

# **“The Obstacle Course to Economic Independence: Labour Force Participation for People with Disabilities in Australia”**

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*“The denial of opportunities and resources is an issue, not of discrimination, but of distributive injustice... This accounts for the fact that the most accurate indicator of the social status of being a person with disabilities is poverty.”*

(Bickenbach, Chatterji, Badleyb, & Ustun, 1999, p. 1181)

## **Abstract**

The 2009 Australian National Disability Strategy Consultation Report (NDSCR) paints a tragic picture of what it is to be disabled in a first world nation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Despite the Australian Government passing the national Disability Discrimination Act in 1992 designed to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of disability in areas of education, employment, access and law, the legislation has failed to live up to its objective of ensuring “that persons with disabilities have the same fundamental rights as the rest of the community”. The 2003 Survey of Disability and Aging found that the 20% of Australians classed as disabled had significantly lower levels of education, higher levels of unemployment and the gross personal household income was half that of persons without disability. This report builds on past research into disability and labour force participation, investigates whether there have been any significant improvements in employment outcomes for disabled Australians over the past decade and considers the social and economic implications for policy makers.

## **1. Introduction**

Economic research overwhelmingly supports the principle that a key determinant of an individual’s capacity to achieve financial independence is employment. Exclusion from the labour force affects disabled Australians at two levels, the impact of limited employment opportunities for the individual, and the personal, social and economic cost of exclusion from the labour force and consequent welfare dependence. Economic research identifies a link between low levels of well-being and unemployment, low income and welfare dependence, as Frey & Stutzer conclude, “Happiness research suggests that unemployment strongly reduces subjective self-reported well-being, both personally and for society as a whole. This is more in line with the view that unemployment is involuntary for the bulk of people affected” (2002, p.428).

This paper describes some initial findings from a program of research in which we plan to analyse whether there is a link between disability, access to education and employment opportunity, and compares recent research data to assess whether there have been improvements in labour market outcomes for persons with a disability over the years since 1998. As a basis this study examines the findings of the 1998, and 2003 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC98 and SDAC03 respectively) and seeks to build on the important research by Wilkins (2004) based on the SDAC98. The SDAC03 was conducted from June to November in 2003. The final sample comprised 36,241 people for the household component and 5,145 people for the cared-accommodation component (figures include respondents who are classed as aged and not disabled), and lists as its aims to measure the prevalence of disability and the need for support, as well provide a demographic and socio-economic profile of people with disabilities.

As part of an ongoing program it is hoped to develop the research using analysis of the unit record files from the ABS CURFs from 1998, 2003 and 2009. The 2009 CURF file is due for release in 2010. This initial paper assesses developments between 1998 and 2003.

## **2. Previous Literature and Statistics**

The World Health Organisation uses the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH) definition of disability as “any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being”. An impairment is “any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function” (in Bickenbach, et al, 1999, p.1175).

When examining the group of people classed as disabled in Australia, it is important to have an understanding of what this term incorporates. As the basis for this research is data from the ABS SDAC, the definition supplied therein would be appropriate. Here, disability is defined as “any limitation, restriction or impairment, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months and restricts everyday activities” (p.3). Disabilities are grouped into four categories based on functioning of the sensory; intellectual; physical; psychological functions and there can be a combination of disabilities experienced, indicating that disabled people have heterogeneous symptoms and support needs.

Disability is further categorised by the severity of disability, the level of core-activity (communication, mobility and self-care) limitation and restriction in education or employment. With this definition in mind, the SDAC03 figures in Table 2 revealed that 20% of Australians (3,958,300) had a reported disability, with the rate being consistent for males (19.8%) and females (20.1%) in 2003.

