

SECCA – Response to Options Paper: Establishing a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence

Sexuality Education Counselling and Consultancy Agency (SECCA) was founded in 1991 in Western Australia (WA) by a small group of professionals working in the well-being sector, whose own lives involved people with a disability. SECCA's focus is to eliminate the gap in education and therapeutic support for people with disability regarding their sexuality, sexual health, and relationships. We aim to expand an individual (or individual's) knowledge and understanding of issues relating to sexuality and healthy relationships, with a view to increasing safety, autonomy, and life-enriching experiences. SECCA has supported people with disability, their parents, carers, and professional supports for three decades. Our expertise in education, counselling, and consultancy in relation to human sexuality, sexual health, and relationships puts us in the unique position to understand the nuances of sexuality and disability, and how these interplay in the complex setting of the workplace.

SECCA also deeply appreciates how critical it is to understand the needs of people with disability (and to respond to these) within specific and situated contexts, including the work environment. In acknowledgement of the complex work settings people with disability may navigate (including Australian Disability Enterprises, open employment, or supported employment settings), SECCA has recently expanded our first-of-its-kind web application: the [SECCA App](#), used to help guide, reinforce, and teach sexuality and relationship skills to include "Going to Work" section. This was created through consultation with teachers, education assistants, therapists and people with disability to help provide scaffolded learning on the necessary skills to build and maintain relationships within the workplace. These include skills in understanding and applying public and private, relationship differentiation, boundaries, consent, appropriate and inappropriate behaviours, hygiene and presentation at work, managing conflict, bullying, and communication skills.

SECCA acknowledges that the formation of a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence (the Centre) as a 'one-stop shop' is a significant undertaking and commitment from the Australian Government. We know the labour force participation rate for people with disability (15-64 years of age) is 30.7% lower than the general population¹. The result is that people with disability are further socially isolated and unable to gain further skills, which can impact mental, physical, and emotional health². Recent research³ points to

¹ [https://includeability.gov.au/resources-employers/disability-and-employment-australia#:~:text=The%20labour%20force%20participation%20rate,%25\)%%20to%202018%20\(53.4%25\)](https://includeability.gov.au/resources-employers/disability-and-employment-australia#:~:text=The%20labour%20force%20participation%20rate,%25)%%20to%202018%20(53.4%25).). And <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/disability-and-labour-force>

² <https://apm.net.au/job-seekers/resources/how-employment-helps-people-with-disability#:~:text=4%20major%20benefits%20of%20being%20an%20employee&text=Finding%20a%20job%20can%20improve,in%20workplace%20activities%20and%20events.&text=Many%20employers%20have%20on%20the,workshops%20or%20further%20education%20courses.>

³ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-10-812sp.pdf>; <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/participation-people-with-disabilities-workplace/docview/2169502835/se-2?accountid=10382>; <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/lps105428/pwtd.pdf>

workplace barriers as an impediment to people with disability achieving and maintaining employment. Therefore, this evidence has been used to inform the following responses to the options paper.

1.1 Why do we need a Centre?

Expanding upon the information provided in the options paper, it is essential to acknowledge that the social model of disability and the human rights model of disability intertwine and should be considered when building and implementing solutions. That is, acknowledging the systemic barriers to meaningful employment that have been long established in society and the prevailing attitudes and values on what forms and terms of employment are acceptable for people with disability. Additionally, the Centre must acknowledge the implications of building design, workplace design, and in-built inflexibility in workplaces. SECCA advocates that equal opportunity should be afforded to people with disability, and that people with disability should be meaningfully remunerated for their labour commensurate with fair work standards set out for the Australian population.

In summary, the Centre needs to be able to provide solutions that are not just focused on the person with disability but attend to the structural inequalities and inequities that are pervasive throughout the labour force.

1.2 What should be the core functions of the Centre?

Whilst SECCA affirms the value of building the capacity of employment service providers, having a quality control function, and consolidating data, we note that pervasive negative attitudes and values throughout society of the usefulness and value of people with disability as employees and valuable members of economic society persist. It is through education and support that both the general public, employment service providers, and potential employers can help reframe these attitudes and values and ensure that change can truly be enacted.

Concerns throughout the processes of recruitment and organisational attraction, employee selection, social integration, and performance management may require accommodations⁴ for people with disability to have equitable opportunities to gain and maintain employment. However, due to long-term structural and systemic barriers, such accommodations are often unknown to people without disability if they have not had sufficient experience or education in understanding the needs of people with varied disabilities. People with disability may be unsure of their rights or have not had the opportunity to develop self-advocacy skills and thus may be unable to ask for the reasonable accommodations they require. Therefore, educating the general public, employment service providers, and potential employers allows for a greater understanding of accommodations and can help employers or other coworkers assist in promoting an accommodating workplace.

