**Autism Queensland response to the
Inclusive. Accessible. Diverse. Shaping your new disability employment support program**

**Consultation paper, November 2021.**

“It's really nice to be acknowledged as an individual who has individual wants and needs. To have that personal relationship makes it easier to talk to people about employment matters”

Autism EmployABLE participant, 2020

**“**Yeah, they have really got him motivated, confident about finding a job, that he is capable and can do it. Looking at his strengths and abilities, not what he can't do, but what he can do.” Parent of Autism EmployABLE participant, 2020

Autism Queensland welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation paper.

We firmly support the need for change within Disability Employment Services (DES) as explicitly stated in our response to the National Disability Employment Strategy Consultation Paper, May 2021.

This current consultation paper highlights people with a disability are still desperately in need of cohesive, coordinated and collaborative employment support. *Australia’s* *Disability Strategy 2021-2031* notes that while the majority of people with a disability want to participate in employment they are significantly underrepresented in the Australian workforce. (pg31)

This is especially pertinent for autistic adults. People on the autism spectrum are one of the most marginalised groups in terms of access to employment. They have employment rates lower than any other disability group including those with learning and intellectual disabilities (Chen et. al., 2015). Furthermore, people on the spectrum are three times more likely to be unemployed than those with other disabilities, and nearly eight times as likely when compared to people without disability.

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| Population | Unemployment rate | Participation rate |
| People on the spectrum | **34.1%** | **38%** |
| People with disability (excluding Autism) | 10.3% | 53.4% |
| People without a disability | 4.6% | 84.1% |

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018)

AQ started addressing this severe lack of employment service provision in 2019 with the development of a specialist autism employment program, Autism EmployABLE, funded through an ILC grant.

Autism EmployABLE is a participant led, autism-specific, open employment, access program for people to explore, navigate, gain, sustain and thrive in employment.

During the pilot (2019-2021) we placed **82% of our participants into employment with a sustainability rate of 82%.** We are on target to **exceed** these figures in the second round of the program (2021-2022)

*Our dual model of bespoke specialist employment service provision works exceptionally well.*

*No other program exists that is as broad-based, inclusive and successful as
 Autism EmployABLE*.

Evaluation of the pilot along with prior research undertaken by Autism Queensland continues to highlight the increasingly urgent need for ongoing **specialist employment service provision** for this and other marginalised cohorts e.g., The Deaf Community.

There is an abundance of research to show how factors such as tailored adjustments, workplace and interpersonal communication (Waisman-Nitzan, 2019), building on the interests and strengths of the individual (Diener, 2019), employer knowledge and understanding of autism (Dreaver et.al 2019), and invalidating misconceptions of increased cost and loss of productivity (Solomon, 2020; Scott, 2017) must be addressed for sustainable employment outcomes. Moreover, a recent study by Harvery et.al 2021 found the “Job fit” for both the employee and employer paramount as it leads to higher odds of the employee being suitably employed and their skills utilised.

*‘The employment challenges of autistic people have been attributed to a variety of factors. …those without intellectual disabilities describe challenges in obtaining and maintaining employment due to their social, communication, and sensory differences, rather than the skills required to complete job tasks (Hurlbutt and Chalmers, 2004; Neary, Gilmore and Ashburner, 2015)’.* (Ashburner et al. 2021)

We therefore propose a model of **Specialist Disability Employment Provision** **(SDEP)** where specialist services are procured from organisations with an established history of quality service provision in their field of expertise. For example, AQ has supported individuals on the autism spectrum for 55 years and has been running a successful employment program for the last 2.5 years.

Our model includes:

* ***In-depth understanding of Autism***

Research shows the outstanding employment results that can be achieved with specialist, tailored participant led provision (Ashburner, 2021; Pillay, et al. 2021). Moreover, knowledge and expertise required in assisting participants through the job application process, mastering the social demands of the workplace, remembering and following instructions and managing sensory demands should not be underestimated in assisting in gaining and maintaining employment.

* ***Strengths based approach***

Too often individuals are viewed from a position of deficit and through the lens of impairment instead of strength and capability. This model provides trained disability specific professionals to take time to understand the needs, skills and interests of each individual participant so that they can ensure a sustainable ‘job fit’.

* ***Bespoke person-centred***

This model enables staff- participant rapport by ensuring that a consistent staff member meets regularly with each participant.