Despite recognition that people with disabilities are under-represented in the labour force, research into the reasons for low levels of labour force participation in Australia has been

fairly limited. In his study of the SDAC98 data, Wilkins (2004) found the presence of disability has adverse effects on labour force participation in Australia, decreasing the probability of participation by 0.24 for males and 0.20 for females, and with the effects increasing with the severity of the disability. Despite improvements in the treatment, rehabilitation and research of potential disabling disease, there has been an upward trend in the number of disability welfare recipients over the past 30 years, as is reflected in research by Cai, Vu and Wilkins (2007). Cai et al used Department of Family and Community Services figures to calculate the number of Disability Support Pension (DSP) recipients had almost doubled between November 1991 and June 2003. More recently Cai, Vu, & Wilkins, (2008) researched transitions from welfare payments to wages as an indicator of employment opportunities for recipients of the DSP and found that less than 3% transition off all income support in that time, with less than 40% due to employment. Cai et al also found that “over 50 % of DSP recipients who make the transition off payments return to income support within two years, and on average spend only 60 % of the four years following exit off all income support payments”(p. 24).

In his analysis of the figures from the 1998 SDAC, Wilkins (2004) found that the percentage of disabled males employed fulltime is significantly lower that of non-disabled males. For disabled women the disadvantage exists in both full and part-time work. As a result almost 50% of disabled people of working age are welfare dependant and have significantly lower mean weekly incomes than non-disabled people. Wilkins found that disabled people tend to reside in areas with higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage which has implications for access to work in terms of local employment opportunities and costs of transport. When considering educational opportunities, Wilkins found that in 1998, over 70% of people with disability aged 0-64 years acquired disability after completing their education and for males, the higher the level of education, the lower the adverse affects of disability on the probability of employment.

### **3. Disability and Education and Training**

To examine the relationship between employment opportunities for disabled persons and levels of education and training, it is important to distinguish between the experience of those who acquire a disability before entering or while still in the education system and those who became disabled after education is completed. Wilkins (2004) observes that having a disability earlier in life may result in the choice of more appropriate pathways in education and skills training to accommodate employment opportunities, while those who acquire a disability after completion of studies have fewer choices available to them. When formulating policies to improve employment opportunities for disabled Australians, it is important to recognise the issues of appropriate education and training are quite different for each of these groups.

### 3.1. Early Onset Disability and Education

Wilkin's (2004) findings of low levels of education attainment among disable persons may indicate higher levels of disadvantage or barriers in attaining an education, and are supported by the figures in Table 1 and discussed later in this paper. This is concerning when we consider that as illustrated in Table 2, in 2003, 10% of persons aged 5-14 years were classed as having a disability. Findings in the 2009 Australian National Disability Strategy Consultation Report (NDSCR) indicate that the education needs of disabled children in Australia are not met by the current education system, leaving them inadequately prepared for the workforce. Parents of disabled children identified that issues of access, inadequate resources and aids, and insufficient training of teaching staff created barriers preventing this group from accessing adequate mainstream education services generally available to non-disabled Australian children, with many reporting that "the current system has little or no capacity to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities and lacks the resources to ensure their full participation in classrooms and schools" (p.47). In 29% of the more than 750 submissions, respondents reported frustration with the education system as "chronically under-funded and staffed by teachers who received little or no training with regard to disability" (p. 6).

These disadvantages in education were reported by parents and carers of disabled children in 2009, despite the establishment in August 2005 by the Federal Government of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (the Education Standards) to ensure equal rights of students with disability as well as obligations on education providers to ensure access and appropriate learning resources to ensure these rights. "The main aim of the Education Standards is to give students with disability the right to participate in educational courses and programs on the same basis as students without disability. This means a person with disability should have access to the same opportunities and choices in their education that are available to a person without disability" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006).