⁴ <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/participation-people-with-disabilities-workplace/docview/2169502835/se-2?accountid=10382>

Further, in acknowledgement of the recommendation (7.30) of the final report of the Disability Royal Commission to phase out Australian Disability Enterprises over time, significant resources will be required to facilitate a supported transition of this workforce into inclusive, open employment.

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

SECCA affirms the potential value of the Centre assisting people with disability and their families, employment service providers, employers, supported employment services, and disability advocates. However, SECCA wishes to note that carers, the general public, human resources organisations, and universities are well placed to assist the Centre. SECCA also believe that parents, carers, family members, professional support, and education professionals who work to support students in their later years of schooling can act as facilitators of employment for people with disability. Further, in line with the recommendations (7.29) of the Disability Royal Commission, to pursue an open employment first approach in the NDIS employment strategy, Local Area Coordinators, National Disability Insurance Agency planners and support coordinators are an additional important target audience for education, consciousness-raising, and capacity-building.

As mentioned above, the value of education cannot be understated; a situation that all people unwittingly uphold requires the help of all people to address the problem and implement the solution. By targeting small subgroups in a fragmented fashion, the Centre may inadvertently neglect people who may be able to assist in dismantling the barriers (e.g., coworkers, human resource departments, university training).

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

As stated above, SECCA believes, through experience, discussions with people with disability, and empirical research, that education is the highest and most valuable site of change, particularly around attitudes and values. However, we also acknowledge the value of total and complete consultation and collaboration with a broad range of people with disability, their families, and carers to ensure that the Centre can fulfil the exact needs and wants of people with disability. SECCA also affirms that these consultations should be paid at an appropriate rate, for the entire duration of the time the people with disability are involved, and in recognition of their expertise. This ensures that the Centre is modelling the importance of valuing the time and expertise of people with disability.

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

SECCA sees the value of employment service providers; however, it also acknowledges that people who work within these provider centres may not be skilled enough to understand how to support people with a broad range of disabilities (cognitive, developmental, intellectual, physical, etc.). Therefore, it would be expected that upskilling employees to communicate appropriately and effectively with different communication levels and skills may be a necessary increase to the capability of employment service providers. Further, employees of disability service providers may be prime candidates for values and attitudes education around the employment of people with disability. For example, ensuring that

employment service providers are aware of key models such as the human rights model of disability, and models of supported decision-making.

3.1 What are your views on the models presented?

The models presented within the options paper appear to highlight different aspects of the overall problem the Centre is trying to address. No single model provides a holistic solution, appearing to be singular in their nature and addressing only small parts of the problem each. This limits their output and, thus, any impact from the models. SECCA believes that a combined approach would provide a better and stronger output for people with disability and all other stakeholders.

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

As mentioned above, SECCA would recommend an integrated model approach that ensures that the most significant impact can be achieved and that research can be conducted and resources developed (Research Centre Model), disseminated widely with practical guides (Clearinghouse Model), experts engaged in providing appropriate training [and education] (Evidence-informed Training Hub), and effective and standardised evaluation, and reporting of outcomes conducted (Statutory Agency).

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

SECCA affirms the value of a standard centralised 'location' for the Centre. However, due to the integrated model proposed, it is likely that a combination of Governmental agency, university, stand-alone institutions, and school-based systems would provide a more robust overall support for the proposed aim of the Centre.

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

As previously mentioned, SECCA affirms the value of appropriate, consistent consultation that has occurred all throughout the process of designing, creating, and implementing the Centre. This will also ensure appropriate buy-in and support from people with disability, their families and carers, ensuring that they promote and support the success and outcomes of the Centre. SECCA also notes the value of ensuring that rural, regional, and remote areas are included to ensure that the Centre suitably serves them. Further to this, appropriate and considered cultural sensitivity to the multicultural nature of Australia, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, individuals from migrant backgrounds, and racialised communities, is necessary to ensure the Centre can meet the needs of all members of Australia's population.

SECCA reaffirms that all people with disability deserve the same rights as people without disability to inclusion, including within the workforce. This includes the choice of access to employment settings with varying degrees of support structures in place, fair remuneration for labour, and the ability to maintain the job through appropriate workplace policies, procedures, and physical set-up.