‘Being able to contact and deal with the same person is good - having a person that can get to know you. ... being autistic, change is something that alarms me’.

Autism EmployABLE participant, 2020

* **Employer Awareness**

The employer needs to see and be shown the jobseeker’s value and appreciate how they can contribute to their organisation irrespective of their disability, rather than viewed as a potential cost with a need for accommodations. Employer knowledge and understanding of autism has been found to be one of the main factors underpinning employment success from an employer’s perspective. (Dreaver, 2019)

Griffith (2020) demonstrated how employees on the autism spectrum may show ‘above standard’ performance compared to their counterparts, which related to increased attention to detail, work ethic, and quality of work.

“So in terms of experience, we've had literally zero. It was really good to have that information there, just to get us started…. My experience was pretty nil until we spoke to you guys. (EmployABLE).”

Autism EmployABLE Employer, 2020.

## Who should be able to access a specialist disability employment program?

* It should be accessible to everyone with a disability (Medical Diagnosis, ESAt eligible, or reduced functional capacity) that are seeking specialist employment assistance. Especially those that have been receiving generalist DES servicing with little to no success.

## Employment pathways

* Full-time employment may not be suitable for some people with a disability therefore other options like part time, casual, self-employment need to be explored.
* Casual and part-time employment are valid and useful forms of employment. Casual employment does not provide annual leave or sick leave but is compensated by the ‘casual loading’ this may suit some more than others.
* Casual employment is often perceived as a transitory form of employment but may fit into the lifestyle of some people with disabilities better than other forms while they are increasing their skills and experience.
* Autism EmployABLE supports participants on the spectrum into a minimum of 8 hours per week, though most will work between 15-30 hrs with a small percentage (12.5%) working full time (2021-2022 current statistics).
* Community engagement, voluntary work and unpaid work experience are all very important steppingstones into providing experiences and provide individuals with the opportunity to ‘try out’ different types of work they enjoy and may find paid work in.
* Current DES model doesn’t value voluntary or unpaid work experience. Providers thus focus solely on employment and education outcomes.
* Some participants have no work history or understanding of the workplace and greatly benefit from gaining experience through voluntary or work experience opportunities.

## Role of the NDIS in supporting employment pathways

* NDIS employment supports are important in preparing individuals with a disability for work and need to continue to provide support and facilitate linkages to appropriate service provision.
* The NDIS ‘*’Achieving a ‘sense of purpose’*: Research Report, notes that they have committed to 30% of all NDIS participants of working age in employment by mid-2023 (NDIA, 2019). For this to become a reality participant need access to specialist employment service provision. Experienced providers able to assist with wide ranging needs especially for those on the autism spectrum. There needs to be delineation of service provision, so participants understand who is responsible for what supports, availability and how to access them.
* There is also a large cohort of individuals who do not meet the eligibility criteria for NDIS support yet are in serious need of targeted employment support that the DES providers have not been able to provide.
* Individuals with disabilities such as autism that are not currently eligible for NDIS would benefit from being able to access NDIS for specific specialist employment support to help them find and keep a job.
* Explore ways to service those individuals that have opted out of DES support for failing to meet their need and are not eligible for NDIS assistance. They are an increasingly large cohort**.**
* A study in Australia found that reducing the unemployment of people with autism by one-third would lead to a $43 billion increase in the Australian Gross Domestic Product (Griffiths, et al. 2020) It is therefore not only ethically and morally important to do so but economically as well.

## How can we simplify entry to the disability support model?

* By not requiring regular ESAt for people with a permanent disability or review service to be every 2 years as opposed to current 78 weeks review period.
* Reduce requirement for assessment for permanent disabilities such as autism.
* Ensure ESAt assessments are undertaken by relevant health and/or allied health professionals with experience of specific disability ie Autism.
* Enable new SDEP providers to accept direct entry onto their program with an official diagnosis by a relevant professional to pre agreed caps or per grant agreement.

## Considerations of the assessment process

* Disability, type and personal characteristics
* The participants ability to communicate and engage
* Enable provision of supporting evidence in multiple formats
* Provided information prior to the assessment to the participant so they know what to expect.
* Observed and/ or reported sensory concerns
* Participants understanding of their diagnosis
* Current level of ability to self-advocate
* Reported motivation to find and sustain work
* Skills, interests and perceived work capacity
* Strength based questions
* Supporting evidence pertaining to capacity to work
* Information regarding possible supports needed.

