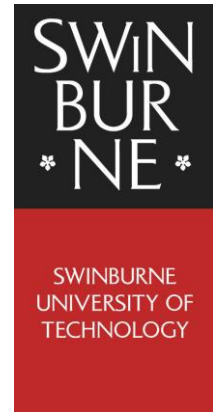25 November 2023

Department of Social Services

COE@dss.gov.au

Submitted Online

Dear members of the Department,

<u>Response to The Disability Employment Centre of Excellence Options Paper October 2023</u>

The Centre for Social Impact at Swinburne University of Technology (CSI Swinburne) thanks the Department for the opportunity to make this response.

CSI Swinburne is a multi-disciplinary research centre established in 2014 and is a part of the national CSI Network. Our research strives toward positive social change through improving the systemic and organisational conditions that shape communities.

SUMMARY OF RESPONSE

- There needs to be a focus on the *whole* disability employment ecosystem, encompassing all employment supports and services, recognising that people with disabilities require different supports at different times in the lifespan in order to be engaged in employment across their lifetime. The availability and shape of these supports is dictated by ecosystem factors.

- The aim of the Centre should be expanded to: **increase the attainment of meaningful employment through the provision of appropriate and effective employment supports and systems, and the removal of barriers to employment across the ecosystem**.

- Need to have a clear Theory of Change for the CoE that identifies the target groups for change, the barriers to employment to be addressed and strategies to use.

- A focus on the disability employment ecosystem and the actors/influencers of employment with this (eg schools) is essential. A key goal is to increase **the functionality of the employment ecosystem to support employment outcomes for people with disability.** This requires a focus on strategies to address system-wide ecosystem factors.

- Employment outcomes need to be more broadly conceived and directed by a diversity of people with disability, because 'valued' or 'meaningful' work and 'fair' remuneration are differently understood by different groups, and at different life stages.

- The understanding of who are employment support providers needs to be expanded well beyond DES and supported employment providers (ADEs). There is a wide range of

disability employment initiatives in Australia that should be included. In addition, employers can also be providers of employment support – this lens also focuses on elements of organisational design that support employment not just service delivery design.

- There is a need to include all groups who are influential in relation to employment. Importantly, this includes people with disability (including those in non-employment settings such as 'day services') and family members as key providers of employment supports.

- The ability to foster collaboration across stakeholders is a key element of CoE design. Employment service providers, of all types, need to be working in a connected way in order to deliver best outcomes.

- The CoE needs to use a differentiated approach – understanding that there is different evidence in relation to different cohorts.

- The range of activities and functions of the CoE needs to be expanded beyond delivering training, support and resources, to enable use of a wide range of strategies and activities that best deliver the outcomes and design parameters expressed in the Theory of Change.

- Useful models to consider might be the Technical Assistance models of the US and the field-building intermediary model.

- A valuable asset is the Analysis and Policy Observatory (APO) which already has a two decade long set of disability employment literature. Importantly, this knowledge repository also houses data in relation to other intersectional cohorts eg young people, Aboriginal people etc. This intersectionality lens is a very important, but often overlooked, aspect of knowledge building in this area. APO provides a ready solution to the connecting across evidence sets related to linked cohorts. The CoE can consider building on, not starting from scratch, an existing knowledge repository. Investment in the use of AI in this environment is suggested.

- CSI Swinburne does not support the CoE to have a role as a quality control or compliance monitor for DES. This is not an effective mechanism to drive collaboration, enhance data sharing, and foster use of best practice. The CoE needs to be a trusted ally.

BACKGROUND

Researchers from CSI Swinburne have been undertaking a wide range of research into employment for people facing barriers to employment and employment of people with disability specifically. CSI researchers have specialist expertise in relation to inclusion of people with disability and strategies for increased employment, including service delivery as well as policy and research. This includes experience evaluating the outcomes and models of disability employment programs, as well as long standing engagement with work integration social enterprises, including those with a special focus on the employment of people with disability.

Over the past 3 years, CSI has undertaken a range of research and evaluation programs in relation to employment of people with disability. This includes:

- the first national scan of employment supports and services for people with disability, injury and illness for the National Collaborative Partnership to Improve Work Participation (via Comcare).

- completion of a doctoral research project on the school to work transition of young people with intellectual disability and the policy and program design necessary for success;

- an evaluation of an employer capacity building program (IncludeAbility) being undertaken by the Australian Human Rights Commission, focusing on activating a small set of major employers as champions and role models, and the use of intermediaries (including ADEs) as employer supports;

- building and testing of an organisational model for ADEs that fosters pathways from ADEs into open employment (the WISE- Ability model, funded by the ILC Economic Participation grant round);

- research audit of the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grants investment, including analysis of the projects funded under the Economic Participation stream (for people with disability) between 2019 and 2021 (54 projects);

- evaluation of a job creation initiative by Down Syndrome Australia drawing on the lived experience of people with Down syndrome as Health Ambassadors;

- evaluation of the Business Connection program of Down Syndrome Australia;

- evaluation of the Payment By Outcomes project led by White Box Enterprises involving social enterprises focused on the employment of people with disability;

- a costs structures study of social enterprises providing employment to people with disability;

- analysis of the outcomes and model of the Ticket to Work school to work transition program for young people with disability;

- evaluation of the Australian Network on Disability (AND) program Employing 100, focusing on increasing employment of people with disability in the 'food and accommodation' and 'health and social assistance' industries

- evaluation of the Australian Network on Disability (AND) program The Victorian Employer Enablement Program, targeting high growth industries such as health care with the goal of increasing employment of people with disability.

