

BMJ Open Exploring tools and measures for evaluating the quality of paid disability support for adults: a scoping review protocol

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To cite: Topping M, Douglas J, Winkler D. Exploring tools and measures for evaluating the quality of paid disability support for adults: a scoping review protocol. *BMJ Open* 2025;**15**:e098035. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2024-098035

► Prepublication history and additional supplemental material for this paper are available online. To view these files, please visit the journal online (<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2024-098035>).

Received 16 December 2024
Accepted 25 July 2025



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ABSTRACT

Introduction The quality of paid disability support services has significant implications for the autonomy, well-being and community participation of adults with disability. However, variability in service provision and evaluation persists. Despite the growing public investment and focus on improving support quality, there appears to remain a lack of comprehensive tools and measures to evaluate the quality of paid disability support. This scoping review aims to systematically identify and map the existing tools and measures used to evaluate the quality of paid disability support for adults with disability.

Methods and analysis This scoping review will be conducted following the methodology outlined by Arksey and O'Malley, enhancements proposed by Levac *et al* and the Joanna Briggs Institute along with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis: Extension for Scoping Reviews guidelines. The research question guiding the review is: 'What existing tools and measures are available to evaluate the quality of paid disability support services?' Comprehensive searches will be conducted in MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Embase, CINAHL and Scopus to identify peer-reviewed articles published in English since 2014. Supplementary grey literature searches will also be conducted, alongside an online survey to obtain stakeholder input. Articles or grey literature sources that report on tools or measures for evaluating paid disability support for adults (aged 18–65 years) with disability will be included. Data extraction will focus on study characteristics, participant demographics and the characteristics of the quality of support measurement tools. A narrative synthesis will be used to present the findings.

Ethics and dissemination Ethical approval will be obtained for the online stakeholder survey component of the review. No ethical approval is required for the scoping review of the literature. The results will be disseminated through peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations and accessible formats to ensure a wide audience is reached, including researchers, policymakers and disability service providers.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of paid disability support has profound implications for the autonomy, well-being and community participation of

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

- ⇒ This scoping review spans peer-reviewed and grey literature and includes stakeholder consultation to provide a comprehensive mapping of existing tools and measures for evaluating the quality of paid disability support services.
- ⇒ The planned engagement of lived experience consultants at key points in the review process ensures that the study remains grounded in the perspectives of those most affected by the quality of support services.
- ⇒ Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis: Extension for Scoping Reviews guidelines and including a comprehensive range of databases (MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Embase, CINAHL and Scopus) will enhance the transparency, rigour and replicability of the study.
- ⇒ The focus on articles and grey literature published in English since 2014 may result in the exclusion of potentially relevant tools or measures. However, it is hoped that if there are relevant measures being used, they will be identified in reference searching.

people with disability.^{1,2} People with disability include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.³ Ensuring support quality is critical for upholding the rights of people with disability to lead the lives they want to live.³ Encouragingly, systems such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in Australia promote individualised support tailored to each person with disability.^{4,5} However, despite the introduction of individualised funding models and increasing levels of public spending on disability support,⁶ the quality of disability support services remains variable, with significant gaps in both practice and evaluation. Recent inquiries, such as the Disability Royal Commission and NDIS



Review in Australia, have underscored the risks associated with substandard support, bringing renewed focus to the need for high-quality services.^{7 8}

The disability sector is further complicated by the different avenues by which support workers are employed (eg, directly by the person with disability, by a service provider independent from housing or by a service provider embedded in housing arrangements) and the varied roles that support workers play in the lives of people with disability.⁹⁻¹¹ Support workers provide essential services that range from personal care to community engagement,¹²⁻¹⁴ yet the training and professional development opportunities available to them are often limited.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Moreover, it is of great concern that the disability sector in Australia is struggling to find and keep sufficient quality workers to meet the increasing demand for NDIS services.^{15 18-22} Given these challenges, the importance of support workers engaging in reflective practice to improve the quality of support has been highlighted in recent research.²³⁻²⁵ Reflective practice allows workers to self-assess their performance, fostering continuous improvement in delivering high-quality support.²⁴ A structured measure could help guide workers to reflect on their interactions and the support they provide, while also being a useful tool for service providers to manage performance and ensure accountability.

