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Submission on Establishing a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence - Options Paper.



**Centre for Disability
Research and Policy**

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Introduction

This submission on Establishing a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence - Options Paper is made by scholars from the Centre for Disability Research and Policy and includes academics with lived experience of disability. The submission offers evidence-based responses in relation to the following questions as raised in the paper:

- 1.1 Why do we need a Centre?
- 1.2 What should be the core functions of the Centre?
- 2.1 Who can the Centre assist? Are any groups missing?
- 2.2 How can the Centre work with stakeholders to increase the employment rate for people with disability?
- 2.3 What can the Centre do to increase the capability and capacity of employment service providers?
- 3.1 What are your views on the models presented?
- 4.1 Where could a Centre be best placed (for example, within a government agency, a university, or as a stand-alone institution)?

Responses to questions in the Options Paper

1.1 Why do we need a Centre?

To provide evidence-based, lived experience informed responses to the ongoing disability unemployment policy issue

Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 noted a need to increase the employment of people with disability as policy priority¹. Furthermore, the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability Final Report recognised the meaningful employment of people with disability as central to an inclusive Australia². Despite national policy efforts and calls for inclusion, the extent of the Australian disability unemployment issue remains. Article 27 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities protects the rights of people with disability on an equal basis with others and free of discrimination while promoting employment and advancement opportunities³. In 2018, however, 53.4 percent of Australians with disability were employed in comparison to 84.1 percent of persons without disability⁴. The National Disability Insurance Agency supports better lives for many Australians with disability through its implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). However, in 2023 families and carers of NDIS participants with cerebral palsy reported on an employment rate of 49 percent being less than the family/carer reported average of 50 percent⁵. Of Australians with disability who are of working age, people with sensory and speech disability are less likely to experience unemployment (8.2 percent) than people with psychosocial disability (24%) or people with intellectual disability (18

¹ Australian Government. (2023). The Strategy and supporting documents. Retrieved from <https://www.disabilitygateway.gov.au/ads/strategy>

² Department of Social Services. (2023). Enhancing Job Opportunities, Decisions for Disabled Individuals. Retrieved from <https://www.miragenews.com/enhancing-job-opportunities-decisions-for-1104576/>

³ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-27-work-and-employment.html>

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2019). Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release>

⁵ NDIS. (2023). Cerebral palsy summary June 2023. Retrieved from [ndis.gov.au](https://www.ndis.gov.au)

percent)⁶. The Disability Royal Commission has also warned of people with intellectual disability working for legal pay rates of as little as \$2.27 an hour. The introduction of an Employment Centre of Excellence can help to **redress a persistently high unemployment rate of Australians with disability** as well as the exploitation of employees with disability by widely disseminating high-quality information, training, and resources among stakeholders. The Centre will also be well positioned to promote evidence-based policy and program measures which are informed by lived experience-led and co-produced disability employment studies.

To help to move away ableist employment discourse

Current **employment discourse is ableist and deficit focused**⁷. The Centre of Excellence must be grounded in critical disabilities studies principles where the discourse about employment highlights the contributions of people with lived experience of disability and the capacity of people with disability to address workforce shortages. Elevating the potential of people with disability to bring perspectives, knowledge and skills to a workplace that is of benefit to that workplace is fundamental to the framing of the Centre. Leadership by people with disability is essential. Partnerships between Disabled People's Organisations, universities, employer groups and government are essential to addressing the breadth of community attitude change that is required to make a difference to employment outcomes and the employment discourse^{8,9}.

To help to improve the services offered by Australian disability services

Persisting low employment rates of Australians with disability indicates a pressing policy need to improve the disability employment services currently on offer. This ongoing lack of employment participation among Australians with disability is supportive of vocational services reform¹⁰. The Centre can advance this reform and increase the capacity of disability employment service providers by generating and sharing the knowledge that is needed to drive service innovation. Moreover, the Centre can help to investigate the role of lived experience towards informing improvements in access to disability employment services as well as the quality and safety of services provided. This investigation is much needed as almost a quarter (24 percent) of Australian disability service organisations have recently reported employing no people with lived experience of disability¹¹. Furthermore, only 19 percent of organisations reported employing people with disability in management roles. The Centre therefore has an opportunity to **inform a shift in disability employment service focus** from a short-term, skills-deficit approach to an individualised, strength-based approach. For it is this latter approach which can support people with disability to identify and embrace their skills and abilities and to engage in job matching which aligns with areas that are

⁶ Australian Government. (2023). People with disability in Australia. Retrieved from

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment/unemployment>.