We have a special interest in evolving the concept and measurement of 'employer disability confidence' and have also built a Typology of Employment Support Interventions, mapping the wide range of activities and supports that underpin the employment of people with disability (https://apo.org.au/node/318002). Previously, we have summarised the evidence in relation to Customised Employment and other employment approaches for incorporation into the Everyone Can Work website of Inclusion Australia (see https://www.everyonecanwork.org.au/resources/evidence/14-customised-employment-for-people-with-intellectual-disability/).

Most recently, we have collated our learnings in an *Explaining the Evidence for Reform* series (https://apo.org.au/node/321816) that seeks to inform policy in relation to the employment of people with intellectual disability. This Evidence has been widely used, including as a submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with a Disability via the disability representative organisation for people with intellectual disability, Inclusion Australia. Paper 4 in this series focuses explicitly on the ADE context, drawing together data (through a collaboration with National Disability Services) to provide a 'snapshot' about what is known about the characteristics and performance of ADEs as at 2022.

In addition to disability employment, we have a wider interest in disability leadership. We are currently evaluating three programs involving the Australian Institute of Company Directors, and the Australian Network on Disability, that seek to build capacity of Boards and company directors, as well as aspiring directors with disability.

We have enhanced this expertise with our work on the self-reported outcomes of people using community services/ beneficiaries of interventions. The Community Services Outcomes Tree is built on a wholistic and interconnected outcomes framework across a wide range of domains based on a large scale literature review of more than 200 outcomes frameworks, measurement approaches and indices. This approach is able to be customised to services' theories of change, in recognition that services address diverse issues and work towards different impacts relevant to specific contexts. The approach is a major addition to support service and project evaluation. It also offers a lean mechanism for the development of a minimum outcomes dataset for services. Website: https://communityservicesoutcomestree.com. The approach has been used as one part of the evaluation of the Payment By Outcomes evaluation of White Box Enterprises, discussed above, and offers a method to capture both employment and non-employment outcomes of employment interventions.

The national collaboration of Centres of Social Impact

CSI Swinburne is part of a national collaboration of Centres of Social Impact (nodes) including UNSW, Flinders and UWA. Each node also undertakes research activity in relation to disability employment. In particular, both Flinders and UNSW have current projects in relation to disability employment. Across nodes, we share our understandings of disability employment, and collaborate on projects.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT WHY EMPLOYMENT RATES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY ARE LOW AND NOT SHIFTING?

Undertaking research across multiple projects related to disability employment enables CSI to understand at the level of the ecosystem where barriers to employment for people with disability are located and how they intersect across levels of the ecosystem. The key barriers to employment for people with disability are summarised below.

- Employment services that are not required to draw from evidence-based practice in their delivery

- Contracting arrangements and privatisation of services and competition between providers

- Siloing of services resulting in less inter-agency and intra-agency collaboration

- De-skilling of the employment services workforce

- Failure to invest in development of the employment services sector, including building new markets to respond to new expectations

- Failure to focus attention on demand side (ie. employer-focused) strategies

- Failure to genuinely co-design an employment service system in order to meet the needs of people with disability and employing organisations.

OVERARCHING COMMENTS

We use the term 'employment support provider' throughout this response to intentionally encompass the widest range of employment support and provider types. This encompasses Disability Employment Services, other Commonwealth labour market programs (for example Transition to Work, and including disability-focused services in this suite such as Job Access), supported employment services (formerly Australian Disability Enterprises – ADEs), social enterprises, vocational rehabilitation services/interventions and the plethora of disability employment focused projects/programs/interventions funded from diverse sources such as government (e.g. DSS Information, Linkages and Capacity Building funding) or philanthropic funding, or a mix of these and self-generated income.

At times in the Options Paper, the focus narrows to 'Disability Employment Services' (DES) without inclusion of other parts of the employment ecosystem that people with disability intersect with. As understood in the contemporary Australian context, this term denotes a very narrow service offering, bounded by specific contractual conditions. Due to the 'black box' (Considine, 2022) nature of the DES system, there is little transparency about the range of employment support practices (targeting both jobseekers and employers) used in this service system.

At other times in the Options Paper the focus shifts to supported employment services (ADEs). Again, with changing legislation and funding arrangements, there is no consistency in the employment support activities and approaches within this 'set'.

It should be remembered that people with disability also commonly access other employment services (including mainstream employment services of Workforce Australia), as well as a wide range of other services, activities and interventions. Across this array of services/interventions many strategies to support the employment of people with disability are used well beyond a focus on placement support to jobseekers, such as supporting micro or small enterprises, building the capacity of employers, or convening place-based and inter-agency collaborations to better coordinate system-wide activity to support the employment of people with disability.

In addition, employment outcomes are strongly influenced by the broader 'employment ecosystem'. To some extent, the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (henceforth, Royal Commission) draws attention to parts of this ecosystem, for example schools and education/training providers. Some reform activities identified by the Royal Commission focus specifically on legislative and policy reform, noting the importance of these settings.

Unfortunately, the real complexity and richness of the disability employment 'ecosystem' is rarely kept in focus in this Options Paper and therefore in the design thinking for the Centre of Excellence. The Royal Commission also overly narrowly focuses reform in relation to the DES and supported employment systems (alongside some legislative change, for example via changes to 'reasonable adjustments' in discrimination law), without a focus on the importance of the ecosystem as a whole.

