

Social Policy and Research Centre

# Preparing for the future

## Evaluation of the Career Launchpad program for school leavers with disabilities

Deborah Warr and Sharon Bond

2023



Brotherhood of St Laurence  
Working for an Australia free of poverty



The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is a social justice organisation working alongside people experiencing disadvantage to address the fundamental causes of poverty in Australia. Our mission is to pursue lasting change, to create a more compassionate and just society where everyone can thrive. Our approach is informed directly by the people experiencing disadvantage and uses evidence drawn from our research, together with insights from our programs and services, to develop practical solutions that work. For more information visit <[www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)>.

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YouthWorX NT is a non-profit organisation that offers specialist youth training programs in the Northern Territory, Australia. It seeks to empower people and give dignity to their lives, provide job and leadership opportunities and advocate for those who do not have a voice. It collaborates with like-minded organisations to harness community effort and find new ways of providing exceptional services. For more information visit <[youthworxnt.com.au](http://youthworxnt.com.au)>.

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# Summary

This report discusses an evaluation of Career Launchpad (CL), an employment support program for young people with disability, that was developed and delivered by YouthWorX NT in Darwin. The CL program presents young people with opportunities to gain critical life and work-related skills and experience, and explore and pursue their employment goals. The evaluation shows that the CL structure and approach is strongly endorsed by its key stakeholders, who include program participants, associated employers and educators, and parents.

CL was launched in 2019. It recognises that while many young people encounter challenges in gaining employment, these are invariably amplified for young people with disability. The program responds to a service gap in transition support for young people with disabilities who are leaving secondary schooling and who are not NDIS participants. Young people in these circumstances have few options for building career paths that can enable them to lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Researchers in the Social Policy and Research Centre (SPARC) at the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) were approached to evaluate the second program cycle of Career Launchpad, which ran across 2022. The evaluation explores experiences of the program, and its outcomes, through interviews with participants (n=7), community stakeholders such as parents and representatives of schools, government services and employers associated with the program (n=8) and YouthWorX NT staff (n=3).

Program data from 2022 shows that 23 young people enrolled in the 2022 CL program, with 14 completing a Certificate I in Developing Independence, 17 participating in volunteering placements and 9 participating in work experience placements. Eleven young people gained employment and 4 were referred to other services.

## What the interviewees told us

Insights from the interviews included:

- young people reporting developing social and life skills, increased confidence and a better understanding of their talents and capabilities. For some, this combined with workplace visits and contributed to a readiness to identify and pursue career aspirations through more intensive vocational training, work experience and employment
- parents, educators and employers associated with the program strongly endorsing Career Launchpad and its value in providing much-needed transition support to young people with disabilities. The program was described as ‘a great asset to the Darwin region’
- confirming how the Career Launchpad program includes critical elements for effective school to work transitions for young people with disabilities, as identified in a review commissioned by the National Disability Service (Sheppard et.al. 2017).

**The CL program presents young people with opportunities to gain critical life and work-related skills and experience, and explore and pursue their employment goals.**



Figure 1 Young people's pathways through Career Launchpad

## What made CL effective

Key features of the Career Launchpad program are:

- **an individualised approach that builds capabilities through small achievable steps.** Young people are presented with activities and experiences that enable them to develop personal, social and employment-related skills. Learning is incremental and young people can proceed at their own pace
- **recognition that career transition for young people with disabilities takes time and can be a non-linear journey with support needs that continue beyond program timelines.** CL has the flexibility to allow participants to return to earlier stages of the program; graduated exit procedures which include referring participants to services that could support the next stage of their journey, for example, mainstream Transition to Work services; and some capacity to re-enrol participants who experienced setbacks and required support to rebuild confidence and reset their career path
- **a program model that integrates components and approaches with demonstrated effectiveness.** These are:
  - **adapting the Transition to Work (TtW) Community of Practice (CoP) four-phase model**, which combines career guidance and exploration, work preparation, workplace opportunities and post-placement support, and allows young people to work through these phases at their own pace
  - **participants completing a Certificate I in Developing Independence** to build young people's confidence and life and social skills using interactive, flexible and applied learning techniques that were successful in engaging young people who had previously struggled in academic settings
  - **applying an Advantaged Thinking approach**, which was embedded in practice and evident in the welcoming space where the program was delivered; and in the respectful, positive and empowering relationships that young people described having with peers and staff.

## Considerations for addressing some outstanding issues

Given the broad community endorsement of CL represented in this evaluation, coupled with its basis in other tested programs (e.g. Developing Independence, the TtW CoP), there is a case for the CL model to be replicated elsewhere, with a key role for YouthWorX NT in providing expertise in both implementation and good practice. The following considerations should inform future iterations of the CL model.

**Providing flexibility to extend the program beyond 12 months.** Some young people could benefit from longer involvement in an employment support program because they were not ready for employment or training at the formal conclusion of CL. Current time limits contributed to a sense of urgency among parents for young people to be placed in a job. Increased flexibility in allowing access to the program after 12 months would provide scope to tailor the program and promote job readiness for a wider group of young people.

**Measuring individual progress through and beyond programs to generate robust data.** The varying circumstances of young people and their pace of progress suggests the importance of understanding their starting points and outcomes generated from involvement in the program. This requires developing ways of assessing and measuring progress across (personal, social and employment-related) domains. This will enable sensitive analyses of the effective aspects of multifaceted program models, the reasons for attrition and the post-program employment-related outcomes.

### **Expanding focus on engaging employers.**

Having established relationships with employers is critical in supporting work transitions for young people with disabilities. While CL staff have developed good relationships with some employers who facilitate regular and timely work experience opportunities for young people, the program primarily addresses the supply side of employment (that is, preparing young people for work). To complement supply-side efforts, greater focus on demand-side issues that expand work experience and employment opportunities could further improve program outcomes. This requires dedicated resources to build relationships with employers, drawing on specialised skills and robust evidence of what works.

### **Ensuring welcoming, supportive and safe environments for young people with disability.**

The inclusive qualities of the CL environment contributed to the ways in which young people thrived through their involvement in the program. How to re-create this environment within mainstream settings—including schools and workplaces—continues to be a challenge and should be a focus in efforts to improve employment rates for people with disability going forward.

**The inclusive qualities of the CL environment contributed to the ways in which young people thrived through their involvement in the program.**

# 1 The need for programs such as Career Launchpad

Career Launchpad (CL) was conceived and developed by YouthWorX NT (YWNT) as an innovative approach to the worrying rate of unemployment among young people with disability. The program design aimed to address gaps and limitations in available employment support programs, and respond to evidence of good practice for improving employment outcomes for young people with disability. CL targets young people with disability who are not eligible for a NDIS Plan (YWNT offers another program—Encompass—that provides employment-related support for young NDIS participants).

