

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Difficult Road: Update on the Educational-Vocational Impact of Disability in Australia

James Athanasou¹¹ Independent researcher**Funding:** No specific funding was received for this work.**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

Abstract

This is the sixth in a series of reports from 1999 that describe the impact of disability in Australia on earning and learning. It summarises the official statistics on *Disability Ageing and Carers* by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Whilst almost three-quarters of those aged 15-64 years without a reported disability completed Year 12 only just over a half of those with a disability completed the highest level of secondary schooling. In the labour market, the participation rate has always been lower for persons with a disability compared to those without a disability. Even when people with disabilities are ready to work the rate of unemployment is more than double for those without a disability.

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I. Introduction¹

There is an effect of a disability across almost every area of human functioning – personal, social and spiritual. More often than not, the impact of disability appears in the more mundane vocational, educational or economic aspects of daily life. This report is the sixth in a series on the impact of disabilities on education or work^{[1][2][3][4][5]}. The report is a summary of the survey of disability by the Australian Bureau of Statistics^[6]. It covers persons of working age (15-69 years) in households as well as in cared accommodation. The emphasis of this report is educational-vocational and where possible the format of the previous reports has been followed in order to allow for meaningful comparisons. The following section outlines general aspects of disability.

Disability

The extent of disability in the Australian community is not always recognised. Its incidence and prevalence is reflected in the 6.4 million persons with a disability in Australia in 2022. The age standardised proportion was around 19.2% of the population. The proportion varies from a low of 5.7% for the youngest age group (0-4 years) and increases directly with

age, up to 83.1% for those over 90 years. Figure 1 indicates the proportions across the general working age groups 15-69 years.

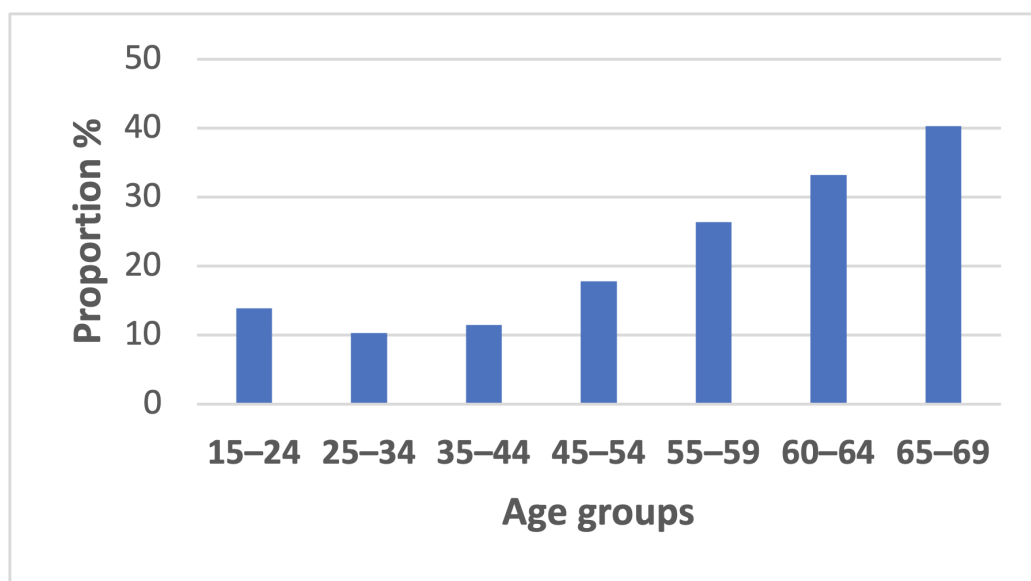


Figure 1. Proportion (age standardised) in working age groups of persons with a disability (Source: ABS [6], Table 1.3).

Disability status

By way of background, the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* views disability in terms of a limitation, restriction or impairment in the activities of daily living and one which has lasted or is likely to last for six months^[7]. The Australian Bureau of Statistics adopts this approach to disability.

Disability encompasses not only specific conditions but also the extent of their impact. Table 1 outlines a broad range of disability conditions, while Table 2 defines the levels of impact, which are categorised as profound, severe, moderate, or mild. This classification corresponds to specific limitations in three core areas of daily activity: (a) self-care, including tasks such as bathing, dressing, eating, toileting, and managing incontinence; (b) mobility, which involves moving around both at home and outside, getting in and out of bed or chairs, and using public transportation; and (c) communication, which covers understanding and being understood by others, whether strangers, family, or friends^[8].

