



IMPROVING HEALTH EQUITY AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE



AN EVIDENCE AND PRACTICE SUMMARY
Developed by the Centre for Social Impact



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SOCIAL TRADERS



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
USING THIS GUIDE	2
PRIORITIES FOR ACTION	3
Priorities for policy, health and social enterprise professionals	
Priorities for governments	
SOCIAL ENTERPRISE, WORK AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S WELLBEING	5
Improving the conditions for health equity	
HOW DOES ORGANISATIONAL DESIGN AFFECT HEALTH OUTCOMES?	6
Diverse work settings and spaces for learning	
Flexible and responsive wraparound support	
A 'blended culture' of education and employment	
Respectful and inclusive workplace	
WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS THAT AFFECT SUCCESS?	10



Having a meaning in your life, rather than just waking up and playing games every day. Even if it's not paid, like I've still got benefits just coming here... it's pretty hard to knock you down if you're like busy every day and just doing something all the time..."

- YOUNG PERSON

>> INTRODUCTION

Health inequities undermine Australia's economic success, and the rights of citizens and communities to lead happy, flourishing lives. Inequities in health status, risks and outcomes arise through social and economic conditions (or, social determinants of health) that are unjust—and, crucially, avoidable and modifiable.¹

Acting on health inequities reflects a commitment to ensuring that all people have an equal and fair opportunity to attain the highest possible standard of health.² For young people (typically aged 15–24) who experience disadvantage, health inequities are made worse by multiple, and often complex, barriers to economic participation.

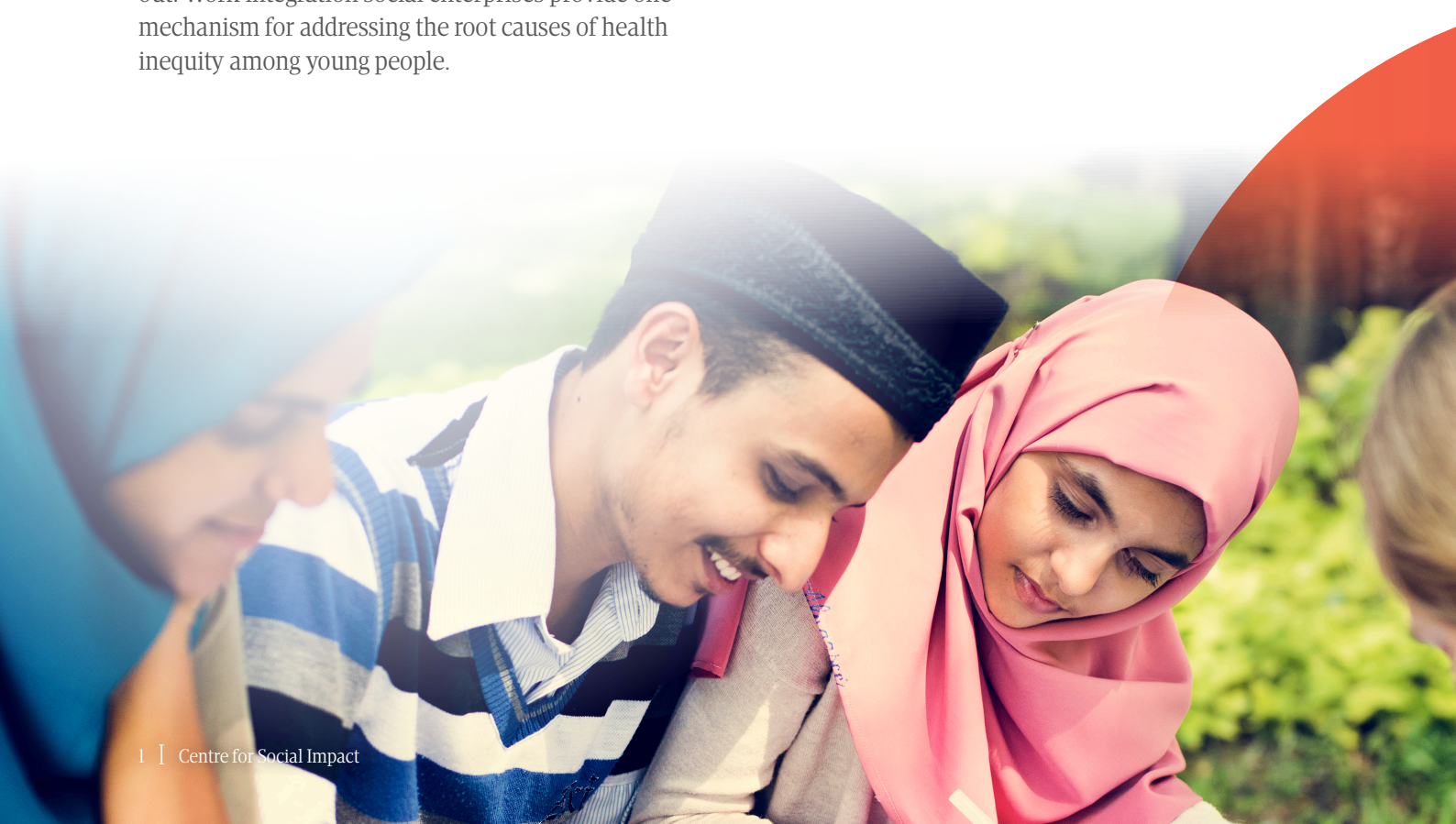
Youth is a period of life usually marked by significant transitions in education, work, health and living situations. While the majority of young Australians successfully navigate these transitions, young people who experience socioeconomic disadvantage face additional challenges in achieving their full potential.