CL is funded through the Commonwealth Department of Social Services. Its broad purpose is stated on the YWNT website as follows:

***Career Launchpad is a program that supports talented young people to transition from school into the world of work ... Career Launchpad offers personalised coaching, accredited life skills training, skills development and access to real-world opportunities that build confidence, independence and work-readiness.***

*(YouthWorX NT 2022)*

These ambitions for CL aim to address key issues that are contributing to longstanding problems of unemployment and underemployment for young people with disability. We briefly outline some relevant issues here.

## Poor progress improving employment rates

There are ongoing challenges in developing a comprehensive picture of the lives of people with disability due to critical data gaps. However, varied evidence suggests that reduced access to education and employment contributes to poorer quality of life, compared with those who do not have disability (AIHW 2022). Internationally, an OECD study found that Australia has one of

the lowest rates of employment for people with disability, coming in at 21 out of 29 countries (OECD 2010). Further, while the unemployment rate for working-age people without disability in Australia remained steady over recent years (around 5% between 2013 and 2018) until the COVID-19 pandemic, it increased among people with disability from 8% to 10% (ABS 2019, cited in AIHW 2022). Findings from a recent survey of young people aged 15 to 24 years with autism spectrum disorder, psychological, physical, sensory, intellectual (mostly Down syndrome), and other disabilities (with some surveys completed by parents) indicated that 92% want to work (DSS & Year13 2021). Despite expressing employment aspirations, young people with disability are much less likely to complete Year 12; and among people with disability actively looking for work, young people aged 15 to 24 years are twice as likely to be unemployed as people aged 25 to 64 years (AIHW 2022).

Reduced access to education and employment impacts on people's economic wellbeing. In 2018 the median gross personal income of people with disability was less than half that of people without disability.

**Table 1.1 Transition to work statistics for young people with and without disability**

Age	Indicator	People without disability	People with disability
20–24	Completion of Year 12 or equivalent	85%	68%
15–24	Not in the labour force	28.4%	48.5%
15–24	Unemployed	11.5%	24.7%
15–24	Underemployed	17.1%	23.1%
All ages	Median weekly gross personal income	\$1,016	\$505

Note: All table statistics come from AIHW 2022 report which draws on 2018 data, except for the median weekly gross personal income data which comes from ABS 2019, cited in *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031* (DSS 2021a). The reason for citing all ages income data is to indicate the long-term impact of low education and employment outcomes.

There is growing consensus that improving employment rates for young people with disability requires stronger emphasis on school-based career development and school to work transition. Recently, the Australian Government conceded that: 'There is clear evidence that people with disability are less likely to successfully transition from school to work or further study than people without disability' (DSS 2021b, p. 18). Key challenges encountered by young people with disability in transitioning from school to work are attributed to poor coordination of services and low expectations of the capacities of young people with disability (SACES 2021).

A survey of parents and carers of young people with disability also points to a lack of appropriate school-based career development and transition activities (DSS & Year13 2021). Insights from this survey highlight the need to build the confidence and capacities of teachers and careers advisers to encourage and support young people to explore career and employment options (DSS 2021b; DSS & Year 13 2021). The survey also showed that young people currently rely largely on parents to provide career support, although parents feel they do not have the expertise or contacts for this role.

Other evidence suggests that career support should commence in the early years of secondary schooling (Sheppard et al. 2017; CYDA 2020).

Critically, low levels of transition support for young people with disabilities have long-term implications for employment opportunities over the life-course. Limited involvement in work not only impacts on the wellbeing and social and financial inclusion of people with disability, but also deprives the community of the valuable contributions they can make in workplaces (DSS 2021a; 2021b).

## Developing solutions

Encouragingly, one of the eight outcome areas for Australia's Disability Strategy (ADS) 2021–2031 (DSS 2021a) focuses on 'employment and financial security' for people with disability. In this outcome area, Policy Priority 2 aims to improve the transition of young people with disability from education to employment (DSS 2021). An Associated Plan under the ADS, *Employ My Ability*, lays out a framework for improving employment rates for people with disability, including the

**There is growing consensus that improving employment rates for young people with disability requires stronger emphasis on school-based career development and school to work transition.**

priority area of 'Building employment skills, experience and confidence of young people with disability: Ensuring young people with disability are supported to obtain work and careers of their choice' (DSS 2021b, p. 12). Action areas identify the need to better support young people transitioning from school to work by developing their skills and confidence and creating more effective transition pathways, and to better resource employers and actors in young people's support networks (DSS 2021b).

Australian state and territory governments are also seeking to align their disability strategies with both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and Australia's Disability Strategy. In relation to young people, the Northern Territory (NT) Disability Strategy 2022–2032 (where Career Launchpad is based) notes:

***Students with disability advance when they are in an inclusive education setting that helps them to learn and grow, where possible in an integrated setting alongside their peers. However, Australians with disability have reduced access to education due to enrolment barriers, limited opportunities for development, a lack of reasonable adjustments, and low expectations.***

***(NT Government 2021)***

Outcome four of the NT Disability Strategy envisages that 'People with disability have the skills and opportunities to participate in the economy and be financially secure.' Priorities are to:

- provide education that meets an individual's lifelong learning needs
- expand options for young people with disability transitioning from school to employment or other forms of economic participation
- increase the employment of people with disability
- support employers to be disability confident (NT Government 2021, p. 14).'

Despite the importance of transition and employment support for people with disability, specialist programs such as the School Leaver Employment Supports (SLES) program and Disability Employment Services (DES) are not currently available to all young people with disability. For young people who are eligible,

they have poor track records in preparing and securing employment. This is attributed to a range of issues, including challenges in navigating a complex disability employment system. NDIS data shows that in 2018 and 2019, 50% of NDIS participants with school leaver supports in their plan did not utilise this funding in the year provided (NDIS 2022). Other factors contributing to poor outcomes include poor oversight and accountability of programs (Hawkins 2022; Pearce 2017) and a lack of person-centred planning and support (NDIS 2021, pp. 54–5).

There is urgent need to develop transition pathways and models for employment support programs that enable young people with disability to develop, pursue and achieve career aspirations. Such efforts address a key plank of laudable policy ambitions to improve employment rates for people with disability across Australia. This evaluation explores how CL uses a capability approach to support young people in transitioning from school to work.

## Overview of this report

This section provides an overview of the evidence informing, and the policy landscape framing, the development of the CL program. The remainder of the evaluation report is structured in the following way. Section 2 explains the method for the evaluation; Section 3 sketches out key features of the Career Launchpad program; Section 4 summarises insights from administrative data that recorded program inputs (activities) and outcomes (participation in work-related activities); Section 5 discusses insights from interviews with program staff, community stakeholders and program participants; Section 6 focuses on the impact of the program as experienced by the young people; and Section 7 offers some concluding remarks to show how the Career Launchpad program responds to evidence on effective approaches for improving employment outcomes for people with disability.

