



Skilled, stable, support.

**Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry
into *Building a skilled and adaptable workforce***

***National Workforce Collaboration
September 2025***

The **National Workforce Collaboration (NWC)** is pleased to provide this response to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into *Building a skilled and adaptable workforce*.

About the National Workforce Collaboration

For the last 2 ½ years, a dedicated group of people who share a commitment to attract and retain skilled workers to the disability sector, have met monthly to devise a strategy to do so. This is the [National Workforce Collaboration](#).

Members of the NWC include individuals living with disability, disability support workers, disability support providers, union representatives and advocates. Those members living with disability are characterised by their complex health and disability support needs; and by an enduring inability to obtain or retain disability support workers with the requisite skills needed to safely provide their support.

As a group, the NWC decided that to have any chance of developing and retaining a skilled disability workforce, they would need to address such areas as skills, training, qualifications and valuing of the work by employers, care users and the community more broadly.

Most importantly, the NWC was committed to challenging the preconception that saw individuals living with disability as charity cases needing help, replacing it with a view of Australians with disability as valued and contributing members of their communities. In other words, if society views people with disability as valued members of society, it stands to reason they will view disability support work more highly and with the regard it deserves.

To date, the NWC has developed a resource rich website – whatsmyfuture.com.au – containing interviews with support workers describing what they value about the work they do; and people with disability discussing what it means to have skilled and reliable workers providing their care.

The group has also developed a national advertising campaign designed to attract and retain workers to the disability sector and has spoken publicly about the value of disability support work and the need to focus on quality rather than quantity of the workforce.

The NWC has also liaised with higher education and secondary schools discussing disability support work as a pathway for students. A consistent barrier nationally has been parents and carers of students refusing to consider the disability care economy as a viable option because there is no career pathway for this work.

Concurrently, the NWC has been facilitating a national roundtable series that canvasses what a career pathway would look like. Representatives from State and Territory Education, Human Services and Health Departments as well as the Departments of Employment and Workplace Relations, National Disability Insurance Agency and the Department of Social Services have contributed and valued the work the Collaboration is undertaking.

Any consideration of skilled workforce development and retention must clearly consider the essential skills needed; training that is provided; how workers are valued for the vitally important work they do; and what a career path for disability support workers might look like.

While certification of sorts exists for support workers entering the disability support workforce this is currently not perceived as fit for purpose. Furthermore, the valuing of workers and development of a career path has not received the attention this critically important work deserves.

The numerous individuals, families and carers, independent disability support workers, organisations and government departments we work with have directly influenced the NWC's work to promote people with disability as valued and contributing members of society; and the attraction and retention of a skilled disability workforce.

To date we have engaged intensively with over 1,500 key stakeholders, all of whom are invested in improving outcomes through quality training and viable career pathways within the disability sector. The information shared in these engagement activities informs this submission.

The need for a skilled and adaptable disability workforce

One of the most urgent needs for people with disability and particularly those living with complex health and disability support needs, is the dearth of disability support workers suitably skilled and consistently trained in delivering the care they require.

Whether a younger Australian at risk of placement in residential aged care, or individuals with complex care needs living in the community, finding and retaining skilled workers is a continuous, frustrating and often desperate task for people living with disability.

From interviews, roundtables, surveys and other work the NWC has undertaken, the negative view of disability support work that currently predominates is the biggest challenge here.

Instead of seeing this critically important work as an opportunity that can lead to varied and satisfying work opportunities, disability support work is too often seen as a short term, stopgap until something better comes along. This is exacerbated by the lack of a consistent approach across States and Territories.

Members of the NWC who live with disability, together with our support worker and support provider members, have personal experience of this.

The lack of skilled workers is so severe that one of our members was left sitting in her powered wheelchair over a long weekend without any assistance to access food, water or the bathroom. The truly shocking case of Anne Marie Smith, who was left sitting in a cane

chair and died from septicaemia as a result of this neglect, is one of too many instances where the lack of a skilled workforce has resulted in systemic neglect with deadly results.