## Option for direct referral

* Enable direct referral from Centrelink to a new SDEP provider
* Automatic DES referral if person has been on their caseload for given period of time
* Person with disability can self-refer to a new SDEP provider that they feel would most be able to meet their needs.

## What employment service and supports would most help young people?

* Support to continue their education and or training is vital for this cohort.
* New SDEP providers to link with high schools to assist in the transition planning and provide information on the support available.
* Building relationships with local employers early so that individuals can gain work experience pre and post leaving school.

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| Highest level of educational attainment for those with autism, disability or no disability(a), 2018, ABS |

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| **Education Level Attained** | **No Disability %** | **All with Disability %** | **All with Autism Spectrum Disorder %** |
| Y10 or below | 15.4 | 34.9 | 32.4 |
| Y11 or 12 | 21.7 | 14.7 | 43.2 |
| Advanced Diploma/ Cert III/IV | **28.1** | **29.4** | **17.9** |
| Bachelor or higher degree | **31.2** | **16.1** | **8.1** |

* + People on the spectrum are less likely than others to complete an educational qualification beyond school and have needs for support that differ from people with other disabilities. Of those with autism, 8.1% had a bachelor degree or higher, compared with 16.1% of those with a disability and 31.2% of those without disability.

All people with disability and those with no disability were also more likely to have an Advanced Diploma, Diploma or Certificate III or IV than people with autism. (ABS, 2018)

* + Many young autistic adults enrol but fail to complete tertiary education, due to mental health, learning and organisational challenges (Aspect, 2013, Neary et al. 2015).
	+ An Autism Queensland client survey (2017) revealed that about a third of clients aged 18-29 years spend most days at home without any regular day-time activities, although the majority would prefer to be working or studying.
	+ This isolation can exacerbate their social challenges over time. As a result, they can experience a crippling loss of confidence, and can become increasingly apprehensive about leaving the house to access training or employment.
* Increased emphasis on pre-employment skills and opportunities for work experience whilst still at school especially for those that have no understanding of what work ‘looks’ like is vital.
	+ Queensland has no mandated transition planning requirements (O’Neill et al., 2016) and therefore for many individuals with a disability the support stops when school finishes. We need stronger connections to NDIS, SLES, DES and have conversations about work much earlier.
	+ Parents often describe the loss of support associated with their adolescent son/daughter leaving school, as “falling off a cliff”.

## Best practices to assist young people with disability to find and maintain work

* Facilitate young autistic jobseekers to explore their strengths and interests, develop social workplace communication skills and self-advocacy, map their vocational goals and understand workplace expectations, navigate the job application process and look to create bespoke roles where appropriate.
* Autism EmployABLE’s dual approach where we gain an in-depth understanding of the individual’s skills, interests and capability and seek an employer that will benefit from those attributes. Enhanced awareness and support is important for both the employee and the employer so that both gain from the relationship. Job fit is paramount paired with ongoing support where needed (Diener, 2019)
* Dreaver et .al (2019) found three underpinning themes; knowledge and understanding of autism, work environment and job match that emerged as key to supporting successful employment from the employer’s perspective.
* Research shows the outstanding employment results that can be achieved with specialist, tailored participant led provision (Ashburner, 2021; Pillay, et al. 2021).

## What support do employers need to attract, employ, and retain people with disability?

***We need to change the narrative when seeking employment for individuals with a disability****.*

* The employer needs to see and be shown the jobseeker’s value and appreciate how they can contribute to their organisation irrespective of their disability, rather than viewed as a potential cost with a need for accommodations.

***The support and coaching process needs to be easy to navigate and seamless***

* DES providers need to consider the broader context of the employer and their business needs, not just the needs of the potential employee if they are to increase engagement.
* Frequent open conversations need to be had by DES providers with employers to see how they can improve their relationship and more importantly listen to what the employer needs to employ a person with a disability.
* Recruitment processes need to become sufficiently agile to allow individuals with a disability to demonstrate their capabilities.

