



Minister Christian Porter MP  
Minister for Social Services  
Disability Employment Services Reform  
Department of Social Services  
GPO Box 9820  
Canberra ACT 2601

8 December 2016

Dear Minister Porter

It is with pleasure that I forward to you Deakin University's submission to the Disability Employment Services Reform Committee, specifically in relation to the discussion paper: *New Disability Employment Services from 2018*.

Deakin University believes this discussion paper, in examining the employment of people with disability, is addressing a particularly important issue for Australia and for the inclusion of people with disability.

Our response includes a summary of our evaluation of an innovative program to encourage employers to hire more people with disability and recommendations for two additional issues:

- better information to improve decision making for people with disability seeking employment
- more control with some funding provided to participants.

Deakin University's current research into engaging small and medium businesses to prepare them to employ people with disability means the University is well placed to comment on the employment of people with disability and the needs of employers.

Deakin University has a research tradition of collaborating with people with disability and their families to explore what they need to promote greater community inclusion. Opportunities for employment are a priority for this group of Australians, therefore we are delighted to comment on this discussion paper.

Yours sincerely

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

Professor Jane den Hollander  
**Vice-Chancellor**

# Deakin University

## Submission

### Disability Services Employment Reform Committee

**12 December 2016**

Deakin University congratulates the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Disability Employment Task Force on developing some innovative proposals in the key areas outlined in the discussion paper including developing better incentives for providers to service all participants equally and engaging employers to hire more people with disability (DSS, 2016)

On the latter point, a recent Deakin University review of the employment of people with disability confirmed that there is a major gap in disability employment supports for small to medium sized businesses, whose voice is largely missing in this important area (Murfitt, Crosbie, Zammit, and Williams, 2016).

#### ***Prevent Market Failure***

The discussion paper proposes a new communication strategy via the Job Access website to showcase best practice by employers and to provide other information to build disability awareness for employers. However, this and other proposals such as relaxing Disability Employment Service boundaries to enable Disability Employment Services (DES) to better engage with national businesses, tend to be more appropriate for larger employers. Smaller businesses often do not have the resources to proactively search for information, neither are they positive or confident about employing people with disability. In addition, an Australian Government review into DES for the period 2010 to 2013 (Department of Social Services, 2014), found that of the 52 per cent of employers in the sample who were aware of DES, only three per cent had used the services in the previous 12 months. These employers need direct assistance to gain disability awareness and confidence from an independent broker who is focused on their unique business needs, before they are in a position to consider recruitment of people with disability. An independent broker can then facilitate the connection between a business and DES to determine a potential and viable job for a person with disability.

Deakin University and the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) have trialled an independent broker system, the Diversity Field Officer (DFO) Service, in Geelong during 2015 and 2016. The DFO Service provides one to one support to approximately 50 small to medium businesses to assist them gain disability awareness and confidence. The service also provides information and support to enable these businesses to develop as more inclusive organisations for potential employees with disability, current employees who may have or gain a disability and customers with disability.

Services provided include:

- disability friendly checks regarding physical access and inclusive culture
- disability awareness and unconscious bias training
- a customised 'road map' to build more confidence and inclusion
- connections with peer organisations and the DES providers.

A preliminary evaluation of this program indicates that:

- disability awareness and confidence has increased for these businesses, 20 per cent of participating business have recruited an employee with a disability since the start of the program
- a staff member in almost 10 per cent of the businesses had disclosed having a disability.

Given that most businesses in the pilot project are still implementing recommendations developed with the DFO service these early achievements are important.

Employers have said:

*"I was made aware of an area I had no knowledge even existed and have an open mind on these issues now."*

*"Knowledge, understanding and language used. We will be training our staff as well as job carving roles for people with a disability."*

*"We are now aware of changes we can make to our recruitment processes."*

*"Increased awareness, part time employment for a person with disability, planning for more employment, installation and changes to workplace to make it more accessible."*

*"We have gained so much confidence in regards to how/what we need to do to now employ people with disability."*

*"We have benefited from participating in the project in a number of ways. It has updated our understanding of what having a disability means, it has broadened our understanding of how adjustments can be made without too much pressure on the organisation for people with disabilities and broadened our thinking when it comes to the recruitment process and inclusion of people with disabilities. As a direct consequence we have recruited two people into the organisation with disabilities."*

All DES providers interviewed for the DFO evaluation have been supported the DFO Service. It is important to note that the program provides a unique and previously missing element in the disability employment pathway of building awareness, confidence and inclusion to enable small to medium businesses to get to a point where connection with a DES or another disability recruitment pathway is relevant and viable.

**Recommendation:**

The Department of Social Services consider supporting the Diversity Field Officer Service in 2017 and beyond to:

- scale up to include more businesses
- expand and support the network of peer organisations embracing disability employment
- gather longitudinal evaluation data to measure growth in disability confidence, inclusion, and job outcomes over time.

### ***Better information to improve decision making***

Approximately 44 per cent of Australians have problems with literacy. Recent analysis of government websites aimed at informing consumers indicate that the language used is often complex and the information is text heavy. People with disability, particularly those with lifelong disability may have limited literacy skills that may reflect a lack of opportunity to learn to read as much as any cognitive impairment. People with disability have the right to engage with information presented in a variety of ways in order to maximise their decision making and choice. This includes decisions about where they might like to work and what employers are offering employees with disability. Furthermore, recent research undertaken by Deakin University in partnership with the Office of the Public Advocate and the Victorian League for Individuals with a Disability (VALID) has indicated that people with disability may lack informal supports such as family members or paid support workers to assist them with decision making. Volunteers can be trained to fulfil this role successfully if they are trained. VALID has successfully developed and piloted such training.

#### **Recommendations:**

- People with a range of disability should be involved in developing and trialling information about employment options for their peers.
- Information should be offered in a variety of modes including Easy English that includes:
  - the use of simplified language and grammar
  - minimal punctuation
  - simplified layout and design
  - the use of images to assist with comprehension of the key messages.
- People with disability need to access appropriately trained volunteers or paid personnel to assist them with employment decision making.

### ***More control with some funding provided to participants***

One option considered in the discussion paper is to introduce an element of individualised funding that gives participants more control to purchase what goods and services they think they need to get into the workforce. In the discussion paper, note is made of specific items such as vocational courses or special work clothes. However, there are a number of people with disability who could manage to work in a modified environment particularly if they had additional technology to assist them. This might include items such as screen readers, adaptations to communication aids or specialised software. It might also include providing specific training to other employees in the work place such as how to communicate with people using communication modes other than speech (e.g. speech generating devices or picture communication boards). Employers might also consider joining a communication accessibility program such as that run by SCOPE Victoria <http://www.scopeaust.org.au/service/communication-access/> to ensure that the work place is communicatively accessible for all employees regardless of ability.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Employees with disability should be provided with some budget to purchase additional training of technology that will make their chosen work more accessible.
- Businesses employing people with disability should have access to funds to ensure for example that the work place is communicatively accessible for all workers regardless of ability.

## References

Department of Social Services, (2014), *Evaluation of Disability Employment Services 2010–2013 - Final report*. Retrieved March 2016 from <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/publications-articles/policy-research/evaluation-of-disability-employment-services-2010-2013>

Murfitt, Crosbie, Zammit, and Williams, (2016), *Employer Engagement in Disability Employment: a missing link for Small to Medium Organisations: A Review of the Literature*, (submitted for publication November 2016).