

Negotiating the school to work transition

by Matthew Ford

Work is important for all of us. It provides financial independence, a sense of identity, and connection with the community we live in. The transition to work or further education can be challenging for all young people but can be even more challenging for a young person with a disability who may need additional supports.

Depending on a person’s employment goals and the type of support they need, there are a number of options and pathways for the transition to work.

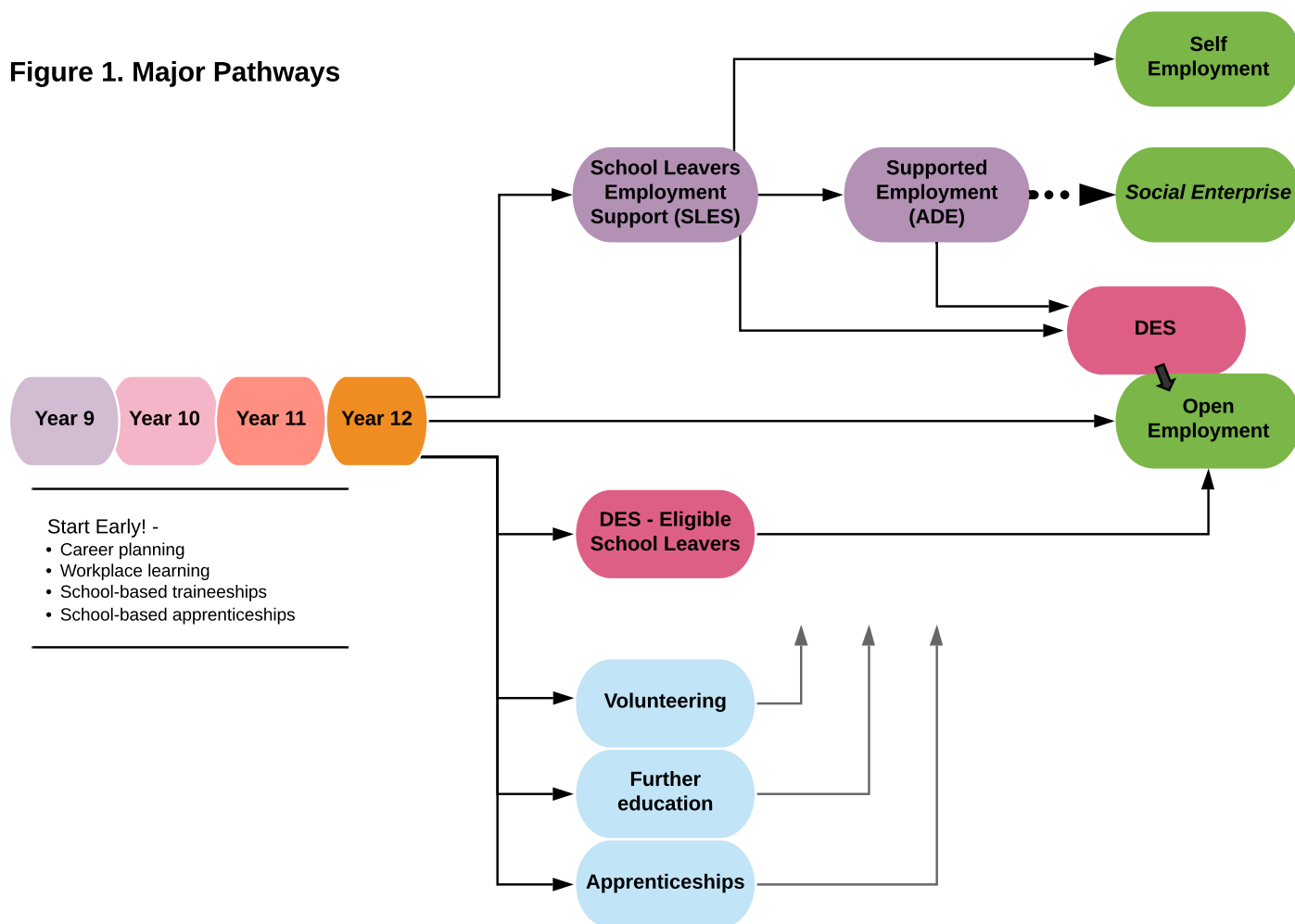
At school – start early!

Perhaps the first thing to say about planning a young person’s transition to work is to start as early as possible – in years 9 or 10 rather than 11 or 12. Engage the school

staff and potential post-school employment providers to explore employment or further education goals, strategies to realise these goals and the local network of services who can help. Schools also provide opportunities for workplace learning and school-based traineeships and apprenticeships. Ticket to Work networks may be able help here too – facilitating partnerships between schools, disability organisations and mainstream services. More information here: <http://www.tickettowork.org.au/ticket-work-locations/>

The University of Western Sydney have also produced an excellent series of ‘Get Ready’ Workbooks: <https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/getreadyforstudyandwork>

Figure 1. Major Pathways



On leaving school

When leaving school, a young person has a number of employment or further education options. These include:

- Straight to open employment through a Disability Employment Service (DES).
- Work experience and skills development as part of their NDIS plan and through a provider of School Leavers Employment Supports (SLES).
- Supported employment through their NDIS plan and with an Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE).
- Further education through TAFE or university.
- Apprenticeships.
- Volunteering.