The ineffective provision of education facilities and suitably trained teaching staff in Australian schools for disabled students has been addressed by Forlin (2006) who identifies that while most schools in Australia have embraced inclusivity of disabled children in the classroom, many teachers in Australia perceive they lack the ability and training to cater for the needs of disabled children, particularly when they have been teaching homogenous classes for a number of years and do not see the need to up-skill. Further obstacles to achieving an effective education framework for disabled students are that each state in Australia is responsible for the administration of education resulting in different programs running across the different states, compounded by the broad range of national teacher training education, with up to "400 programs in 36 universities" (p. 271) across the country in 2005. Forlin (2006) states that while changes in education policy have seen disabled children receiving access to mainstream education in Australia, the role of the support teacher and the educational structure of the school must be developed to ensure the teaching and learning needs of disabled children are being met and supported at the community level, as he sees "inclusivity is an evolving paradigm that represents each school's attempts to provide appropriate educational opportunities for all

children within their community” (p. 273). In terms of preparing students for transitioning to higher education, training or the workforce, inclusivity must be embraced by society at large if school leavers with a disability are to have access to and gain meaningful employment.

This is a view shared by the findings of Win & Hay (2009) who reviewed literature examining the transition from school to work of Australian youths with disability. They found a number of factors create barriers to school leavers successfully finding employment as well as limited opportunities for further education and training. Separation of the health and education functions and inadequate resources means the education system lacks the capacity to incorporate the aids and appropriate delivery methods needed to meet the disabled child’s learning needs, leading to poor levels of academic achievement and creating barriers to a transition to the workplace, vocational or tertiary education. These are findings backed by figures from the SDAC03 in Table 1, where we see that disabled persons are under-represented when compared to those without a disability across all categories of high school completion and post school education and education, with the exception of certificate level. Win & Hay (2009) concluded the reasons for these outcomes include low levels of literacy and numeracy among school leavers with disability due to traditional education and careers transition systems designed to meet the needs of students with no disability, together with “deep seated prejudices in the labour market” (p112) and the relatively weak legal status of persons with disability in Australia. Win and Hay (2009) also discuss the need for improved access to and expanded resources for employment services for disabled job seekers.

### **3.2. Disability Acquired Post Education**

The relationship between disability and labour force participation is experienced differently for Australians who acquire a disability after the completion of their education and training. Recent research by Lattimore (2004) found that in 2003 around half of the men aged 35 to 54 years not in the labour force were broadly defined as disabled. A concerning aspect of Wilkin’s (2004) findings is that disabled persons are likely to be older, 50% less likely to have degree qualifications than non-disabled, and are up to 16% less likely to have finished high school, implying that there is a higher rate of disability onset among less educated and lower skilled workers. This has implications for the capacity of these people to retrain and acquire the skills and/or education necessary to re-enter the workforce. There is also the possibility that more could be done by the person’s employer to modify the work place to enable a return to the place of work in a role suited to the current level of ability and capacity. More research is required into the area of workplace modification and rehabilitation and is beyond the scope of this report.

Interestingly, comparisons of the data in Table 2 show that there is no statistically significant change in the proportion of people classed as disabled in each of the age classifications across the five years, indicating that from 1998 to 2003 there is no evidence of an upsurge in respondents claiming disability for improved welfare benefits as implied in some research (Brown, 2010, Thomas, 2010). What is concerning is the

figure in 2003 that 22% of all people aged 45-54 and 34% of all people aged 55 to 64 years in Australia have some form of disability, indicating the need for inclusive work places and flexible work practices to ensure that as many as possible from this large cohort of Australians are able to engage in the workforce. The importance of the opportunity for meaningful work “is as much about identity, participation and social and psychological well-being as it is about income and productivity, and social policy has failed to acknowledge the employment barriers that confront people with a disability” (Roulstone and Barnes, 2005, p. 104).

The loss of work has implications for mental health and wellbeing and can further compound the affects and trauma experienced by those acquiring a disability. As Win and Hay (2009) observe, it is time that we as a society learn to focus on the abilities that each person possesses, rather than the degree of disability. This approach offers greater scope to identify education and training opportunities as well as flexible work-place design.

