



## AUSTRALIAN NETWORK ON DISABILITY

### **Submission in response to the Establishment of a Disability Centre of Excellence options paper**

Australian Network on Disability strongly supports the Australian Government's efforts to establish a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence and we welcome the opportunity to provide input.

#### **Who we are**

Australian Network on Disability (AND) is a national, membership-based organisation that helps organisations welcome and retain people with disability into all aspects of business.

We work with our 450 member organisations - who in combination employ around 2.2 million people or 18% of Australia's workforce - to remove barriers that limit opportunities and prevent the employment and career advancement of people with disability.

As the peak body for disability inclusion in the workplace we provide expert guidance, services and programs to employers, Government representatives and industry bodies.

Our vision is to create a disability confident Australia.

In addition to building disability confident workplaces, AND gives organisations the tools they require to become disability confident recruiters.

AND helps organisations introduce workplace adjustments, finds internships for university students with disability, connects jobseekers with disability to mentors and partners with the Australian Institute of Company Directors to provide leaders with disability with the skills and opportunities they require to join Australian boards.

We work with employers to provide opportunities for career advancement for people with disability and encourage greater representation of people with disability in leadership roles.

### **1.1 Why do we need a Centre?**

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It is particularly concerning that despite the goodwill and commitment of Australian employers and Governments, the unemployment rate for people with disability has not improved in more than three decades.

Clearly, Australia needs a new approach to disability employment to overcome the entrenched barriers which exclude people with disability from the workforce.

A Centre of Excellence would provide a focused one-stop-shop of evidence-based practice, training, and tools to strengthen the capacity of employers and employment service providers to shift the unemployment rate and lack of career progression among people with disability.

AND supports greater collaboration and information sharing between Australian employers, the Australian Government and Disability Employment Services (DES), and we encourage a streamlined approach and commitment to adopt evidence-based Communities of Practice (CoP) developed by a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence.

We encourage the Government to design and fund the Centre to provide sustainable, long-term solutions that inform future strategies to improve disability employment.

The systemic and transformational change required to address decades-long problems cannot be achieved within 3 or 4 years.

## **1.2 What should be the core functions of the Centre?**

There is already significant research and data on the barriers to employment for people with disability. Therefore, we would argue that the Centre of Excellence should focus on the research and development of innovative new programs, or strategies to replicate and extend successful, existing programs.

All core functions of the Centre of Excellence should contribute towards increasing the employment outcomes of people with disability and increasing the capability of employment service providers and employers including:

- To research, collate and share case studies and how-to-guides which outline successful, evidence-based processes, programs and strategies implemented by employers and peak disability organisations which have improved employment outcomes for people with disability.
- To undertake analysis of current employment programs to identify factors which contribute to successful outcomes

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- To conduct and oversee trials of new disability-employment models.
- To produce publications based on research and data which provide insights and strategies to overcome employment barriers.
- To develop evidence-based and quality assured training and professional development materials for employers and employment providers, co-designed with employers, industry bodies and people with disability. In particular, there is a need for training and resources for small-to-medium enterprises and employers in rural and regional areas.
- Provide publicly available information, tools, and resources to facilitate the employment of people with disability.
- To encourage engagement and collaboration with employers to facilitate better employment outcomes for people with disability.
- To provide a one-stop-shop for data through the collection analysis and consolidation of data on employment outcomes for all people with disability. This will require collaboration with Commonwealth, state, and territory government agencies; existing research organisations including the National Disability Research Partnership, the National Disability Data Asset; The Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP) and the Grattan Institute; DES providers, employers, disability organisations, peak bodies and the public.
- To enforce regulation and monitor compliance (using a model similar to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency).

## **2.1 Who can the Centre assist? Are any groups missing?**

The Centre of Excellence would greatly assist people with disability by shining a light on the employment barriers and inequity faced by people with disability. It is well documented that 46% of people with disability of working age are currently not being engaged in the labour force.

A national, Centre of Excellence would provide a centralised body which welcomes feedback from a broad range of people with diverse lived experience of disability.

The issues and concerns raised by people with disability would assist the Centre to determine the most critical issues in regard to employment that require investigation and resolution.

A Centre of Excellence which welcomes collaboration would also assist employers and employment service providers by offering opportunities to share knowledge

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through Communities of Practice (CoPs), and by developing evidence-based strategies and tools to create greater employment and career progression for people with disability.

Two sectors which are currently underserved are the small business sector and rural and remote businesses.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) who are committed to increasing their employment of people with disability find the time and costs of implementing inclusive practices prohibitive.

According to the Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, in 2021-22 more than 5 million Australians were employed by SMEs, representing 42% of the private sector workforce.

The Centre needs to focus on understanding the unique challenges faced by the small business sector and providing support to strengthen the capacity of SMEs to employ people with disability.

We would encourage the Centre to develop partnerships with the Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA) to collaborate on potential research and training for SMEs.

AND would welcome any opportunity to work with the Centre of Excellence, the Government and COSBOA to learn more about the barriers preventing SMEs from employing people with disability and play a role in developing specific training and resources for the small business sector.

Rural and regional businesses also face multiple, unique challenges including being located sometimes a considerable distance from large commercial centres, a smaller potential talent pool, and a lack of support services.