You are now in the driver's seat! - you can choose the provider who best responds to your needs but choosing a path will depend on your **readiness for open employment**:

- To access a DES, a job seeker must have a future work capacity, with intervention, of at least eight hours per week.
- If a young person does not have this level of capacity, then SLES is designed to build their capacity and transition to a DES (although the SLES provider may identify other opportunities, including self-employment or supported employment).

Ready for open employment: DES – eligible school leaver program

Disability Employment Services (DES) help people with disabilities find jobs with mainstream employers and get support to develop their skills and confidence to find and keep a job. They also assist employers to provide practical support to employees in the workplace.

The DES program for students in their last year of school is called the DES ESL (Eligible School Leaver) program. Through a Job Plan, a DES provider can provide:

- assistance to address barriers to employment
- job search, job-site training and placement
- post placement support in a paid job and
- ongoing support to maintain a paid job, if required.

More information here:

<https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/programmes-services/disability-employment-services>

Not yet ready for open employment: SLES

School Leavers Employment Supports (SLES) is NDIS funding offered for two years after year 12 to help young people with a disability prepare for work. SLES supports are only available to NDIS participants who have been assessed as ineligible or are unlikely to meet the access requirements for DES. SLES was introduced to address what has been described as a 'culture of low expectations' among participants, families, planners and the community. Early NDIS plans have shown little emphasis on employment — currently only 4.6% of total funding for 15 to 24-year-olds is being committed to employment support. The NDIA have indicated they are committed to addressing these low expectations by promoting an 'employment first' approach for all NDIS participants of working age. Participants and their parents or carers should therefore feel confident in pushing for employment in their NDIS plans!

Typically, participants receive SLES support for about three days a week for 48–52 weeks a year. However, the actual days and hours of support received will need to be negotiated and will vary from person to person. Supports will be tailored to meet employment goals, and may include:

- work experience in open employment
- learning to take instructions and communicating in the workplace
- understanding employer expectations
- activities to build resilience and manage fatigue in the workplace.

SLES supports are just part of a holistic response to a person's needs – there are a range of complementary capacity-building supports available through the NDIS that can accompany SLES.



Self-employment

Self-employment is a real option for a young person who has a business idea that reflects their capabilities and goals. It can also provide a degree of flexibility in work hours and in some cases the opportunity to work from home. My colleague, Sara Gingold, profiled three young people who have gone this route and are operating their own businesses: <https://www.disabilityservicesconsulting.com.au/resources/microenterprise-profiles>

Supported employment and social enterprises

‘Supported’ employment refers to employment with Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) – businesses whose primary purpose is the employment of people with disability, and where the majority of employees have disability. ADEs operate in a range of industries such as packaging, recycling, plant nursery, landscaping, cleaning services and food services. Unfortunately very few people make the step from ADEs to open employment.

The challenge for ADEs in an environment of raised expectations is to provide a better employment experience than what is essentially a ‘congregated’ disability employment business. One way to do this is by moving from an ADE to a Social Enterprise. Social Enterprises exist to provide an employment experience for the target group – in this case, people with disability – but the key difference is that ‘workers are employees, with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities associated with this socially valued role, not “customers” or “service recipients”’.¹

Choosing your SLES provider – who’s embracing best practice?

The NDIA provides a useful list of questions to ask a prospective SLES provider covering things like the sort of supports they offer, the opportunities they provide for work experience in open employment, and their success rate with past participants – how many went on to get a job? It is available here: <https://www.ndis.gov.au/participants/finding-keeping-and-changing-jobs/leaving-school>

SLES providers around Australia are increasingly adopting the evidenced-based *Customised Employment* approach. At the heart of customised employment is a personal ‘Discovery’ process. Discovery is an employment-focused version of person-centred planning, focusing on capacity rather than deficits.

The support a young person should expect to receive as they negotiate the tricky transition from school to employment is -

... to be treated as an individual who is free to make choices about his or her life’s direction; is afforded respect and dignity; is assumed to have competencies that, if not readily obvious, can be discovered; is given access in natural settings with minimal intrusion; and is provided with high quality employment opportunities and services¹¹

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¹ Smith, P., McVilly, K., McGillivray, J., Chan, J. 2018b. Developing open employment outcomes for people with an intellectual disability utilising a social enterprise framework. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 48(1) 59–77.

¹¹ ICF International, Customized employment competency model. <https://www.dol.gov/odep/pdf/2011cecm.pdf>

