

New Disability Employment Support Model

A National Disability Coordination Officer Program submission

Summary

This submission to the New Disability Employment Support Model consultation provides background information and recommendations to improve transition of tertiary education (including university and vocational education and training) graduates with disability into appropriate and meaningful employment.

The employment is to be commensurate with their skills, qualifications and career aspirations as a significant lever to improve the employment outcomes of all people with disability in Australia.

“People with disability represent a rapidly growing cohort of graduates across Australian Universities, TAFE, and other VET providers, and are emerging as capable talent - ready to begin their careers. However, these individuals are not attaining qualification related work on an equal basis as peers without disability.”

National Disability Coordination Officer Program submission to National Disability Employment Strategy Public Consultation Process, April 2021

This submission has been prepared by David Swayn and Elicia Ford, who are employed as National Disability Coordination Officers. The NDCO Program is an Australian Government initiative which aims to drive change so that people with disability have equitable opportunity to access, participate and achieve their goals in tertiary education and subsequent employment. The views presented in this submission do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government.

Recommendations

Aligned with the priority areas identified through the [DES mid-term review](#) and mapped to new Disability Employment Support Model consultation questions 3, 3.2, 3.3, 4, 4.1, 4.2, and 4.4, our recommendations to better meet the needs of participants and employers, and facilitate improved employment outcomes for people with disability, specifically tertiary education graduates, are:

- Improve cohort targeting to focus support for those for whom the individual and social benefits will enhance overall employment stability and return for the individual. This can be achieved by utilising specific funding from the Disability Employment Services (DES). Funding should enable providers to engage in specialist work to support people with disability to successfully move out of tertiary education into suitable work and progress their career.
- In alignment with Australia's new Disability Employment Strategy "Employ my Ability" priority area 3: Improving systems and services for job seekers and employers *'provide tailored supports that meet the needs of people with disability and employers'*. This can be realised by testing a specialist contract with a unique model that focuses on integration with Australia's tertiary education providers to support graduates with disability into work commensurate with graduate skill and qualification levels.
- Encourage flexibility and innovation in support models by ensuring that the tertiary specialist contracted DES providers recommended within this submission, participate in a national learning framework that builds and shares knowledge and skills across providers, including with new entrants, for the benefit of participants.
- The proposed national learning framework is guided by an advisory board consisting of graduates with lived experience, academic, legal and political experts to support the specialist providers growth, connection and skill in the field.
- That the funding is not restricted by participant's income support or benchmark status, in line with the concerns raised in the [NDCO Program's submission to National Disability Employment Strategy Public Consultation Process, April 2021](#) - meaning up to 30% of participants in USEP or TSEP have become ineligible for DES support in 2021.
- All efforts are made in the program development process to scrutinize the specialist contracts for opportunities to remove administrative burden in line with the provision of a flexible, capable and agile service that meets the needs of service users.

- **Complimentary investment:** Expand and mirror the existing National Disability Recruitment Coordinator (NDRC) Program to incorporate a graduate facing service offering to develop and support a pipeline of talented people with disability suitably skilled and qualified to fill roles and progress careers within the NDRC employer and alumni employer networks.

Introduction

Students with disability in Australia continue to experience inequitable employment outcomes following completion of tertiary study compared to students with no declared disability (Education Council, 2019). They are not enjoying the benefits of better employment outcomes and higher levels of income generally associated with attaining a higher level of education on an equitable basis with their peers, which is of critical concern as a key factor in creating economic security and independence.