Unfortunately, through our engagement activities, we have heard that the lack of consistent training combined with negative stories played out in the media, in concert with a lack of real solutions, has perpetuated a culture of fear resulting in skilled workers leaving the sector or individuals not wanting to enter in the first place.

For disability support providers, it's a constant battle to fill shifts with workers with particular skill sets. Because of the chronic shortage of workers, disability support workers are choosing to work for several providers but take only those shifts that suit them.

As a sector that is renowned for casual employment, many providers are informed by the worker that they cannot attend a shift at the last minute, resulting in people with disabilities being without care or being provided care by someone who does not have the skills required to support them adequately.

Also concerning is that, as one union's biannual survey of their members revealed, three quarters of the 1,500 support workers surveyed are thinking of leaving the sector. This is despite many workers responding strongly with the positives of their work, including building relationships with clients, learning new skills, and working in a growing sector with opportunities.

Workers are considering leaving the sector not just because of poor pay, but because they feel undervalued and disrespected by their employers.¹

In fact, the top three reasons workers gave for wanting to leave the sector were: workplace stress (56%), feeling undervalued (55%) and staff shortages and turnover impacting clients (53%). Lack of consultation from management and excessive workload also ranked highly amongst those workers planning to leave. The top 3 reasons were consistent between public and non-public providers.²

With a national shortage of workers in the aged care and disability care economies already concerning, evidence that the skilled workers we do have are considering leaving the sector is equally alarming. A wage increase and stronger safeguarding in the aged care sector has outstripped those provided by the disability sector and only exacerbated the exodus of disability support workers to aged care.

As this situation demonstrates, it's not only attracting quality, skilled workers to the disability sector that is paramount... retaining these workers is equally important.

¹ United Workers Union *Workforce Crisis in Disability, Survey – Final analysis*, 2023: 3.

² Op.Cit: 4.

The best resources to improve school student outcomes

Draft recommendation 1.1

Invest in a single national platform for all teachers to access lesson planning materials

While a single national resource bank of lesson planning materials sounds a positive way of encouraging development of foundational skills, such a national resource runs the risk of becoming all that is considered, with no allowance made for other, innovative approaches that may be developed in response to unique and local circumstances.

Rather than uniform lesson planning materials that risk stifling innovation and prevent consideration of local concerns, overarching principles that inform the shape of lesson planning and lesson planning materials should be produced. These would provide enough room for educators to respond to unique circumstances and build on these to produce innovative workforce outcomes. Educators should also be encouraged to log innovative lesson planning materials they have developed, so that the body of work the platform contains is being continually built on, updated and refreshed.

The NWC have found that without an identifiable career path, parents of school leavers will not consider disability support work as an option but will only consider and encourage their children to pursue those work options that do have an identifiable career path, such as nursing or teaching. Development of an identifiable career path for disability support work must therefore be a priority for building a skilled and adaptable workforce that Australians with disability can have confidence in.

Furthermore, in our engagement with education departments nationally, a common theme has been that educators and career counsellors struggle to understand and articulate what disability support work is. And because there is no clear alignment between training and career pathways or opportunities, educators and career counsellors fail to recognise the transferable skills and plethora of roles and opportunities that the disability sector offers.

Building skills and qualifications for a more productive workforce

Draft recommendation 2.1

Move toward a national system of credit transfer and recognition of prior learning (RPL)

The National Workforce Collaboration supports this recommendation wholeheartedly. Recognition of prior learning including from lived experience, microcredentials (both accredited and non-accredited delivered 'in house' by providers), informal learning opportunities, and work experience that takes an apprenticeship approach to learning from highly skilled and experienced mentors, are options that our wider stakeholder research has found to be valued and effective.

Recognition of prior learning allows workers with a varied work experience to enter the workforce more quickly, addresses the national shortage of workers and enables 'learning on

the job' where people already in the sector and/or people with disability can instruct workers in how support should be delivered.

