Nundah Community Enterprises Co-op was formed 20 years ago by eight people with intellectual disability and their supporters. The 8 people with intellectual disability had been unemployed on average 10 years. They had not been interested in ADE employment and had sought employment through DES services. Their lack of success through DES services, either no referral to jobs or referral to jobs where were they let go within a day or two days meant they became discouraged job seekers. This is possibly one of the reasons why only 4% of DES participants are people with intellectual disability. In spite of this they continually said they wanted to work and said things such as ‘sitting at home all day, I go mad’. This was clearly the case with several of the group developing mental health issues and some people substance use issues.

The group and their supporters formed the Co-op out of desperation. It was clear that to be able to work the participants would need support; therefore initially that on-the-job support was provided by volunteers. As the Co-op developed, the individuals chose to utilise their individual funding or block funding through the State Government to provide this on-the-job support. The Co-op is now regarded as one of the longest serving and progressive social enterprises in Australia and has received Social Enterprise awards.

The Co-op shares characteristics of both ADEs and open employment.

* Jobs have been designed around people’s individual abilities (although this needs to be more general if people with intellectual disabilities are going to be successful in work).
* The Co-op jobs are all out in the community with a high interaction in the community.
* The work force includes both people with an intellectual disability and without, in some work teams there are more people without a disability, in others it is equal and in some a 1:2 or 1:3 ratio person without a disability to person with a disability.
* The Co-op utilises the Supported Wage System. At a philosophical level we would love to pay workers with a disability a full award wage; however in a market based economy productivity is an inescapable factor. The only way to not use a productivity based system would be if an external player, e.g. customer or the Government met the productivity difference. Even in using the Supported Wage system the Co-op took a view that no one in the Co-op would be remunerated at less than 60% productivity.

Keys to success of the Co-op have been –

1. The ability of workers to utilise individual funding for on-the-job support.
2. The Co-op success in social procurement from local and State Governments. NCEC was one of the first groups to pioneer this. One way to promote more employment for people with a disability would be to mandate a percentage social procurement by not only Federal, State and Local Governments but also private firms.

In terms of guiding principles for disability employment we would:

1. Do not dismantle existing systems which create employment. ADEs in spite of the many criticisms employ 20,000 people, the majority of those with an intellectual disability. No other system has achieved that and it would be very detrimental to disband when there is no discernible alternate.
2. Recognise the great heterogeneity of the disability population. One system is unlikely to offer the best outcomes for everyone. So yes, diversity beyond ADEs and DES systems. People need to be able to move between and have pathways to and back.
3. Support to workers with intellectual disability needs to be ongoing if they are to remain in employment.