There are several factors compounding this disadvantage. Some of them are:

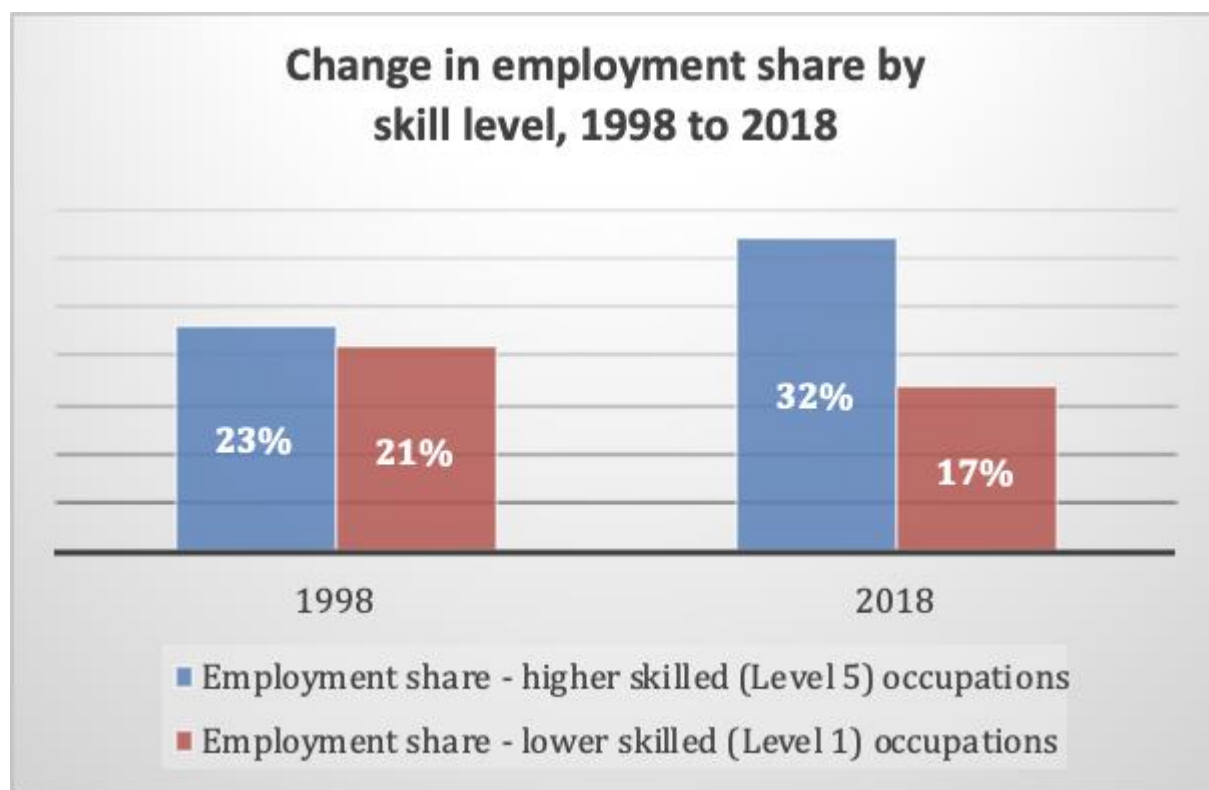
- Policy frameworks and strategies that support employment outcomes for people with disability can be difficult to navigate, and are not unified, cohesive or well-integrated, spanning across the education, skills and employment, social services and health portfolios. The opportunity to leverage learnings and innovate good practice across these strategies is not realised (Department of Social Services, 2021b).
- Lower levels of employment, and employment opportunities that are not aligned with the career aspirations of people with disability, limit access to social inclusion, skill development and networking opportunities critical to career advancement (Diversity Council Australia, 2019).
- A lack of disability-specific career information and support within tertiary education institutions leads to students with disability not having sufficient preparation to disclose their disability and to advocate for necessary accommodations in the workplace (Gatto et al., 2019)
- The recognition that “disclosure is a complex issue faced by people with disability during recruitment and when in employment” (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016)
- The tendency of some DES providers to focus on placing jobseekers in entry level and low-skilled jobs, ineffectively matching jobseekers with significant qualifications (tertiary and otherwise) to employment opportunities that are unrelated to their expertise (Department of Social Services, 2021a).