#### **4. Background Data**

Although estimates are not strictly comparable over time, the ABS collections show a dramatic increase in the number of Australians classified as disabled. The ABS definitions have fluctuated over time, with definitional changes possibly influencing estimates of the number of disabled persons by up to 1.5%. However, the estimated proportion of the population with a disability has almost doubled from 1.95 million in 1981 to 3.96 million in 2003, a difference far exceeding any measurement effects. In absolute numbers, it is older Australians who have contributed the most of this increase. This is to be expected given the aging of the population; however, there have also been very large increases in the number of disabled between the ages of 35-54, which are considered to be relatively prime working years.

The disability rates by age and gender are presented in Table 2 and illustrate that the prevalence of disability has increased from 13.2% in 1981 to 20.0% in 2003, with a slightly higher increase among females than males. In this paper we are mainly concerned with employment opportunity among disabled persons, and hence we focus on those of working age and under. Table 2 presents the changes in prevalence of disability between 1981 and 2003. There has been an alarming increase in the incidence of disability among women aged 55-64, with the disability rate for this group increasing from 22.3% in 1981 to 34.2 percent in 2003 – meaning the incidence of disability among this demographic increased by around 50% over the 22 years. There was also a large increase among women aged 45-59. For working age men the increase in the prevalence of disabilities is spread more evenly across age groups, with the largest increase occurring among 45-54 year olds (from 17.7% in 1981 to 21.6% in 2003). The most disconcerting aspect of the figures for males is that the largest increase in the incidence of disability occurs among males who are younger than 15. The incidence of disability for 5-14 years olds increased from 17.6% to 12.4% over this period. Increases are also observed for males aged 0-4 and for pre-working age females. This highlights the growing importance of educational opportunity for people with a disability.

As illustrated in Table 1, the SDAC 03 survey provides evidence of the educational disadvantage for disabled persons aged 15–64 years. Almost one in three (30%) of disabled persons did not complete high school, a decline in educational outcomes from 19% in 1998. In 2003, just over 29% of people with a disability had completed Year 12, compared to half (49%) of those without a disability, and this percentage had improved only marginally since 1998, though there was a more significant improvement in the corresponding high school completions for non-disabled students (Year 12 or Equivalent). Disabled persons were no more likely to obtain out of school qualifications in 2003 than in 1998, indicated by the category of persons without a post-school qualification remaining constant at over 50% of the disabled population. Of persons aged 15-64 years with a reported disability, 13% had completed a bachelor degree or higher, which was a slight fall from 1998, compared to those with no disability where the proportions were 20%, up from 15.5%. These figures need to be considered in relation to employment data for the same periods.

When comparing the employment data of the 2003 SDAC with that of 1998 in Table 1, there is no observable change in the percentage of disabled people employed full time and only marginal improvement in the percentage working part time, indicating that there was no effective improvement in the work place opportunities, and therefore wellbeing of disabled people over this period. People with a disability who were employed were more likely to work part-time (37%) than those who were employed and did not have a disability (29%). In more recent data, the 2009 ABS Survey of People Not in the Labour Force found there were 462 000 Persons aged 15-64 not in the labour force due to ‘Own long-term health condition or disability’, of which 42,500 reported that they “Wanted to work but not actively looking and not available”.

**Table 1: Labour Force Status and Educational Attainment of Persons Aged 15-64 by Disable/Non-disabled Status: 1998, and 2003 SDAC**

	1998		2003	
	<i>Disabled</i>	<i>Non-disabled</i>	<i>Disabled</i>	<i>Non-disabled</i>
Number (Percentage of Population)#	2,066,000 (16.6)	10,388,300 (83.4)	2,228,800 (16.6)	11,164,300 (83.4)
Educational Attainment - per cent				
Bachelor's Degree or Above	13.7	15.4	12.7	19.7
Advanced Diploma or Diploma	7.2	8.2	6.8	8.4
Certificate	27.3	23.2	26.0	23.3
No non-school qualification	54.2	47.1	53.9	48.2
Highest Year of School completed				
Year 12 or Equivalent	27.1	43.9	29.6	49.3
Year 10 or Equivalent	51.0	43.1	39.9	37.8
Less than Year 10	19.5	7.0	30.5	13.0
Labour Force Status (per cent)#				
Employed full-time	639,700 (31)	5,472,000	686,900 (30.8)	6,054,600
Employed part-time	333,600 (16.2)	2,191,200	397,600 (17.8)	2,490,500
Not in labour force	966,500 (46.8)	2,072,400	1,042,800 (46.8)	2,168,400
Unemployment Rate – per cent	11.5	7.8	8.6	5.0
Participation Rate – per cent	53.2	80.1	53.2	80.6