⁷ Van Aswegen, J., & Shevlin, M. (2019). Disabling discourses and ableist assumptions: Reimagining social justice through education for disabled people through a critical discourse analysis approach. *Policy Futures in Education*, 17(5), 634-656.

⁸ Accenture. (2018). Getting to equal: The disability inclusion advantage.

⁹ Aichner, (2021). The economic argument for hiring people with disabilities. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8(1), 1-4.

¹⁰ Mellifont, D. (2017). DESperately Seeking Service: A narrative review informing a disability employment services reform framework for Australians with mental illness. *Work*, 58(4), 463-472.

¹¹ Mellifont, D., Smith-Merry, J., & Bulkeley, K. (2023). The employment of people with lived experience of disability in Australian disability services. *Social Policy & Administration*.

experiencing workforce shortages such as the disability sector. The **strength-based employment approach** can also assist more people with lived experience of disability to hold leadership positions across Australian disability services and elsewhere.

To help to retain people with disability in the workforce by redressing workplace discrimination

Australia's Disability Employment Strategy - Employ My Ability is challenged to redress a major employment barrier for people with disability. This barrier is the disability stigma and discrimination that resist inclusive workplaces. A recent survey revealed up to 70 percent of Australian job seekers with disability reported experiencing negative attitudes from employers¹². Neurodivergent employees also often report experiencing discrimination in the workplace¹³. We note that ableism can be present in recruitment processes where hiring managers without disability tend to employ people who they see as similar to themselves¹⁴. Crucially, there is little point in employing people with disability only to have them leave because of exposure to disability stigma and discrimination. It is within these ableist work environments where the abilities of people with disability are readily dismissed. We thus recognise that lived experience perspectives can include the expertise which accompanies shared experiences of dismissal and discrimination¹⁵. The Centre will be well positioned to investigate and widely promote evidence-based ways of redressing the disability stigma and discrimination that is presently experienced by many employees and prospective employees with disability.

1.2 What should be the core functions of the Centre?

We endorse the core functions of the Centre as raised in the Options Paper. These functions include: building an evidence base to support the employment of people with disability; building the capacity of employment service providers; supporting quality control; consolidating data; and providing accessible information and resources. We recommend adding an overarching function of the Centre that emphasises **innovation and evaluation**. The entrenched unemployment and underemployment of people with disability is a complex problem that needs innovative and experimental solutions; a willingness to try something new and different. In the context of disability and the principle of "nothing about us without us", innovation should involve co-design, co-production, and co-evaluation. The evaluative function is critical - not doing research for research sake, but to establish an evidence base for what does and doesn't work, building upon it, and disseminating what is learnt in accessible ways. Another core function of the Centre needs to be about consistently **addressing disability community informed priorities**.

Included among the core functions of the Centre must also be activities to address broader community attitudes towards people with disability that are ableist and implicitly biased. Co-designed and co-produced research and policy as well as community narratives and identification of

¹² Advanced Personnel Management (2022). Response to the New Disability Employment Support Model Consultation Paper. Retrieved from <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/APM-Response-to-the-New-Disability-Employment-Support-Model-Consultation-Paper.pdf>

¹³ Henderson, C., Brohan, E., Clement, S., Williams, P., Lassman, F., Schauman, O., ... & Thornicroft, G. (2012). A decision aid to assist decisions on disclosure of mental health status to an employer: protocol for the CORAL exploratory randomised controlled trial. *Bmc Psychiatry*, 12(1), 1-9.

¹⁴ Chan, A. (2005). Policy Discourses and Changing Practice: diversity and the University College. *Higher Education*, 50 (1):129-157.

¹⁵ Duvnjak, A., Stewart, V., Young, p., & Turvey, L. (2022). How does lived experience of incarceration impact upon the helping process in social work practice?: A scoping review. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 52 (1), 354-373.

the experiences of discrimination by people with disability in the pursuit of employment is an essential component of improving employment and inclusion of people with disability.

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

Employers can unfairly typecast and dismiss some disability types as only suited to particular positions. For example, people with autism are stereotyped in terms of being limited to information technology, accounting, and engineering roles¹⁶. A Disability Employment Centre of Excellence can assist in promoting the wide-ranging abilities of people with lived experience of disability to employers across industries. We also note gaps in knowledge about employment rates for different disability types in Australia (e.g., deafblindness, cerebral palsy) and subsequent risks of people being overlooked in disability employment research and policy conversations. Examples include a need to identify measures that can support the employment of people with cerebral palsy¹⁷ and to explore the employment impacts of networking for individuals who use augmentative and alternative communication¹⁸. The Centre can inform strategies to support these and other neglected disability groups.

