

## **Establishing a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence.**

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### **Introduction.**

#### **About the Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP)**

The Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP) was established over a decade ago in response to the lack of interest among universities and academia in Australia to address the overwhelming need to develop evidence-based practices and translate evidence into practice. This would and is achieved by focusing on practice evidence, peer-reviewed research and addressing the fundamental questions asked by people with a disability, families, service provider staff, service providers and employers.

These are not new challenges, with disability employment researchers acknowledging that much of today's research is about admiring the problem, not coming up with practical solutions (Wehman, 2022). Indeed, in Australia, few people are pushing the boundaries of practice research, with many simply replicating what has already been done or producing papers based on longitudinal studies and, to a degree, operating within the university maxim that all research should always lead to a question and a request for more money.

CDERP was established independently of the university system to break this cycle and leverage its global contact network of researchers and practitioners to focus on improving outcomes. To this extent, it has established relationships and collaborations with leading centres of excellence in disability employment globally. This has been and is being achieved without any support from the government or the service provider sector. We have funded our research by service delivery across training, direct support and consulting globally and locally. Our training programs are accessed by support professionals globally, underpinned by our research and desire to benchmark against accepted international standards, which we contribute to. As an organisation, we have modelled ourselves on our overseas partner centres of excellence and continue evolving based on local and overseas developments.

Today, CDERP is the most prolific and only developer and publisher of practice guides and training in Customised and disability employment in Australia based on practice evidence and research, along with peer-reviewed papers focusing on systems change, policy and practice in Australia. Likewise, we have many pilot projects running in ADE, DES and schools.

Ironically, what we have been doing and continue to do has been largely ignored in Australia, with the government now considering what we do something that it needs to have skin in

the game. That aside, we welcome the government's acknowledgment that employment rates and efforts to date to improve these have come to nothing despite billions of dollars being invested in service provision, research and advocacy.

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

At this point, centres are a flavour of the month favourite of governments and universities. Government because they are meeting their platform promises, and universities because they offer more funding, tenure and prestige for their involvement. That said, the recent intellectual disability and health centre under Julian Trollor is an excellent outcome primarily because of Julian's reputation and track record. In many ways, this outcome brings together the many disability and health focus centres that already exist. Disability employment, however, is a different matter, with most universities in Australia paying little attention to disability employment, some simply replicating existing work but mostly ignoring it. I note the longitudinal study being run by the University of Melbourne; however, this is data collection and not related to practice or participants in any meaningful way.

The proposed Centre will only achieve positive outcomes once the government defines employment. In the USA, The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) published a definition of integrated employment to underline its purpose. That definition is.

"ODEP defines integrated employment as work paid directly by employers at the greater of minimum or prevailing wages with commensurate benefits, occurring in a typical work setting where the employee with a disability interacts or has the opportunity to interact continuously with co-workers without disabilities, has an opportunity for advancement and job mobility, and is preferably engaged full-time."

Without a defined outcome or purpose, the likely outcome will be an organisation that is focused on the politics of disability and navigating that rather than pushing the agenda to create more significant levels of inclusion through the use of person-centred practices based on existing and emerging evidence. It is worth remembering that disability employment in Australia is tribal, with parties pushing their agendas, such as the continuation of segregated employment (ADE), social enterprise or firms (SE), open employment (DES) and the NDIS (potentially the best vehicle) and mainstream employment (Workforce Australia) who have a significant number of clients with mental illness.

We do not need another clearing house like the ill-fated National Disability Services (NDS) Centre for Applied Disability Research (CADR). High on rhetoric and ambition, it failed to bring the disability community with it comprehensively.

Before considering a Centre of Excellence, we should establish a body such as the US Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), which aims to "promote policies and coordinate with employers and all levels of government to increase workplace success for people with disabilities."

Its mission statement is quite illustrative of its remit. It reads as follows.

“ODEP’s mission is to develop and influence policies and practices that increase the number and quality of employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

To fulfil this mission, ODEP promotes the adoption and implementation of ODEP policy strategies and effective practices — meaning those that ODEP has developed and/or validated — that will impact the employment of people with disabilities. ODEP’s approach is to drive systems and practice changes by disseminating ODEP policy strategies and effective practices, sharing information, and providing technical assistance to government agencies, service providers and non-governmental entities, as well as public and private employers. Through these activities, ODEP contributes to the achievement of DOL’s Strategic Goal 1, Supports the ability of all Americans to find good jobs, and Strategic Objective 1.3: Develop evidence-based policies, practices, and tools to foster a more inclusive workforce to increase quality employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.”

It is from this that all efforts follow.

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

The answer to this question is, in some ways, contained within the DOL’s achievement goals: Support the ability of all Americans to find good jobs and develop evidence-based policies, practices, and tools to foster a more inclusive workforce to increase quality employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The question is how to achieve this in a cost-effective, simple to the point manner. Miring it in an academic bureaucracy or advocacy groups runs the risk of nothing happening – the old committee designing a horse and ending up with a camel outcome. That might look frivolous, but it is usually a recipe for self-interest and negligible outcomes that meet the broader community’s needs.