By contrast, we strongly urge a focus on the *whole* disability employment ecosystem, recognising that people with disabilities require different supports at different times in the lifespan in order to be engaged in employment across their lifetime. The availability and shape of these supports is dictated by ecosystem factors.

COMMENTS THAT ADDRESS THE DSS OPTIONS PAPER

Purpose: Why do we need a Centre?

1.1 Why do we need a Centre?

It is important to articulate a clear Theory of Change for the Centre – in short what problem/s does the Centre seek to address, what are the desired outcomes to be attained, and for what groups/levels of the ecosystem? Answers to these questions then influence the activities chosen to achieve these ends.

Presumably, the Centre's ultimate beneficiary group is people with disability via their **increased attainment of meaningful employment through the provision of appropriate and effective employment supports and systems, and the removal of barriers to employment across the ecosystem.**

As articulated currently, the Centre has a number of target groups beyond these beneficiaries, including employment support providers. Each beneficiary group and target is linked to different 'problems' that the Centre of Excellence may be set up to address. These include:

People with disability and their supporters (families and carers)	• Complex employment support system • No single point of information about employment support providers • Lack of relevant information in accessible formats • Lack of access to evidence about which types of employment supports are most suitable and effective for them (including for their disability cohort) • Lack of involvement in setting quality standards for employment services to best meet their needs
Employment Support Providers	• Lack of high quality evidence about efficacy and design elements of effective employment supports (for some support types or contexts) • Lack of access to existing evidence about efficacy and design of employment supports. This results in not knowing 'what good services look like'. • Barriers to translating and applying evidence to inform employment support design • Insufficient focus on quality and mechanisms to monitor it • Lack of workforce capacity building (training) resources and opportunities • Lack of collaboration and information sharing to expand best practice
Employing organisations	• Lack of access to evidence about best practice in disability employment • Lack of appropriate supports to implement disability employment initiatives • Dominance of organisational practices (e.g. systematisation of mass recruitment, productivity metrics) that present barriers

	to employment of people with disability, and lack of guidance about how to dismantle these or mediate their effects
Policy makers and program managers	• Lack of a clearly articulated evidence base to draw from • Lack of data about program effectiveness and factors contributing to this, particularly program design features • Lack of information about ecosystem design, including the interactions between policy settings and program design, the intersection of available programs, and the funding levers and barriers in operation • Lack of consolidated (and differentiated) data to inform decision making across all levels of the ecosystem • Lack of focus on market building and stewardship to meet employment support needs of beneficiary group
MISSING TARGETS	
Ecosystem actors/influencers of employment (e.g. secondary schools, education and training providers; place-based communities and networks)	• Lack of co-ordination and collaboration across sectors driven by barriers and disincentives to this and lack of collaboration-focused resources • History/legacy of segregrated systems that have reinforced separation, limited expectations about people with disability, and low capacity levels of workforce to engage with people with disability

Deep understanding of these targets and their needs should be developed through direct engagement with each, with a privileging of the experience and viewpoints of people with disability and their supporters (family members and carers).

1.2 What should be the core functions of the Centre?

At this stage, the Department has identified the core outcome areas of the Centre to be threefold (when disaggregated):

• increase the employment outcomes of people with disability and

• increase the capacity of employment service providers

• increase the capacity of employers.

The functions of the Centre need to address the Theory of Change. This requires expanding the remit of the above and adding other outcome focuses, such as:

• increase **the functionality of the employment ecosystem to support employment outcomes for people with disability.**

Employment outcomes for people with disability

The Options paper focuses attention on employment outcomes related to unemployment/ employment and labour force participation rates, as well as discrimination. These are important elements, but employment outcomes need to be conceived more broadly. A range of research and the Royal Commission highlight a lack of meaningful/valued work roles and lack of fair remuneration for work as central issues in the exploitation and abuse of people with disability, These elements overlap with provision of high-quality employment supports, including job design.

Employment outcomes need to be more broadly conceived and directed by a diversity of people with disability, because 'valued' or 'meaningful' work and 'fair' remuneration are differently understood by different groups. This ties into a focus on the required characteristics of the employment ecosystem necessary to sustain valued employment opportunities and suitable wages for a broad range of people with disability, including those who have been deemed by the system to be 'non workers' (ie people with intellectual disability).

Getting the expected outcomes of the CoE 'right' is important as these will dictate the activity that it undertakes. It is essential that employment outcomes are defined by diverse people with disability. We note that CSI has previously sought philanthropic funding to undertake this piece of work, as a needed initiative identified by us. However, this has not been supported with funding. This is an example of how needed elements of evidence building and thinking are not currently supported by available funding and an area the CoE could support.

Capacity of employment service providers

The contemporary design of the primary employment service available to people with disability in Australia, DES, has resulted in a deskilling of the employment services workforce and a shift in the type of employment outcomes service providers are seeking to procure for people with disability. Increasing outcome rates for people with disability requires a fundamental shift in the type of outcomes government procures. Rather than a focus on short term 'placements', a shift to life course focused service delivery enables the development of a range of supports that suit different people at different points in their life.

Shifting the staffing profile of employment services is required to improve employment outcomes for people with disability. There needs to be an increased focus on attracting and retaining a highly skilled workforce that can deliver meaningful employment outcomes.