Furthermore, while the Options Paper states, “it is envisaged the Centre will place people with the disability at the forefront of its work”, the recruitment of people with disability into the Centre, including into leadership positions was not explicitly mentioned. Importantly, **researchers with lived experience of disability is a key group that is currently missing** in the Options Paper if the policy intend is to co-design, co-produce and co-evaluate innovative and evidence-based employment practices. The Centre also needs to address the leadership and career pathways of people with disability. Addressing the disability employment policy issue is not just about getting people with lived experience of disability into any job. It is about building a career pipeline that expects representation of people with disability as part of the full range of roles in organisations and this includes leadership and board positions.

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

An urgent need exists to educate employers about the value of employing and retaining staff with disability¹⁹. The Centre can play an important part in developing and delivering employer education materials and training sessions while also including people with lived experience of disability among its educators. The Centre also needs to be actively involved in informing the development and review of national disability employment policies. National policies that to date are clearly failing to address the alarming statistic of 46.6% of Australians with disability not

¹⁶ Wright, E. & Edmonds, C. (2022). Shay used to work behind the scenes — now he's up front smashing autism stereotypes. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-26/autistic-and-neurodiverse-employment-value/101780588>

¹⁷ McNaughton, D., Light, J., & Arnold, K. (2002). 'Getting your wheel in the door': Successful full-time employment experiences of individuals with cerebral palsy who use augmentative and alternative communication. *Augmentative and alternative communication*, 18(2), 59-76.

¹⁸ Carey, A. C., Potts, B. B., Bryen, D. N., & Shankar, J. (2004). Networking towards employment: Experiences of people who use augmentative and alternative communication. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 29(1).

¹⁹ Khalema, N. E., & Shankar, J. (2014). Perspectives on employment integration, mental illness and disability, and workplace health. *Advances in Public Health*, 2014.

currently employed²⁰. This statistic has not shifted in well over a decade. In addition, the Centre can provide information to assist with **advancing the demand side of disability employment** in Australia. Supporting the demand side will help employers to create job opportunities for people with disability²¹. Opportunities also exist for the Centre to **examine strong policy options** such as disability employment quotas that have been successful in other countries such as France by providing empowerment and agency to people with disability through their disclosure of disability²². The Centre could also work with stakeholders in co-evaluating disability action plans and in identifying and **targeting areas of workforce shortages** that would benefit from a much-needed increase in the employment and retainment of people with disability.

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

The Disability Employment Centre of Excellence can provide information and resources encouraging disability employment service (DES) providers to offer individualised, integrated and outcome-oriented services. Individualised services offer a strength-based approach to disability employment by focusing on the abilities of clients with disability²³. Integrating mental health services and disability employment services has also shown to improve employment outcomes for DES clients with mental ill health²⁴. Finally, outcome-oriented services include monitoring the employment experiences of people with disability and providing ongoing support²⁵. For it is these monitoring and support activities that can enable the long-term employment of people with disability. An opportunity also exists for the Centre to engage with participatory action research that is inclusive of people with disability, DES providers, researchers (including researchers with lived experience of disability), and employers to **explore innovative approaches to disability employment** which hold upscaling potential.

3.1 What are your views on the models presented?

We recognise attributes assigned to the research centre model as described in the literature. These attributes include fostering professional learning and research engagement²⁶, strengthening research

²⁰ ABS. (2018). Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release>.

²¹ Chan, F., Strauser, D., Maher, P., Lee, E. J., Jones, R., & Johnson, E. T. (2010). Demand-side factors related to employment of people with disabilities: A survey of employers in the Midwest region of the United States. *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, 20, 412-419.

²² Richard, S., & Hennekam, S. (2021). When can a disability quota system empower disabled individuals in the workplace? The case of France. *Work, Employment and Society*, 35(5), 837–855

²³ Xie, H. (2013). Strengths-based approach for mental health recovery. *Iranian journal of psychiatry and behavioral sciences*, 7(2), 5.

²⁴ Morris, A., Waghorn, G., Robson, E., Moore, L., & Edwards, E. (2014). Implementation of evidence-based supported employment in regional Australia. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 37(2), 144.

²⁵ Gladman, B., & Waghorn, G. (2016). Personal experiences of people with serious mental illness when seeking, obtaining and maintaining competitive employment in Queensland, Australia. *Work*, 53(4), 835-843.

