting the focus from a 'theory-heavy' approach to information provision to one which included more story-based communication and practical examples to show how the theory played out.

To some extent it was always intended that the project would change over time. However, the specific shape that these changes took was guided by participant responses, both through the formal evaluation and through informal feedback and responses from participants.

Pride in Success

The team reinforced the finding of this evaluation that the project has been successful in achieving its goals. Some of the achievements highlighted by the team include:

- It has inspired families with a vision for employment for their family members.
- It has given them practical tools to achieve this, and they are seeing many families use the tools and benefit from them.
- They are seeing some of the young people whose families have engaged with the project move into employment or their own businesses and seeing the benefits the young people get from this.

This represents the beginnings (on a small scale) of the acceptance of high expectations for employment for people with disabilities in Australia. They commented that at the start of the project they struggled to find relevant Australian examples of young people in work, but over time they have seen more young people in valued work roles and able to share their experiences in various ways. This then makes it easier for others to see this as possible for them.

They are also seeing outcomes that reach beyond the direct impacts on families. They have seen strong interest in the project and the thinking behind it from many people in governments and services and are seeing some others start to take up the ideas behind customised employment.

Systemic Barriers

The project partners talked in our reflection about how much interest the project has generated in the world of disability employment. The project partners have been invited to discuss the project and its contribution to employment in a wide range of contexts, to the extent that they have had to be selective about which ones to accept to avoid overstressing limited project resources.

Despite this interest, they have found a wide range of systemic barriers to the project itself, and to young people achieving employment.

For the project, after the first three years the funding has been extended three times for a year each time. This has allowed the project to continue to deliver but has not allowed for long-term planning or a more strategic approach.

The initial plans for the project envisaged that schools in particular would be active partners, linking families in with the project activities. In the event, they found that while the project attracted a lot of interest from teachers and support staff in schools who enrolled to attend activities themselves, this rarely translated into information being passed on to families and even less to active encouragement of their participation.

This reflects the broader sense many families expressed of being left on their own to deal with employment. The project partners reflected that there remains a strong and highly influential view within the education, employment and disability support sectors that employment is not a realistic option for many people, and a tendency to steer young people into segregated activities. These activities are well resourced and often well-known and can provide an 'easy' option for a young person post-school. By contrast, employment support can be hard to find. For example, it is particularly hard to find services in Australia that have the skills to support young people through the process of customised employment. If the families don't drive it, it doesn't happen. This contrasts

with nations such as the United States, where customised employment is built into legislation and surrounded by a system of professionals and services who are skilled at making it happen.

All this contributes to a sense that this work is still in its infancy. Some young people and their families have used the tools highlighted in this project to access employment, and there are some professionals around Australia who understand the concepts and have supported young people to use them. However, these are still small in number, and there is a lot of work to be done to make such practices widespread and easy to implement.

7. What Can Happen Next

At the time of writing, the funding for the School to Work project runs to the end of June 2026. It's not clear at this point what will happen after that date.

Participants are consistent in saying they would like to see the project continue. Some of the words to this effect are quoted in other sections of the report. Participants comment that the project is unique in their experience, that they have never heard information presented in this way before and that it represented a 'lightbulb moment' or an affirmation of what they had been working their way towards on their own. As one participant said:

(School to Work) has done a fantastic job. It has definitely been a light in what is a fairly untapped area - (it) has really filled a need in the community. Top job, keep going!

Or this one.

It's really important to have this in place and ongoing - we might have given up without (School to Work) in the mix supporting it. It gave us a clear plan and focus, and the knowledge that there was support for what we were trying to do.

Others repeat this theme.

Please keep doing it. Please keep getting the message and conversation out there.

It needs to keep going and funding bodies need to know how crucial the school to work project is.

There is also a strong sense among the project partners that the work is still incomplete and there is still a lot more that they would like to achieve. A bedrock for this is continuing to equip families to take leadership on this issue. There are many families who could still benefit from this work, and new generations of young people are constantly reaching the age at which it becomes relevant. However, future considerations go beyond extending the project in its current form and into consideration for how to build on the beginning they have made.

7.1 National Focus

The three project partners are members of the National Alliance of Capacity-Building Organisations (NACBO), which also has member organisations in other States. In framing the project back in 2020, the partners decided to limit it to the three jurisdictions, rather than take on the larger and more complex task of delivering the project nationally. This means that while a small number of families and professionals have participated from other States and even from overseas, the benefits of the project have overwhelmingly flowed to families in NSW, Queensland and the ACT.

