



DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

National Disability Employment Strategy

Submission from:

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Introduction

About Scope

Scope (Aust) Ltd ("Scope") is a leading provider of services to people with disability in Victoria, and one of the largest not-for-profit organisations in Australia. Our origins stretch back to 1948, when a group of parents who wanted better lives and opportunities for their children with disability established the Spastic Children's Society of Victoria.

Scope is today one of the largest not-for-profit disability service providers in Australia, supporting more than 7,000 people with complex intellectual, neurological, physical and multiple disabilities.

Scope's mission is to enable each person we support to live as an empowered and equal citizen. Our commitment is to work with and advocate for people with the most complex support needs, to promote and support access to mainstream services, and to build inclusive communities for all.

Scope provides services including accommodation (supported independent living and short-term accommodation), therapy, individual support, communication access and supported decision making across metropolitan and regional Victoria. Scope also works with government, corporate and community organisations to improve inclusiveness for people with disability.

We have been active in research for more than 30 years. As part of our commitment to research-led and evidence-informed policy and practice, we have a long-term partnership with the University of Melbourne.

Our response

With this response, we have taken the proposed Employment Strategy vision and each of the four proposed Employment Strategy priority areas into consideration, as we believe these elements to be interdependent. However, we have chosen to focus on suggested improvements to the systems and services for jobseekers and employers.

Our response includes a 'deep dive' on Customised Employment, and its potential to become a viable alternative to existing government disability employment programs. We assert that Customised Employment enables people with disability to move beyond having a job to progressing a career, particularly people with complex needs.

Existing government programs

Australia's disability economic participation models have not facilitated the employment of people with disability at scale in Australia – the disturbing reality is that labour force participation for people with disability in Australia has changed little over the past twenty years.

Australia has obligations under the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006) to recognise and support the right of persons with disabilities to work. This imperative is given effect under the objects and principles of the *National Disability Insurance Agency Act 2013*. The Australian Government has also established several programs to support the labour market participation of peoples with disability: School Leaver Employment Support (SLES); Disability Employment Services (DES); and Australian Disability Enterprises (ADE). Yet these programs have not been able to increase the participation rate of people with disability in employment¹.

The National Disability Insurance Agency has committed to supporting 30% of NDIS participants to achieve their goal of employment by 30 June 2023. Progress is steady, with 23% of participants now in employment (against the current stage target of 24%), and despite a two percent decrease in employment for participants aged 25 or over compared to 2019. However, on other measures, the NDIS continues to underperform in its support for people with disability to find work.

Only one in five NDIS participants of working age says that the NDIS has helped them find a suitable job. Average payments to NDIS participants for employment goals in fact dropped six percent in the six months to 31 March 2020, with utilisation rates falling from 71% to 67%². Moreover, as of September 2019, only 1.4% of NDIS supports for people aged 25 or over and 4.2% of supports for people aged 15 to 24 years were for employment.³ These figures are disappointingly low, decreasing one percent in both age groups over two years; and the data is no longer being reported.

National Disability Services' *Making Employment a Priority* report⁴ highlights the need to embed an employment-first approach into NDIS planning. The report argues that employment supports should be included automatically in all NDIS plans for participants of working age, unless they choose otherwise. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Currently only 31% of individuals with NDIS plans set employment as a personal goal.

¹ Smith, P., McVilly, K., Rhodes, P., Pavlidis, L., (2018). Customised Employment: building workforce capacity for and establishing an evidence-based means of achieving the social and economic participation of people with disability. Final Report to the Innovative Workforce Fund. Sydney: Innovative Workforce Fund (IWF).

² Utilisation rates fell to 54% as of September 2020, but this is likely attributable to the impact of COVID-19.

³ NDIS (2017 and 2019). National Dashboard 30 September 2017 and 30 September 2019

⁴ National Disability Services (2018). NDIS Essential Issues: Making employment a priority

In practice, the NDIS does little to encourage the inclusion of employment goals in participant plans. It disconnects employment support from real jobs and SLES intervenes too late in the school life of young people. The interface with the DES program is complex to navigate. The low incidence of employment support in the plans of NDIS participants is effectively denying many people with disability a key pathway to an ordinary life, limiting people's aspirations and life goals, leading to poor mental health outcomes and a lack of economic independence.

The most recent published outcomes data⁵ shows that 29.5% of DES jobseekers were in employment after 12 months. This figure also disguises the fact that only 5.8% of these people were employed full-time. While the number of jobseekers using DES has increased by over 100,000 since 2014, this coincides with the period during which 107,000 fewer people received the Disability Support Pension.

There is a problem with relying on DES to improve the employment participation rates of people with disability, particularly people with complex disability; and similar structural and implementation issues affect the SLES and ADE programs. Enabling Australians with complex disability to find and keep meaningful employment that is substantive, well-remunerated and value-aligned remains essential.

Scope asserts that an alternative to the existing government disability employment programs is required to establish a more direct pathway to mainstream employment for people with disability.

Customised Employment has the potential, following a rigorous validation process, to be adapted and implemented at scale in Australia. Ultimately, this may lead to the delivery of Customised Employment through the NDIS and improve overall employment outcomes for people with disability in Australia. There is already an extensive evidence base in the United States that speaks to the effectiveness of Customised Employment practice.

Several studies reviewed by Inge et al.⁶ report job placements for 60% to 75% of participants across projects involving between 200 and 500 participants. Wehman et al.⁷ in a study on employment for 64 adults with autism spectrum disorder, many with intellectual disability, found that 72% of positions were customised. These figures stand in stark contrast to the recent outcomes from DES cited above.

⁵ Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2019). Employment Services Outcomes Report: Disability Employment Services, January 2018 – December 2018.