Of note, our research has found that over 95% of people with disabilities and families/carers are open to being trainers, if this meant that more people would be entering the sector with the skills and attributes required. Additionally, there was unanimous support for people with disability being formally employed and paid appropriately for their expertise and for providing this training.

Draft recommendation 2.2

Better target incentives to lift work-related training rates in small and medium enterprises (SMEs)

Rather than Certificates III and IV in disability support work that are roundly criticised for the out of date values and poor preparation they offer students, the concept of work related and on the job training provides people with disability the opportunity to offer practical training in how they prefer their needs to be met. On the job training therefore offers people with a disability the opportunity to take on a teaching role where they can engage directly with new workers and provide proactive real time learning.

Disability service providers who fit the definition of an SME may need encouragement to not only to offer on the job, apprentice style learning opportunities for workers. They should also be encouraged to employ people with disability to deliver work related training opportunities regarding particular skill sets required in disability support work.

Incorporating a team approach to disability support work as part of this training, should also be considered.

One of the core reasons workers leave the sector is because they feel isolated, undervalued and unsupported..

instead, working as a member of a team offers opportunities to learn from others, be supported when working in challenging situations and have the opportunity to debrief at the end of shifts. Given the large number of workers considering leaving the disability care economy because they feel undervalued and disrespected, working as a member of a team offers opportunities for the value of this important work undertaken by individuals, to be acknowledged by team leaders and members.

Promoting a team culture for workers not only supports improved care provision, but is also a cost effective worker retention strategy.

Fit-for-purpose occupational entry regulations

Draft recommendations 3.1 and 3.2:

Remove excessive occupational entry regulations that offer limited benefits and; expand entry pathways and streamline qualification requirements for occupations

While the NWC provides in principle support for draft recommendation 3.1 and 3.2 we urge caution if these recommendations are applied to disability support work entry regulations and qualifications.

Individuals living with complex health and disability support needs can routinely require highly skilled assistance to deliver tracheostomy care, bowel care, in dwelling catheter and/or PEG feed care...activities that have the potential to cause fatalities if managed inappropriately. Workers providing care and support to people with this complex level of need are expected to undergo the requisite training and undertake refresher training at regular intervals.

We have heard numerous horror stories where people are not sufficiently trained or supported in entry level positions to undertake complex support.

For example, one entry level worker was left to support a client who lived independently by providing the client with a PEG feed. Percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy or PEG feeding involves delivery of liquid nutrition, fluids and medication via a tube inserted directly into the stomach. It is used when a person cannot eat or swallow safely due to conditions like stroke or brain injury.

A worker not trained in how to provide a PEG feed safely poses a very real risk to the individual with disability of causing infection, bleeding, tube blockage or dislodgement, perforation of internal organs, aspiration where the liquid is inhaled into the lungs, leakage around the stoma site, et al. Rare but equally serious complications can include [blood infection](#), [anaphylaxis](#) and [death](#).

Without a coworker to assist and their employer uncontactable, the worker instead watched a YouTube video to gain some idea of how to undertake the procedure. This illustrates the significant gaps between career pathways, training and support needs that currently exists.

As other programs and systems do, the disability sector has significant sector specific expertise that has been developed and refined over many years and is highly valued. Rather than trying to cover all elements in an entry level qualification, foundational skills coupled with micro-credentials have been the preferred training option across all stakeholder groups.

Similarly, a Certificate III is not the preferred option for an entry level qualification. Most of the many people asked, believe that if mandated, this requirement alone will turn people away from the sector. This is especially the case for those such as university students, who see undertaking this work for a particular period of time only.

Far from throwing the baby out with the bathwater, the challenge in expanding entry pathways for disability worker qualifications, streamlining qualification requirements and removing excessive occupational entry regulations, is to incorporate the best aspects of this sector specific knowledge in these efforts.

Consultation and co design with people with a disability is paramount to achieving this and the NWC strongly recommends that any reworking of pathways and requirements only be undertaken in close consultation with a diverse range of people living with disability.

Further contact

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