



Establishing a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence

Feedback to Options Paper

27 November 2023

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Introduction

The Salvation Army Employment Plus (EPlus) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the design of a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence (DECoE) through this our response to the Options Paper October 2023.

The Salvation Army in Australia

The Salvation Army (TSA) is an international Christian movement with a presence in 128 countries. Operating in Australia since 1880, TSA is one of the largest providers of social services and programs for people experiencing hardship, injustice and social exclusion. TSA has been supporting people impacted by unemployment long before the inception of government welfare and employment service programs in Australia. In 1890, TSA opened a free labour bureau in Melbourne to help people find jobs, the first formally operating employment bureau in Australia.

TSA provides more than 1,000 social programs and activities through networks of social support services, community centres and churches across the country. In addition to supporting communities across Australia with employment services, we address the greatest areas of need through:

- Addiction Recovery Services
- Community Services
- Emergency and Disaster Response Services
- Family and Domestic Violence Services
- Homelessness Services and Housing Supply
- Youth Services
- Aged Care
- Financial Support and Advice
- Chaplaincy

The Salvation Army Employment Plus

EPlus has been providing employment services on behalf of the Australian Government since 1998. Over this time, we have supported more than 710,000 people experiencing unemployment into employment. Today, we support over 32,000 participants across a range of employment programs and our employer network of 10,000 Australian businesses enable us to offer our participants fulfilling career pathways across a wide range of industries. EPlus has been a DES provider since 2018. We currently support around 1,400 participants across 8 diverse Employment Service Areas in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory.

We also provide a growing number of community-based employment services through local expressions of TSA, which support disadvantaged people in the communities we serve. In New South Wales and Victoria, our *EPlus Local* employment program provides employment support services to asylum seekers and refugees.

Our participants benefit from the close relationship between EPlus and other services delivered by TSA, including homelessness and housing support, youth services, recovery services, financial counselling and emergency relief. Our closely integrated services ensure seamless, holistic support for our participants against a range of complex social, economic, housing and cultural barriers.

Feedback to Options Paper

In general, we strongly support the proposal and agree with much of the content in the Options Paper. Therefore, we have provided the following general response, which focuses primarily on the topics addressed in questions 1 and 2 in the Options Paper.

Core functions and objectives of a Centre of Excellence

The Options Paper emphasizes the importance of improving employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities and enhancing the capabilities of employment service providers as the main drivers for establishing a DECoE. We support these objectives and believe that the DECoE could also provide assistance to a wider range of organizations involved in or connected to employment services. Additionally, it could evaluate and provide recommendations on the overall effectiveness of the system, drawing on best practices from both Australia and other countries.

Increasing employment outcomes for people with disability

This goal is sufficient justification for the establishment of a DECoE on its own, with all other objectives being secondary. This justification would be better defined if it expanded beyond the important objective of increasing the participation rate of people with disabilities in employment to also include qualitative objectives such as ensuring secure employment, fair pay and conditions, preventing discrimination in the workplace, and promoting equal access to career advancement in line with personal aspirations.

Increasing the capacity of employment service providers

We see a significant opportunity for the DECoE, if adequately designed and resourced, to increase the quality and effectiveness of services delivered by employment service providers. The existing ongoing continuous improvement efforts of providers would be enhanced by a DECoE through the provision of information and resources that offer greater clarity on the most effective service improvements, practical guidance on implementation of research findings, relevant benchmarking information, and improved staff training resources, among other potential benefits. These resources could not only enhance the effectiveness of a service but also expedite the development time required to implement service improvements.

'Whole of system' remit encompassing other supports

The Options Paper correctly focuses on how the DECoE could help DES providers improve their services. It also correctly mentions other stakeholders who could benefit, including people with disabilities and their families, employers, the supported employment services and disability advocates.

By expanding the DECoE's scope further to include all aspects of support provided to help people with disabilities find employment, the centre could play a crucial role in evaluating and recommending improvements to the entire system. This would involve identifying issues and opportunities for improvement that go beyond the control of individual actors within the network of supports available to individuals with disabilities on their journey to meaningful employment.

For example, the DECoE could provide information, advice and resources to the following organisations.

- **Government departments**, such as the Department of Social Services, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, the Department of Human Services, and Treasury, could benefit from the work of the DECoE in governing existing programs and designing future programs.

- **Services Australia** plays a crucial role in the overall operation of the DES, Workforce Australia, and other employment-related programs accessed by people with disabilities. This includes various administrative and procedural practices that impact thousands of people with disabilities each week, assessments that determine service access, and the provision of information to empower users of the service to fully understand what is available to them within the services they are accessing.
- **Workforce Australia Online** has become a significant provider of employment services to people with disabilities and an integrated element of the total system. Hence, it should be included alongside other elements within the scope of a DECoE.
- **NDIS and other disability service providers** could be assisted by evaluating interfaces with employment services (including identifying best practices) and providing information on how to best support people in their services in relation to their employment goals.
- The DECoE should also provide assistance to **universities** to encourage and enable further research into aspects of disability employment.
- **Auditors** undertaking certification of a Provider's compliance with the National Standards for Disability Services could benefit from more information and resources published by the DECoE. This is because the principles and standards involve subjective interpretation in the context of a system that should be continuously improving.

Other considerations

In answering the questions of which model should be used and where the DECoE should be situated, the overriding principles should be that the DECoE should:

- have a tightly defined overriding goal (see above) that informs all plans, priorities and activities;
- draw from a diversity of stakeholder perspectives in developing its agenda within the scope of this overriding goal;
- be equipped to deliver research that is academically rigorous, can be implemented with impact in practice, and is widely promoted;
- should be free to deploy a variety of methods according to need and effectiveness, such as directly undertaking as well as commissioning its various projects;
- be independent of government or any one or other particular stakeholder group, yet with a bias towards of people with disability seeking employment as primary stakeholders and also employers; and
- be transparent about its plans, activities, and findings and active in sharing information and promoting best practice in a variety of ways.

The impact of a centre of excellence will necessarily be indirect, given that implementation of the work of the centre will be the responsibility of other organisations. Therefore the DECoE should be well equipped to communicate persuasively and in terms that the target audience(s) can understand and adopt. Whilst the objectives of the DECoE are urgent, there should be a recognition that, as an influencer (not a direct actor in this space), the effectiveness of the DECoE should be assessed over a longer rather than shorter period.

Further Information

Please feel free to contact us at any time if you would like clarification or further information about any of the content of this paper.

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