Re-skilling the workforce requires a dual strategy of upskilling the existing workforce, including provision of training and support to deliver evidence informed models of employment support, and a strategy to attract skilled workers to the sector.

Capacity of employers

Additionally, the Options Paper sometimes narrowly focuses the activities of employment support providers on the provision of a range of supports to job seekers/employees. This repeats the mistakes of past policy focus and service design and ignores research evidence. There has been insufficient focus on building expectations and supports in the community for the employment of

people with disability and on building the capacity of employing organisations to align the available job roles with the needs of people with disability. It is helpful to see employers identified as a key group in the Options Paper, as there is currently little in the way of evidence about what supports Australian employing organisations, both large and small to medium, to offer employment opportunities to people with disability.

Note: it is important to note that for some people with disability, particularly intellectual disability, the distinction between employers and employment support providers is a fine one (as in the case of ADEs or social enterprise), and employers are also providers of employment support. This also highlights the need to include a focus on organisational design in the frame of capacity building for both, not just a focus on employment support design. There is research evidence that highlights how organisational design elements have enhanced employment outcomes for people with disability. For example, recent research conducted by CSI highlights how a Recovery Coaching organisation intentionally designed their organisation so as to maximise the employment of people with lived experience including building-in elements of peer support, using flexible and remote work practices, and an explicit focus on wellbeing of employees (see https://www.csi.edu.au/research/one-good-day-evaluation-project/).

This focus on how employing organisations can also act as employment support providers to their employees, is critical and requires a more nuanced understanding of stakeholder roles. A key role for the CoE would be to focus on the evidence for employers/employing organisations.

Remediating ecosystem barriers

A key missing function is addressing the ecosystem barriers to employment for people with disability. Recent research undertaken by CSI has clearly demonstrated that increasingly complex policy and program settings, in particular, are undermining innovation and the delivery of evidence informed employment supports to Australians with disability.

Currently, the functions of the Centre predominantly emphasise the strategy of improving service provision as the key activity to attain increased employment outcomes. While this strategy is important, service delivery and employment outcomes are impacted by a wide range of factors. **The Centre needs capacity to identify ecosystem factors affecting employment outcomes, and have a mechanism (such as a policy taskforce) to devise solutions to them.**

International research highlights the importance of taking a policy-focused, systems alignment/coordination approach to addressing increased employment for people with disability. Across a range of social issues, including disability employment, multi-level and multi-factor interventions are needed to effect change (Idle et al., 2021). The experience of the US lifts the viewpoint to overarching economic participation policy, above the mechanism of individualised funding. 'Employment First' policy has been shown to support collaboration, influence practice and achieve outcomes. Employment First policy settings bring a focus on capacity building, provider transformation, school-to-work transition, employer engagement, and policy/funding alignment (Giordono, 2020). The US has evidenced substantial results when they align systems and drive expected outcomes through policy. For example, the Mississippi Partnerships for Employment (Hughes Jr, 2017), Tennessee Works (Carter et al., 2017) and Let's Get to Work

Wisconsin (Molfenter et al., 2017) models have achieved higher rates of competitive employment for young people with disability, including intellectual disability, than states without them. The projects have **a system-wide focus**, are collaborative and have the goal of increasing the number of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are employed.

In the Australian context, there is a strong rationale for a system focus to increasing employment of people with disability. Research evidence points to:

- siloed systems and funding (when 'blended' and 'braided' funding and interconnected systems are evidenced elements of effectiveness)

- lack of differentiation of services and policy (when evidence points to need for cohort-specific intervention and policy design particularly for people with intellectual and developmental disability)

- perverse incentives in the market model of DES that lead to poor outcomes

- individualised funding (e.g. NDIS) driving against collaborative work across services and systems (e.g. school, employment support providers, VET, employers, disability services).

In relation to each of these outcomes areas, the Centre needs a strategy for driving change. This should be based on the following broad functions (Table 1), customised to the logic of change in relation to each of the outcome areas identified above. For example, the strategies for engaging actors and designing change approaches may be different in relation to employment support providers and other actors across the ecosystem, such as employing organisations.

Table 1: Key functions of the Centre

Key: CSI contribution is highlighted in grey

OUTCOMES
• increase the employment outcomes of people with disability and
• increase the capacity of employment service providers
• increase the capacity of employers
• increase the functionality of the employment ecosystem to support employment outcomes.

Key functions (related to executing the Theory of Change) – to be customised to each outcome area and relevant set of stakeholders	Functions proposed throughout the Options paper (with suggested alignment)
1. Establishing what is known about the problems and the solutions, and identifying gaps in knowledge (in each outcome area). Setting priorities for evidence building. Undertaking evidence building. *Inherent skills/capacities: research, knowledge management*	Establishing, maintaining and developing the evidence base • Build the evidence base • Identify and describe best practice (what good looks like)

