BEYOND THE PLACEMENT

What the 2026 Customised Employment Retreat revealed about practice, capability and systems

PRACTICE / CAPABILITY / SYSTEMS

A reflection on evidence, judgement and collective learning

CDERP
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CENTRE FOR DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH & PRACTICE

LOCATION

Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

WEBSITE

www.cderp.com.au

PUBLICATIONS

www.cderp.com.au/publications

EMAIL

info@cderp.com.au

TELEPHONE

1300 001 349

The question

What does good individualised employment practice require, and what happens when practitioners, organisations and funding systems cannot consistently provide those conditions? The eighth CDERP Customised Employment Retreat, held at Warburton in November 2026, returned to this question across eight conversations concerned with capability, evidence, employer relationships, family participation, technology and the conditions of practice.

The Retreat had a planned programme of eight conversations, but the agenda provided starting points rather than fixed boundaries or predetermined conclusions. Consistent with its longstanding ethos, participants could take discussions in directions they considered important and remain with an issue for as long as the conversation warranted. Discussions were not curtailed simply to keep to the programme. The material considered here therefore arose through participant-driven conversations within a facilitated setting.

This reflection draws on recordings of those conversations and subsequent thematic analysis. The grouping into Practice, Capability and Systems is CDERP's interpretation of the material, not the structure imposed on participants during the Retreat. Its subject is the questions the Retreat opened, not a record of what was said. It is not a transcript, a consensus statement or an evaluation of any service. Participants challenged one another and qualified their own claims, and the themes that follow are interpretive. Individual identities and distinctive cases have been omitted.

CDERP's role in this reflection

CDERP convened and facilitated the Retreat and prepared this reflection. It also developed several of the instruments discussed. The account aims to reflect participants' different perspectives, including points of disagreement. Where CDERP offers its own interpretation, particularly on fidelity and Australian-developed practice, this is identified as CDERP's perspective rather than presented as a shared conclusion of the Retreat.

How this reflection is organised

The themes are grouped at three levels. **Practice** concerns what individualised employment requires once a person, an employer and a practitioner are working together. **Capability** concerns what practitioners, and the field as a whole, must be able to do and to demonstrate. **Systems** concern the evidence, reporting, funding and authority that surround practice and determine whether it can respond to what it learns. The limits of this account are set out in one place, at its end.

Part I. Practice

1. Employment continues after placement

The Retreat repeatedly moved beyond job commencement as the marker of success. Employment changes over time. People learn, preferences develop, tasks and environments change, relationships strengthen or weaken, and opportunities for progression emerge. A placement milestone captures only the beginning of that process.

Broader accounts of progress are not easier to measure. Retention, choice, belonging, adaptability and career development cannot be read from a single outcome. The challenge is to build longitudinal evidence that remains meaningful to the individual without reducing each experience to a generic score. Shared descriptions across reporting settings may help, provided they keep their context and do not displace the person's own account of what has changed.

2. Evidence matters only when someone can respond

The conversation about sensory mapping and experience reflection raised a deceptively simple question: what happens to information once it has been collected? A report may describe a mismatch between a person and an environment. Its practical value depends on whether someone can consider an adjustment and has the authority to make it. Information that influences no decision becomes another administrative product.

Participants asked whether tools and quality assurance should support practitioner judgement or become further compliance exercises. Both concerns are legitimate. Unstructured judgement can be inconsistent and difficult to scrutinise; excessive standardisation can suppress individual circumstances. A useful test would follow a single observation through its interpretation, the decision it informed, any change that resulted and the person's subsequent experience. The value of a tool lies in that whole sequence, not in how favourably practitioners receive it.

3. Employers: from vacancies to the organisation of work

Employer engagement developed into a more demanding conversation about work itself. Rather than begin and end with a vacancy, practitioners may need to understand workflow, tasks, interruptions, productive time and the employer's operational needs. That understanding makes it possible to design work that has genuine value to a business while matching a person's interests, capabilities and preferences.