Source: ABS SDAC 2003 Summary of Findings

# Total Population aged 15-64 1998: 12,455,000; 2003: 13,393,100, rounded to nearest 100 (hence percentage calculations have minor rounding discrepancies)

**Table 2: Disability rates, by age and gender, 1981-2003**

Age	1981	1988	1993	1998	2003	Percent. point Change, 81-03
<b>Males</b>						
0-4	3.4	4.0	4.5	4.8	4.7	1.3
5-14	7.6	8.5	9.1	12.3	12.4	4.8
15-24	5.8	6.5	6.7	9.1	8.9	3.1
25-34	8.4	8.6	9.5	10.7	11.7	3.3
35-44	11.6	12.2	13.2	15.2	14.5	2.9
45-54	17.7	17.6	20.5	22.3	21.6	3.9
55-64	32.8	37.5	36.9	38.9	33.8	1.0
All Ages	13.7	15.9	17.4	19.9	19.8	6.1
<b>Females</b>						
0-4	2.6	2.7	3.8	2.5	3.9	1.3
5-14	5.0	6.3	5.7	6.9	7.5	2.5
15-24	5.7	5.8	6.7	7.2	9.0	3.3
25-34	7.6	7.4	8.5	8.8	9.7	2.1
35-44	10.1	11.5	11.5	13.2	13.9	3.8
45-54	15.6	17.1	16.3	19.6	21.5	5.9
55-64	22.3	25.3	25.8	28.9	34.2	11.9
All Ages	12.8	15.2	15.7	17.6	20.1	7.3
<b>Persons</b>						
0-4	3.0	3.3	4.1	3.7	4.3	1.3
5-14	6.3	7.4	7.4	9.7	10.0	3.7
15-24	5.8	6.2	6.7	8.2	9.0	3.2
25-34	8.0	8.0	9.0	9.8	10.7	2.7
35-44	10.8	11.8	12.4	14.2	14.2	3.4
45-54	16.7	17.4	18.4	20.9	21.6	4.9
55-64	27.6	31.4	31.2	33.8	34.0	6.4
All Ages	13.2	15.5	16.6	18.8	20.0	6.8

Sources: ABS Catalogue number 4430.0, 1998 and 2003

Table 3 provides rudimentary indicators of how employment opportunity changed for people with a disability between 1998 and 2003. The Australian labour market improved significantly over this period, with the unemployment rate for people without a disability falling from 7.8 percent at the time of the survey in 1998 to 5.0 percent in 2003, and the participation rate increasing by 0.5 of a percentage point. Continuing long run trends observed in the Australian labour market, this change in participation comprised of a significant rise in female participation partly offset by declining male participation.

For all persons with a disability, the unemployment rate fell by a similar 2.9 percentage points, but there was no improvement in the rate of labour force participation. Compared to persons without a disability, the percentage point decline in unemployment for disabled persons is much smaller in relative terms since it started from a much higher