# 2 Method for the evaluation

YouthWorX NT (YWNT) approached the Inclusive Communities (IC) team of the Social Policy and Research Centre of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) to conduct an evaluation of the Career Launchpad program. The evaluation design was informed by insights from the Pathways to Employment (P2E) evaluation conducted by the IC team in 2021 (Warr et al. 2022).

The evaluation was guided by the following research questions:

- What are young people's experiences of the program and the outcomes and impacts achieved for them?
- What are families' and carers' goals for the program and their perspectives of its impacts for young people?
- What are the perspectives of staff and community stakeholders about how the program progressed, outcomes that were achieved and contextual factors influencing the program?

A mixed methods approach was used to generate and analyse a combination of administrative and qualitative data. De-identified administrative data from the CL program database for the 2022 intake was used to describe program participants' characteristics, activities that were delivered, and training and work-related outcomes that were achieved.

Qualitative data consisted of 18 semi-structured interviews conducted online in August 2022 with key informants (program staff and community stakeholders including employers and parents) and program participants. Interviews were coded to identify content and themes in interviewees' perceptions and experiences of the program. When reporting qualitative data, quotes are attributed to YWNT team members (interviewees involved in developing and/or delivering the CL program), community stakeholders (community-based interviewees representing employers, schools, government departments and parents) and program participants (young people then enrolled in CL).

## Limitations of the evaluation

The study sample included good representation of CL staff and community stakeholders; however, one limitation is the relatively small sample size of program participants that were interviewed, although they represent 50% of participants who were anticipated to complete the program. Another limitation is relying on retrospective accounts of how young people were feeling when they started the program. It would be desirable to collect data at key points across the program (start, midway and following completion) to ensure it reflects how participants were feeling at different times.

# 3 Key components of the Career Launchpad program

Career Launchpad was developed to address gaps and limitations in available employment support programs, and in response to evidence of good practice for improving employment outcomes for young people with disability. It was established by YWNT in 2019 to support school leavers in Years 10 to 12 with a disability who:

- are ineligible or lack access to the National Disability Insurance Scheme, Disability Support Pension and Disability Employment Services (DES), and
- are unsuited to mainstream job services such as Transition to Work and Workforce Australia (formerly jobactive) services.

The program runs for 12 months across the calendar year with young people transitioning from school participating in a few induction sessions prior to the formal program commencing in January. Participants undertake a Developing Independence Certificate, which involves a flexible program of work that is responsive to individual situations.

The CL model integrates complementary components and practice approaches, as explained below.

## Extending the Transition to Work Community of Practice model

From 2016 to 2022, YWNT delivered Transition to Work (TtW), a Commonwealth employment program targeting young jobseekers. Along with 10 other TtW service providers, YWNT was a member of a national TtW Community of Practice (CoP) convened by the Brotherhood St. Laurence, with 'a shared aim of developing and documenting an effective response to youth unemployment, through collaborative and multi-sectoral effort' (McColl Jones et al. 2021, p. 4). The CoP supported services to deliver an enhanced TtW model that featured an Advantaged Thinking approach for supporting young people to explore and identify meaningful career goals.

**Participants undertake a Developing Independence Certificate, which involves a flexible program of work that is responsive to individual situations.**

Components of the enhanced TtW CoP services influenced the model for CL. In addition to adopting an Advantaged Thinking practice for working with young people with disability, staff make a 'deal' with program participants that involves signing an agreement framed around mutual accountability and reciprocity – for example, expected participation of young people and expected supports provided by staff (McCull Jones et al. 2021).

## Advantaged Thinking

CL applies an Advantaged Thinking (AT) approach which was developed by Colin Falconer. The AT approach has demonstrated effectiveness for working with the general population of young people and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness (Bond & Keys 2020; McCull Jones et al. 2021). It recognises that their aspirations and abilities are the basis for effecting change and transformation (The Foyer Federation 2022). AT practice holds the expectation that young people with disability can work and make a valued contribution to society. It is applied through a four-stage model:

1. Guidance and exploration (identifying strengths and talents, experiential learning, career guidance, developing goals and co-designing a plan, individual coaching)
2. Work preparation (skills and capabilities building workshops, industry specific training, external activities such as industry tours, accredited or pre-accredited training, ongoing coaching)
3. Workplace opportunities (work experience, internships and volunteering; pre-employment workshops; ongoing coaching)
4. Post-placement support (tailored support for the participant and employer/education provider) (McCull Jones et al. 2021).

## Certificate I in Developing Independence

The CL program applies an AT approach to work with program participants to achieve a Certificate 1 in Developing Independence (DI). Since 2020, YWNT has partnered with the NT Education Department's Registered Training Organisation to deliver the DI course. The course was originally developed by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence in 2012 for young people living in youth foyers and subsequently adapted for young people leaving out-of-home care (Myconos 2014).

DI is an accredited certificate course that provides opportunities for young people to explore goals and aspirations and build capabilities to sustain future opportunities through six life domains. These domains are education, employment, health and wellbeing, social connections, housing and living skills, and civic participation.

The certificate is co-delivered by a qualified Trainer/Educator and a Youth Development Coach who apply their complementary expertise (Hart 2017; Coddou & Borlagdan 2018). In CL, the certificate is offered through interactive workshops designed to build practical life skills needed in adulthood. Topics include independent travel; housing; budgeting; cooking skills; finding courses; industry tours; workplace norms, rights and responsibilities; health and relationships.

**AT practice holds the expectation that young people with disability can work and make a valued contribution to society.**

## A smooth transition

CL targets young people at a critical life stage when they are transitioning from secondary schooling into education, training and employment pathways. These pathways are less defined for young people with disability because of gaps and limitations in the service system. School leavers in Year 11 and 12 (recently expanded to include Year 10 students) can be referred into CL by the NT Department of Education and directly by schools and parents. For young people transitioning from secondary schooling, contact is initiated with CL in the final months of schooling. A meeting is organised involving the young person, their parents/carers, teachers and a member of the CL team. The program runs for 12 months from January to December.

## A focus on parent engagement

CL staff engage with parents formally and informally. This recognises that young people with disability might rely on parents for more varied kinds of support compared to other young people. This includes practical support at home, transport, identifying training and job opportunities, assistance with preparing and understanding documentation and navigating websites.

Early in the program year, the CL team run two Parents as Career Transition Supports (PACTS) workshops. The workshops provide careers information and 'take parents on the journey' so they can support their young person through the program. In 2022 the workshops were not held due to the impact of COVID-19 and limited parent availability. At the end of the CL program, parents, program participants and CL staff meet to co-design and develop an exit plan for each young person and coordinate their referral to other programs if needed. Parents are welcome to drop in at other times and are copied into correspondence with participants (with the young people's approval and consent) so they can encourage and support their involvement in activities.