AND would encourage the Centre of Excellence to collaborate with the small business sector and rural and regional businesses to address their specific challenges and invest in research and accessible training to build their capacity to improve employment outcomes for people with disability.

## **2.2 How can the Centre work with stakeholders to increase the employment rate for people with disability?**

The Centre could be a one stop shop where everyone comes together. Roundtables and frequent events could be hosted to share employment successes and case studies so Disability Employment Services (DES) and employers can connect.

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The Centre could be a place to list DES's by state and region rather than in the current format of lengthy excel sheets which is extremely difficult to navigate.

Additionally, the Centre could introduce DES to employers based on industry type to support the ongoing problem that employers voice of not being able to identify and find suitable DES in their relevant industries.

### **2.3 What can the Centre do to increase the capability and capacity of employment service providers?**

- The Centre could provide resources that the DES sector could access to learn about what disability is, which includes information on different types of disability and what employers are looking for.
- Offer disability confidence training.
- Establish a Hotline for employers to ring and ask questions about DES.

### **3.1 What are your views on the models presented?**

#### **The Research Centre Model**

There are significant benefits to the research centre model including collaboration between universities, businesses governments and other local and international research centres.

We agree with the views outlined in the Options paper that the research centre model could also utilise evidence from practitioners (such allied health experts) or the applied experience of program providers (for example, the Commonwealth's JobAccess program).

We also agree the research centre model has the capacity to produce practical tools and training programs based on best practices for DES providers, supported employment services and employers.

However, although the research centre model has merit, we are concerned that the funding model is not sustainable as it would require ongoing support from business and philanthropy.

We would also question the need for another research-based entity following the established of the National Disability Research Partnership (NDRP) in 2022. The NDRP received \$12.5 million in funding to establish a partnership to facilitate a

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collaborative and inclusive national disability research agenda, translate disability research into policy and practice to improve outcomes for people with disability.

We would recommend that the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence merge with the NDRP and the Centres of Research Excellence in Disability to streamline rather than duplicate their effort.

### **The Clearinghouse Model**

The Clearinghouse Model has merit; however, its role is limited, and it would not provide the tools and training required to boost the capacity of employers and employment service providers.

We believe the Clearinghouse model is passive and would not bring about the substantial, long-term systemic changes that are required to overcome the entrenched barriers which have limited employment and career progression for people with disability for decades.

### **The Evidence-Informed Training Hub**

Structuring the Centre of Excellence as an evidence-based training hub would allow the centre to conduct training based on best practice research and evidence, share valuable knowledge, and build employer capability.

However, existing organisations including AND, already provide employers with evidence-based training, delivered by disability employment experts which has been designed based on global best practice and over 30 years of knowledge.

We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with an evidence-informed training hub.

However, we acknowledge there are disability employment training gaps including training for disability employment services and SMEs which could be assisted by a training hub model.

### **The Statutory Agency**

We believe a statutory agency model could adopt the most effective activities of the research centre model and the evidence-based training hub model in addition to having a broader regulatory role.

AND supports the view that a statutory agency would elevate the importance of disability employment with the business community and the public.

We would strongly encourage the creation of a Centre of Excellence based on the model of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

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### **3.2 Are there any models for a Centre to consider that are not included in this paper?**

No

### **4.1 Where could a Centre be best placed (for example, within a government agency, a university, or as a stand-alone institution)?**

AND recommends the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence operate as a stand-alone institution.

To ensure its independence, its collaboration with existing research bodies and its focus on developing practical outcomes and solutions it should not be housed within a university.

To maintain independence from the responsible minister and to safeguard its ability to enforce regulation it should not be placed with a government agency.

### **4.2 Are there any other implementation issues that should be considered?**

The Disability Employment Centre of Excellence should be designed in consultation with people with disability, representative organisations for people with disability, employers, providers, and academics.

The use of evidence to guide practice and/or capacity building and resource development is critical to achieving measurable improvements in disability employment.

The long-term sustainability of the centre must be considered as a guiding principle during the design and implementation phases.

### **4.3 What elements of the proposed role of the Centre or its function should or prioritised?**

- Engaging/collaborating with disability employment experts to ensure the Centre utilises current the best practice tools which already exist and existing research, particularly research into the barriers preventing employment and career progression.





- Establishing partnerships with local and international research bodies, peak bodies, employers, employment service providers, Government departments and agencies and most importantly, people with disability.
- Delivering results-driven training and support to build the capacity of employment service providers and employers.
- Establishing specific training for the currently under-serviced small business sector.
- Providing accessible training for rural and regional businesses such as online training and specialised phone-lines.

## SUMMARY

AND welcomes and supports the establishment of a collaborative Disability Employment Centre of Excellence. We recommend the Centre be established as a statutory, stand-alone body incorporating three key areas of focus – evidence-based best practice, training, and regulation.

We believe this independent, multi-faceted model has the greatest potential to achieve the systemic and attitudinal changes needed to overcome the entrenched barriers which have excluded so many people with disability from the workforce.

We thank the Australian Government and the Department of Social Services for the opportunity to provide feedback on this options paper.

We welcome any further opportunities to consult on specific points outlined in this submission.

