

July 13, 2015

## Submission to Disability Employment Framework Consultation

### Introduction

Monash University's Occupational Therapy Department welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Disability Employment Framework consultation. Monash University is a leading provider of occupational therapy education in Victoria. As of March 2015, there were over 17,000 registered Occupational Therapists working in Australia. Occupational Therapists are health professionals whose role is to enable their clients to participate in meaningful and productive activities. Employment and vocational rehabilitation are important aspects of the role of occupational therapy. Occupational Therapists work across physical and mental health and seek to enhance the inclusion and participation of clients in all aspects of our community.

A planned and considered approach is essential in establishing a National Disability Employment Framework. We believe that through such a considered approach such a framework can become an important tool in facilitating the participation of all Australians in meaningful and sustainable employment.

This submission focuses on addressing some of key questions asked, particularly relevant to the occupational therapy provider workforce.

### What can improve employment outcomes for people with disability?

A consideration of sustainability is essential in developing services to assist people with disabilities enter employment. It is important that, within the framework, duration of tenure in employment be considered as well as entry into employment. Within the issues paper we note that, of the 76,917 job seekers with disability who found a job placement in the 12 months to February 2015, less than 45% achieved a 13-week outcome and less than 30% achieved a 26-week outcome.

The above figures indicate an opportunity to improve employment participation for people with a disability. By improving the support provided to people with a disability once they have entered employment, there is an opportunity to reduce demand upon and improve the efficiency of the current employment services and also improve the outcomes and wellbeing of the individuals involved. In keeping with Bandura's (1977) Self Efficacy Theory, repeated experiences of job placements falling through early on, which may be perceived by job seekers as repeated failures, could potentially be detrimental to job seeker self efficacy; a non desirable outcome given that self efficacy has been recognised as a protective factor against mental illness, including depression (WHO, 2004).

In the context of the above discussion, we will highlight a number of key opportunities below.

### **Government services**

Further promotion of government services such as the Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) and Job Access may also be beneficial. We note that the figure given for the number of job seekers with disability assisted by the EAF in 2013-2014 (2,787), when compared to other figures provided in the report (e.g. the number of job seekers with disability who found work in the 12 months to February

2015 [76,917]) suggests that this service may potentially be being underutilised. When considering supports to employers it is important to consider the education provided to employers.

Similarly, current financial incentives (i.e. wage subsidies) to employ people with disability in mainstream employment are short-term and do not promote longevity in job tenure. Consideration of options to promote employers to employ and maintain persons with disability within their workforce through provision of ongoing supports (e.g. tax subsidies) associated with the level of representation of persons with disabilities in their workforce is encouraged.

### **Practical supports**

Provision of practical supports is another important aspect of supporting people with disabilities to enter the workforce. In particular, transport can serve as a major barrier/facilitator for successful entry into the workforce. In order for people to successfully participate in employment, they need to be able to get to the workplace in a timely and convenient manner. Depending on the level of disability, this may require significant taxi assistance or fully modified vehicles (including roof hoists), or someone to drive them to and from work if they cannot drive themselves. Moreover, some persons with disabilities may require personal care assistance to enable them to get ready for work on time. Such services and related funding must be appropriate and flexible to peoples needs.

It is also important to consider the environment of the workplace. Supports provided to employers and people with a disability must also consider funding for appropriate access to and around the workplace. Of particular importance is the provision of an appropriately accessible toilet, which must be designed and monitored by a specialised access firm or suitably experienced Occupational Therapist.

### **Existing Qualifications**

Another factor that can serve as a barrier to re-entry into the paid workforce for persons with disabilities acquired in later life are the level of the qualifications that they held prior to the onset of their disability/injury/health condition. At present, a person's ability to access government subsidised training is dependent upon the level of their existing qualifications. Many skilled workers (particularly those in manual labour and trades) who have experienced the onset of disability in later life are no longer able to work in jobs in which their pre-existing qualifications are relevant. These qualifications can however render them unable to access government subsidised training in other areas appropriate to their abilities and future employment goals.

### How well do these programmes work together to support people with disability throughout their life-course, including for conditions episodic in nature?

Current pathways into the services discussed on page 8 of the report could be further enhanced by considering the difficulties that some job seekers with disabilities face in obtaining the required medical documentation to support appropriate referrals into particular service streams via Employment Service Assessments (ESAT's). This can be particularly challenging for job seekers who have mental health and/or substance misuse issues and who have lived transient lifestyles.

Often these clients present to a number of service providers prior to attending the correct service. This means that a significant part of the service provider's time is spent assisting job seekers to gather appropriate medical evidence to support reassessment and redirected referrals. This not only places strain on employment service providers but also upon the assessment teams in terms of time use and costs.

Consideration of strengthening links with primary healthcare providers, particularly GP's, is also encouraged within the framework. This will allow increased efficiency and accuracy of referrals. This would also provide increased support to the system and allow for clients with no regular GP's to be outwardly referred to GP's familiar with system requirements. Such outward referrals to GP's could assist in the identification of undiagnosed health issues that warrant consideration in the context of any referrals made to employment service providers.

An individualised funding model in employment services would need to acknowledge that individuals within employment service programs require variable levels of support, and empower participants to progress towards personally meaningful employment goals. Importantly, within the context of any individualised funding model introduced, there needs to be an understanding that individual job seeker needs can, and are indeed likely to, fluctuate throughout the course of a program of support. As such, any such funding model would require inbuilt flexibility to account for this. As such, to be sustainable, individualised funding would need to be continually reassessed rather than fixed at the point of referral. To promote sustainability of employment funding must provide access to services that promote health and readiness for employment (e.g. occupational therapy and physiotherapy consultations, psychological counselling), as well as funding of employment specific training and equipment.

#### How can DES providers better assist people with disability to prepare for and find a job?

Disability Employment Service (DES) providers need to ensure that the persons that they employ are suitably qualified to identify and appropriately address job seekers physical and mental health concerns. Persons with training undergraduate qualifications in allied health (e.g. occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, and psychologists) are best placed to work with job seekers with disability. Occupational therapists, are well suited to work in this area as they are qualified and trained to complete functional capacity evaluations and worksite assessments. It is important that DES providers develop guidelines where job seekers are provided with early contact and support from health professionals.

#### Concluding Statement

Monash University's Department of Occupational Therapy welcomes the opportunity to contribute to training of the occupational therapy workforce to continue to support the contribution of society members with disability, and provide education and support to the employment sector.

We look forward to following the progress of the Disability Employment Framework consultation.

Yours Sincerely,

Stephen Elliott<sup>1</sup>, Matthew Boyd<sup>1</sup>, Linda Barclay<sup>1</sup>, Associate Professor Rachael McDonald<sup>1</sup>, Professor Ellie Fossey<sup>1</sup>

Monash University, Department of Occupational Therapy<sup>1</sup>

Email addresses for correspondence:

[stephen.elliott@monash.edu](mailto:stephen.elliott@monash.edu)

[matthew.boyd@monash.edu](mailto:matthew.boyd@monash.edu)

[linda.barclay@monash.edu](mailto:linda.barclay@monash.edu)

[rachael.mcdonald@monash.edu](mailto:rachael.mcdonald@monash.edu)

[ellie.fossey@monash.edu](mailto:ellie.fossey@monash.edu)

## References

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