## Work tasters and placements

CL staff engage local employers to offer program participants meaningful involvement in volunteer roles, work tasters and work placements to get a feel for different kinds of jobs. Volunteering opportunities are organised through established relationships with a local Foodbank, a wildlife park and a fast-food restaurant. For young people who have identified interest in particular kinds of work, CL staff can also arrange industry tours to observe the everyday aspects of work roles, and work placements for more immersive experiences of work. Some young people are supported into new employment; and CL staff offer post-placement support for both employers and young people to identify and resolve issues that arise during the settling in period.

These components and practices of the CL program are explored in the analysis of the interview data.

**CL staff engage with parents formally and informally. This recognises that young people with disability might rely on parents for more varied kinds of support compared to other young people.**

# 4 Who participated in the CL program?

Young people were eligible for CL if they had diagnosed disabilities but were not currently receiving, or eligible for, Tier 3 NDIS funding. Tier 3 funding enables people with significant and long-term disability to access individually tailored supports. The young people involved in CL described a range of disabilities that impacted on their daily life, experiences of schooling and capacities for mainstream employment.

## Participant characteristics

The 2022 CL program had a total of 23 enrolments (15 young men and 8 young women aged 15 to 21 years) although 3 withdrew early in the program for unknown reasons. Of the 20 young people who continued, 14 or 70% were still engaged in the third quarter of 2022 and expected to complete. Among the 6 young people who did not complete the program, 4 gained employment, 1 transferred to a TtW service and 1 moved interstate.

The disabilities reported by the participants included Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD), anxiety, depression, communication and language disorders, intellectual/learning disability, borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). None of the CL participants interviewed identified as having disabilities that impacted their vision, hearing or movement.

## Training and employment outcomes

Secondary program data provided by Career Launchpad identified the following outcomes for the 20 participants at the end of the third quarter of the 2022 program:

- 14 young people (70%) completed Certificate 1 in Developing Independence
- 9 young people (45%) participated in work experience opportunities, with more expected to complete placements during the last quarter of the program
- 17 young people (85%) participated in volunteering placements
- 11 young people (55%) gained full or part-time employment
- 4 (20%) were referred to other service providers to follow up at the completion of their involvement in CL.

**The young people involved in CL described a range of disabilities that impacted on their daily life, experiences of schooling and capacities for mainstream employment.**

# 5 Promising approaches of the CL program

Interviews were conducted with 18 individuals: members of the CL program team; working in government and community services, local employers and parents; and a sample of program participants (7 young men and 1 young woman).

Key themes emerging from these discussions were: CL filling a service gap in the employment support landscape for young people with disabilities; the relevance and effectiveness of program components and approaches (Advantaged Thinking practice, program environment and a flexible and applied approach to learning); and the quality of engagement with employers, education and training stakeholders, and parents and carers.

When discussing these themes the perspectives of program participants and other informants are presented together. (Section 6 discusses young people's reflections on the program's personal impact.) Illustrative quotes are used to support claims and these have been mildly edited to improve clarity. Quotes from key informants (KIs) are attributed to YWNT team members or community stakeholders to enhance confidentiality for those who participated in the study. Gender-neutral pseudonyms and pronouns are used to protect the confidentiality of program participants.

**Many key informants noted the lack of school to employment transition support for young people with disability who do not qualify for NDIS funding.**

## Addressing a service gap

Many key informants noted the lack of school to employment transition support for young people with disability who do not qualify for NDIS funding. Prior to establishment of the CL program, early school leavers and Year 12 graduates with disabilities were frequently referred to Centrelink and jobactive services. This left young people feeling 'frightened' and contributed to them disengaging from the service systems and retreating into their bedrooms. Parents were obliged to take on 'key support' roles for their young people because there was 'no safety net in place'. As interviewees observed:

***There's young people with a disability, leaving school, who are not quite ready to hit the workforce, there's a gap, there's nowhere for them to go.***

*(Community stakeholder KI03)*

***When we were looking at the education system in the Northern Territory, and young people transitioning from mainstream [schools], there ... were no opportunities for scaffolded support ... [or] to be included in either pre-employment programs, or any other types of supports that are going to meet their needs and meet the needs of their families. So essentially, they were young people who are disabled, but not disabled enough to receive the supports they ultimately require.***

*(YWNT team KI11)*

*[When I heard about Career Launchpad] I cried, because I was just so grateful that there was something there for my [child] when I was at a loss for what to do.*

*(Community stakeholder KI02)*

YWNT staff and other interviewees described program participants as benefiting from opportunities to develop and consolidate life skills that they had struggled with or missed at school:

*I do a session on the very first day saying, 'Tell me something that you would like to learn that you didn't learn at school, that you feel like you want to learn or that you should have learned at school that you didn't' ... so we write a big list and they all come out with the most amazing stuff ... I tell them, I'm not going to teach them anything they're not going to use in their life ... So none of it's a waste of their time.*

*(YWNT KI03)*

*It's fundamental [and] should be delivered while they're at school. It is important because it prepares them for the real world ... how to find a house, eat healthy, banking, job skills, part-time employment.*

*(Community stakeholder KI08)*

*I've been expanding my skills along with reaching out to jobs that I never would have done without YouthWorX.*

*(Micky)*

## Insights into key features of the CL model

Community stakeholders and program participants discussed effective elements of the CL program. Key elements were an Advantaged Thinking practice, creating welcoming and positive environments and using an individualised, flexible and applied approach to learning.

### Embedding Advantaged Thinking in the program

The AT approach seeks to change the narratives around the capacities of people with disability and is embedded in the CL approach and practices. This was explained by two of the YWNT team members:

*You've got to live and breathe it to be able to get and bring [young people] along for the ride. It's not about putting a label on it; it's not going, 'Hey, we're going to "Advantage Think" this out' ... They're just coming along for the ride. And before they know it, before you know, it, they're doing it.*

*(YWNT team KI03)*

*In a schooling system ... [and] talking to families [there's] always been a deficit lens and we wanted to change the narrative ... and take the parents on that journey whilst their young people were in the program.*

*(YWNT KI11)*

**YWNT staff and other interviewees described program participants as benefiting from opportunities to develop and consolidate life skills that they had struggled with or missed at school**

In practice, AT involves building young people's confidence in their skills and abilities, while acknowledging disability but not making it a focus. When talking to employers, it requires being positive about young people's capabilities and explaining the reasonable accommodations or supports necessary for them to successfully perform their roles and duties in workplaces:

***[Advantaged Thinking with employers is about] being positive about what these young people have to offer, talking them up, and the opportunities [for employers]... It's just about giving someone a chance.***

*(YWNT K103)*

## **A warm and welcoming environment**

Although YWNT delivers a range of youth-focused programs, CL is located in separate premises. Universal design principles have been used to create a learning environment that contrasts with the settings young people experienced at school. The young people and other informants commented that the best part of CL was the friendly people and atmosphere. The physical environment was described by interviewees as 'vibrant', 'positive', 'warm', 'safe' and 'welcoming'. One community stakeholder said it is like a 'teenager pad' with a lounge, kitchen—where young people can make breakfast or coffee—and tables for group work.

