

27th November 2023

Submission in response to the proposed Establishment of a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute.

Our response to the consultation is on behalf of over 300 member researchers of Griffith University's research centre for *Work, Organisation and Wellbeing* (WOW) and Griffith University's strategic initiative: *Inclusive Futures: Reimagining Disability*. These researchers span all disciplines and have an interest in promoting better lives for people with disability. Many of our researchers are people with disability or care for people with disability.

Griffith University is a leading voice for workplace research and for disability research and researchers. We are a member of the National Disability Research Partnership, and we are currently leading the establishment of the Queensland Disability Research Network.

We would welcome the opportunity to host representatives from your Department at a roundtable with members of the Queensland Disability Research Network to discuss this new Centre of Excellence and how it relates to Queensland workplace and disability researchers.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Paula Brough,

Director, Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing

Response to consultation questions

Question 1.1 Why do we need a Centre?

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, only 53.4% of people with disability are employed in Australia, emphasising the need for a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence (DECE) to bridge the gap between job seekers with disability and gainful employment while actively challenging misconceptions and biases. There is no challenge that requires a more interdisciplinary solution than disability, as evidenced by the recent findings of the Disability Royal Commission. The Commission has concluded that people with disability experience attitudinal, environmental, institutional and communication barriers to achieving inclusion and employment. Thus, all aspects and levels of society must respond if this exclusion, exploitation and abuse is to be prevented in future.

Question 1.2 What should be the core functions of the Centre?

We believe that the DECE should provide education and training regarding different aspects of the employment cycle for people with disability. In addition, it should establish linkages between government, academia, and industry (for instance, through networking events or sponsoring mentorship programs) to support research, job placements and promote inclusive workplaces that value diversity and understand and accommodate the specific needs of employees with disability.

The DECE is recommended to facilitate the shift in discourse surrounding people with disability to employ a strengths-based language, recognizing systemic factors that contribute to employment outcomes. The DECE should emphasise the importance of employing people with disability for a sustainable economy and increased productivity. Promote inclusive participation in employment and the economy, resulting in universally designed products, services, and practices that are accessible to all people. Innovation should focus on products and ideas that are co-designed with people with disability and can deliver on inclusive workplaces and provide opportunities for economic participation in society.

The DECE is recommended to also focus on an inclusive research environment that values lived experience as a form of expertise, involving community members and elders, and particularly those whose voices are most marginalised. The DECE can also identify the barriers preventing job seekers with disability from gaining employment and research strategies to overcome these barriers. It is essential the DECE builds evidence-based practice, as noted this includes:

- Publish high-quality research and commission new research that will continue to strengthen and guide practice.
- Undertake research and capacity building concerning particular cohorts with unique employment challenges.

- Promote evidence-based practice in employment for people with an intellectual disability.
- Translate research into practice guides.
- Be accompanied by a targeted research translation strategy, to aid design and delivery of policy and practice in disability employment.
- Build the capacity of employment service providers.
- Be an advocate for employment of people with disability.
- Deliver training and support.

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

We propose the DECE to assist a diverse range of people with disability, including physical, sensory, neurodiverse and cognitive conditions. To be inclusive, it is crucial to address the needs of different groups and ensure a comprehensive approach towards disability employment, which includes the often overlooked non-visible disabilities, including mental health conditions that may be categorised under psychosocial disability, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder. This means that DECE would tailor programs and supporting resources that consider the unique needs of different disability groups. Such endeavours may also lead to solutions that can benefit individuals with other types of disability. For instance, by promoting the destigmatisation of conditions and encouraging skill-building and refining, DECE can foster confidence in people with a disability regarding their ability to work. Furthermore, through developing and implementing different training programs and resources, the DECE can educate employers and employment support centres on how best to create a workplace culture that supports individuals with non-visible conditions, such as mental health challenges, to encourage disclosure and ensure the availability of relevant workplace accommodations.

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

The DECE would be strategically positioned to promote employment rate for people with disability through research, education and collaboration initiatives. Regarding research, the DECE would facilitate ongoing dialogue on promoting employment by providing new theoretical insights and empirical evidence on best practices for building sustainable, inclusive workplaces. The research focus would also examine barriers and opportunities for people with disability in terms of upskilling and preparing for employment to empower them. The DECE could pay specific attention to commissioning research for overlooked cohorts facing employment challenges, including people with psychosocial disability. Such targeted research will enable the DECE to identify nuanced interventions that address the distinctive needs of these groups, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of effective employment practices. This evidence can be disseminated through organising forums, conferences and symposia to promote the field of disability employment.

Industry partnerships and collaborative engagements with disability employment service providers are crucial for ensuring the design of meaningful roles, effective human resource practices and establishing accessible workplaces to address barriers to entry into employment. This can be done by raising awareness through networking events, brokering funded research programs (PhD students, for instance), and establishing industry mentorship programs, internships or apprenticeships to reduce the gap between potential candidates and future employers. In addition, having targeted training programs for employment service providers would equip them with relevant knowledge and skills to support job seekers effectively.