Out of the 17.8 million people aged 15–69, approximately 17.9% (3.19 million) had a disability, with 10.7% (1.9 million) experiencing restrictions in schooling or employment. Among individuals with a disability, the majority had a mild limitation in core activities (see Figure 2).

Table 1. Disability conditions

Loss of sight (not corrected by glasses);
Loss of hearing (with difficulty communicating or use of aids);
Loss of speech;
Chronic or recurring pain that restricts everyday activities;
Breathing difficulties that restrict everyday activities;
Blackouts, fits or loss of consciousness;
Difficulty learning or understanding;
Incomplete use of arms or fingers;
Difficulty gripping;
Incomplete use of feet or legs;
A nervous or emotional condition that restricts everyday activities;
Restriction in physical activities or physical work;
Disfigurement or deformity;
Needing help or supervision because of a mental illness or condition;
Head injury, stroke or other brain damage, with long-term effects that restrict everyday activities;
Treatment for any other long-term condition, and still restricted in everyday activities; or
Any other long-term condition that restricts everyday activities.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics^[8]

Table 2. Categorisation of the extent of a disability

Category	Description
Profound	unable to perform a core activity, or always needing assistance
Severe	sometimes needing assistance to perform a core activity
Moderate	not needing assistance, but having difficulty performing a core activity
Mild	having no difficulty performing a core activity, but using aids or equipment because of disability.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics^[8]

Schooling and qualifications

One of the earliest disadvantages faced by people with disabilities often emerges in schooling. For example, about 12.5%, or roughly 1 in 8, of individuals aged 15 and over with a disability did not complete Year 10, which is generally considered the minimum standard for school leaving^[6].

As anticipated, this educational gap widens further in secondary school completion rates. While 73.3% of those aged 15 and over without a reported disability completed Year 12, only 54.6% of those with a disability reached this highest level of secondary schooling^[6].

This educational disadvantage also persists in higher education. Among those aged 15 and over, 37.1% of individuals without a disability attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with only 19.5% of those with a disability. Additionally, 39.9% of people with a disability lack any post-school qualification, compared with 32% of those without a disability^[6].

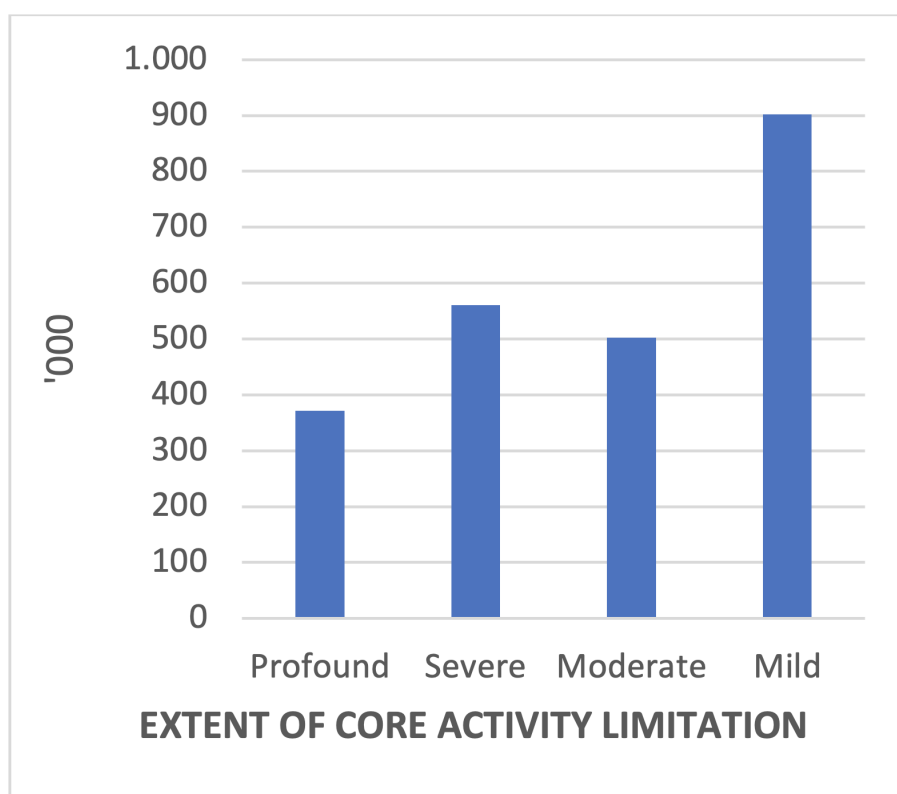


Figure 2. Ages 15-69 with a core activity limitation (Source: ABS ^[6]).