**Table 3: Changes in employment opportunity by gender and disability status; 1998 to 2003**

	1998		2003		Pctge point change 1998-2003	
	Unemp rate (%)	Partic rate (%)	Unemp rate (%)	Partic rate (%)	Unemp rate	Partic rate
<b>Males</b>						
Core restriction						
Profound	8.3	20.9	8.5	22.1	0.2	1.2
Severe	13.3	43.4	10.0	38.3	-3.3	-5.1
Moderate	16.0	51.5	7.2	56.2	-8.8	4.7
Mild core	11.7	65.3	9.0	53.2	-2.7	-12.1
School or emp't restriction	16.2	51.4	11.8	49.9	-4.4	-1.5
All with specific restrctions	14.2	55.9	10.2	53.4	-4.0	-2.5
All with disability	13.5	60.3	8.8	59.3	-4.7	-1.0
No disability	7.7	89.2	4.8	88.9	-2.9	-0.3
<b>Females</b>						
Core restriction						
Profound	6.4	16.9	24.6	9.3	18.2	-7.6
Severe	9.8	37.2	9.0	33.8	-0.8	-3.4
Moderate	9.2	40.8	8.1	40.2	-1.1	-0.6
Mild core	5.6	46.7	6.3	48.0	0.7	1.3
School or emp't restriction*	8.2	40.6	11.0	39.5	2.8	-1.1
All with specific restrctions	8.2	42.3	9.5	42.1	1.3	-0.2
All with disability	8.6	45.5	8.3	46.9	-0.3	1.4
No disability	8.0	71.0	5.3	72.2	-2.7	1.2
<b>Persons</b>						
Core restriction						
Profound	7.4	18.9	13.9	15.2	6.5	-3.7
Severe	11.6	40.2	9.5	35.8	-2.1	-4.4
Moderate	13.1	46.3	7.6	47.9	-5.5	1.6
Mild core	9.3	56.5	7.7	50.6	-1.6	-5.9
School or emp't restriction	12.9	46.4	11.5	44.9	-1.4	-1.5
All with specific restrctions	11.7	49.3	9.9	47.7	-1.8	-1.6
All with disability	11.5	53.2	8.6	53.2	-2.9	0.0
No disability	7.8	80.1	5.0	80.6	-2.8	0.5

Sources: ABS Catalogue number 4430.0, 1998 and 2003

\* Note the ABS caution these particular estimates have high standard errors.

base in 1998: 11.5% for persons with a disability and 7.8% for those without. This stagnant participation rate and smaller relative improvement in the unemployment rate suggests that persons have not benefited to the same degree as others from the overall strengthening in the labour market over this period, and are interesting in light of the education data in Table 1.

Moreover, there were pronounced differences between persons with differing levels of disability. The participation rate for males with mild core restrictions dropped markedly from 65.3% to 53.2%. Overall the labour force participation rate for males with disabilities and especially those with specific restrictions fell by more than the participation rate for males generally. Offsetting this, there were significant improvements in the unemployment rate for men who were in the labour force in 2003.

For women with school or employment restrictions an increase in the unemployment rate of 2.8 percentage points was observed despite a fall in participation. This can be traced to a very large drop in employment opportunity for women with a profound core restriction, with the unemployment rate rising despite a large fall in participation.

Overall the figures point to very little, if any, improvement in the relative employment opportunity of Australians with a disability compared to those without a disability. The limited choice in job opportunities is evidenced in the 2003 SDAC with 797,000 people with a disability reporting they were restricted in the type of job they could do, and 658,000 reported they had difficulty changing jobs or getting a preferred job. This clearly has to be of considerable concern given the rapidly growing number of persons with a disability. Given the continued improvement in the labour market since 2003, and the fact that Australia seemed to be at close to full employment for some of that time, it will be interesting to see when the 2009 data become available whether this strong demand for labour has 'trickled down' to impact upon employment opportunity for persons with a disability.

## **5. Policy Responses to Low Levels of Work Force Participation**

In 2010 the federal government minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin announced changes to DSP eligibility criteria in the form of streamlined 'Job Capacity Account' effective from July 2010 that are an attempt to move mildly disabled persons off disability welfare dependence and into the 'Newstart' - unemployment benefits program. This policy initiative has two aims: to reduce the number of recipients of DSP and increase workforce participation of disabled persons (Thomas, 2010), while effectively cutting the welfare benefit by \$235 per fortnight for an individual. While this policy shift can be seen as an acknowledgement that some disabled persons represent the 'invisible' unemployed, in the absence of increased job accessibility and opportunities, compelling disabled, possibly low skilled workers to the workplace given many reside in areas with socio economic disadvantage is not a realistic expectation.