²⁶ John, G., & Prabhakaran, G. (2019). a conceptual framework on the significance of teacher engagement in higher education. *Think India Journal*, 22(4), 9075-9080.

collaborations²⁷ and linking research to processes of information dissemination, capacity building and policy impact²⁸.

We also understand that the centre is not intended to be a typical Centre of research excellence - that excellence in disability employment rather than research is its primary focus. It can and should draw on research skills and methods, but should also incorporate aspects of other models, including the evidence informed training hub; “to conduct training based on best practice research and evidence, and undertake tasks to build capability, disseminate knowledge, deliver training and undertake promotional activity to change community attitudes.” There is also a need to **promote translational models** which can see research outputs translated into benefits for people with disability in a timely manner.

Critically, the centre should take a cooperative approach that draws on multiple sources of expertise and levers of power to support of a common objective²⁹. Cooperation involves partnership between people with lived expertise and leaders in the community, industry, government and academy to co-design, co-produce, and co-evaluate information and evidence-based practices that maximise disability employment. **Participatory action research** should be a feature of the Centre of Excellence in the collaborative advancement of innovative approaches to disability employment. Engaging and valuing people with lived experience of disability as researchers, leaders, employers and employees is a key part of shifting ableist discourse about employing and advancing people with disability. The Centre of Excellence model needs to privilege and elevate the roles of people with disability in all components of the employment partnership.

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

We do not have a fixed view on where best to place the Centre, but a cooperative approach suggests it may be best given an **independent structure** that enables multiple points of “ownership” - industry, government, community, and disabled persons organisations. Nonetheless, people with lived experience of disability need to be visible and meaningfully involved at every level including leadership roles.

²⁷ Stevens, M., & London, K. (2019, June). Strengthening Academic and Industry Collaboration for Improved Outcomes and Impact: Construction Management Sector Centre Model. In *Constructing Smart Cities: Proceedings of the 22nd CIB World Building Congress (CIB2019)*, 17-21 June 2019, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China.

²⁸ Brown, L. D., & Gaventa, J. (2010). Constructing transnational action research networks: Reflections on the Citizenship Development Research Centre. *Action Research*, 8(1), 5-28.

²⁹ Hollosy, E. (2009). New research centre for Australia's remote economy. Retrieved from <https://www.thirdsector.com.au/new-research-centre-for-australias-remote-economy/>

About the Centre for Disability Research and Policy

The Centre for Disability Research and Policy (CDRP) at the Faculty of Health Sciences of the University of Sydney aims to change the disadvantage that occurs for people with disabilities. We do this through addressing their social and economic participation in society, and their health and wellbeing. By focusing on data that demonstrates disadvantage, we can develop models of policy and practice to better enable support and opportunity for people with disabilities.

About the Authors

Dr Damian Mellifont

As a Lived Experience Postdoctoral Fellow, Damian Mellifont (PhD) leads and contributes to studies that advance the economic and social inclusion of people with disability. Damian is a member of the Centre for Disability Research and Policy (CDRP) leadership team at The University of Sydney. With more than 30 scholarly publications, Damian has been an active member of the Centre over the last decade, with extensive prior experience in government policy. Damian strongly advocates for the disability inclusion mantra of, 'Nothing About Us Without Us' to be consistently applied to research about disability.

Associate Professor Shane Clifton

In 2013, Shane joined the Centre for Disability Research and Policy as honorary associate, working with the centre to write *Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics and the Good Life*. He spent four years as a researcher and Policy Director at Australia's Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. On its completion, he joined the University of Sydney as a faculty member of the School of Health Sciences.

Dr Annmaree Watharow

Dr Annmaree Watharow is an academic with interest in the experiences of people with disabilities in social environments, specifically health care. Annmaree has the living experience (indicating the continued experience) of deafblindness, two decades of experience as a general practitioner and, most recently, the experience of a doctoral research student at the University of Technology Sydney. This multifaceted history uniquely positions Dr Watharow in the health and disability research environment.

Dr Kim Bulkeley

Dr Kim Bulkeley has worked as an occupational therapist in community disability teams, management roles, disability policy and academia for over 30 years. Kim is currently in an academic role with the University of Sydney, teaching undergraduate and post graduate students in the Faculty of Health Sciences. Kim's research areas focus around increasing access to allied health services for rural and remote communities with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal community members and people with a disability.

Professor Jennifer Smith-Merry

Professor Jennifer Smith-Merry is an Australian Research Council (ARC) Laureate Fellow and Professor of Health and Social Policy in the Sydney School of Health Sciences. Jen is Director of the Centre for Disability Research and Policy. Her work focuses on creating practical, research-informed policy and practice development in partnership with government and non-government organisations.