Previous research, including findings from the Multi-Perspective Quality Support (mpQS) project, has provided valuable insights into the factors that influence the quality of paid support for adults with acquired neurological disability.²³⁻²⁶ Among the numerous factors at the dyadic, organisational and system levels contributing to quality support, research highlights the importance of person-centred, tailored support that allows people with disability to lead their support services.^{25 26} However, there appears to remain a gap in the availability of tools and measures to assess the quality of these services comprehensively. Without valid and reliable evaluation tools, it becomes difficult to ensure that disability support services consistently meet the needs and preferences of service users and for people with disability to evaluate the quality of support they receive. Since the mpQS project findings are grounded in lived experience, they have the potential to inform future development of a quality of support measure. However, it is essential to first scope the literature to ensure that existing measures are fully understood and evaluated before any new tools are developed. This review will therefore search for measures assessing the quality of support provided to adults with any disability type, rather than restricting it to acquired neurological disability, to ensure the inclusion of any relevant tools.

Innovative approaches, such as participant-led interventions and co-created resources, have begun to address some of the challenges faced by people with disability and support workers in enhancing the quality of support. For example, online resources and interventions have emerged to assist support workers in aligning their support provision with the unique needs and preferences

of individuals and to support people with disability to direct support workers.²⁷⁻³⁰ These resources draw insights from experiential data gathered from both people with disability and support workers, aiming to enhance the quality of support provided.²⁷⁻³⁰ Another example is the Workforce Capability Framework introduced by the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission to articulate expected behaviours and skills of support workers.⁹ The Commission is developing tools to assist users of the framework, including resources to help people with disability to hire new workers, for example, but government and industry support is needed for effective implementation.¹⁵ However, the impact of these resources on improving the quality of support remains unclear and there is evidently still a lack of innovation in home and living supports.^{8 31} Without comprehensive evaluation tools, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of sector-wide innovations aimed at improving service delivery.

In this review, we adopt a broad and inclusive understanding of quality in paid disability support, recognising that it can encompass a range of dimensions including safety, responsiveness, respect, effectiveness, person-centredness, relational fit and alignment with the rights and goals of people with disability. Quality is inherently subjective and relational and is often best understood through the lived experiences of those receiving support. Informed by the findings of the mpQS project,²³⁻²⁶ we view quality as shaped by the interactions between people with disability and their support workers, as well as by organisational and system-level factors that enable or constrain good support. Different tools and measures may reflect different conceptualisations of quality; for instance, some may focus on service outcomes, others on worker behaviours or the perspective of the person with a disability. This review will map how quality is defined or described in each measure, to help identify how quality is currently being assessed and where gaps remain.

Despite the importance of the quality of support for adults with disability, it appears that there are limited, if any, standardised measures to evaluate it. Moreover, the findings from our recent research, the mpQS project, point to the need to codesign a quality support measure. Thus, the purpose of this scoping review is to systematically identify and map the tools and measures available to evaluate the quality of paid disability support. By reviewing the existing literature and tools, this review will provide critical insights into the current state of the field and inform future efforts to improve the quality of support. The findings will be essential for researchers, policymakers and service providers aiming to enhance the quality of disability support services and ensure that they align with the needs and preferences of people with disability.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

The proposed scoping review will be conducted and reported in line with established scoping review guidance,

including the methodological framework by Arksey and O'Malley,³² enhancements by Levac *et al*,³³ the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for scoping reviews³⁴ and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis: Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR).³⁵ This review commenced in January 2025 and is expected to be completed by October 2025.

Identifying research question

The research question central to this scoping review is: 'What existing tools and measures are available to evaluate the quality of paid disability support services?'

Identifying relevant studies (developing the search)

The search strategy has been developed by the authors in collaboration with an experienced research librarian. Three core concepts were extracted from the research question to inform the search strategy. The concepts were: (1) adults with disability, (2) paid disability support and (3) quality measures. A comprehensive list of search terms was then developed, informed by the authors' existing content knowledge and experience, known peer-reviewed literature and relevant review reports. In addition, initial searches on MEDLINE, PsycINFO and Embase were conducted to identify subject headings and keywords. Concepts will be combined with BOOLEAN operator 'AND', with keywords and subject headings within each concept being combined with BOOLEAN operator 'OR'.