Brown's claim (2010) that mildly disabled persons choose to remain on welfare benefits that are well below the minimum wage, to avoid working are hard to support given the findings of Cai et al. (2008) which imply how difficult it is for disabled persons to obtain work. In the 2009 NDSCR, respondents reported frustration at the inability to obtain work, distress at relying on the DSP and in fact, far from enjoying a 'free ride' on the DSP felt impoverished, "The high cost associated with living with disability relative to

the level of the pension was seen as restricting the ability of people to live independently and enjoy a decent standard of living” (p.6).

A reality for disabled people is that few employers are prepared to employ people with disability, and this may be compounded by the inaccessibility of public transport and barriers preventing entry to buildings that house work places. As reported in the NDSCR “Some employers and recruitment agencies are using medical tests to ‘screen out’ candidates with disabilities which are irrelevant to their ability to perform the job” (p. 38). While many individuals not in the workforce indicate they are willing to work, data shows the appropriate job vacancies do not exist. In the ABS Report on Persons Not in the Labour Force (2009), the most commonly reported reason given by job seekers for not actively looking for work was 'considered too old by employers' (36%), then 'no jobs in locality or line of work' (22%) and 'lacked necessary training, skills or experience' (11%). Moving mildly disabled people from one form of welfare category to another does not address the issues of work force participation disadvantage, nor does it bring the microeconomic reform that generates jobs for these Australians, however, it will save the government up to \$383 million in tax expenditure (Massola, 2010) while increasing the financial burden of an already disadvantage and marginalised group.

Of concern is that little analysis has been undertaken to determine the reasons behind the increase over the past 20 years in the percentage of Australians being classed as disabled. As Brown (2010) observes, “in the mid-1980s, about one in every 40 working-age people relied on DSP; by the mid-2000s, this had doubled to one in 20” (p.1), while the figures have stabilised recently. Comparing DSP figures today to those in the 1980’s in isolation from political, social and economic variables risks an inaccurate analysis. The 1980’s have been identified as times of economic rationalism and market-based policies (Wearing, 1998, Healy, 1999) focused on achieving economic growth via fiscal restraint and “economising on social spending” (Wearing, 1998, p. 4) to reduce the numbers of welfare recipients, a policy approach mirrored recently by the Howard government. In response to community pressure, the Federal government enacted the Disabilities Services Act 1986 and largely as a result of this Act, and recognition of the need for social inclusion for disabled people, the focus shifted from institutional care to care within a home environment. Welfare reforms such as the de-institutionalisation of disabled people caused an upward surge in the number of disability welfare recipients in the late 80’s, as the emphasis moved from state run support to self determination and social inclusion.

A further factor that explains a portion of the rise in DSP recipients over the past 20 years is that people now feel entitled to claim social benefits. As mentioned, it wasn’t until as late as 1986 that the Australian government enacted legislation giving disabled people equal rights in this country. Given the negative past attitudes and social stigma of disability caused by such factors as mental illness and psychological disorders, this recent increase in DSP recipients may in fact be a more accurate representation of the true numbers of people suffering these conditions due to an improvement in medical diagnosis, education and a more understanding society where individuals are more likely to acknowledge this condition and seek medical help.

The government's policy response aimed at decreasing numbers of disabled welfare recipients is a cause for concern if it is driven by a desire to reduce the welfare bill and force disabled persons to take on any work, or accept the lower welfare payment of the unemployment benefit. Recipients of disability pensions are a heterogeneous group, with multiple barriers to achieving work. In figures from SDAC03, 27% of disabled Australians aged 15-64 were classed as 'Permanently unable to work', indicating that the remaining 73% were able to participate at some level in the workforce at some stage in the future. The challenge for government policy is to make this achievable with a genuine attempt to redress the barriers preventing disabled persons from participating in meaningful and appropriate work. This requires a comprehensive analysis of the different employment skills and access needs of DSP recipients to improve job opportunities and achieve a successful return to the workplace.