The group also questioned whether every practitioner can reasonably be expected to undertake sophisticated business analysis. Some doubted that foundational job analysis is yet strong enough to carry more complex commercial tasks. Two responses were discussed: better training and mentoring, or a differentiated employer-facing function. Neither was shown to be preferable, and a specialist arrangement may introduce handovers and discontinuity of its own.

The practical question that remains is which skills should be universal, which should be supervised, and which may require specialist capability. Any employer business case must also be tested against the person's informed choice. Work that benefits an employer is not necessarily suitable employment.

4. Families, supporters and meaningful choice

Families and supporters were discussed as sources of knowledge, continuity and confidence. The discussion also challenged three assumptions: that every person has an available family member, that family involvement is always helpful, and that more family engagement is always the answer. In some situations, other trusted relationships are central; in others, involvement needs to be limited by the person's wishes.

The choice is not between including families and excluding them. The practice question is how a person's autonomy, consent and relationships are understood in context, and how supporters contribute without replacing the person's voice. A consistent reporting language could make these distinctions visible, rather than recording family participation as a simple yes or no.

Part II. Capability

5. Capability is more than course completion

The opening conversation about competencies, training hours and mentoring soon became a question of evidence: how would anyone know that a practitioner can make sound decisions? Attendance and credentials establish exposure to learning. They do not demonstrate judgement in a complex employment situation. The question returned when employer-facing skills, assessment and professional recognition were discussed.

More demanding training standards might strengthen practice, but they also raise cost and can restrict access. Mentoring offers a different route, one in which practitioners explain their decisions, receive challenge and show progression over time. The Retreat did not settle a threshold for competence or agree how it should be assessed. It did suggest that professional capability has to be observed in decisions and their consequences, and cannot be inferred from certificates alone.

6. Artificial intelligence: possibilities and safeguards

AI entered the conversations through accessible information, learning materials, recruitment, task analysis and job design. One possibility attracted particular interest across the group: using AI to help explore an employer's workflow and identify combinations of tasks that could form a job.

The same conversations raised concerns about accuracy, privacy, intellectual provenance, staff capability and organisational policy. An AI-generated suggestion cannot establish what an employer actually needs or what a person wants. Those propositions must be verified by people who understand the work and the circumstances. A small, controlled trial could compare AI-assisted analysis with skilled human analysis, documenting errors alongside any practical value.

7. Fidelity, adaptation and recognition

A recurring tension was whether CE can extend its reach without losing the features that make it recognisable. Some participants described using individual components of the method in settings that cannot support it in full, and that use may be of value to the people concerned.

CDERP's position, discussed in the forthcoming Governing Choice and Quality in Australian Employment Support (for members, December 2026), is that using components alone is not Customised Employment and cannot draw on evidence for the full method. Evidence attaches to defined practice, not isolated components. A service using Discovery-informed elements within another model is delivering that other model, adapted, and should describe itself accordingly. Clear labelling concerns integrity, not branding. The same principle applies to commissioning: where funding blends methods, claims for the resulting service must rest on evidence for that service, not evidence borrowed from either method.

CDERP has developed two instruments intended to make this distinction examinable. The Customised Employment Fidelity Assessment (CEFA) rates practice against defined criteria of the method. The Customised Employment Quality Assurance Framework (CEQAF) sets organisational conditions, with practice fidelity as a gate that strengths elsewhere cannot offset. Both are field-test versions, offered as a means of asking whether a service is delivering CE rather than as a settled answer to that question.

Part III. Systems

8. An Australian approach already exists

The question of what an Australian version of CE would look like arose alongside the discussion of fidelity and local adaptation. CDERP's view, as the developer of much of the work concerned, is that the question should be examined against what already exists. CDERP has built an ACRE-accredited training pathway and a suite of Australian-developed practice instruments. These include the Individual Discovery Record – Australia (IDR-A), the Sensory Comfort Mapping Tool (SCMT), the Discovery Experience Reflection Scale (DERS), the Family Experience Reflection Scale (FERS), and the fidelity and quality frameworks described in Part II.

