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Department of Social Services
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Discussion Paper – ‘Ensuring a strong future for supported employment’


Submission by genU



Organisational overview:

Karingal St Laurence Limited (KSL) is the amalgamation of Karingal and St Laurence Community Services. KSL Ltd is a public company limited by guarantee and trades under various registered business names including: genU Ability, genU Aged Care and MatchWorks, offering aged care, disability and housing and housing support services in Victoria and Disability Employment Services (DES) in Victoria and South Australia and jobactive in every state/territory of Australia except Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Karingal St Laurence Limited has been working in the disability and aged care spaces for over 60 years. It has over 200 locations, 350 plus volunteers and 2800 employees and 4000 supported clients. Specifically, its origins are in the Geelong region, where it continues to be one of the larger community services providers in disability and aged care services. KSL’s vision is to build inclusive communities by creating and delivering innovative services and supports that empower people to reach their full potential.

As an organisation genU operates a number of supported employment programs and employs some 200 supported employees (around 1% of the current 20,000 supported employees nationally) through a number of Australian Disability Enterprises (ADE’s) which include:

- genU Food Processing
- Seasons Catering
- Seasons Gourmet
- Viva Energy Cafe
- Seasons Cafes
- CSIRO Canteen
- Geelong Community Nursery
- Mobile Land Care
- Botanic Café Colac
- Kui Nursery Colac
- Property Maintenance
- Otway Kitchen
- Document Destruction
- genU Laundry
- genU Business solutions
- Packaging and warehousing

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Historically genU, through Karingal and St Laurence have operated supported employment programs over 40 years and have a wealth of expertise and experience working in this space. The provision of supported employment is seen as a valuable component of the organisation's overall mission - 'to create and deliver innovative services and supports that empower people to reach their full potential'.

As an organisation, the various supported employment businesses operated by the organisation tend not to be profitable, however they are seen as essential in providing opportunities for participants to live meaningful, productive, social and engaged lives (full social and economic participation).

Government Context:

According to the most recent OECD rankings, Australia was ranked 21 out of 29 countries for the employment of people with disabilities. Australia's employment rate for people with disability (48 per cent) is comparable to countries such as Canada (49 per cent), and ahead of the United States (around 34 per cent), the United Kingdom (46 per cent), and Norway (43 per cent). However, the employment rate for people with disability in some countries is substantially higher than in Australia. More can be done to increase the employment and participation rates of Australians with disability and move Australia towards being an International leader in disability employment, including improving our current approach to promoting the employment of people with disability.

Economic modelling by Deloitte Access Economics in 2011, found that if labour force participation by people with disability increased by 10 percentage points (from 54 per cent to 64 per cent at the time), and the unemployment rate for people with disability decreased by 0.9 percentage points (from 7.8 per cent to 6.9 per cent at the time), Australia's gross domestic product would increase by approximately \$43 billion over a decade. All Australians, especially people with disability, would benefit from their increased economic and social participation.

Comments/Feedback:

The sector is going through a period of significant change, with the establishment of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), a review of the Disability Support Pension (DSP), a review of ADE and wage assessment tools (Modified Supported Wage System) and a Fair Work Commission Hearing around wage assessment tools in various Industrial agreements. At the same time significant policy shifts are occurring which include ADE employee numbers no longer being capped, funding for supported employees transitioning to the NDIS, a stronger focus on 'open employment', growth in the number of people within supported employment, potential market expansion and an increasing emphasis on participant choice and control.

Challenges continue to exist for ADE providers to adopt and adapt to these multitude of changes. In particular, the 'demand driven' market requiring providers to promote themselves to NDIS participants who have employment supports in their individual NDIS plans.

In consulting widely across our organisation, through visioning around what the future for supported employment might look like and seeking to identify the components of what makes a successful supported employment program at the grass roots level, we have identified four (4) major themes as follows;

1. Service Delivery models and challenges

As an organisation that has successfully operated supported employment businesses over a number of years, genU are acutely aware of the need for service delivery models to be well integrated and continuous as compared to disjointed, uncoordinated and fragmented. It is our experience that a more seamless approach to disability pathways requires greater co-ordination and liaison amongst all components such as schools, DES, Employment Pathways, School Leaver Employment Support (SLES) and Service Providers. What has been articulated, as being vital for success is the need to understand 'that supported employment is a process and a pathway and not solely a 'destination'. As a result, key features of any successful supported employment program need to be **flexibility and integration**.

One factor, driving poor employment outcomes for people with disability are poor education outcomes before entering the workforce. People with disability achieve lower education levels when compared to their peers without disability. For instance, in 2015, 41 per cent of people aged 15 to 64 years with reported disability had completed Year 12, compared to 63 per cent of people without a disability. In addition to this, only 17 per cent of people aged 15 to 64 years with disability had completed a bachelor degree or higher, compared to 30 per cent of people without a disability (ABS,2015, Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers). From the outset schools need to play a pivotal role in supporting, developing and preparing people with a disability.

Successful ADE's are those, which have participants along a continuum of skills, abilities and experience. It is our observation that, as in any workplace, there is great value in having more experienced and skilled workers sharing their knowledge, skills and wisdom with newer workers. In this regard, there is an ongoing dilemma around harnessing and holding onto this expertise, whilst at the same time providing opportunities for participants to experience 'Open Employment'. In keeping with our earlier comments, it is important to recognise that the journey for participants is much more important than the destination. As an example of being flexible, we strongly support the idea of allowing supported employees to undertake work experience in open employment without losing supported employment funding.