**The young people and other informants commented that the best part of CL was the friendly people and atmosphere.**

This environment encouraged sociability among program participants:

***At the start of the program, the young people sit there, they won't even eyeball you or each other. Whereas you walk in ... a number of weeks later, and they're all sitting there chatting, talking, making themselves a coffee ... it's just so evident that it's such a positive experience for them.***

*(YWNT K103)*

***The shyest kid that sits in the corner eventually has the confidence to move forward and have conversations with employers and organisations.***

*(Community stakeholder K104)*

Positive relationships with CL staff contributed to creating a 'safe space' of 'respect' and 'acceptance'. CL participants described the atmosphere as 'high-level noise, banter, laughter' which led to them forming new friendships and establishing an online chat group. These aspects of the physical and social atmosphere at CL are important because of the negative experiences the young people described having at school, including 'bullying' and 'segregation'.

Program participants particularly enjoyed the cooking sessions at CL that were followed by communal meals. They also mentioned sharing jokes, the ability to get help if you had a problem, and supportive staff:

***You learn a lot, not just about [life and work skills] ... but about other people.***

*(Sunny)*

***It's a group you can come and hang out with. Sometimes I'll show up early and I'll just chill here. It's a nice place to be.***

*(Fab)*

The insights suggest that it was important to create an open, social space to build young people's confidence, comfort and interpersonal skills as a prelude to, and preparation for, their subsequent engagements with workplaces.

## Individualised, flexible and applied learning

The carefully tailored Developing Independence (DI) certificate that CL participants complete during the program was seen as an exemplary model of good practice for other services to learn from. Key features included curriculum content relevant to the young people's lives and goals, and a holistic and person-centred approach to learning. One-on-one coaching sessions focused on co-designing career plans and identifying small achievable steps for realising aspirations.

Flexibility was key in the approach. Examples of this include reorganising DI units to cover housing and transport issues in response to emerging needs among program participants. One community stakeholder noted the importance of being flexible if participants were 'having a bad day' and providing additional support when required. Flexibility was also evident in enabling non-linear progress across the four-phase model in response to participants' needs. Another community stakeholder contrasted the flexibility in the CL program with standard delivery formats in the Vocational Education & Training (VET) sector:

***Often kids that are enrolled in VET, there's a set schedule. They're either in the classroom or they're in the workshop. If they can't keep up, they often get left behind or if they're struggling with language and numeracy, then often they'll drop out. But [CL] is an individualised approach; they recognise that every [young person] has different levels of being disadvantaged, whether it's in the education system or ... things going on at home. The trainers and mentors are meeting the needs of those individuals. It's not just a program where everyone needs to fit into to this same box or you're not going to succeed.***

*(Community stakeholder KI04)*

Another notable feature of the CL program is an interactive and applied approach. Program participants were involved in identifying topics for the DI content and the course features a 'hands-on' approach with less focus on bookwork and assessment tasks. Assessment questions are integrated and interspersed through the program.

Community stakeholders noted that the young people frequently compared CL with school to explain why they found CL so helpful.

***It's just the holistic approach that they take, these kids are learning without feeling like they are in a learning environment, for example school.***

*(Community stakeholder KI04).*

The flexible, applied approach strongly appealed to the young people:

***Doing fun things that you [like to do] instead of just following a paper.***

*(Micky)*

***They teach you a lot ... The workshops are very fun and interactive... You learn a lot, not just about things but about other people, but also if you've got something else going on.***

*(Sunny)*

Another young person likened CL to an 'open school' with less rigid work requirements and staff that are 'here to help you ... get on to the next stage of your life' (Roxy). Micky described how it offered a helpful balance between having some structure and being person-centred because it was 'less strict ... you have to follow a line but you can draw your own line' where you just needed to 'keep within the boundaries'.

**The carefully tailored Developing Independence (DI) certificate that CL participants complete during the program was seen as an exemplary model of good practice for other services to learn from.**

Comparing attendance rates with other programs they were familiar with, one community stakeholder commented that attendance at CL was 'phenomenal', with participants who are 'happy and eager to be there'. They went on to explain:

***Poor attendance is usually the main factor in [a] program not being successful because ... [it] can only work when the young person has developed a great relationship with the trainer/assessor (their mentor) and when contact is consistent. If kids are only turning up to snippets of sessions or one day every couple of weeks then the program is never going to be successful ... the thing that stands out about the YouthWorX program is that the kids are turning up! Kids that have completely disengaged from school and not had the ability or drive to enter the workforce – they're turning up every day.***

*(Community stakeholder KI04)*

Drawing on interviews with community stakeholders and young people, notable attributes of the CL program are:

- **respect and voice.** Respect for the young people was shown by providing a cosy and welcoming environment and coffee/breakfast making facilities. Participants are encouraged to express their 'opinion' and 'voice' by showing 'respect' to others
- **flexibility to pursue personal goals.** CL is like an 'open school' with less rigid boundaries and work requirements and helpful, caring staff. Expanded boundaries offered young people the scope to explore and grow their interests and the curriculum reflected their interests and concerns
- **relevance.** Participants enjoyed and felt a sense of achievement from learning skills that support their independence and path into adulthood.

## Engaging with employers

CL staff have strong connections with some local employers and noted the potential to expand this pool. Work experience is critical in supporting young people to explore career options (Sheppard et al. 2017). For CL participants, work experience ranged from short work 'tasters' (e.g. half a day at a fast-food restaurant or wildlife park) to weekly volunteering with a local food bank to block placements of a couple of days over a number of weeks with an employer in an industry of interest (e.g. child care). Community stakeholders described the benefits:

***[CL has] great engagement with local industry ... this exposure and introduction provides many employment opportunities for the kids.***

*(Community stakeholder KI04)*

***It was good for [young people] to get into a real-world setting and see that what their teachers are saying to them is true. It actually works ... [It's] not just learning in the classroom, or learning in workshops ... It gave them a lot of confidence to meet the people that were employing them or to meet the other people they could possibly be working with and see that it's not as hard as they might think to get an employment position.***

*(Community stakeholder KI05)*

The young people who were interviewed each described completing work tasters, although not all were ready for work experience placements. For some participants, work experience placements led to part-time jobs in typical youth employment sectors such as fast-food. These were described as 'stepping-stone' jobs that are important for:

**Promoting employers' interest in offering employment to young people with disability is enhanced by providing post-placement support.**

***Giv[ing] them such a confidence boost to go: 'I can fit into a mainstream work environment with no issues'.***

***(Community stakeholder KI05)***

Young people who identified career goals were supported to participate in relevant work experience settings. This could involve identifying, engaging and advising suitable employers; preparing young people with work skills training; and then job shadowing and task analysis in the workplace. The young people were able to 'test' their interests, on occasion realising some jobs weren't what they expected.