Labour force participation

Disability has a clear impact on employment outcomes, with labour force participation rates consistently lower for individuals with a disability (60.5%) compared to those without (84.9%). Figure 3 highlights how participation varies depending on the severity of the disability.

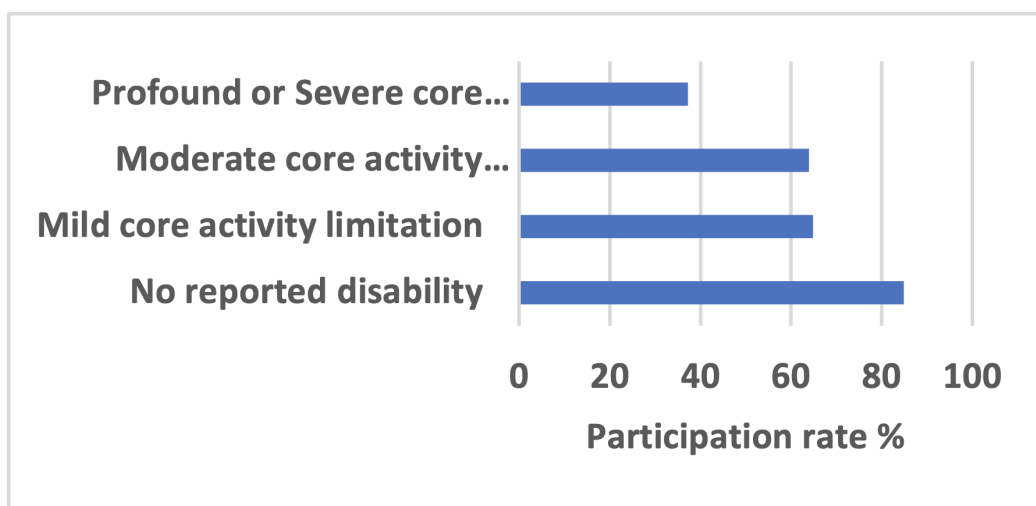


Figure 3. Labour force participation rate and core activity limitations (Source: ABS [\[6\]](#)).

Even when individuals with disabilities are prepared to work, they experience higher unemployment rates (7.5%) compared to those without disabilities (3.1%), as shown in Figure 4. Additionally, individuals with profound or severe core activity limitations face an unemployment rate of 10.7%. It should be noted that in Figure 4, the unemployment estimate for the moderate core activity group has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

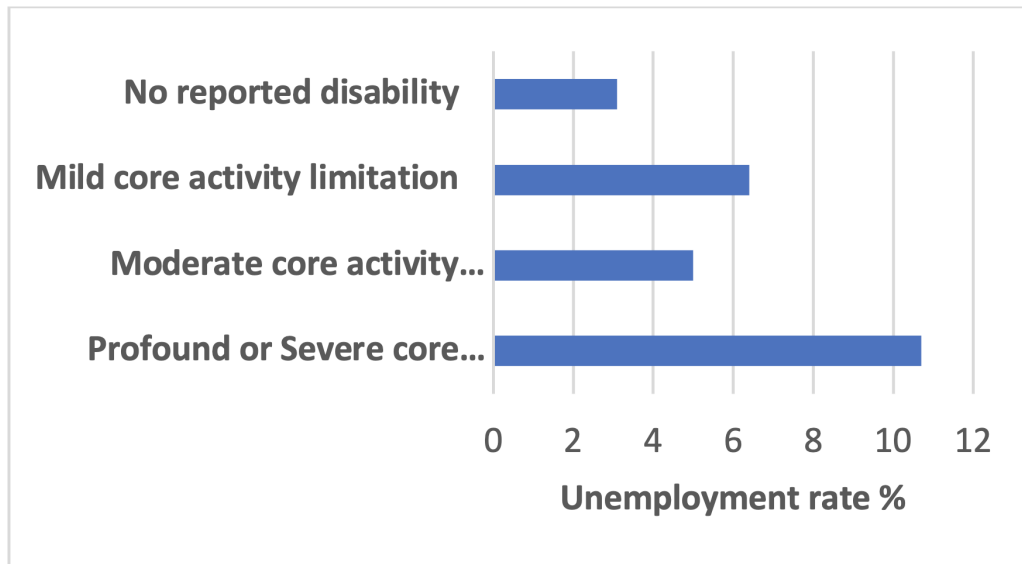


Figure 4. Unemployment rate and core activity limitations (Source: ABS, 2024, Table 8.1).