Moving supported employees into open employment can be difficult and challenging, as they often move into less valued roles, offering little opportunity around career pathways. For some, this insecurity and loss of identity may lead to the exacerbation of mental health issues such as anxiety, which in turn leads them to return to supported employment where they often have strong relationships, friendships and social connections with their peers.

In keeping with the idea of flexibility, we have found greater success in open employment where employees are able to transition as part of an integrated team of supported employees from an ADE across to open employment, where they can collectively work on a specific program or activity. There is a greater sense of support, security and familiarity amongst

participants, as it is a shared experience and individual workers are not left feeling isolated and insecure.

2. Recruitment and Retention

Not surprisingly, recruitment and retention of employees in supported employment is linked to service delivery models. Recruitment of participants is strongly dependent on having a well-integrated and seamless transition through schooling, education and employment support programs.

It is our experience that critical components around success with supported employment, relate to the type of employment, work and the skills match with the employee and their interests. Equally important however is the relationships with staff and other workers, friendships and social connections. These are important considerations, that need to be taken into account when looking at transitioning someone into open employment.

It is our understanding from feedback received, that families and carers of supported employee's are often quite concerned and therefore reluctant to support the transition from supported employment to open employment, for fear of losing the Disability Support Pension (DSP), which would occur if the employee were to reach 30 hours in open employment.

There is also some concern within the sector around the possible changes to the eight hours per week participant/employee capacity requirements, which need to remain flexible and not rigidly interpreted i.e. 1.6 hours per day. We encourage, endorse and support continued flexibility of hours.

Other matters relevant to recruitment and retention relate to areas which will be discussed in more detail below and include levels of support given to employees at those various transition points such as moving from school, going to work, moving in and possibly out of open employment, transitioning to retirement.

The viability of supported employment will also influence recruitment and retention, but in particular, employment needs to add value and be of value to the individual. This creates challenges for ADE's as their work model needs to be able to be self-sustaining and competitive and the range of tasks/jobs may be limited, repetitive or routine. Additionally, there are greater challenges in rural and regional areas where work options and ADE's may be limited in scope and variety. As in most workplaces, there needs to be sufficient funding and attention given to individual training and developmental needs, which at various times, due to resource and funding constraints, can be difficult.

Equally important in helping to make an open employment placement successful is the amount of funding and support given to the employer for staff/supervisors to undertake specialised disability focused training. The level of support, or otherwise, given by other staff in an open employment environment can easily impact on the success or otherwise of the open employment placement.

As a result, we would strongly encourage government to consider giving a direct subsidy (an incentive payment) to businesses who provide supported employment to people with

disabilities. This subsidy/funding would cover the cost of running ADEs e.g. specialist disability training for staff, promotional and marketing activities and providing guidance mentoring and social supports to the employees – all of which are essential components of doing business for an ADE.

3. Help identifying those who could transition to open employment

As highlighted in the Discussion Paper there are a number of barriers to open employment. We support the comment and suggestion in the Discussion Paper that ‘Work could be done to look at transition options to support participants who may not be DES eligible, but would like to explore open employment options’ Additionally, genU support the comment that ‘The take-up of complementary servicing has been modest, suggesting work could be done to better promote or target this option more effectively for eligible supported employees’.

We would support greater **flexibility** around working with people with a disability in moving from an ADE to open employment. As highlighted previously we have had some success in moving a group or team of staff collectively from an ADE to open employment, to undertake some specific roles, tasks and functions. We believe that this type of approach should be both recognised and supported as being an alternate approach for individuals to transition to open employment.

For some people with a disability, transition to open employment may need to be transient, due to recurring medical and/or chronic medical conditions. In these scenario’s employers and funding bodies need to remain flexible to better allow for ‘changes in circumstances’. While this may be seen by some as being unworkable, it is an emerging reality that workplaces of the future will need to be more flexible and accommodating around the needs of their employees.

4. Ongoing support for open employment – aligning incentives to support better outcomes

A critical component to success for people with disability in supported employment moving into open employment is the link to ongoing supports. It is not financially viable to have a supervisor for only one or two employees. Currently, DES help people with disability in the workplace through Ongoing Support and Job-in-Jeopardy assistance, but there is a need to improve the effectiveness of both programs so that people with disability who need support to stay in a job, get the required support, particularly those transitioning from ADEs. Perhaps there is an opportunity here to promote or suggest a shared servicing model or arrangement with NDIS funding provided for more intensive support, as well as some further level of DES funding support.

Supported employees transitioning to open employment are often further disadvantaged if looking to increase their open employment hours or if looking for additional open employment, as they need to take unfunded days off to look for work and attend interviews. Overall, for many, the experience in moving to open employment is both a disappointment and a ‘let down’ as they often find themselves unhappy and out of their depth and comfort zone. As highlighted in the Discussion paper, ‘the number of supported employees that move

into open employment is small. The number of supported employees that remain after moving into open employment is smaller still'.

While the government is seeking to increase the number of people with a profound or severe core activity limitation, in the labour market, it is perhaps an opportune time to reflect on whether the ultimate goal here should be solely on open employment. Perhaps a stronger supported employment program together with greater flexibility and incentives (rather than disincentives) is more likely to achieve the desired goals of increased economic participation and increased social, community and civic engagement, producing more meaningful, sustainable and aspirational outcomes for participants.



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