2. Identifying the systems and the key actors and the change required by each. *Inherent skills/capacities: system analysis*	
3. Engaging and motivating key actors to commit to take actions to increase outcomes and to collaborate. *Inherent skills/capacities: networking, relationship building, brokerage, inclusive/co-design approaches*	• Provide a collaboration lead to focus on building and retaining relationships with existing research bodies, peak bodies, employment service providers, employers, Government departments and agencies, and various other stakeholders
4. Designing strategies (based where possible on evidence of what works) to support actors to become knowledgeable about evidence-based solutions, and to design and implement them. *Inherent skills/capacities: knowledge translation, capacity building, change and/or intervention design, systems thinking*	Deliver training and support (to build capacity of employment service providers) • Build capacity of employment support providers through training, resources and advice • Build collaboration and information sharing • Support the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, employers and disability sector to enact supported employment principles
5. Assessing the level of outcomes attainment, the efficacy of the approaches adopted to achieve outcomes and factors affecting efficacy *Inherent skills/capacities: outcomes measurement, evaluation, research, systems analysis*	• Quality control, monitoring and compliance across employment support providers (CSI suggests removing this focus) • Advise on interactions across government programs
6. Collecting, analysing and using data in an ongoing way to support sector development. *Inherent skills/capacities: research, evaluation, knowledge translation*	• Consolidate data from service providers • Curate all evidence in a single site
7. Translating and communicating knowledge so as to have maximum utility by all relevant stakeholders. *Inherent skills/capacities: knowledge translation, training development and delivery, resource development*	Build evidence-informed best practice tools and resources • A 'one stop shop' of evidence • Supporting a community of practice • Translate the evidence base • Accessible information for range of audiences

In our view, not all the functions identified in the Options paper should be included in the Centre's remit. In particular, quality control and compliance is a major activity and <u>not</u> one that best fits the Theory of Change of the Centre. Quality control and compliance is a function best

associated with the commissioning agency of services (i.e. the funder), as this agency has the authority to set standards for performance, require compliance, and drive activity via funding and contractual mechanisms. If the Centre of Excellence was to take a quality control and compliance remit, this has potential to significantly undermine relationships with employment service providers and distort the accuracy of data provided by them to the Centre.

In order to be a high quality and trusted Centre of evidence, knowledge translation and change, the Centre needs to be able to access data that accurately captures the levels of outcomes, the types and level of barriers and the effectiveness of strategies to address these. While the Centre can play a strong role in driving change through capacity building around best practice, this role would be undermined if it was also then to police best practice. In addition, the budget allocation to the Centre is unlikely to be able to encompass the significant costs of maintaining a quality control and compliance monitoring system across the sector as well as deliver its other functions. These assessments are informed by data from the Boston Consulting Review of Disability Employment Services (2020), which reported substantial impost on staff time in managing compliance (up to one fifth of front-line staff time spent in compliance management) and negative effect on staff-client relationships and consequent employment outcomes.

We suggest that quality practice is driven by the Centre through collaborative work with providers to build workforce skills and capacity, to build internal organisational mechanisms to gain and use feedback from employment service users, and to build meaningful continuous improvement processes in the organisation across its service delivery.

From a change perspective, the Centre is best placed as a trusted ally, rather than an invigilator.

Audience: Who should the Centre assist?

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

As discussed above, the lack of focus on the employment ecosystem in Centre design means that other ecosystem actors (and influencers of employment outcomes) have a reduced focus. A focus on barriers to employment across the ecosystem and enablers, makes visible the actors who are influential in relation to these. For example, decades of international research evidence about school to work transition for young people with disability highlights the need for evidence informed transition practices to be embedded in school and actioned with young people from the age of fourteen, and across all subsequent years of schooling. School transition research highlights a set of strongly evidence-based predictors of later employment for young people with disability, with many of these being delivered within the school setting.

Another example is that of disability social participation services (formerly day centres). Many people with disability have not had the opportunity to consider employment goals and have been placed in day centres at an early age instead. Research and practice from the US has begun to focus on new practice that centres employment as a life activity for all. Centering employment, often of 8-12 hours per week, is opening up new opportunities for a range of life opportunities utilising employment as a key mechanism to enhance social inclusion.

In the contemporary disability system, family members are becoming a critical provider of employment supports to young people with disabilities and are driving the design of employment service markets through the use of individualised funding. Rather than being passive service recipients, family members are increasingly seeking to partner with service providers who can support their vision of a valued life for their family member, Therefore, the Centre must include family members as a valuable actor in supporting people with disability to achieve their employment goals by curating training and resources specifically for them, and involving them in the design thinking around effective employment services and supports.

Examples such as this show how it is imperative to include groups/actors that are influential in employment outcomes, and how the parameters of 'employment support providers' do not currently encompass key areas of employment need or research evidence.

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

Table 1 above has highlighted some of the activities related to working with stakeholders. Stakeholders will vary depending on the outcome focus of the Centre activity. Three key elements are:

1. **People with Disability and families/carers:** The Centre must centre its work around supporting people with disability to be self-determining and supporting families as the natural support system in the lives of many people with disability, particulalry young people. In particular, focus should be on understanding the nature of the outcomes people are seeking, the barriers to them, the design of appropriate solutions, and the appropriate translation/communication of useful information.

   It is important to take a differentiated approach to this work, noting that these elements are differently experienced and understood depending on a range of characteristics. For example, people with intellectual disability have very different experiences of employment support to those with acquired disability, particularly physical disability, and best practice in this area has different features. Young people with disability have different support needs as they start their employment journey, as opposed to older workers who are seeking to re-enter the workforce after acquiring a disability.

   Ideally, the Centre will utilise the involvement of diverse people with disability and families in all aspects of the work, including as co-designers of the Centre, co-researchers, trainers, advisors and content developers.