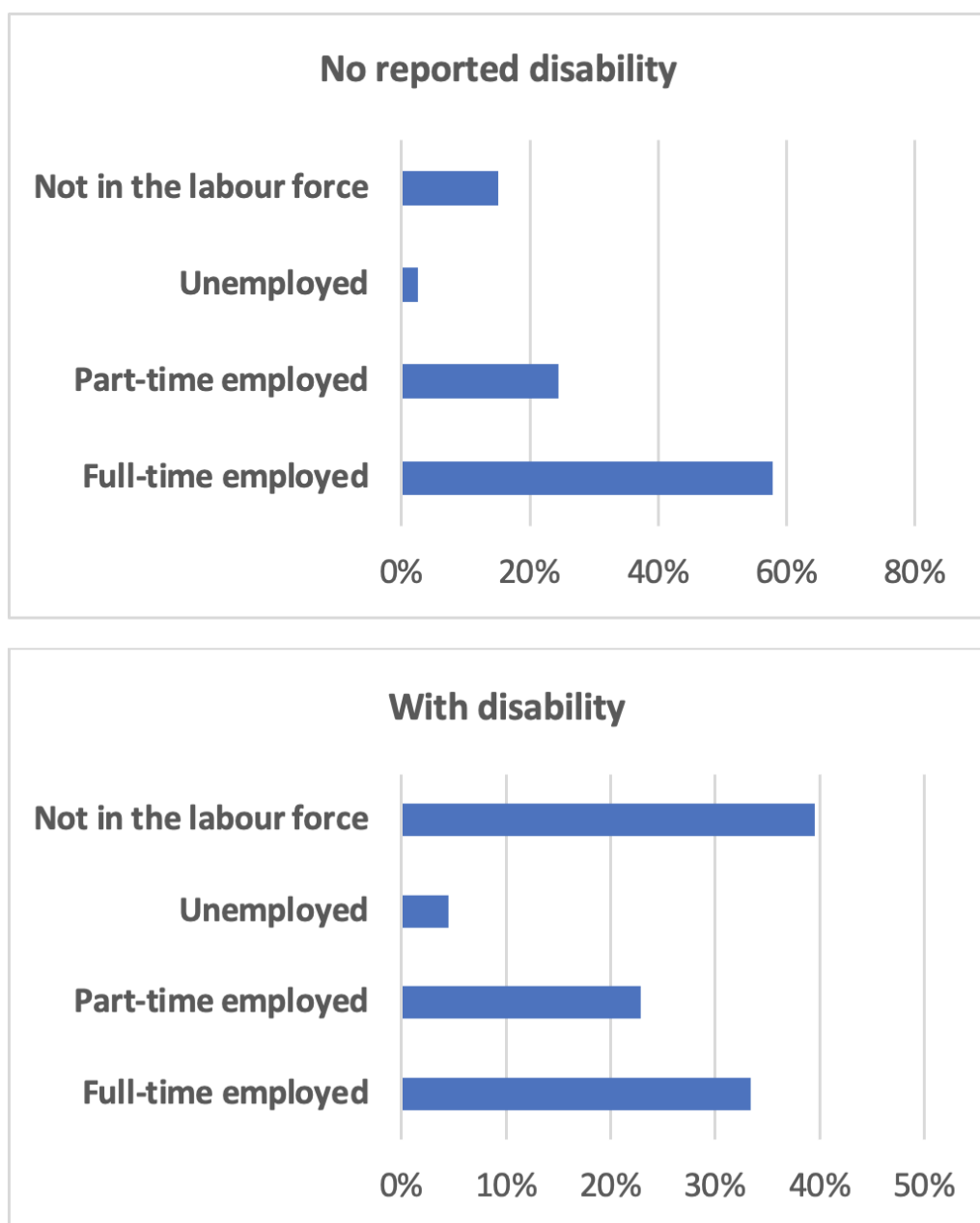


Figure 5. Comparison of those with and without a disability in terms of labour force involvement (Source: ABS, 2024, Table 8.1).

Figure 5 illustrates the stark contrast in labour force composition between individuals with and without disabilities. The majority of those without a disability are employed full-time, while large numbers with a disability are not participating in the labour force.

Types of occupations

For vocational rehabilitation, it is important to consider the types of jobs held by individuals with disabilities. Figure 6 shows the distribution of employment across the eight major occupational categories. Among the 1.49 million people aged 15–64 with a disability, there is a concentration in professional roles, with significant representation in community and

personal service, as well as in clerical and administrative positions.