Work and employment—including the conditions and nature of work itself—are key arenas in which the many influences on health and wellbeing play out. Work integration social enterprises provide one mechanism for addressing the root causes of health inequity among young people.

This guide summarises the 'better-practice' features, contexts and design of successful youth-focused work integration social enterprises:

- 1 Diverse work settings and spaces for learning
- 2 Flexible and responsive wraparound support
- 3 A 'blended' culture of education and employment
- 4 Respectful and inclusive workplaces

Although the focus of this guide is on social enterprises, many of these features are relevant to public health planning, and policy and practice related to designing effective social services and inclusive businesses.



>> USING THIS GUIDE

The **Centre for Social Impact** has developed this document to provide practical, evidence-based guidance about the role of social enterprises in addressing health inequities among young people experiencing disadvantage and their communities.

The guide contains information relevant to:



Social enterprise
professionals and
practitioners



Policy
professionals



Health
promotion
professionals

The evidence presented in this guide was generated from case studies of four employment-focused social enterprises located in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, Australia. It focuses on how social enterprises can be **designed and operated** to address health inequities among young people who experience disadvantage.

In this guide, we define **organisational features** as the characteristics of an organisation that affect how it operates, such as its culture, structure and processes. Our research shows that social enterprises can be purposefully designed to maximise the health benefits they bring to their communities and young people.



Everyone's kind of laid back. They're chill, not too much stress which is good. I like that. When I'm at home the environment is a lot different. It's a lot more stressful, a lot more work... When I come here for volunteer work it was come here, chill, do work. It's quiet. You hear birds. You're always surrounded by nature sort of thing, so it's just awesome."

- YOUNG PERSON

Key terms

> Social enterprises

Social enterprises are businesses that exist primarily to further a social mission rather than maximise profit for individuals. **There are an estimated 20,000 social enterprises in Australia.**

> Work integration social enterprises

Work integration social enterprises (WISE) are a type of social enterprise that focus on **creating employment or pathways to employment** for people who otherwise experience disadvantage in the labour market.

>> PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

There is wide evidence that decent work is an important social determinant of health. The future of work is complex, and employment more precarious than ever for current and upcoming generations. This poses a 'double jeopardy' for young people experiencing disadvantage, who are over-represented in casual and part-time employment.³

*Nationally, youth unemployment sits at **11.5%**, more than twice Australia's overall unemployment rate (**5.1%**).⁴ The 2018 underemployment rates for young people are also well above any other age group at **17.4%**, an increase from a rate of **11.4%** reported in 2010.⁵ The economic impacts of COVID-19 are further exacerbating these trends. Although new welfare measures did protect against these impacts, the rate of youth unemployment rose to **16.1%** in May 2020.⁶*

With fewer resources and supports to draw on, young people who experience disadvantage are less likely to complete or enter education and gain secure employment. As a result, they are less likely to enjoy the documented benefits to wellbeing that education and economic participation bring.⁷

Currently, policy action on youth health equity is limited in Australia. With regard to economic participation, mainstream employment support services primarily focus on behavioural and individual responsibility for health, rather than its structural causes. The limitations of this approach are well-documented.⁸

While not a wholesale solution, social enterprises offer one setting for improving employment pathways, reducing barriers to economic participation, and building the capability of young people to achieve what they can and want to do.

PRIORITIES FOR POLICY, HEALTH AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE PROFESSIONALS

- Engage with and help develop social enterprises by *purchasing goods* and services from them.
- Consider how work settings can be diversified to *cater to the different learning and mental health needs* of young people.
- Endorse wraparound models of support to better *address the overlapping and often multiple challenges* that young people face.
- *Implement clearly defined principles* of respect, inclusiveness and client-centred care among professionals who work with young people.
- Involve young people in various levels of decision-making to help align services with their own needs, *empower them as individuals, and develop their professional skills*.



PRIORITIES FOR GOVERNMENTS

- 1** Recognise social enterprises as a form of active labour market program within employment services systems and work closely with them to improve service coordination and facilitate innovative policy and practice learning.
- 2** Invest in work integration social enterprises to scale their business activities and related capacity to assist more young people.
- 3** Help promote learning about the design strengths of social enterprise to other businesses and employment services providers.



>> SOCIAL ENTERPRISE, WORK AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S WELLBEING

IMPROVING THE CONDITIONS FOR HEALTH EQUITY

Economic participation enables people to gain the resources necessary to improve their quality of life.⁹ It also improves mental and physical health and can promote feelings of life satisfaction, inclusion and participation in society.¹⁰

Work integration social enterprises positively influence the health and wellbeing of young people by providing opportunities for personal development, social interaction and vocational training.

Our findings indicate that social enterprises:



Increase young people's access to employment and/or their employability



Improve young people's self-reported mental health and wellbeing



Positively influence healthier behaviours, including healthy eating, reduced smoking, and drug use



Significantly improve young people's confidence and social skills in professional and personal contexts



Foster positive new relationships and connections.

These outcomes are supported by a business design that is youth-focused, inclusive, integrated with other services, and that recognises young people as capable and ambitious as they navigate challenges in their lives.

>> HOW DOES ORGANISATIONAL DESIGN AFFECT HEALTH OUTCOMES?

Our research identifies **four** overlapping features of work integration social enterprises that support health equity outcomes for young people.

1 DIVERSE WORK SETTINGS AND SPACES FOR LEARNING

A focus on learning and the variety of forms it can take allows young people to try **different types of work** and build new skills, while also getting to know themselves and their longer-term career aspirations. Work-integration social enterprises offer access to multiple spaces such as classrooms, farms, or training spaces in commercial and retail businesses. This gives young people the opportunity to develop a range of technical skills and explore work that best suits their **strengths, experiences, and work preferences**.

Why it works

- > Caters to diverse learning styles, such as hands-on forms of learning.
- > Opportunities to develop new relationships and work with a variety of people within and outside the social enterprise, including different management styles and personalities.
- > The use of spaces is structured and purposeful, encouraging strong engagement and catering to different learning needs.