It has always been in the thinking of the project partners that over time this work could expand to other parts of the country, in collaboration with other NACBO members. The uncertain and short-term nature of funding for this work since 2023 has not allowed for this and has instead favoured maintaining the current scope. However, the issues experienced by families in these three jurisdictions are almost certainly also experienced elsewhere in Australia, and the responses offered by School to Work are applicable anywhere.

7.2 Building a Supportive Environment

The leadership of families in supporting family members into employment would be much easier if there were good quality supports available to families and young people to achieve this goal, and a policy and funding environment that prioritised it. Such an environment would not negate the importance of family leadership but would make the task much easier for many more families. This is reflected in some of their comments:

The hard thing is you get lots of good advice and information about how to do things and then you have to do it yourself. It's hard for parents, especially if they have to work.

At the moment the NDIS is not ready to respond - things like career planning with young people with disability, job coaching and Customised Employment have no framework (within the Australian service system) or skilled workforce around them, so people have to forge their own path.

There are four domains in which there is scope for significant improvement:

- Schools and the wider education system in supporting young people to access work experience and to work towards post-school employment.
- Employment services including Disability Employment Services (DESs) and the policy architecture under which they are funded, to improve their skills and focus on supporting people into meaningful employment, working in partnership with families.
- The disability support system, including the NDIA and individual service providers, to have a clearer framework around employment support including supporting customised employment and job coaching.
- Employers, big and small, to understand the value people with disability can add to their workplaces and think creatively and flexibly about how best to use their skills.
- For all of these stakeholders to understand and use Customised Employment as one evidence-based approach to achieve employment.

Work in these domains is not within the scope of School to Work as currently conceived and is beyond the direct capacity of the project partners or the broader NACBO membership. However, there are lessons from the project that could be taken up in all these domains to build a more supportive system around families and young people.

It is helpful in sparking the thinking in these wider systems to stress the cost-effectiveness of supporting young people into employment and building a culture where employment of people with disability is an expectation that is supported and accepted practice. The cost of supporting a young person and their family to go through a discovery process, start

along a career path and succeed in a workplace is likely to compare favourably with the cost of maintaining a segregated system, particularly when considered over the entire lifetime of a young person leaving school. At the same time, the benefits to young people in improved income, independence, social relationships and agency are much greater. The skills required to do this work are easily attainable and there is no reason why organisations could not be doing it right now. A few have already done so and more could follow.

8. Conclusion

This report provides a summary of four years' worth of evaluation data and qualitative input from School to Work participants. This shows that the project has been highly successful in achieving the outcomes envisaged in the program logic. Participants begin their engagement with the project already motivated to support young people into employment, and find this motivation confirmed and strengthened through their participation. When we have sought their feedback after some engagement with the program, they report that:

- They have a vision for the young person in employment.
- They have increased confidence about the pathway the young person can take into employment.
- They have a practical and highly valued set of tools to use in working with the young person, including knowing how to work through a discovery process, how to develop a visual resume, how to negotiate with the young person's school about work experience, and a bundle of tools and skills around customised employment.
- They have information about potential avenues of support, and for some they have new relationships with others who are on the same path, although finding support continues to be a challenge.

The results of these efforts can be seen over the course of the project in increasing numbers of young people entering employment, with numbers at the time of the 2024 evaluation substantially above those shown for comparable cohorts as reported by both the NDIA and the AIHW.

The project shouldn't be considered as 'finished' in any sense. Funding is still ongoing, at least until June 2026, and the project partners will continue delivering along the current lines while they are able. However, this project is only one small part of a wider set of changes which would improve the employment prospects and experiences of young people and assist more of them to make a successful transition from school to work.

The participating families have resonated strongly with the project's emphasis on employment over segregation, and on building the capabilities of families and young people. As one participant said, this project 'flips things on their head' to bring about inclusion, rather than channelling young people into segregated settings. Other participants echo this sentiment, and it is fitting to give them the last word.

A really good project that looked outside the box, and looked at what was happening, what was not working and what could be improved to centre opportunities on the person with the disability, not trying to fit them into an existing box. I take my hat off to you guys with the initiative you have, to flip things on its head.

I'm incredibly grateful, it's really, really made a difference in (our) life. It was lifesaving, standing against stigma and low expectations.

Wonderful and life changing. Thank you.