I have noticed that some advocacy groups are already promoting the idea that it should be about finding jobs for people with a disability. While you can’t argue with that as an outcome, that’s not the purpose of the Centre. That’s the service provider role, one that hasn’t been met with much success to date. Likewise, advocacy, while essential, doesn’t produce jobs of any consequential number. Jobs flow up from employer need and opportunity, not down from research and advocacy. Service providers need to provide opportunity, something Sen wrote about with his Capability Model of Disability.

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

This document has missed the obvious. Many people are working away quietly and have, for years, largely ignored by advocacy and self-interest groups, been producing evidence and resources that support actual employment outcomes. It’s worth remembering that very few people are members of advocacy groups, many of whom claim representation of entire disability types. Similarly, peak bodies very rarely represent the majority of people. It’s worth remembering that the NDIS has given power to significant numbers of families who aren’t interested or representative of peak and advocacy groups. Many exist within informal small community groups. There are more groups outside of the membership suites of peak bodies.

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

Let's accept reality here. Wages are the residue of profit, which by default means employment. The disability employment sector has done an excellent job of scaring employers into thinking that employing a person with a disability is hard work and may require investment in disability awareness, friendly, etc. programs. This isn't helped by the government making a big deal about investing millions of dollars in awareness pilot programs for the big end of town, something they could easily fund themselves. That sends the wrong message to the small and medium employer sector – the real big employers of people with a disability.

Current disability employment practice focuses on selling people to employers using fluffy messages about reliability, sick days, etc. All well and good, but it isn't a reason to hire someone. In reality, businesses hire people with skills they can exploit for profit. To do otherwise in our declining business environment, any environment is a recipe for failure. Given the declining employment rates for people with disability and the absence of any advance after forty years of investment, it would suggest that the wrong stakeholders are involved.

I suggest that the government look beyond the usual suspects and look to meet community needs. Go beyond your current box!

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

The options paper notes common themes such as one-stop shops, which in some ways is akin to what the four peak bodies who claim to represent disability employment have all attempted. This type of big-box store approach is unlikely to work partly due to Australia's lack of human resources with sufficient expertise to make this a practical approach. In our work, we recognise this and work with experts globally and locally to meet our targets. It's worth noting that US Centres of Excellence in Disability Employment invest considerable resources in supporting staff to do their work. I haven't seen this in Australia, and with universities generally cutting back, it is unlikely to happen here.

To get service providers in Australia to invest in their staff, in all likelihood, the government will need to mandate skill types and practice models, along with a percentage of turnover, to make any real difference. This will likely be met with resistance by service providers and no doubt followed by big funding requests by the sector for the government to fund what they should be doing as part of their social licence. There is no easy solution, but one that could be moved along by recognising disability employment as a profession, which the ATO and ABS are working on.

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

The discussion document references research centre, clearing house, training hub and statutory agency as model ideas.

Let's look at research centres based in universities. It is flawed thinking to think that universities are the holders of all research knowledge. Current data suggest that there are more than 185,000 PhD holders in Australia. Universities currently have employment for approximately 46,700 positions across a range of part-time, casual and full-time. Recent data illustrates that over one-third of these positions were part-time, casual and insecure. This highlights the failings of the various ARC and NHMRC approaches to research, which only support academics based in universities when the bulk reside outside the university system and have no access to the largesse afforded universities.

Anecdotally, we know that the number of people in universities interested in or focused on disability employment is very small. So much so that the common joke is that you can count the number of people in our field on the fingers of one hand, even including those outside of full-time academic roles. This isn't surprising when you consider that one prominent honorary academic leader, during a discussion I had with him, was dismissive of disability employment, likening it to a distraction. The recent Australasian Society for Intellectual Disability annual conference in Melbourne attracted only three speakers on disability employment. One was a parent and advocate; the other two were one of my staff members and me co-presenting. Not a single other person from any of our academic institutions spoke. This highlights the need to spread the resources throughout the broader academic community and not simply spend it in one place.

Recent discussions within academic circles in relation to the CoE for Disability Health noted that it is about the calibre of the people, not the institution, that matters. The government needs to be very careful to ensure that the right people are engaged in it, not limiting it to the existing inside academia club that excludes anyone who is not a member.

Clearing houses are interesting models that, over time, tend to fail once they lose energy or real industry support. The NDS clearing house was unable to engage the sector, limiting itself to the club. Many of its people took an adversarial role to those outside their club, dooming it to a slow death. Similarly, GLADnet, an international clearing house for disability knowledge based at Cornell, couldn't survive in part due to the limited number of people who had the time to administer it and exists today only as an archive.