Navigating and challenging employers' preconceptions about disability is also important. YWNT staff described having 'open' conversations about the needs of young people and assessing the best fit between young people's capacities and the role requirements.

***Our biggest challenge is working with employers who have the confidence to take on, not only a young person, but a young person with a disability ... We do whatever it will reasonably take to make that employer and young person connect and feel comfortable.***

***(YWNT staff KI09)***

Going forward, YWNT staff are keen to engage more employers so they can offer a wider range of vocational experiences and employment opportunities. Currently, there remains an imbalance between the supply of young people with disability seeking employment opportunities and the demand among employers willing to offer work to young people. One community stakeholder was optimistic that the effects of the COVID pandemic in limiting employers' capacities to take on young people appeared to be waning:

***I feel like there's been a bit of a shift in the whole, you know, being open to having someone on board with a disability.***

***(Community stakeholder KI03)***

Promoting employers' interest in offering employment to young people with disability is enhanced by providing post-placement support (Thies et al. 2021). YWNT team members and community stakeholders noted the value of employers, co-workers and young people having access to ongoing specialist advice and guidance for sustaining employment outcomes over time:

***It's a fundamental ingredient for success [that post-placement support] be available should there be a job in jeopardy, or a need to retrain in a specific task asked by the employer, to keep everything on track.***

***(Community stakeholder KI11)***

## **Engaging with education and training sectors**

CL staff have good connections with local secondary schools and this supports young people's transitions into the program. YWNT has been auspiced by a registered training organisation to deliver Certificate 1 in Developing Independence (DI). The DI course that CL delivers was highly regarded by the community stakeholders who were interviewed. They noted relatively high percentages of young people enrolled in CL completing the 12-month program; and described CL as an example of good practice for other organisations.

***It has been one of the most successful programs for students with a disability and who are disengaged from school [in guiding them] to find their own worth, their own value, and leading into employment outcomes [... and offers a] self-paced student journey. In relation to the outcomes and the program, all targets have been achieved each year for the students enrolled .... We always get completion outcomes. Most of the students go into jobs. And it's a very cost-effective model, with the trainers employed through YouthWorX NT.***

***(Community stakeholder KI08)***

Community stakeholders attributed much of CL's success as a specialist youth employment training program to the qualities of the team:

***[The trainer] is just a phenomenal mentor to the kids, [they] actually really care [and are] very innovative in their ideas ... additionally, they're eager to grow and learn and seek out and engage in professional development opportunities to support the role. That's exactly what we look for in a great trainer/ assessors and that's why I believe it's been so successful.***

*(Community stakeholder KI04)*

The skills and capacities across the YWNT team to build rapport with young people were corroborated by the young people:

***[They were] calming, [they] knew what they were doing and put words in a way that I could understand them.***

*(Micky)*

***The best part about YouthWorX is the trainers' ability to connect with the people that are coming ... I feel like I could talk ... freely like they're my friends, even though they are actually just my trainers. They are really amazing people.***

*(Roxy)*

Community stakeholders considered the DI certificate as an important stepping-stone into further vocational training. In addition to completing the DI certificate, two of the young people interviewed reported studying prevocational or trades Certificate 1 courses, with one having now completed their course. Other participants completed short certificate courses such as First Aid and construction induction training (commonly referred to as a 'white card') which is required to work in the construction industry.

## Engaging with parents

The CL program recognises the importance of engaging with parents, given their critical roles in supporting young people. Parents reported being relieved to find a service such as CL:

***You just think that there are no options out there and [young people like my child] they just need that ... hands under someone's foot to lift them up and just give them that helping hand and guidance to the next level, and that needs to be someone that's not a parent.***

*(Community stakeholder KI02)*

While the PACTS workshops that were planned at the commencement of the 2022 CL program were not able to go ahead, communication with parents and carers was conducted through formal channels and frequent informal contact. This included general updates when parents were dropping off and picking up young people, phone calls to sort out arising issues, and copying parents into messages sent to participants so they could support their attendance. Parents who were interviewed were satisfied with the level of communication they had with the CL program team.

Parents also described how they supported young people's involvement in the program: providing encouragement, transport to activities, administrative assistance in applying for a my.gov account, preparing CVs and collating other required documentation. Some parents from the 2021 program had established a support network that was ongoing. Some of these parents had been supported by staff to apply successfully for NDIS funding for their family member and these young people could be referred to the NDIS Encompass program at YWNT.

Despite the CL efforts to engage and communicate with parents, the interviews suggest that parents had varying expectations of the program and some were unclear about the value of, or rationale for, some activities. Some parents were strongly focused on placing young people in paid employment and less on work tasters and placements, while others wanted young people to have more work experience opportunities. Some parents were uncertain of the value of the life skills training that is included

in the DI Certificate program and felt more effort should be going into finding paid employment, even as they noted the social benefits of work:

***I just want [my child] to work, not only for themselves, but for financial reasons, for self- confidence, socially ... You make new friends. You could make lifetime friends in a workplace.***

*(Community stakeholder KI07)*

***I thought they'd be more focused on getting a job ... I thought there'd be more work experience. Working in a lot more places ... because they don't know what they want to do or where they want to work [so] having that work experience ... might give them a bit of an idea.***

*(Community stakeholder KI06)*

Parents' varying responses underline the potential value of the PACTS workshops for engaging parents early in the program to explain its aims and approach and gain a better understanding of their concerns. It was also evident that not all young people were ready for paid work after one year of the program. Working with parents and young people to identify achievable goals and post-program pathways and supports could help clarify the contribution of CL and allay some uncertainty.

## What's next after CL?

Progressing towards employment is a key objective for the CL program; however, some young people may not be ready for this step after 12 months. Many participants will make uncertain progress in securing and sustaining employment because, like young people generally, they will explore different career options, be geographically mobile and occasionally experience setbacks that involve periods of unemployment. Disability can limit access to some opportunities and amplify the impact of setbacks, with significant consequences for young people's confidence. For this reason, YWNT staff 'leave the door open and check in' (with young people and their parents) after the program ends. While some young people move into employment, training or further education, others move to mainstream TtW

services, or apply for NDIS funding which will cover more intensive employment support.