In addition, through engaging with policymakers and key government bodies and advocacy groups, the DECE can ensure that disability employment is prioritised in regulatory frameworks and people with disability are protected from exploitation. For instance, through round-table discussions and networking opportunities that can include employers and academia, the DECE could shape broader landscape of disability employment policies.

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

As discussed earlier, to enhance the capability and capacity of employment service providers, the DECE can develop and implement various educational resources and training programs to equip them with relevant knowledge and skills to support job seekers as well as potential employers effectively. In terms of education, the DECE's resource repository can include guides, handbooks and research articles which the employment service providers can consult to make sure they are equipped with the right knowledge and tools to facilitate job candidates. In addition, training programs can be offered to these service providers which could include areas such as how to develop effective professional development plans and upskilling for individuals with disabilities (for instance through technology), job crafting techniques, inclusive hiring practices, accommodation strategies and effective communication with individuals with disabilities. Apart from these trainings, the DECE can encourage employment service providers to attend the various conferences, networking events and symposia that involve other stakeholders so that the employment service providers can exchange insights with academia, industry and policymakers to strengthen their collective capacity. Such opportunities can also result in mentorship programs or partnerships with other stakeholders that are aimed at improving employment outcomes for people with disability.

Question 3.1 What are your views on the models presented?

The Research Centre Model is recommended as the most feasible to establish in the short-term, providing a high quality of outputs from a range of stakeholders. Moving to a Statutory Agency over time could also still be considered, especially after initial research investment has been completed.

The figure entitled '*Establishing the core functions of the Centre*' is pertinent by describing the key functions of the Centre, although the associations between the functions are recommended to be revised. Building evidence-informed practices and training capacity will likely have direct impacts upon both improved capacity and outcomes.

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

As above, the Research Centre Model is recommended as the most feasible to establish in the short-term.

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

It is important that a Centre be located within an institution that does not prioritise a geographic region, such as a specific university within a State or Capital City. Instead, a partnership model between universities is recommended, to ensure that the diverse experience of academics throughout Australia can be drawn upon and meet the needs of different geographical areas and disability employment needs. For example, within Queensland, there are unique challenges in regional areas, where access to employment services and training is minimal. To understand these challenges, it will be important to have the Queensland universities partnering with each other. Similarly, it will be important that each State can be represented to contribute to broader issues that the Centre will address. For this reason, a stand-alone institution is recommended for the Centre to ensure equal representation of universities and States across Australia.

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

The effective organisation and management of high-quality research is certainly a key priority for this Centre, with transparent calls open to all suitable parties. Improving Australia's evidence-base for sustainable pathways to employment for people with disabilities is a key priority. The involvement of individuals with lived experiences of disabilities is critical for all stages of the Centre's formation and continuation, including its staffing, membership of its external advisory board, industry and policy advocates, and research grant recipients.

Griffith University

Griffith University was created to be a different kind of university – challenging conventions, responding to trends and pioneering solutions through innovative teaching and research. Since its beginning, Griffith has been deeply connected to the Asia-Pacific region, environmentally aware, open to the community and industry focused. Always ahead of its time, Griffith introduced Australia's first degrees in a range of important areas, including modern Asian studies and environmental science.

Ranking in the top 2% of universities worldwide, Griffith has come to be regarded as one of Australia's most innovative tertiary institutions and one of the most influential universities in the Asia-Pacific region. Everything we do – from education to research and community engagement – is designed to meet the new world in which everything interconnects and is focused on improving people's lives. Our mission is to deliver the project objectives and to add value to client operations through the intelligent application of our knowledge, and our technical and management expertise.

Griffith University is a member of the National Disability Research Partnership and leading the establishment of the Queensland Disability Research Network. Griffith University was ranked #1 university (The Australian's Research Awards 2022-2023) in the country for research and innovation on disability and rehabilitation.

Griffith Inclusive Futures research beacon supports an interdisciplinary alliance of over 300 people with disability, researchers from all disciplines, designers and educators, as well as health and social service providers, industry and government bodies. We seek to deliver innovative solutions and shape policy to improve quality of life—through sport and recreation, education and work, and communities that promote health, wellbeing and social connection. We aim to work with people with disability, promoting disability leadership, to create products, services and places focused on reducing impairment and increasing participation in a reimagined, inclusive society.

Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing

The Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing (WOW) was established in 2007. Its membership incorporates scholars from human resource management, industrial relations, organisational behaviour, psychology, and other fields researching in the area of work. WOW provides a strong research culture as evidenced by its quality, and internationally regarded researchers who are well connected with global colleagues.

WOW ranks #2 in Australia and #8 globally for cited research on industrial relations, employment relations, organisational behaviour and human resource management. WOW implements a robust framework for focused research performance based on “rigorous academic processes to bridge the gap between workplace research, practice and policy to meet the demands of a constantly changing and adapting business world.” WOW's focus is thus on translatable, interdisciplinary, internationally-focused research that drives improvements in organisational productivity.

One of WOW's three key research themes is *diversity and inclusion at work*. We currently are conducting research projects examining different routes to sustainable employment for people with disability.