These are not changes of terminology or localised teaching materials. They are original contributions to how information is gathered, how experience is interpreted, how practitioner reasoning is supported and how practice quality is examined. Their existence changes the question. It is no longer whether an Australian approach can be developed, but how the approach that exists should be recognised, accessed and tested.

That question has several parts. Which features of the original method must remain intact? Which Australian developments add genuine capability? How should a practitioner distinguish an informed accommodation from a changed method? Recognition should follow transparent description and scrutiny: a clear account of each element's relationship to established CE, its original contribution, its implementation requirements and the evidence that supports it. Neither dismissal nor automatic endorsement serves the field.

9. From instruments to a shared evidence base

The most concrete collective outcome of the Retreat was the intention of participants to use and test the Australian-developed tools in their own practice settings. Use in practice will show whether questions are understood, whether observations are relevant, where interpretation differs and what happens when information is acted upon. It will also expose shortcomings that need correction.

Participants explored carrying the language and concepts of the tools into routine documentation, including NDIS reports, IEA reporting and reports for Job Access (still widely known as SLES). A shared language could make descriptions of Discovery, sensory conditions, experience, environmental barriers, choices, opportunities and progress more consistent. It would not require practitioners to reach the same conclusions or deliver identical interventions. It would make their different observations intelligible to one another and comparable across settings.

The potential extends beyond individual records. Where information is collected with consent, quality controls and privacy safeguards, consistent reporting may reveal issues that recur across settings.

Those patterns could inform professional learning, strengthen communication between services and support more precise feedback to government about what is happening in practice. A formal research pathway for examining the instruments is also intended, subject to approvals and a defensible design. Figure 1 sets out the pathway as it was discussed.

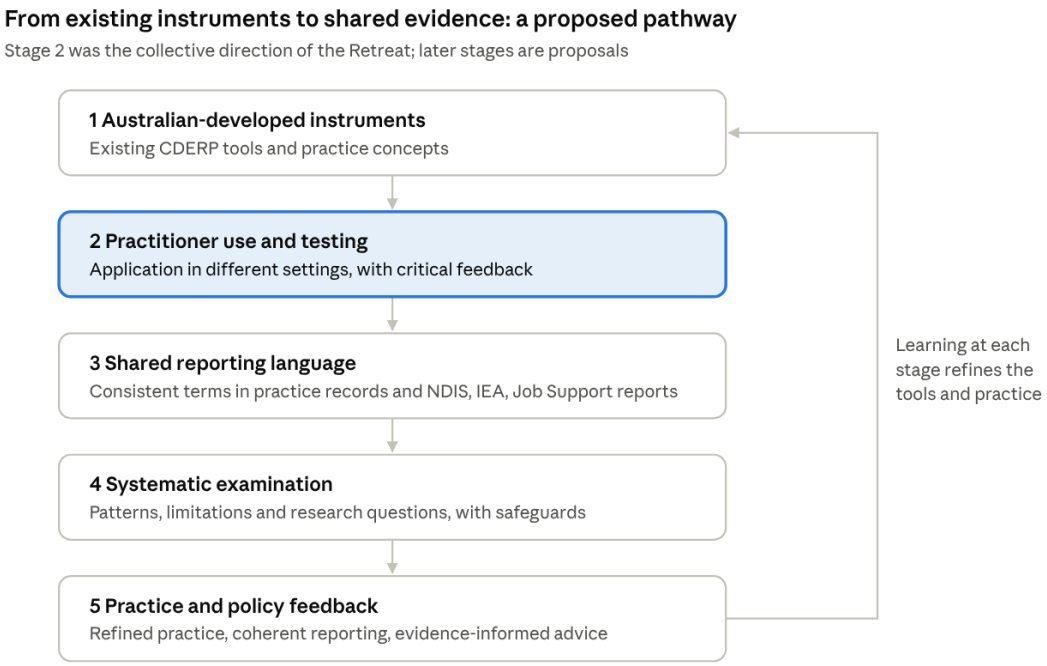


Figure 1. Proposed pathway · 5 stages with a feedback loop

The pathway is prospective, not a validated model. Only the second stage has been taken up collectively; the rest set out a direction for inquiry.