To operationalise the concept of 'adults with disability,' the search includes a structured list of health conditions and impairments that are most commonly associated with access to formal disability support for people aged 18–65 years. To identify relevant disability search terms, we took a structured approach drawing on: (1) disability categories commonly included in international disability support systems (eg, Australia's NDIS, the UK's Care Act and Canada's provincial and territorial disability income and support programmes), (2) conditions frequently associated with substantial functional impairments likely to require formal, ongoing support and (3) existing literature and scoping reviews in disability and social care domains. Various terms for physical, intellectual, cognitive, neurological, sensory and psychosocial disabilities are included. While not every possible disability type was included as a specific search term, the strategy includes broad terms such as "disab*" to ensure that relevant studies involving other conditions are still captured. These conditions are not excluded from the review but were not explicitly listed in the search to maintain a focused and feasible search strategy aligned with the review's aims.

A full search strategy was developed and tested in MEDLINE (see online supplemental appendix), with search filters used to limit the search to include articles published in the English language from 2014 onwards. This search strategy will be adapted for use in each bibliographic database. The databases to be searched in this scoping review will include MEDLINE, PsycINFO,

Embase, CINAHL and Scopus. To identify any potentially missed relevant articles, a backward citation search of reference lists from included studies, as well as a forward citation search for articles that cite the included studies, will be conducted. The search strategy will be saved in each database to automatically capture newly published eligible studies that appear online after the original search date.

In accordance with JBI and PRISMA-ScR guidelines,^{34 35} we will also conduct a targeted search of grey literature to identify quality assessment tools or measures that may not be published in peer-reviewed sources. This will include a structured desktop scan using Google Search, Google Scholar, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, TROVE, the OpenGrey archive and targeted website searching of relevant disability organisations, government agencies, research centres and advocacy bodies. The targeted website list will be added to iteratively as initial searching progresses. To manage the search process, website searching will be prioritised in three stages: (1) Australian organisations and agencies, (2) global organisations, for example, international peak bodies and (3) selected UK and Canadian sources due to comparable service contexts and disability policy structures to Australia. While the same level of precision as used in bibliographic database searching is not feasible due to the limitations of grey literature platforms, the searches will still be guided by the three core concepts of the review: adults with disability, paid disability support and quality measures. The approach will be iterative, with search terms refined during the process based on emerging results. All grey literature sources, including the search strategy and screening decisions, will be documented and reported in line with PRISMA-ScR³⁵ guidelines.

To complement this process, we will also consult key stakeholders, such as people with disability, support workers, service providers, allied health professionals and family members, via an anonymous online survey to identify any tools or measures they are aware of or currently use to evaluate the quality of paid disability support services. No identifiable data will be collected to ensure participant confidentiality and privacy. Measures identified from participants in the survey will be reviewed and integrated into the scoping review to capture current practice not always represented in published or grey literature.

Study selection

Consistent with the JBI framework for scoping reviews,³⁴ this study uses the Population, Concept and Context approach to define inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Population

Studies must focus on adults with disability, defined in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as individuals with long-term impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may limit full and equal participation in society.³ Specifically,



this review targets adults aged 18–65 years who require support with activities of daily living from a paid disability support worker.

- ▶ The lower age limit (18 years) excludes studies on children or adolescents, as this review focuses on adult disability support.
- ▶ The upper age limit (65 years) aligns with eligibility for the NDIS, Australia's primary disability support scheme.
- ▶ If participant age is not clearly reported or a subgroup aged 18–65 years cannot be differentiated, studies will still be included where possible and relevant measures will be extracted.
- ▶ Studies will only be excluded if the identified measure is explicitly designed for children (<18 years) or older adults (65+ years), such as aged care service assessments.

Concept

The review includes published articles and grey literature sources that identify or use a tool or measure to evaluate the quality of paid disability support services. Eligible grey literature may include unpublished reports, evaluation tools or resources developed by government agencies, disability service providers, advocacy organisations or research centres, provided they contain or describe a defined measure that assesses the quality of paid support. The term 'tools or measures' is defined broadly to include scales, questionnaires, observational instruments or similar methods used to assess support quality. Frameworks or standards without associated empirical instruments (eg, conceptual models or policy guidelines without measurement tools) will be excluded. Paid disability support services are defined as assistance provided by paid support workers to adults with disability. Support workers are referred to by multiple titles internationally, including direct care workers, paid attendant carers, personal care assistants or support staff. For the purposes of this review, the term disability support worker refers to paid employees who provide direct and daily support including assistance with daily and domestic living, community participation and achieving self-described goals. This review does not aim to identify measures used to evaluate informal support such as support from family members, friends, advocates or peers. The review will also exclude articles identifying measures focused solely on paid professional services, such as psychologists, allied health professionals (eg, occupational therapists or social workers), teachers, cleaners or gardeners. Additionally, tools intended to measure support related to service coordination, administration, informational assistance, equipment repairs or transport are beyond the scope of this review.