These diverse pathways for young people with disability suggest the benefits of flexible arrangements to support them to keep progressing towards career goals and to navigate setbacks. CL has some capacity to provide post-program support but it cannot be guaranteed to be available, as one of the YWNT team members explained:

***Individual by individual, we can kind of determine how much support they're going to need, and are they at risk of falling off? ... We're fortunate we do have that flexibility ... One young man who did Career Launchpad last year got a job [and then] lost his job and was just floundering at home ... He's rejoined ... we have the capacity [but] it gets a bit grey.***

*(Community stakeholder KI09)*

Funding structures that recognise the importance of flexibility in employment programs supporting young people with disability are critical for achieving meaningful and sustainable outcomes over the medium and long term.

**These diverse pathways for young people with disability suggest the benefits of flexible arrangements to support them to keep progressing towards career goals and to navigate setbacks.**

# 6 Young people's reflections on impacts of the CL program

Interviews with the young people generated valuable insights into their perspectives on the personal impacts and benefits of the CL program. All of the young people we spoke with described acquiring social and life skills that can be called 'soft outcomes'. These kinds of outcomes can be difficult to measure, yet are critical in preparing young people for employment and to function in work environments. Young people also described acquiring employment-related skills and experience, in addition to participating in learning activities that promoted capacities for independent living and using public transport. As reported in Section 4, 11 young people became involved in full or part-time work, and others developed employment goals and pathways or were feeling optimistic without having specific career plans.

Notably, all of the young people described being socially isolated before joining the CL program. These situations were explained in different ways: they had 'nothing to do', were 'introverted', or preferred to do things 'on my own'. These reflections were corroborated by other informants who noted that, prior to the CL program, young people had few friends and spent much of their time in their bedrooms.

Through their involvement in CL young people came to enjoy the social interaction. This aspect of the program contributed to their personal development and enhanced their interpersonal skills. They described gaining self-esteem, increased confidence and social skills that expanded their social interactions with others in the program and out in the community (for example, when shopping). As one young person explained:

***I've met a lot of new people [and] have made a couple of new friends and connections that helped me with social skills as well.***

***(Jac)***

Young people also said the social skills they developed reduced the anxiety and fearfulness they had previously experienced in unfamiliar settings and situations. These positive changes were noticed by others:

***They've come out of their shell in a different way. They have trust in [the CL team] and in themselves.***

***(Community stakeholder KI07).***

Insights into the soft outcomes achieved by young people are presented in Tables 6.1 and 6.2. Table 6.1 presents excerpts of young people's responses to a question asking what they had learned about themselves from being involved in CL. Their reflections suggest the impact of the Advantaged Thinking approach, with young people coming to view and understand themselves from new and positive angles.

**Table 6.1 'What I learned about myself'**

What I learned about myself ...
I didn't think I would be able to get a job and keep it ... they've helped me write my résumé, [which was] something I couldn't wrap my head around: it just seemed too hard. But having the support to write my résumé, to go in and drop off my résumé, and then do an interview, like, it was not something I thought that would be so easy to me. But through the support, they've [helped me] build up the courage and shown me different ways of doing things. [Applying for a job] was a lot easier than I thought it was going to be and I actually got the job. (Sunny)
That I can be creative, as well as very communicative ... I like talking to people, making new friends. I can be really reliable. That's something I've learned. (Jac)
I'd say my persistence, because after all the shit that I went through in my childhood ... and then the changing conditions of moving around and [other] shit, I'd say it'd be persistence and the ability to adapt to new situations. (Roxy)
Learning new stuff at home, like learning how to mow the grass [and] other stuff I never done before. (Luca)
That I am a lot more than what I see myself as ... I'm a decent cook, and I have a want to work, which I had before ... I'm able to work with groups pretty well, which, before, when I was in school, I absolutely despised groups and all ... I became a lot more social [being involved in CL] whereas before I was quite antisocial. (Micky)
[That] I'm pretty hard-working if I actually like, if ... I'm putting my heart and soul into [something] and actually really go and like talk to people and ... be there on time ... I just didn't feel like that when I was like at school ... [I didn't] want to go there every day. (Quinn)
I've definitely learned how to manage time a bit. I mean, I'm still not amazing ... but I'm much better than I was and ... I've sort of started to branch out. Branch back out a bit more ... [I] Just thought I'd work out some more of my interests. (Fab)

Table 6.2 presents young people's responses to two questions asking them to describe: (1) how they were feeling before they commenced CL; and (2) how they were feeling at the time of the interview (eight months into the program). These insights are helpful in showing their different starting points as well as their own understanding of the kinds of progress they achieved.

**Table 6.2 Program participants, reflections on personal growth**

	How I was feeling before starting CL	How I'm feeling now
Sunny	I was unsure and I thought it was gonna suck, and I didn't want to do it.	I'm a lot more resilient than I thought I was ... The things I didn't think I would be able to do or deal with, and like, I have ...
Jac	I didn't really want to do it, because I thought it was gonna be like more school ... I guess I was pretty nervous when I started. I didn't know what was going to happen and I've just thrown myself into a bunch of new people I've never met before.	Not as nervous as I was at the start. I'm pretty calm now. I have a better understanding of what's happening here.
Roxy	I was nervous. I was nervous to come and try it because I wasn't the most social person. Yeah. But I ended up going anyway and trying it.	I'm feeling a lot more confident. I'm feeling a lot better about myself, and what I'm doing. I'm definitely feeling a lot better than I was before. I'm feeling happier. I feel like, as corny as it is, I've got hope for the future.
Luca	I didn't know much about this place. I have learning difficulty, it was a learning difficulty to learn new people, but I got through it.	Great. It's really good just learning stuff I didn't learn before at school. Learning this other stuff that they're doing here [that] I didn't know about.
Micky	Nervous, but also some excitement as it was something new compared to school.	Relieved, relieved. As I was never the one to start the push. And I just kept bottling up anxiety and all that. But once I got that push, I'm able to actually push myself and it's quite relieving.

	How I was feeling before starting CL	How I'm feeling now
Quinn	I was like, kinda nervous ... I don't really like interacting with people ... I'm just terrified, and I just don't want to interact with them. But I gave it a shot just to see how they are. And they were really nice.	I feel like I'm okay with it now. I feel much more confident ... about myself. Still able to do the things that I might be hesitant at first, but ... stop thinking over, and [decide] okay, I might do this and something.
Fab	I was a bit nervous. But I was hopeful about where this could lead ... [I was nervous about] mostly the interview aspect of job applications ... I mean, I can talk to people, but I'm not going to make talking to people a career. I'm not that good at it.	I'm a lot more confident! Definitely. So yeah ... I'm a bit more confident in talking to people than I was. Because I was the kid in high school, I was the kid listening to music in the corner, as I do. But yeah, definitely gotten better at being social since then.