It might be assumed that employment patterns across occupational types would differ significantly between individuals with and without disabilities. However, the overall employment pattern for those with disabilities closely resembles that of those without disabilities. Due to the large sample size, this similarity is statistically significant (chi-square (7) = 35.7, $p < .01$; Preacher, 2001).

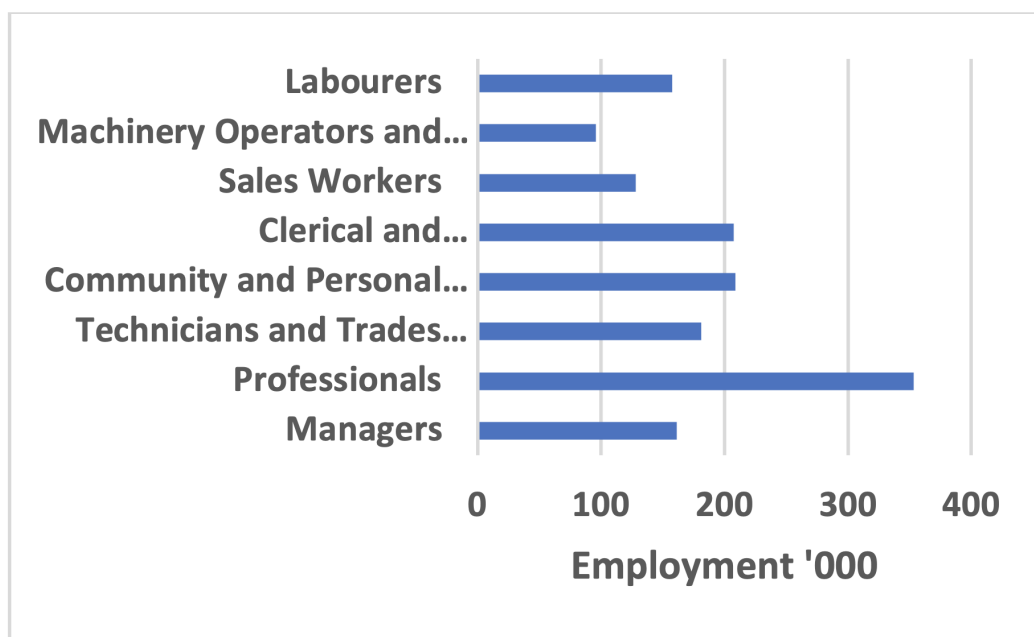


Figure 6. Employment across all occupational groups for those with a disability (Source: ABS, 2024, Table 9.1).

Income

This section explores the impact of disability on income, including government assistance. The median weekly income for individuals without a disability was \$984, compared to \$500 for those with a disability. Furthermore, income levels decrease progressively from individuals with minimal limitations to those with severe core activity limitations, as illustrated in Figure 7.

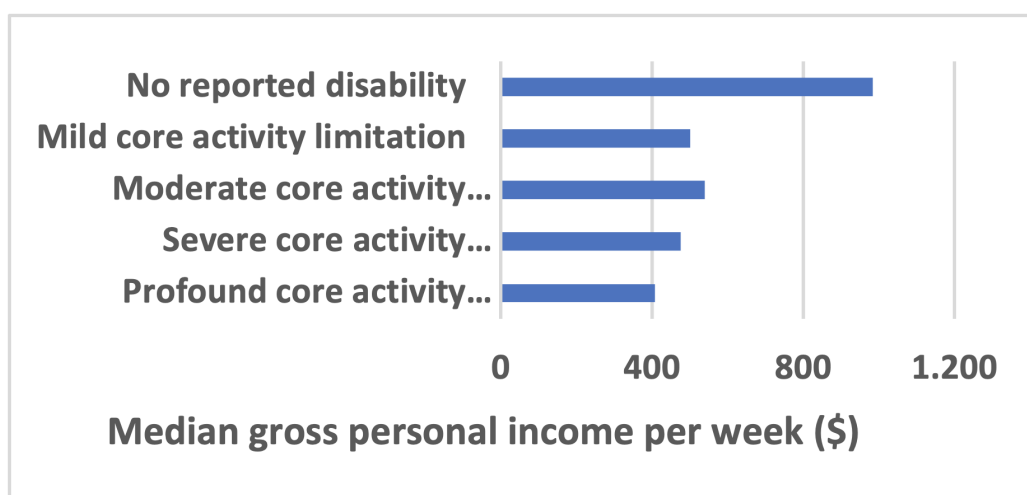


Figure 7. Median gross income and core activity limitations (Source: ABS, 2024, Table 7.1).