The SDAC03 survey findings illustrate the varied nature of work force abilities and needs of the respondents, and indicate why policy makers need to support the formulation of flexible workplace design and workplace practice in terms of job content and flexible working hours. This, and more detailed information is also important for town planners and public transport designers to remove physical barriers that prevent many disabled people from enjoying the access job spaces, social infrastructure and transport afforded non-disabled members of the community.

## **6. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations**

In a paper written for the World Health Organisation (WHO), Bickenbach et al (1999) quote disabled author Harlan Hahn who writes that the disadvantage of being disabled "stems from the failure of a structured social environment to adjust to the needs and aspirations of citizens with disabilities rather than from the inability of a disabled individual to adapt to the demands of society" (p.1174). Bickenbach et al claim the only way to redress disadvantage of disabled persons is through a fundamental social and political change in attitudes, policy and law. "Distributional injustice is created, not intentionally ..., but systemically: institutionally, structurally, as a product of impersonal economic forces. The injustice persists because of the variation in impairment-related needs and disability accommodations" (1999, p. 1181). The lack of improvement in relative employment outcomes in Australia over the five years between 1998 and 2003 indicates that Australia as a society has made little progress in achieving equal education and employment outcomes for disabled people. The release of the SDAC 2009 findings later this year will provide an opportunity to analyse whether the policy initiatives over the intervening years have redressed this imbalance.

Win & Hay (2009) make an important observation that traditionally there has been an over-reliance on parents and carers to meet the recreation needs of disabled children, resulting in social exclusion. I would argue this over-reliance extends to the burden of negotiating the gap of unmet financial and educational needs as evidenced in this research. Any future policy initiative designed to redress the under-representation of disabled Australians in the workforce requires a paradigm shift to ensure educational

content and delivery are designed collaboratively by healthcare and education specialists specifically to meet the needs of the child, as Win & Hay identify “it is time for educators, disability professionals, employer groups and legislators to reconceptualise how to enhance this critical bridge so that there is an increased probability that young adults with a disability acquire skills that are work relevant and develop the confidence to cope within society” (2009, p. 112).

For the individual who acquires a disability after the completion of his or her formal education and training there are further policy implications. Research suggests that he or she is likely to be less educated, less skilled and reside in area of high levels of social disadvantage. Investing in and supporting resources for rehabilitation, retraining and educational courses to enable these people to return to the original place of work, or acquire the skills necessary to obtain new work should be a priority for policy makers. Suggestions that lowering the minimum wage (Brown, 2010) would resolve this problem is yet another form of discrimination and would be ethically and legally inappropriate. Improving access to employment services is a policy initiative that has been identified in the current Budget statement for 2010-11. There is also a need for a paradigm shift among employers to view potential applicants in terms of their abilities rather than their disabilities. Many employers have the misconception that the cost of modifying the workplace makes employing disabled persons too costly without realising the government subsidies available. The important implication for policy makers is that disabled people indicate they want to work and adequate resources should be allocated to enable this.

For many of us, the simple reality is that disabled people are either invisible or someone else’s responsibility. As Bickenbach et al (1999) observe, “The social construction of disablement creates inequality of access to social resources” (p. 1181). Acknowledging that there is no difference between the rights, desires and needs of disabled and non-disabled people is the first step required by members of the community and policy makers to redress this imbalance. Public perceptions need to be changed via education and information to ensure that disabled persons enjoy the same levels of health, education, employment opportunities, social inclusion and well being enjoyed by the rest of us.

To ensure meaningful and effective policies are adopted to reduce the obstacles preventing disabled persons from entering the labour force, much more research is required into the delivery of, and access to meaningful education and training, as well as methods of reducing employer reluctance to offer employment opportunities to this sector of the workforce. Only then will improved and sustained economic independence be achievable for Australians with a disability.

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