



Disability Employment Taskforce
PO Box 7576
Canberra Business Centre, ACT, 2610
disabilityemploymenttaskforce@dss.gov.au

7 July 2015

Dear Taskforce Chair

I am pleased to forward to you Deakin University's submission to the public consultation of the National Disability Employment Framework.

Deakin University considers this consultation on disability employment issues, in examining how employment outcomes for people with disability can be improved, is addressing a particularly important issue for the inclusion and wellbeing of people with disability and the communities in which they live. Participation in employment results not only in better economic status for people with disability, but also provides a real sense of value and is perhaps the gold standard of inclusion.

Deakin University, currently amongst the leading Australian universities in attracting students with disability, is committed to ensuring that students with disability are well supported as they undertake their degrees. Consequently it is pleasing to see that the Government is prioritising how these graduates along with other employees with disability will be best supported to enter and remain in the workforce.

Deakin's extensive network of guaranteed entry pathway arrangements and its deep industry engagement throughout much of regional and outer metropolitan Victoria, along with its current research into engaging small and medium businesses in employing people with disability, means that the University is well placed to advise the Government on evidenced based ways of supporting an increase in employment of people with disability and the outcomes that signal success for both employers and employees with disability.

I commend this submission to the taskforce.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jane den Hollander".

Professor Jane den Hollander
Vice-Chancellor



Deakin University Submission National Disability Employment Framework

Introduction

Deakin University is pleased to contribute to the public consultation of the National Disability Employment Framework. Deakin University has a strong commitment to disability and inclusion as evidenced by the creation of an Inaugural Chair in Disability and Inclusion in 2014. The University views employment of people with disability as a keystone to inclusion. Thus the University supports not only a strong program to support students with disability studying at Deakin but also has a range of research initiatives aimed at increasing employment for people with disability and encouraging employers to consider employing this disadvantaged sector of our community.

Deakin supports the government's intention to consult widely on how to improve employment outcomes for people with disability. Recent research has demonstrated that people with disability wish to enter the work force but often face physical and attitudinal barriers that make this difficult. Deakin University is committed to ensuring that all our graduates, including those with disability, are work ready. At the same time, researchers at Deakin are working actively to promote employment for people with disability with employers and dispel myths that act as barriers. Recent research has demonstrated that people with disability, provided they have the necessary accommodations, are loyal and hardworking employees who more than justify the costs of any needed accommodations in the work place. Furthermore, Deakin is committed to building strong, inclusive communities that include all members, including those with disability.

The commitment to inclusion for people with disability extends across all faculties within Deakin University. With a Chair in Disability and Inclusion, held by Professor Susan Balandin, the University is well placed to advise the government on evidenced based ways of supporting both people with disability and employers. Such support includes overcoming barriers for all stakeholders and developing solutions that will lead to outcomes that signal success for both employers and employees with disability.

Deakin University has provided a response to questions 2 and 3 outlined in the Issues Paper:

2. What can help reduce the barriers for people with disability seeking employment?
3. What can help reduce barriers for employers hiring people with disability?

Deakin University's selected responses to the questions raised in the National Disability Employment Framework Issues Paper:

2. What can help reduce the barriers for people with disability seeking employment?

As the Issues Paper highlights, negative attitudes or misperceptions about the potential of people with disability as employees, are well established as a major barrier to their employment. Dr Kevin Murfitt from Deakin University in his PhD thesis (2006) on attitude change in employment of people with disability confirmed that these negative attitudes are based on misperceptions. For example, employers may think that employees with disability are less productive, are an increased occupational health and safety risk, need more supervision, require costly workplace modifications, will have difficulty being accepted by co-workers and will affect the image of the organisation negatively. More recent evidence from the Australian Safety and Compensation Council (ASCC) (2007) supported earlier Australian research by Graffam, Shinkfield, Smith, & Polzina (2002) in demonstrating that in fact workers with a disability have, on average, a lower number of OHS incidents and have lower workers' compensation costs. Furthermore, the productivity of employees with disability is similar to that of employees with no disability and workers with disability have, on average, a higher retention rate. The research also showed that if the workplace needs to be modified for workers with disability, the costs of workplace modification are quite low and the economic benefits of employing people with disability exceed the cost of the workplace modifications.

Despite these findings and additional benefits included in the business case for employing people with disability included in the Issues Paper, employment of people with disability has not improved in the last decade (Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) 2014). Murfitt (2006) concluded that information is not enough to shift deeply embedded personal and cultural stereotypes and attitudes. He found that experiential programs such as work trials, mentoring programs, internships and job placements for people with disability are the most powerful methods of changing attitudes. These programs give employers an opportunity to get to know people with disability first hand. As a result of such experience they rely less on inaccurate stereotypes. In an Australian study involving over 600 employers who had employed a person with disability, Graffam, Shinkfield, Smith, & Polzina, (2002) also cited numerous studies that had found that previous experience with people with disability led to better attitudes.