Context

This is an international review. Studies conducted in any country will be considered, provided the article is published in English. The review is not limited to specific

service settings and may include home-based, community or supported accommodation environments where paid support is provided.

Eligibility criteria

Inclusion criteria

- ▶ Population: adults (aged 18 to 65 years) with disability who receive paid disability support provided by a disability support worker.
- ▶ Concept: published articles or grey literature sources that identify or use a tool or measure to evaluate the quality of paid support provided by a disability support worker.
- ▶ Publication type: peer-reviewed articles, including reviews, opinion pieces and commentaries, published in English since 2014, as well as eligible grey literature including theses, organisational reports, evaluation tools and resources from reputable non-academic sources (eg, government, service providers, advocacy groups).
- ▶ Study design: all study designs will be considered. The primary or stated aim of the included studies is not important in terms of eligibility for review, providing the article or resource identifies or uses tools or measures for evaluating the quality of paid disability support.

Exclusion criteria

- ▶ All participants below the age of 18 years or above the age of 65 years.
- ▶ Articles or sources that only identify measures solely focused on informal support (eg, unpaid carers) or healthcare professionals (eg, nurses, allied health) rather than disability support workers.
- ▶ Articles or grey literature sources that do not include or describe a concrete, structured tool or measure (eg, conceptual frameworks or general programme descriptions without an evaluative component) will also be excluded.

Screening

Once the literature search is completed, all citations from bibliographic databases will be uploaded into Covidence, where duplicate references will be removed. Two independent reviewers from the research team will screen the titles and abstracts based on the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. After the initial screening, articles that meet the criteria will undergo a full-text review, which will also be conducted independently by two reviewers. For articles that are included after the full-text review, reference lists will be checked to identify any additional relevant studies for this scoping review. In addition, a forward search for articles citing the included articles will be conducted.

Grey literature sources identified through structured desktop searches (eg, Google, organisational websites) will be managed in a separate spreadsheet and screened for eligibility by two reviewers. Titles and summaries

(where available) will be assessed first, followed by full-text review where applicable. Given the variability in format and detail across grey literature sources, an iterative approach to screening will be applied, with reviewers documenting decisions transparently and refining inclusion criteria if needed.

In the case of disagreement between the reviewers on article or source eligibility, there will be discussion between the reviewers until an agreement is reached. If necessary, the eligibility criteria may be modified or a third member of the research team will be consulted if agreement cannot be reached. The full screening process, including database and grey literature results, will be outlined in a full PRISMA-ScR flow diagram, including the number of records retrieved, screened and included in the final review.³⁵

Charting the data

The review team will iteratively modify the data extraction form during the screening process, as the eligibility criteria are refined to ensure a rigorous and appropriate response to the research question. Once the team has collaboratively developed the data extraction form, two reviewers will independently chart data from five to 10 articles, depending on the total number, to determine consistency of data extraction between the reviewers.

It is anticipated that the following data will be extracted from the eligible articles: (1) study characteristics: author, year published, study design/methodology, sample size, country of completion, measures used, (2) participant characteristics: basic demographics and disability type, (3) support characteristics: amount of paid support and setting in which support is provided (eg, community, disability-specific housing, own home, family home, day centre), (4) characteristics of the quality of support measurement tool/s and (5) identified gaps in the literature.

For grey literature sources, equivalent information will be extracted where available, including the type of source (eg, report, policy document, toolkit), issuing organisation, year of publication, country of origin and any tools or measures described or used to assess the quality of paid disability support. Source credibility (eg, government, research institution, advocacy organisation) will also be recorded to aid in contextualising findings.