2. **Identifying the full range of stakeholders:** A key capacity of the Centre needs to be its ability to identify and engage a range of stakeholders relevant to each outcome focus. Identifying relevant stakeholders requires knowledge of the sector and systems, as well as established relationships with key parties such as peaks, advocacy groups, governments etc. One mechanism is to build these groups into the governance arrangements for the Centre, however engagement capacity needs to extend beyond

this. CSI Swinburne has found that building positive relationships with stakeholders as the basis for engaging in change activity requires trust-building, a grounded knowledge of the stakeholder context and constraints, open sharing of resources and support, clear agreement on use of exchange of information. The Centre needs to be positioned as a neutral agency whose approach is to work with stakeholders from where they are at. The Centre needs to understand its value proposition for all stakeholder groups including employing organisations, employment support providers, disability service providers, people with disability, families, schools, government (including services such as Job Access), and others. Possibly the most important attribute of the Centre is to be able to bring about collaboration on change actions.

3. **Expand the Centre's functions:** The functions of the Centre must expand beyond 'delivering training and support' and 'building evidence-based tools and resources'. This is a too narrow remit for the use/translation of knowledge to achieve increased employment outcomes. The Centre needs to be able to support the use of a range of strategies through a range of mechanisms, and it must seek to partner with a range of stakeholders in order to deliver on its aims. For example, Job Access is presently underutilised by employing organisations. The involement of Job Access in the Centre offers an opportunity for their role to be both expanded and better utilised in the sector.

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

Firstly, the Centre must expand the understanding of 'employment support providers' in the contemporary Australian context. As argued above, employment supports are diverse, as are the organisations and practitioners delivering them, and this diversity has increased since NDIS funding became available to people with significant disability. Through ILC funding, organisations traditionally not engaged in employment service delivery are delivering employment related activities. For example, Down Syndrome Australia are delivering brokerage services that are matching people with Down syndrome to organisations willing to employ them.

A key strategy to drive innovation and uptake of best practice is opening up opportunities for communication and sharing of information. For example, collaborative approaches involving schools, employment services, training providers, employing organisations and people with disability have delivered employment outcomes in Australia and overseas (for example Ticket to Work). The Centre must therefore focus attention on employment service providers as one element of a connected system that, when working effectively, results in employment outcomes for people with disability, rather than as the sole provider of employment related supports. A risk of the Centre is that it drives too narrowly to one set of employment support providers, DES providers, particularly if it is hosted by an organisation focused on a single or narrow provider type.

The Centre will need to bring together those who are actors in the employment system, including a wide range of employment service providers and others. This could be via supporting place-

based, cohort based (e.g. school aged or intellectual disability), intervention-type (e.g. large employer-facing interventions) based collaborative activity, information sharing and capacity building. Separating providers (e.g. into DES, ILC-projects, ADEs etc) is not necessarily useful, except perhaps in the area of treating of families as employment support providers and designing specialist approaches with and for them.

Models: What models exist?

3.1 What are your views on the models presented?

The models presented have overlapping elements in terms of governance arrangements, funding and location/host. We provide our views on each of these below.

Governance arrangements

The Centre should be governed by a representative group of stakeholders, In this context, this would include:

- people with disability, or their representative organisations and advocates (including those most marginalised from employment outcomes such as people with intellectual and developmental disability, and those with intersectional identity),

- families/carers or their representative organisations and advocates,

- representatives from a full range of employment support providers (DES, Workforce Australia, ADEs/supported employment, social enterprise, vocational rehabilitation, Transition to Work, other interventions such as ILC-funded economic participation activity),

- researchers/evidence curators,

- government policy makers/funders. This is critical to address policy level barriers as they are made visible,

- legislative reformers (e.g. the Australian Human Rights Commission)

- employer bodies (such as Business Council of Australia, Small Business Council)

- other key stakeholders (for example the VET sector, careers counselling, schools).

Funding arrangements

Initial funding needs to provide a sufficient, secure 'runway' of development to establish a program of work, implement it and assess change. It is likely that the minimum initial 'runway' is five years.

Long-term, the Centre's funding should include a level of base funding to maintain the Centre and its core functions. While the Centre can seek and gain additional funding from a range of sources (including for targeted projects), its funding base should be guarenteed to enable core activities to be delivered. A Centre that is forced to operate solely on generating funding via

multiple ad hoc projects (from a range of sources) cannot easily progress a firm agenda of work, but rather has to respond to the vicissitudes of available funding and shift its focus to suit. It is also unlikely that funding will be readily available to resource the change activities identified as necessary (such as workforce capacity building) or to engage in filling identified knowledge gaps.

Relying on ARC or NHMRC funding to fund the evidence building activity is problematic, as the criteria for selection is narrow, and based largely around academic track record (which is narrowly defined). These funding schemes do not value research that has focused on grounded knowledge translation, and this type of activity is not generally included in 'track record'. Additionally, the ARC and NHMRC rely on University co-contributions. In the main, this takes the form of University-funded, tenured academic positions having a small portion of their time allocated to the Centres. Both of these funding mechanisms skew to a narrow set of hosts/partners likely to meet these criteria. For example, CSI Swinburne, in the main, does not have research personnel who are tenured and funded by the University. This means that it makes it difficult for organisation like CSI Swinburne to meet the criteria for ARC and NHMRC funding as they cannot offer lead chief investigators funded by the University. Hence reliance on these funding mechanisms will not enable the Centre to meet its objectives.

Once the Centre is established and a strategy is in place, some additional funding already allocated to support improved employment outcomes for people with disability should be made available to the centre. For example, funding to undertake evaluation of ILC projects could be allocated to the Centre, which would then result in the outcomes of ILC investments being more easily compared, widely shared and utilised. The Centre could play a commissioning role in conjunction with DSS to ensure that projects funded by schemes such as ILC Economic Participation stream are aligned with gaps in the evidence base and/or identified need in the sector.