These factors interact to create an avoidable storm which places graduates with disability at disadvantage, when seeking support from Disability Employment Services.

Background

Completing tertiary education is critical because jobs for people without post-secondary studies are disappearing. The Australian labour market has changed significantly, with fewer jobs that don't require post-school education and training (refer Graph 1). These trends are only set to continue (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019), making it all the more important that all Australians have the opportunity to participate in education and training beyond Year 12.

Graph 1: Change in employment share by skill level, 1998 to 2018 (source: ABS 2018)



Enrolment of people with disability in tertiary education is consistently outpacing the all-student average and is the fastest growing equity cohort in tertiary education now representing 6.57% of students in Vocational Education and training (NCVER, 2019) and 6.72% in Higher Education (DESE, 2019). This is a positive sign, however, the support to get relevant and related employment at the end of the study requires bolstering.

At University, 81.4% of graduates with disability were likely to be working in any form compared to 87.2% for students without disability (QILT, 2019). According to the [Australian Network on Disability](#), “graduates with disability take 61.5% longer to gain full time employment than other graduates”. Employment rates for TAFE graduates with disability are alarming – 49.1% of TAFE graduates with disability are employed post-study, compared to 74.2% of their peers without disability (NDCO, 2021).

To address these gaps, the National Disability Coordination Officer (NDCO) Program launched two trial projects: [University Specialist Employment Partnerships](#) (USEP) in 2017, and [TAFE Specialist Employment Partnerships](#) (TSEP) in 2020.

These trials offer substantial learnings about the efficacy of providing tailored supports that meet the needs of people with disability and employers and are now at sufficient maturity to offer an existing blueprint and established network of relationships between tertiary education providers and DES providers.

With appropriate resourcing to enable its full potential, this model can be scaled to improve the economic participation of all tertiary education qualified people with disability in Australia. This submission sets the path forward for DES reforms to facilitate this to happen.

Challenges with the current DES model for tertiary education students and graduates

DES eligibility limitations and links with welfare management

Project information from USEP and TSEP indicates that the Disability Employment Services guidelines are not in alignment with providing direct, specialist support to University and VET graduates with disability to utilise their qualifications. This is stifling the ability for a free-market economy to emerge and provide needed services, limiting quality options for students with disability.

Failure to rectify this gap in a national and systemic way may have far reaching impacts, from the loss of opportunity to build diverse workforces (especially at the senior or leadership level), to a loss of future taxation income, potential increase in welfare outgoings, increased health care costs of the unemployed. Most importantly it may represent a missed opportunity to change the narrative and improve employment outcomes for future generations, by enabling this cohort of future leaders.

For students who are not on an income support payment, yet have a disability and require support, a gap is broadening with recent changes to guidelines for eligibility for Disability Employment Services from July 1, 2021. The change excludes participants who are not recipients of income support from DES (Services Australia, 2021). Our survey data indicates that there are students with disability who are not on income support yet are seeking specialised employment support to put their qualifications to work who would benefit from equal access to services.

For students on the Disability Support Pension (DSP), there are direct short term and long-term economic imperatives and benefits for government to invest in supporting these students to reach their employment goals.

As an example, from the USEP survey data collected: 33 students receiving the DSP have directly requested specialised support to obtain either full time (mostly) or part time work to utilise their qualification. If these students do not meet their graduate employment goals the direct cost to government of just these 33 survey respondents remaining unemployed, in receipt of the DSP for 5 years after graduation is \$3,691,974. The direct cost to the individual of not meeting these goals is unquantifiable, as is the cost to potential employer who may benefit from harnessing these individuals' potential in their workforce.