Training hubs are vital; after ten years of delivering training focused on Disability Employment, Customised Employment and Discovery, the real issue is that the disability employment sector does not focus on staff skills development. It prefers fluffy training that supports staff to stay sane rather than concentrate on clients and their development. Similarly, the compliance nature of DES sends a message that the service providers need to invest in compliance-related training rather than focusing on the clients, their families and employers. This is partly because disability employment isn't a recognised profession, something that ASQA has gone to great lengths to inform me on the frequent times that they have rejected submissions to accredit a disability employment program with them. Service providers have informed me on more than one occasion that staff prefer accredited training where they can get a certificate. The sector overcame this nonsense in the USA by creating its own accrediting body for disability employment – ACRE. ACRE doesn't operate outside the USA; we modelled our training programs on their requirements and offer

CDERP-accredited training in our field to overcome this limitation. This is slowly gaining traction within the NDIS community and forward-thinking DES providers.

Statutory agencies modelled on ODEP and the US National Disability Institute provide excellent examples to explore. As I have discussed ODEP earlier in this document, I will not add any more.

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

Without stating the obvious, the paper and its authors have chosen to ignore our work for the past decade and our reason for being. CDERP has been a centre of excellence in disability employment for over a decade. Our work, model, and research collaborations with US centres of excellence are highly regarded globally. If you examine the USA centres, you will also observe that they deliver services directly, providing constant feedback for their research and training work. This is the model we use, and I should also note that in the USA, multiple centres of excellence support disability employment. They work collaboratively with the community and experts, many of whom aren't university-bound academics without practice experience.

This is where we have failed by relying on academics who don't practice, only observe. Nuancing is vital to systems and practice change. The Autism CRC is a perfect example of a system replicating existing research and developing tools that already exist in some form overseas. While their work relating to employment is good, it is in some ways a follower, not a leader and would benefit significantly from greater industry engagement and leadership.

### **3.3 What can the Government take from existing models of Centre of Excellence? What should be ruled out?**

In many overseas countries, CoE have been set up to focus on particular aspects of a sector. There are several focused on Disability Employment in the USA, each with a different focus, such as employment law, business, practice, provider transformation, etc. Placing everything in one place under the aegis of one institution will result in money being spent with limited outcomes. Ultimately, this is about people and their lives underpinned by employment and good practice models, not statistics and data. People with a disability, their families and potential employers don't care about data and academics; they care about what's good for their employees and themselves. Practical guidance in a readable form, not academic papers.

Some disability-related issues benefit from co-location, such as health and preventative medicine. Employment is a broad church very much related to its communities. In our practice work, we remind people that every client will get their own version of our practice model because clients are unique and not homogenous. This is something to ponder, particularly in light of the flaw in the model shown on page 11 of the opinion paper. The starting point (establishing the evidence base) shows the usual suspects in the club, ignoring the reality that has given us unchanged outcomes for forty years. The diagram also needs to consider the reality that most employment outcomes come from families using their social capital, not service providers. Families aren't mentioned, nor are the growing band of small

organisations that work in their community delivering results at levels that exceed the system providers.

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

It is a moot question when getting the model and purpose right is more important. If anything, spread it around the country through various organisations, with all reporting back to the disability employment policy group. You want the best of what is available and emerging, not hamstrung in a bureaucracy that puts image and political influence as its main agenda. We already have enough of them within the university system.

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

The opinion paper (page 12) mentions several institutions as examples; however, this list must include a better starting point. The MDI is simply a distribution point for funding within UoM, with some funding going outside the university. The CREDH does excellent work, and I respect the one or two people who focus on employment; however, it does not have a history of engaging with practice. While I recognise the list is just a few discussion points, it is Melbourne institution weighted. As pointed out earlier in this document, the CoE will need to be a broad church, particularly to meet the needs of the wider cultural diversity in our community.

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

The opinion paper mentions training and practice tools. I want to draw your attention to our training and education work focused on practice. Developed locally with support from universities and noted academics internationally and domestically (peer-reviewed). Like our research, we have funded this at great expense and have not received government support. We are fortunate to have connections and support at a level that isn't available to anyone else in Australia due to their belief in supporting better employment outcomes. Our programs are available online and face-to-face via our college ([www.college.cderp.com.au](http://www.college.cderp.com.au)), while some of our research and publications can be found on our main site ([www.cderp.com.u](http://www.cderp.com.u))

The quality of our work is evidenced by the support from US institutions with collaborations with a number of CoEs, universities, etc. This continues with new fellowships being taken up in the USA in 2024 to advance our research and partnerships.

It is difficult to focus on one priority for the proposed CoE given the urgency that needs to come to disability employment. The priority should be ensuring that it doesn't become a bureaucracy and sheltered employment for academics. We have enough of them. It needs to have very clearly defined outcomes and KPI; otherwise, it will simply be a pointless exercise. Importantly, it must get its hands dirty and deliver services to know what they feel like. This is common to disability employment CoE in the USA.

## **Summary.**

I applaud the government for looking at his initiative. As someone running an independent CoE in disability employment for over a decade, it will not be without its challenges. The risk is that it becomes a bureaucracy with itself as the endpoint and purpose, ignoring reality. It must be grounded in the community and not simply become a place for influence peddlers.

Properly funded, community grounded and responsible too, it may have an impact. If its work and outcomes are hidden behind sandstone walls and peer-reviewed journals, it will not serve any purpose and will not reach its potential.