Employment restrictions and support

Beyond lower participation rates, higher unemployment, and reduced income, individuals with disabilities face various employment restrictions that limit job opportunities. These include (a) restrictions in the type of job (affecting 908,000 individuals), (b) limitations on the number of hours worked (631,000 individuals), and (c) difficulty changing or obtaining preferred jobs (719,200 individuals). The extent of these restrictions varies depending on employment status—whether full-time, part-time, unemployed, or not in the labour force.

Table 3. Restrictions in employment of persons with a disability for different labour force cohorts

Employment restrictions	Full-time	Part-time	Total employed	Unemployed	Not in labour force	Total
Restricted in type of job	40.4%	38.7%	39.5%	40.1%	41.4%	40.2%
Restricted in number of hours	20.8%	30.5%	26.4%	32.4%	29.6%	27.9%
Difficulty changing jobs or getting a preferred job	38.8%	30.8%	34.0%	27.5%	29.0%	31.8%
Total ('000)	586.7	795.6	1,382.3	173.6	695.7	2,258.2

Source: ABS^[6], Table 10.1

Restrictions on job type (see Table 3) are relatively consistent across all groups. Limits on the number of hours primarily affect part-time workers but also present challenges for job-seekers and those not in the labour force. Difficulty in changing jobs is similarly widespread across groups.

Support needs due to disability vary, including leave arrangements, workplace modifications, and specialized equipment. Of the 1,495,700 individuals needing assistance, approximately 256,800 used specific leave arrangements, including casual or part-time hours (120,900), flexible hours (80,400), leave without pay (66,000), and sick leave (55,300)^[6], Table 10.1).

Regarding equipment and modifications, 159,400 individuals reported special needs, such as specialized equipment (59,700), reassignment to different duties (48,600), assistance from coworkers (35,600), training or retraining (16,700), additional software (9,400), and modified buildings or fittings (8,000)^[6], Table 10.1). Note that some individuals required multiple forms of support, so percentages are not provided.

Discrimination

Unfortunately, 9.9% of individuals with a disability (402,800 out of 4.06 million) reported experiencing discrimination^[6], Table 19.1). This discrimination varied by employment status: 11.8% of those working full-time, 13.4% of part-time workers, 17.1% of those not in the labour force, and 31.5% of unemployed individuals with a disability reported discrimination. Additionally, over one-third (1,411,700 out of 4,067,300) reported avoiding situations due to their disability^[6], Table 21.1).

For the 403,700 individuals who experienced discrimination, the sources were as follows: 24.4% reported discrimination from employers, 20.8% from coworkers, 21.4% from family or friends, 38.5% from service or hospitality staff, and 30.3% from strangers in public settings^[6], Table 20.1).

II. Concluding Comments

This report examined the employment situation of over three million Australians aged 15 to 69, with a secondary focus on education. It compared officially reported levels of mild to profound restrictions among people with disabilities to those without disabilities and revealed a consistent pattern of disadvantage.

Individuals with disabilities are less likely to complete the highest level of secondary education and are also less likely to obtain higher education qualifications. Their labour force participation rate is significantly lower than that of individuals without disabilities, and even when they are ready to work, they face higher unemployment rates. Overall, for those aged 15 to 64, income is nearly halved, with a reduction of 49.2%. A separate analysis has provided Updated tables for career duration, worklife expectancy, and estimated lifetime earnings for persons with and without disability in Australia^[9].

One factor influencing the latest labour market data for both individuals with and without disabilities is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workforce in 2022. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Australia occurred around January 2020, and it was not until late 2023 that it was no longer classified as a communicable disease. The data presented in this report pertains to 2022 and it remains unclear how COVID-19 may have further affected education and employment.

Despite this limitation, the overall findings for 2022 align with earlier reports dating back to 1999 (i.e., Athanasou^{[1][2][3][4]}; Athanasou, Murphy, & Mpofu^[5]). These reports outline the challenges that individuals with disabilities must navigate in their educational and vocational pursuits.

Statements and Declarations

Funding

The research was not undertaken with any financial support or assistance.

Conflicts of Interest

No conflict of interest is reported for this paper.

Footnotes

¹ Sections of this paper are taken verbatim from earlier reports (Athanasou^{[1][2][3][4]}; Athanasou, Murphy, & Mpofu^[5])

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