The specific characteristics of the quality of support measurement tools to be extracted will be informed by the framework developed in the mpQS project²⁵ and review standards in line with human rights and services for people with disability (eg, National Standards for Disability Services³⁶). Since the goal of this review is to conduct a broad search to identify existing measures, rather than evaluate the methodological rigour of the included studies, we do not intend to conduct a quality assessment of the included articles or grey literature sources.^{32 34}

Collating, summarising and reporting the results

A descriptive summary of the scoping review will detail the number of citations screened and studies included at each stage, which will be illustrated using a PRISMA flow diagram.³⁵ The key characteristics of the included peer-reviewed articles and grey literature sources, such as study or source type, origin and the support quality measurement tools used, will be summarised in both table and text formats. A detailed summary of these characteristics will be presented in tables, and a high-level overview will be provided in the text. Separate sections or tables will be used to clearly distinguish between peer-reviewed sources and grey literature, while using consistent categories for data extraction and reporting.

A more detailed table focused on the characteristics of the quality of support measurement tools identified will be developed. This table will include the aim of the measure, how it was designed, the population and setting it was designed for, the intended respondent, what the data are used for and by whom and whether the tool is validated. To further explore the content of the measurement tools, we will extract the items or indicators and conduct content analysis to compare the concepts measured with the factors influencing the quality of support identified in the mpQS project.^{23–26} Since our focus is on the identified measures, we will not do any further analysis on the results of the reviewed sources. Furthermore, any identified gaps in measurement tools related to quality support, whether highlighted by the included articles, grey literature sources or recognised by the authors, will be thoroughly examined.

Patient and public involvement

Adults with lived experience of disability who receive paid disability support will be invited to review the initial draft of this scoping review and offer their feedback and suggestions. The goal is to recruit at least three consultants with diverse experiences, using the existing networks of Summer Foundation and La Trobe University. These lived experience consultants will receive an electronic version of the draft to review at their convenience, and they will be encouraged to provide feedback in a format that suits their accessibility needs. In addition, a research fellow with lived experience of receiving disability support working in our team has reviewed and provided feedback on this scoping review protocol. The primary aim of the ongoing consultation with people with disability is to ensure the review incorporates the perspective of those with lived experience, helps identify any overlooked gaps in the literature and offers guidance on the dissemination of findings. Lived experience consultants will be paid for their time and acknowledged in the scoping review article as they deem appropriate (eg, anonymously or named). In addition, adults with disability, support workers, support providers, family members and allied health professionals will be invited to complete the survey described above to identify measures or tools they use or are aware of.



Limitations

This review has certain limitations, including the restriction to articles or grey literature sources published in English since 2014. While this time frame allows the review team to manage the volume of studies within a reasonable period, it may result in missing relevant articles published before 2014. However, it is expected that key earlier studies will be referenced in the more recent articles included. If needed, the recency criteria can be adjusted to account for this. Additionally, there is a risk that very few, if any, relevant articles exist on this topic. However, finding no relevant studies would still provide valuable insight, as it would highlight the need for further research, particularly in developing a quality of support measure.

ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION

Ethical approval from La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (humanethics@latrobe.edu.au) will be required for the stakeholder consultation component of this scoping review, which includes an anonymous online survey involving people with disability, support workers, service providers, allied health professionals and family members. The survey will not collect identifiable data and is therefore expected to be classified as low-risk. No ethical approval is required for the scoping review of publicly available data. The goal of this scoping review is to explore existing tools and measures used to assess the quality of paid disability support services. To our knowledge, this will be the first scoping review addressing this specific topic. It is expected that the findings will highlight the significance of quality support for adults with disability and provide valuable insights into how key stakeholders currently assess support quality. This information could contribute to improving the measurement of quality in practice. Additionally, any gaps identified in the literature may guide future research efforts. We plan to disseminate the results through peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations and accessible plain language formats to reach a broad audience.

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Acknowledgements We would like to thank Dr Mark Brown for reviewing this protocol and providing his expertise and feedback, grounded in his experience as a person with disability and a Senior Research Fellow. In addition, we would like to thank Hannah Buttery, Senior Officer Research Data Outputs at La Trobe University library for her contribution to the development of the search strategy.

Contributors All authors made substantial intellectual contributions to this scoping review protocol. MT led the conceptualisation of the review and the writing of the protocol. MT, JD and DW contributed to the scope and design of the review. MT developed the search strategy with support from a research librarian and input from JD and DW. MT is responsible for the overall content as guarantor. All authors contributed to the editing and revision of the manuscript and approved the final version for publication.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient and public involvement Patients and/or the public were involved in the design, conduct, reporting or dissemination plans of this research. Refer to the Methods section for further details.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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