...I was pretty depressed, because I just kept getting knocked back. I was sort of giving up. I definitely feel healthier mentally just coming here every day and being punctual, having a routine, and stuff like that..."

- YOUNG PERSON

FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE WRAPAROUND SUPPORT

Wraparound support services are central to improving employment pathways for young people who face complex access barriers. Work-integration social enterprises add to the efficacy of this model by offering specialised, flexible and personalised forms of support **for all participants** that are mindful of the social and economic issues that affect young people. Central to this is a therapeutic, **strengths-based approach** that focuses on what is right about a person, rather than what is wrong, with services being coordinated around helping them succeed. Wraparound mentoring and counselling improve shared knowledge about how to best tailor support to meet student needs, respond to their circumstances, and build on their strengths.

Why it works

- Meets people where they are at, creating an understanding and empathetic environment in which barriers to learning can be addressed.
 - Reduces stigma around literacy and numeracy skills, or physical and mental health differences.
 - Maintains a supportive approach for identifying and communicating what young people need to work on and improve to transition into work or further education.
-



A 'BLENDED CULTURE' OF EDUCATION AND WORK

Social enterprises blend education and employment to enable young people to engage with different people and experience what it is like to transition from a practice environment to a professional workplace. Offering a **'bridging space' between training and real-life work** allows young people to experience being part of a team both within and outside the social enterprise. Because young people are engaged in the organisational culture of the social enterprise, its processes and policies are also more responsive to their needs. Strong attention is given to **supporting transitions** into education or mainstream work throughout the course of the employment programs, and this encourages both personal development and skills-building.

Why it works

- Creates spaces of belonging and safety while balancing real world expectations for work.
 - Links learning to employment, empowering young people to imagine themselves in the industry or social enterprise as 'emerging staff members'.
 - Increases confidence of young people by building their relationships within the social enterprise and with industry partners.
-

An accepting, understanding and professional work culture supports education and learning, with each social enterprise drawing on their particular setting to achieve this. Strategic partnerships with external industry organisations ensure cultural alignment with the social enterprise's values of treating young people with respect and professionalism. In general, **clearly defined 'human-centred' rules, boundaries and principles** guide how staff interact with young people and with each other. A culture of respect and empathy informs the ways in which the programs are practically run and sustained, and this is vital to their success.

Why it works

- Recognition of the personal challenges that young people are going through, creating safe spaces to learn, collaborate and minimise any risks with transitioning into employment.
- Appropriate rules and boundaries foster co-responsibility and recognise young people as active contributors in the workplace.
- Ensures that young people, especially those with complex backgrounds, feel included and at ease.
- Acceptance of difference allows young people to 'learn from their mistakes' and develop skills in a challenging but supportive workplace.



...in terms of the skills, I've definitely found that I've become more assertive. All the liaising that you need to do. Also leadership, not just of other people, but of yourself. Self-leadership is definitely a real thing. It's all part of the motivation, the initiative. And on top of leadership, it's teamwork skills and communication skills."

- YOUNG PERSON

>>> WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS THAT AFFECT SUCCESS?

Because each work integration social enterprise is different, the success of their health-promoting features can vary depending on a range of factors. This includes features that position the social enterprises within particular communities, such as:



The location:

what is needed in a particular area and what type of industries can be supported.



The origins:

the why, what, and how of the founding of the social enterprise, such as its leadership, culture, policies, practices, and mission and strategy.



The market position:

what types of industry might be scalable while also providing long-term opportunities.

These features, alongside those that shape day-to-day interactions among people within the social enterprise, guide how the specific needs of young people are met and responded to.

The success of work integration social enterprise is also affected by the broader policy context, such as the extent to which funding and social procurement frameworks meet their specific needs. Greater investment in social enterprise is needed to help scale their effects on health inequities and promote cross-sector learning about inclusive business design.



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