10. Funding, commissioning and organisational authority

Participants described friction between individualised practice and programme rules, administrative load, fragmented responsibilities and short-term measures. They raised a legitimate question: who is responsible when information reveals a need, but the authority or resources to respond sit elsewhere?

It would be too easy to conclude that the system explains every difficulty. Participants also named gaps in practitioner capability, weak job analysis, uncertain fidelity and organisational choices. These explanations interact. More resources will not of themselves produce better judgement, and excellent judgement achieves little where action is not permitted or supported. Research needs to examine both the conditions surrounding practice and what practitioners actually do within them.

Carrying the work forward

11. What participants intend to carry forward

The Retreat generated next steps of different kinds. Some concern direct practice: testing the tools, improving reporting language, using employer informational interviews and examining how feedback changes decisions. Others concern capability: mentoring, job analysis, fidelity and clearer professional

expectations. Still others depend on organisations and wider systems: sustained reporting consistency, research collaboration, commissioning change and feedback to government.

These do not form one agreed programme of work. The intention to use and test the tools was a collective direction; the other ideas remain proposals, questions or possible small pilots. The distinction matters, because credible follow-up must report what was attempted and what was not, and what failed as well as what succeeded.

Questions for the next stage

Use and interpretation. Do different practitioners interpret the same tool concepts consistently, and what explains disagreement?

Reporting. Can common terms improve the clarity of NDIS, IEA and Job Access reports without reducing individualised reasoning?

Decisions. When a tool reveals an issue, who acts, what changes, and how is the result checked?

Capability. What observable evidence shows sound job analysis, employer inquiry and professional judgement?

Research. Which instruments are ready for feasibility study, reliability testing or formal evaluation, and which require further development?

Systems. What recurring patterns, if any, can be communicated responsibly to government without overclaiming representativeness?

The contribution and boundaries of this reflection

The 2026 Retreat brought together practitioners to examine questions arising from their experience of individualised employment practice. Its purpose was not to produce consensus or evaluate services, but to create the conditions for sustained professional inquiry, including the exploration of uncertainty, disagreement and emerging possibilities.

The conversations identified practical questions about capability, fidelity, employer relationships, technology and the conditions surrounding employment practice. They also generated a collective intention to use and critically examine Australian-developed instruments in different settings. These are meaningful outcomes of the Retreat, even where the questions remain unresolved.

This reflection offers an interpretation of those conversations rather than findings from a representative research study. The proposed reporting language and evidence pathway are directions for further examination, not established standards. Similarly, the existence of Australian-developed instruments should not be confused with independent evidence of their effectiveness.

The contribution of the Retreat lies in what participants were able to explore together, the questions they sharpened and the work they chose to carry forward. Its value will continue to develop as those ideas are applied, challenged and refined.

CDERP's undertaking

CDERP will report on the use of the instruments at the 2027 Retreat, including where they proved unclear, unhelpful or wrong, and will publish a summary of that report. Without that undertaking, the commitment to publish what does not work would remain an aspiration.

A continuing conversation

The 2026 Retreat offers something more useful than a list of complaints or a claim of consensus. It identifies an existing Australian body of employment practice that participants intend to examine together, a possible common language for reports and feedback, and unresolved questions about competence, employers, families, technology, fidelity and institutional authority. The next contribution will come from careful application, critical testing and a willingness to publish what does not work as well as what does.

About this reflection

CDERP Research Reflection, November 2026. Based on thematic analysis of eight Retreat recordings and associated working material. Paraphrases are interpretive and no direct quotations are used. Participant contributions have been de-identified, including the omission of distinctive cases that could permit identification.

KNOWLEDGE HIDDEN HAS NO PURPOSE

An account of the questions, disagreements and practical directions emerging from the 2026 Customised Employment Retreat.

Australian-developed tools. A shared language. Evidence that can inform practice and policy.

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