⁶ Inge, K.J., Graham, C.W., Brooks-Lane, N., Wehman, P. and Griffin, C. (2018). Defining customized employment as an evidence-based practice: The results of a focus group study, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 48, pp.155-166.

⁷ Wehman, P., Brooke, V., Brooke, A.M., Ham, W., Schall, C., McDonough, J. and Avellone, L. (2016). Employment for adults with autism spectrum disorder: A retrospective review of a customized employment approach. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 53, pp.61-72.

The pending transition of jobactive to the New Employment Services Model (NESM), and the associated measures announced as part of the 2021-22 Federal Budget, may have substantial implications for the future of DES. Jobseekers in DES will have the option to use online services from 1 January 2022, and then to move to NESM from 1 July 2022. Both initiatives should provide options for jobseekers that foster choice and control and lead to further customisation of employment. The idea of facilitating more direct connections with employers for jobseekers through Customised Employment could also be explored by the DES Reference Group.

Customised employment

Background

Customised employment is an evidence-based approach, endorsed by the United States Department of Labor and Industry, as its preferred means of supporting people with disability to gain and sustain employment. It has been broadly adopted across the United States and evidence demonstrates it is the most successful approach to assisting people with significant disability to participate in the labour force.

The term “Customised Employment” originated during a series of discussions within the Clinton administration’s then Committee for People with Disabilities. This later became known as the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), a part of the US Department of Labor formally creating a permanent focus on disability employment. In 2001, ODEP funded its first grants to validate Customised Employment as an effective workplace practice for employing people with a disability previously perceived as not employable.

Description

Customised Employment is a process that places the person with complex needs at the centre, considers their environment, interests, skills and abilities, then matches them with employers in their local area. It focuses on abilities and common interests of employees and employers and attempts to find an economic solution suitable to all parties.

Customised Employment has four distinct phases:

- the **discovery** phase identifies the person’s interest and abilities and develops self-determination
- the **job development** phase conducts an employment, business and cultural scan to find the best fit

- the **job matching** phase focuses on developing relationships and person-centred employment opportunities in partnership with the employer and employee
- the **transitional support and coaching** phase provides employment transition support post-placement.

After a successful placement, Customised Employment resources are gradually phased out following the period of transitional support. The outcome of this process is an employer with a business need that has been met, and the person with complex needs finding long-term meaningful employment.

Marking a distinct strategic departure from the ADE model, in which people work in segregated workplaces, Customised Employment supports people to achieve employment in the mainstream community, and to realise their ambitions to move beyond having a job to progressing a career.

Key elements of good practice

Customised Employment is based on sound evidence-based principles and good training programs that provide ongoing support to service providers and families.

In 2018, Inge et al.⁸ reported the results from a survey of 28 national experts on Customised Employment. The aim of the survey, conducted across several states in the USA, was to elucidate key elements of Customised Employment practice and to discuss the way future research could help add empirical evidence to the efficacy of these processes. A thematic analysis was completed of the phone conversations which led to the creation of twelve key elements of Customised Employment practice.

These 12 elements represent good practice for Customised Employment, from discovery through to employer engagement, development of supports, social networking, family education and planning and career development.

1. Physically meet at a location of the person's choice
2. Build rapport and get to know the person
3. Mindfully listen to the person
4. Identify the person's interests, skills and abilities
5. Conduct in-depth interviews with family and friends concerning the person's interests, skills and abilities
6. Observe the person in daily activities in a few different community settings
7. Arrange for the job seeker to observe the local businesses that potentially match the job seeker's interests, skills and abilities

⁸ Inge, K.J. et al. op cit.

8. Conduct informational interviews with employers at local businesses that are representative of the job seekers interests, skills and abilities
9. Observe the job seeker engaging in a job-related task
10. Assist the job seeker in identifying a work experience(s) to refine/identify job interests, skills and abilities
11. Collaborate with the job seeker, family and friends in confirming the job seekers 's interests, skills and abilities
12. Negotiate a customised job description.

Australian context

The term "Customised Employment" has to date been misrepresented in the Australian context. This is due to inadequate controls, which allow anyone with a related idea to tag that as "Customised Employment". Perhaps partly as a result, Customised Employment has not been widely adopted or tested in Australia. Indeed, some existing Customised Employment providers would fail to meet fidelity standards set in the USA; standards that do not even exist in Australia.

The evidence base in Australia requires further interrogation to demonstrate how and why key parts of the process should always be followed. There is a vital need to complete rigorous validation of the evidence base, ideally with the NDIA being engaged, before Customised Employment is adopted at scale in Australia. However, interim actions would also assist in positioning Customised Employment for broader implementation, e.g., NDS observe that SLES would be enhanced by incorporating the person-centred approaches of Customised Employment.⁹

Summary

Australia needs alternatives to the existing government disability employment programs. Scope asserts that Customised Employment can become self-sustaining through the NDIS and made accessible to many thousands of Australians with disability, strengthening employment choice and control for participants and transforming the employment landscape in Australia.

⁹ National Disability Services, op cit.

Appendix

Scope recommendations

Include employment as a goal in all NDIS plans for participants of working age, with the option for participants or their representatives to request that the goal be removed.

Support the exploration of Customised Employment as part of the forthcoming National Disability Employment Strategy.

Explore the idea of developing more direct connections with employers for jobseekers through Customised Employment at the DES Reference Group.

Review evidence based best practice for employment of people with disability, including Customised Employment, at the international level.

Ensure that the National Disability Insurance Agency is engaged, and evidence and outcomes are shared, throughout the validation of Customised Employment.

Incorporate the person-centred approaches from Customised Employment into SLES as recommended by National Disability Services in their report Making employment a priority (2018).

Aim toward the inclusion of Customised Employment as a legitimate and empirically tested item in the NDIS Price Guide by 1 July 2024.