***Promotion of the National Work Experience Program (NWEP) to employers***

* Encourage and find pathways for employers to utilise the NWEP so they have direct experience of working with people with a disability and can make informed decisions based on experience rather than misconceptions.
* Pathways to employment and negotiating work experience need to be easy to access and widely known.
* There is a need for greater availability from DES providers for site visits and on the job support at both the employee and employer’s request.
* Educate employers with current research findings that shows there are no additional costs associated with employing individuals on the spectrum over and above that associated with any new employee (Scott, et al. 2017).

***Lack of awareness of non-inclusive recruitment practices***

* Too often recruitment practices do not support all candidates to demonstrate their capabilities especially those on the spectrum.
* Interviews that test social skills and the capacity to “sell yourself” rather than testing the ability to do the tasks of the job.
* We need to provide employers with knowledge and practical support in this area.

## How can funding arrangements incentivise good work outcomes?

***Service Fees***

* The focus by some DES providers on increasing participant numbers for growth of revenue through gaining service fees has resulted in poor servicing due to higher caseloads for staff.
* Set/capped servicing fee in terms of number of participants would allow providers to work on existing participants rather than constantly seeking new participants.
* Moving part of the outcome payments into the service fees.
* Focus on the pathway to work then end goal of sustainable employment. DES providers focus on learning about the client then to seek employment.

***Benchmarks***

* The large differentiation between outcome fees based on servicing levels can lead to providers working with participants on higher levels with lower benchmarks at times. If there was a greater emphasis on funding higher service fees to support the pathway to employment and less on the outcome claim it would drive a more equitable result.

***Outcome Milestones***

* Outcome milestones reviewed as providers are often chasing 13 and 26 week outcomes, perhaps smaller outcomes every 4 weeks to progressively increase up to the 52 week mark.

## How do we drive high quality services and supports?

* Anyone on the autism spectrum that is linked to Centrelink can be given the option to be linked with a specialist provider (SDEP)
* Anyone with an NDIS plan can have the SDEP provider funded through the plan.
* System to determine the quality and genuineness of service discussed in previous points and perhaps a review of the Star Rating system to catch this data.

## How do we measure success?

* Report via the Labour market portal on the sustained employment outcomes over longer timeframes of at least a year.
* Capture data on all disability subgroups to ensure that employment outcomes are being achieved throughout the sector and people from all subgroups are sufficiently represented in the sustainable outcome claims.
* Independent jobseeker and employer evaluations- qualitative data to measure their experience, meaningful employment outcome and sustained employment.
* Providers to report on the qualifications of their staff with the view to improve training and relevant qualifications attained.
* Providers to measure and report on staff perceptions: internal case reviews: Have they done the job they set out to do? Have they delivered a good service, Does the organisation encourage reflective practice?.
* Record and track the number of support services accessed by employers via the employment services Areas (ESA) for the Employer Assistance Fund, Job Access, Supported Wage System, Wage Subsidy Scheme and National Disability Recruitment coordinator.

## What will success look like for:

***People with disability***

* Finding and staying in meaningful employment
* Being accepted, included and supported by their peers in the workplace

***The community***

* Building knowledge and normality around hiring people on the spectrum

***Employers***

* Specifically hiring on the spectrum to fill certain roles that have been somewhat tailored and target potential employees on the spectrum.
* Acknowledgment from employers regarding the benefits of employing some on the spectrum.

***Service providers***

* Lower staff turnover
* Positive work culture
* Greater number of staff advocating for their clients rather than chasing outcomes

## What do people with disability and employers need to make an informed choice to select the best provider for their needs?

* Specialised disability specific providers (SDEP) as mentioned earlier is the only viable choice.
* Individuals with a disability need to receive the best support available from professionals who understand and have experience in their area of disability.
* Taking a back-to-basics approach, focussing on long-term career planning, individual capacity building and getting to know individual support needs.
* Centrelink can provide information to job seekers on the autism spectrum
* List SDEP providers with the NDIS for those seeking specialised employment support.
* High Schools provide options of support during transition planning.
* DES/JA Providers can refer to SDEP providers.

Although most employers reported limited experience with other disability employment providers, some perceived Autism EmployABLE as offering a better service. Phil explained *“We had a little bit of exposure to other disability client service providers, and it was far less pleasant than what Autism Employable was able to provide.”* Max was the only employer who had dealt regularly with other disability employment services and observed *“…. clearly if we'd gone through just a DES … I can't see that it would have gone so smoothly…. it's just much better to work with Autism Queensland than other providers.” (Ashburner, 2021)*

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