Collectively these excerpts show the important work-related skills that young people developed, such as ability to talk and work with others, readiness to try something new and take initiative. Their starting points reflected the lack of opportunities and low public expectations of people with disability and suggest that programs such as CL must partly be focused on 'undoing' the effects of these circumstances.

Prior to commencing the program, young people were also reacting to the challenges they had faced growing up, including learning styles at school that had not worked for them, experiences of bullying and feeling generally overlooked. Their insights suggest how the personal development and social aspects of the CL program are important foundations for building employment-specific skills. Efforts to capture the impacts and outcomes of programs such as CL should recognise these starting points because what might seem like modest progress for some can represent significant growth and development for young people with disability.

Diverse starting points and learning capacities meant that by the end of the program some young people will be ready to move into employment or training, while others could benefit from extended time focusing on a particular stage, or revisiting stages, of the 4-stage model that guided program activities.

## Qualities of the CL model for building young people's capacities

Young people spoke positively about CL which created genuine opportunities for them to build their capabilities and to develop and pursue career aspirations. From young people's perspectives the program offered:

- a flexible, person-centred program that supported young people at their own pace, including the opportunity to revisit program phases if needed
- a thoughtfully designed and welcoming adult learning environment
- opportunities to develop confidence and self-esteem
- an applied or 'hands-on' approach to learning
- a setting for developing social connections with young people with similar experiences
- a sense of optimism about the possibilities of employment and future prospects.

# 7 Conclusion

This evaluation of the YWNT Career Launchpad program has discussed key elements of a model for providing employment support to young people with disability who are not NDIS participants. It presents the perspectives of the young program participants, their parents, the program team and community stakeholders.

## Strengths of CL

The evaluation of Career Launchpad shows:

1. CL provided vital transition support for young people with disabilities in the Darwin region and was considered effective in preparing young people for work by program participants, parents and community stakeholders. The program model incorporates evidence-informed approaches. These include Advantaged Thinking practice, the four-phase model from the TtW CoP, delivery of a Certificate I in Developing Independence and the PACTS workshops for parents and carers.
2. The program includes other elements to support effective 'school to training and employment' transitions for young people with disabilities that are identified in a review commissioned by the National Disability Service (Sheppard et al. 2017). These include:
  - the expectation that young people with disability can work, expressed through an Advantaged Thinking approach which seeks to build young people's capabilities
  - collaboration across sectors, in this case between local secondary colleges, the state education department, volunteering organisations and local employers
  - involvement in meaningful work experience ranging from work tasters, volunteering opportunities, to extended work experience placements that provide opportunities to explore career tracks
  - service providers committed to achieving the best outcomes for young people, and qualified program staff with an understanding of empowering approaches for working with young people

- family involvement encouraged through PACTS workshops, regular informal and formal communication.

Career Launchpad was developed to address a critical gap for young people with disability who are not NDIS participants. The practice approach outlined in this evaluation of Career Launchpad contributes a potential way forward for supporting young people into training and employment.

## Considerations for future development

This evaluation discusses how the CL model integrates critical components in an employment support program for young people with disability that is effective in building employment-related skills and generating encouraging employment outcomes. The evaluation also identifies some key issues to consider in future iterations of the program model and for adapting the program in other settings:

- Some young people were not ready for employment or training at the formal conclusion of the program and could benefit from longer involvement in an employment support program. Current time limits also contributed to a sense of urgency among parents for young people to be placed in a job. **Increased flexibility for enabling access to the CL program after 12 months would enhance potential to tailor the program and promote job readiness for a wider group of young people with disability.**

- Part of the work of CL is ‘undoing’ the effects of limited opportunities presented to young people with disability. This underlines the importance of understanding young people’s starting points as well as the outcomes generated. In turn this requires developing ways of assessing and measuring progress across (personal, social and employment-related) domains, to enable sensitive analyses of multifaceted program models. It is also important to capture reasons for attrition and to track progress in finding and sustaining employment following exit from programs. **Measuring individual progress through and beyond the program will generate robust data** on the enabling factors and barriers for young people with disability in preparing for, and maintaining, employment.
- While CL staff have established relationships with some employers who facilitate regular and timely work experience opportunities for young people, the program primarily addresses the supply side of employment (that is, preparing young people for work). To complement supply-side efforts, greater focus on demand-side issues to involve diverse employers in offering work experience and employment opportunities could further improve program outcomes. **Expanding employment opportunities for people with disability requires dedicated resources to build relationships with employers, drawing on specialised skills and grounded in reliable evidence of what works.**
- There is wide agreement that services and settings that integrate, rather than segregate, people with disability are critical for upholding the rights of people with disability as laid out in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability. This is also explicit in the quote from the current NT Disability Strategy (see page 9). A key factor for why CL is effective in building young people’s confidence and aptitudes, however, lies in intentionally creating a spatially and socially separated environment that is welcoming and safe for young people with disability. **Creating supportive environments for young people with disability within mainstream settings – including schools and workplaces – continues to be a challenge and should be a focus in efforts to improve**

**employment rates for people with disability going forward.**

- The effectiveness of these strategies must be grounded in ongoing efforts to shift community perceptions and the public discourse about the rights and capacities of people with disability.

Finally, while the evaluation generated helpful insights into the characteristics of an employment support program that is widely viewed as effective in achieving key outcomes, we need to reiterate a few limitations of the study. In particular it is based on a small sample of program participants who cannot represent the diversity of young people’s experiences of disability. Further, while the interviews with young people offered reflective and nuanced insights that suggested the value of taking the time to talk with them about their experiences, we did not measure participant outcomes in consistent ways. This requires the measurement of program objectives and outcomes for all participants over multiple time points, including after exit from the program. Generating accurate information will require working closely with program delivery teams to identify and address practical and ethical issues that are involved.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the issues discussed in this report are helpful for understanding how to effectively prepare and support young people with disability to achieve their employment goals.

**There is wide agreement that services and settings that integrate, rather than segregate, people with disability are critical for upholding the rights of people with disability.**

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## Preparing for the future

### Evaluation of the Career Launchpad program for school leavers with disabilities

Deborah Warr and Sharon Bond  
2022

This report discusses an evaluation of Career Launchpad, an employment support program for young people with disability who are not NDIS participants. Designed and delivered by YouthWorX NT, Career Launchpad supports young people to gain a Certificate 1 in Developing Independence while exploring employment aspirations and pathways. It uses a holistic, flexible and applied approach to learning, offers a warm, sociable environment and facilitates real work experience through partnerships with local employers. It has proven effective in building young people's confidence and interpersonal skills and supporting their transition into training and employment.

## Acknowledgement of Country

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence and YouthWorX NT acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways on which our organisations operate. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging.



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