Location/setting/host

Each type of location/host has its strengths and limitations. Each is likely to be subject to shifting priorities and commitments of the host over time.

One issue to ensure is that the repository function of the Centre is not 'gatekept' by the host as part of furthering its own position. CSI has had experience of Universities hosting various knowledge and translation portals, but where there have been formal or informal hurdles to the depositing of knowledge products from other Universities or organisations. In these instances, the portal functions to showcase only the resources developed by the host University. One valuable example where this has NOT occurred and where wide information sharing has been enabled is that of the Analysis and Policy Observatory (APO) despite it being hosted by a University.

In the US, various models have been in place to promote employment outcomes for people with disability. For example 'Think College' is a Technical Assistance Centre that has an overarching goal to increase the number of people with intellectual disability who attend college, and therefore obtain paid employment. This has been established as a separate centre within a university. It has a similar mandate to the proposed Centre, in that it collects evidence and

disseminates good practice across a range of stakeholders, including young people with intellectual disability, families, schools, colleges and the wider community.

The Americal organisation that promotes employment for people with significant disability, APSE, is a separate incorporated organisation. It provides a range of activities which are similar to those proposed for the Centre, as well as employment staff accreditation programs, advocacy and an annual conference.

Other models

Regardless of the above, we feel that the Centre needs to include some level of Clearinghouse or a searchable repository model. It should be noted that these models require long term investment. For example, the APO has been operating for more than 20 years, It is a trusted source of information which has been designed so that lodging information is relatively easy and available to all. It requires $300,000 per annum to operate. However, over time, funders can lose commitment to funding something in perpetuity – this remains an issue given that lack of knowledge access and complexity of the system have been identified as issues to be resolved. Given that the APO has built a knowledge repository and audience in relation to disability employment, we strongly suggest that this is built on for the CoE, rather than commence a new repository. This builds on an existing identity as a trusted source, and a significant knowledge base over twenty years. It also enables utilisation of other relevant data from other intersectional cohorts eg young people, Aboriginal people etc as the repository extends beyond disability. This intersectionality lens is a very important, but often overlooked, aspect of knowledge building in this area. APO provides a ready solution to the connecting across evidence sets related to linked cohorts.

Similarly, the Centre needs to include functionality as a capacity builder, via training or resource development functions. This might be in the form of Technical Assistance, which is widely available in the US (often through Technical Assistance Centres – as discussed above) which drive innovation and promote sector development through targeted approaches. Think College (outlined above) is an example. Think College:

- provides resources, technical assistance and training related to college options for students with intellectual disability

- manages the only national listing of college programs for students with intellectual disability in the United States.

- conducts research and evaluation

- generates and shares knowledge 'guiding institutional change, informing public policy, and engaging with students, professionals and families' (https://thinkcollege.net/about/what-is-think-college).

Similarly, the The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C) is a Technical Assistance Center co-funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). They provide information, tools, and supports to assist multiple stakeholders in delivering

effective services and instruction for secondary students and out of school youth with disabilities. The NTACT:C builds service provider capacity to:

- Use data-driven decision-making processes
- Strengthen interagency partnerships
- Provide quality professional development
- Implement technical assistance (supports) in the form of:
  1. Universal TA – Take & Use
  2. Targeted TA – Teach & Coach
  3. Intensive TA – Coach, Scale-Up & Sustain.

This approach enables the embedding of good practice across systems which is both sustained and scaled.

The Centre might work to evolve appropriate curriculum and resources for use across the training sector. We do not believe that the Centre needs to be the primary training deliverer, but should resource the existing training infrastructure with best practice curriculum and materials.

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

Hussein, Plummer and Breen (2018) report on the role of 'catalysts' in social change movements. They argue that complex social problems require collaboration and coordination across actors, that is enabled by a 'field catalyst' or 'intermediary'. Cabaj (2021) describes the set of activities of a field-building intermediary below (Table 2), noting that intermediaries may take on any/many of these roles.

Table 2: Intermediary elements

Type	What it does	Key functions
Capability specialist	Provides one or more supporting capability to the field (e.g. social finance, innovation management, human centered design, reconciliation, policy advocacy, research and evaluation).	- Research & evaluation - Education & professional development - Networking opportunities - Facilitation, coaching and technical assistance - Granting & investment advance policy - Contribute technical support to direct-service providers
Evidence-Action Lab	Focuses on research and development, advising policy makers, and helping the field's practitioners	- Developing, testing and evaluating innovative solutions - Disseminating results to issue stakeholders

	learn, improve, and scale solutions.	• Providing facilitation, coaching and technical assistance to solution adopters • Advancing policy and regulatory change to support the scaling of the solution
Place-Based Backbone	Coordinates local and regional cross-sector stakeholders and supports them in collectively transforming a fragmented field	• Advancing the overall vision and strategy • Establishing shared measurement • Aligning activities and resources • Building public will • Advancing policy • Securing resources and funding
Field Catalyst	Deploys different capabilities, quietly influencing and augmenting the field's efforts to achieve population-level change	• Research & evaluation • Build public awareness • Assess the field's strengths and weaknesses • Advance policy • Contribute technical support to direct-service providers • Collect, analyze, and share data

This set of thinking is useful to inform the design of the Centre as a change agent. It has potential to be uniquely situated as to be able to bring together stakeholders into a collaboration, while remaining independent of the 'system' or any one stakeholder so as to be able to independently critique it and drive evidence-based action.