Deakin University, along with other organisations such as the Australian Network on Disability (AND), have successfully developed internship and mentoring programs for students with disability. For example, since 2000, Deakin's Willing and Able Mentoring (WAM) program has successfully matched over 500 tertiary students with disability with mentors in large and small organisations relevant to the student's career interests. Murfitt (2006) presented conclusive evidence that almost without exception, mentors (professional volunteers who often have not had previous direct experiences with a person with disability) feel they have gained much from the program themselves especially in terms of demystifying disability and becoming more positive about the potential of people with disability as employees. In addition, the mentees or students with disability themselves had just as much change in their own attitudes or perceptions about their potential. They consistently reported growth in their self-confidence and clarity of career direction. This is a unique and important attribute of more experiential attitude change initiatives. Such initiatives actually empower and change both potential employers and people with disability themselves through their interaction and partnership. Given government support, the WAM program and other similar initiatives have significant scalability and should be a key plank in any future disability employment strategy.

3. What can help reduce barriers for employers hiring people with disability?

Recent research by the United States Office for Disability Employment Policy (ODEP, 2015) stated that implementing an economic business case was not sufficient to persuade employers to increase efforts to employ people with disability. The researchers suggested that the solution lies in '...developing a persuasive argument that addresses the underlying biases and cultural stereotypes' (ODEP, 2015: 7). They also found that employers need support in countering the disability stereotypes, facilitating disability disclosure for employees and applicants, making accommodations and assembling basic information for increasing disability employment.

In Australia, recent research by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) (Waterhouse, Kimberley, Jonas, & Glover, 2015) identified similar employer needs for employment of people with disability. Through focus group discussions with 40 employers, Waterhouse et al. (2015) confirmed that:

- many employers are not confident that they have the knowledge, understanding or capability to employ people with disability
- the lack of disclosure of disability is a key concern for employers
- small-to-medium-sized enterprises express frustration at their difficulties in accessing information relevant to their businesses
- the role of trusted brokers and mediators emerged as a key issue.

Furthermore, the voice of the employer has not been heard when discussing and researching employment of people with disability. Waterhouse et al. (2015, p.8) supported previous research such as that by Graffam et al. (2002) when they noted that: 'A review of the literature confirmed that the employer's perspective was largely absent from the research literature and policy discourse on employment of people with disability.'

One exception cited by Waterhouse et al (2015) was a study conducted in the US by Domzal, Houtenville & Sharma (2008). These researchers reported significant employer anxiety about employing people with disabilities. The researchers highlighted the need for information and support for employers, particularly smaller employers.

In light of the above findings and with a focus on smaller employers, Deakin University in partnership with the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) are currently conducting a pilot project in Geelong that is recruiting Diversity Field Officers to provide first hand support to up to 50 small to medium size businesses to develop their confidence and capacity to employ people with disability. This Diversity Field Officer (DFO) Project is funded by the Helen McPherson Smith Trust, Worksafe, the Geelong Community Foundation and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) for 2015 and 2016. Deakin University will lead the background research and project evaluation and AFDO is leading the project management. This pilot project has considerable scalability and will provide significant input from small and medium employers to inform the future disability employment strategy.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Efforts are made to dispel community and in particular employers' negative attitudes or misperceptions about the potential of people with disability as employees.
2. Initiatives such as the Willing and Able Mentoring (WAM) are implemented to empower and change the attitudes of both potential employers and people with disability themselves through their interaction and partnership.
3. Employers consider workplace modifications for workers with disability, as the costs of workplace modification are quite low and the economic benefits of employing people with disability exceed the cost of the workplace modifications.
4. Employers are given support to countering the disability stereotypes, facilitate disability disclosure, make accommodations and gain basic information for increasing disability employment.
5. Skilled brokers or mediators are available to support stakeholders in all aspects of gaining and maintaining employment.

References

Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, (2014), Developing the foundation for a new employment model for Australia, National Disability Employment Advocacy Project Final Report to the national Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

Graffam J, Smith K, Shinkfield A, & Polzina U, (2002), Employer benefits and costs of employing a person with a disability, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 17, 251–263, IOS Press

Graffam J, Smith K, Shinkfield A, & Polzina U, (2002), Factors that influence employer decisions in hiring and retaining an employee with a disability, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 17, 175–181 IOS Press

Murfitt K, (2006), Attitude change in Employment of People with a Disability, PhD thesis, Deakin University, Australia.

Office of Disability Employment (ODEP), (2014), EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY, Policy Contract Number: DOLU139434942

Waterhouse P, Kimberley H, Jonas P, & Glover, J, (2015), What would it take? Employer perspectives on employing people with a disability, National Centre for vocational Education Research (NCVER).