DES staff lack specialist expertise to place graduates

In 2017 a NDCO stakeholder survey was conducted focusing on Disability Employment Services staff on their capacity and confidence working with graduates and their relationship with universities to inform the USEP trials. 330 DES staff across Australia completed this survey; key findings showed:

- 79.78% of DES consultants reported that they either did not know about, or that their local office does not work with Universities to directly register graduates with disability after study.
- 68.40% of DES consultant respondents had no experience at all working in a University setting.
- 82.52% of DES consultant respondents did not have a relationship with either equity or careers staff at their local university. 15.85% of this makeup included where there was no local university.
- Only 23.49% DES consultant respondents had a degree or postgraduate qualification themselves, bringing forward a potentially low representation of lived experience of the student perspective.
- Consultants mainly placed their current clients in to work at small businesses – either local or regional (69.95%) and only 1.64% reported large to multinational businesses as their main way of placing customers.
- 58.2% thought there was a lack of a national approach to promoting Graduates with Disability to employers
- Societal expectation – 23.65% felt that there is not a high expectation that people with disability will get employed after study

Disability Employment Service staff also advised that they would benefit from improved training on supporting people with disability in their tertiary goals:

- 84.5% of consultants wanted further training about access and inclusion in the workplace for people with disability
- 77.5% would like further information/ training on how to support a person with a disability in their tertiary education goals

The information provided by DES staff reinforces the need for universally embedded training and supports for DES consultants to support people with disability to reach their full potential in tertiary education and subsequent employment.

DES are not meeting the needs of graduates with disability or of graduate employers

Students with disability make up only two per cent of students taking part in employers' graduate programs (AAGE Graduate Survey, 2019).

“The greatest challenge employers face when recruiting graduates is trying to meet diversity targets”. Over half of all employer respondents (57%) to the 2022 AAGE Employer Survey indicated this as the greatest challenge in their graduate programs. This represents an untapped opportunity to vastly improve the graduate employment outcomes of students with disability and build employer confidence and competence to employ people with disability at a national scale.

Proposed Opportunities for the new Disability Employment Support Model

The new Disability Employment Support model represents a genuine opportunity to provide flexible, innovative and tailored support and specialised point in time transition services to a targeted cohort of tertiary education students and graduates with disability, as a significant lever to improve the employment outcomes of all people with disability in Australia.

The [University Specialist Employment Partnerships](#) (USEP), and [TAFE Specialist Employment Partnerships](#) (TSEP) trialled by the National Disability Coordination Officer (NDCO) Program offers a blueprint, emerging evidence, and an existing national network of tertiary education provider and DES partnerships for the new Disability Employment Support Model to build upon.

It is our proposition that the new Disability Employment Support Model resource a significant trial of a program model utilising the learnings from USEP and TSEP to test the effectiveness of an integrated service that works within TAFE and Universities, and with private RTO's by isolating and repurposing existing funding.

As a comparative example, a resourced trial of the expansion of the Individualised Placement and Support Program of an initial 4,000 participants saw a greater success rate than the overall DES program. From this trial evidence, it was expanded to an additional 6,000 young people experiencing mental illness.

Many of the challenges in the delivery of the USEP and TSEP models are related to the multiple impacts of DES policy on the delivery of an effective service. Some of these include the link with welfare management

policy (requiring people to accept any job), the removal of 30+ benchmark eligibility for the program, which impacts a number of tertiary students with disability, the removal of people not on income support, and others outlined in the [NDCO Program's submission to National Disability Employment Strategy Public Consultation Process, April 2021](#).

A robust trial with an evaluation framework underpinning it would enable a unique and tailored solution to the specific needs of University and VET students with disability, enabled to access a national career based employment program that is fair, meets their needs, and supports their career goals.

It is advisable to break some of the allocated funding to Disability Employment Services away from the welfare management model in place to explore and evaluate potentially impactful, agile, flexible solutions to individual cohorts. This cohort is another great opportunity to do this and learn from the experiences of removing a welfare management element from the investment in Australians with disability.

These tailored propositions are necessary and required, as this cohort of individuals continues to be significantly disadvantaged - yet are well positioned to support Australia's goals relating to disability employment.

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