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

Two other examples are worth examining.

1. The recently funded Centre of Excellence in Intellectual Disability and Health (CoEIDH) is a collaborative Centre that includes a range of stakeholders using a consortium model. The Centre has a clear mandate to be a source of information and advice for people with intellectual disability and families, and has embedded the involvement of people with intellectual disability in the governance of the Centre. The Centre's alignment with the National Roadmap for Improving the Health of People with Intellectual Disability provides direction and focus to the Centre's work. This Centre is an interesting example of a sector collaboration with beneficiaries at the centre.

2. The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare has a purpose to: develop, influence and advocate for public policies that advance the rights and wellbeing of children, young people and families and address the social, economic and cultural barriers to improving their lives. The Centre has strong links to the organisations that deliver services to children and families which results in a partnership approach between the service delivery providers and the Centre around implementing good practice. They offer frequent knowledge sharing and heavily involve senior/expert practitioners from the sector in a range of skill building and knowledge translation activities.

Implementation: Next steps

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

We have provided some commentary above.

Each of the options outlined in the Options paper have advantages and disadvantages.

Universities have experience managing Centres of Excellence and are independent of the service system. Universities also have access to high quality research and evidence about 'what works' and are experienced in information dissemination and teaching. However, one risk in a university hosting the Centre is that other universities and research centres are not equally included in the Centre, resulting in a loss of expertise from across academia. In addition, a university may be required to make a financial contribution to the Centre, meaning that smaller universities or research centres are not equally included.

Stand-alone institutions (such as the Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Welfare) have the advantage of being independent, meaning they can focus on delivering to their vision and purpose. Disadvantages include not having the financial backing of a large university or research centre and the substantial time it takes to establish an organisational structure, as has been evidenced in the start-up of the NDRP.

Some research centres or institutes exist as government agencies such as the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) or the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). While much larger, AIFS has undertaken many similar functions as those discussed in this Options Paper. Setting up a government agency signals long term investment in an issue of national significance. Disabilty employment should be considered such an issue given little has changed in twenty years and it affects a substantial portion of the Australian population at different times in the life course. One issue here is the ease, or not, with which philanthropy could co-fund a government agency.

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

1. Artificial Intelligence (AI) provides opportunities for the Centre of Excellence to streamline the way information is curated and accessed by individuals and organisations. Resources need to be

committed early in the design thinking of the Centre to ensure that this opportunity is harnessed. For example, as an evidence portal/knowledge repository, with resourcing for AI design this repository could become a bounded knowledge 'world' (i.e. separated from knowledge across the internet that is not regulated or quality checked). This knowledge world can be curated and maintained, and AI can be deployed within it to interrogate this knowledge set and quickly synthesise answers to questions. It should be noted that this still requires expert users (trained researchers) to develop robust query prompts and to scrutinise output. At its highest level of functionality, AI can be used as a chatbot interface between public users and the knowledge world, so as to aid utilisation of the knowledge set by all stakeholders. This type of design requires further development with careful consideration of ethical implications. Our suggestion is to resource this development into the APO platform. This offers way to best use the investment, not by starting from scratch but by adding new technology as an interface solution for users. This would significantly lift the utility of the knowledge repository for all audiences. The use of technology to aid knowledge access and translation is an area that CSI Swinburne is particularly interested in and have commenced skills uplift for all our staff.

2. Given our long history in the creation, use and translation of evidence in disability employment, we are aware that there is a lot of 'evidence' of varying quality that is not easily accessible or never made public. This includes:

- evaluations of employment interventions and related research (i.e. ILC Economic Participation grant evaluations)
- government data (such as supported wage data)
- service data (e.g. from ADEs).

In some cases, the data has never been available (e.g. supported wage data). In other cases, government has withdrawn from data collection and sharing (e.g. ADE data). In most cases, where evaluations have been funded by government or philanthropic organisations, there has been no requirement to make these public or share information. The Centre requires a strategy to capture and translate existing data in order to make the learnings available and to identify research gaps.

Given the investment in disability employment research being undertaken by philanthropic organisations, it would be helpful to gain agreement from them that funded evaluations should be provided to the Centre (even if deidentified) as these would make a valuable addition to the knowledge base.

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

There are already research centres, peak bodies, disability representative organisations, family organisations, philanthropy organisations, industry bodies and service providers engaged in research and development in relation to disability employment. It is therefore important that attention is paid to ensuring that these are identified and included in discussions about the Centre as it commences operations.

As outlined above, the Centre should prioritise collating and curating the existing evidence base both from Australia and overseas. This will ensure that the Centre can begin to engage in research dissemination and develop resources and training early, which will support the engagement of the sector in the Centre's work.

Finally, the Centre must be grounded in what will make a difference for people with disability and their supporters (families and carers). This requires strong engagement with and leadership by these stakeholders, commencing at this stage of design and commissioning.

CONCLUSION

CSI Swinburne thanks the Department for the opportunity to provide this response.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the research raised in this submission with the Department further.

In this regard, please do not hesitate to contact Professor Erin Wilson, ewilson@swin.edu.au

Yours sincerely

Professor Erin Wilson

Uniting Chair in Community Services Innovation
Centre for Social Impact Swinburne

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