



## **Vision Australia Submission on Proposal for a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence**

Submission to: Department of Social Services

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Vision Australia is providing comment on the proposal to establish a disability employment Centre of Excellence (COE) as outlined in the Options Paper produced to inform the consultation. While we are not, in principle, opposed to a COE, we strongly believe that if it is not informed by knowledge of the multi-faceted nature of employment outcomes, and if it simply performs research that tells us what we already know about barriers to employment, then it will fail just as comprehensively as the many other policies and programs designed to increase the employment of people with a disability over the past 30 years. If the COE does not, in its structure and operation, reflect the positive employment outcomes that it is designed to achieve, then there will be little point in having it and, in fact, it could do more harm than good by diverting attention and resources away from the fundamental, socially constructed barriers that limit employment outcomes for people with a disability.

### **Whole-of-society barriers require whole-of-society solutions**

In our response to the Disability Royal Commission's Employment Issues Paper, we argued strongly that the only way to create new pathways to meaningful employment for people who are blind or have low vision is to implement interconnected and coordinated strategies that are anchored in the family, developed in the school and tertiary education systems, embraced by employers, supported by governments, and embedded in society as a whole. We included a counter-factual, "what-if" scenario that illustrates the need for a wholistic approach when seeking to create or improve positive employment outcomes. We reproduce this scenario below as it has particular relevance for a disability employment Centre of Excellence.

#### **Emily's story**

"Emily was born totally blind as the result of Leber's Congenital Amaurosis, a recessive genetic disorder primarily affecting the retina, and which can cause various levels of vision impairment, including, as in Emily's case, total blindness.

When her parents received Emily's diagnosis, the ophthalmologist gave them a brochure about the early childhood services provided by Vision Australia. He strongly encouraged them to be proactive and support Emily as she began the process of developing the skills she would need throughout her life. The ophthalmologist assured them that with these skills, the right supports and the appropriate assistive technology, Emily would grow up to be self-motivated, able to achieve her goals and certain to find a job that would be fulfilling and remunerative.

Emily's parents were encouraged and reassured, and with the support and advice they received from Vision Australia, they became proactive in Emily's development.

By the time Emily started school, she was curious about the world around her, had some basic orientation and mobility skills, and was excited at the prospect of

learning braille. Her class and support teachers realised that braille was a primary key to literacy for Emily, and her parents encouraged her by arranging for braille labels to be attached to household items such as the microwave oven and salt-and-pepper shakers and included on birthday cards.

They also liaised with teachers and adaptive technology specialists about the most suitable technology for Emily at different stages of her progression through school. They worked closely with her teachers to make sure Emily was learning the extra skills (known as the Expanded Core Curriculum) she would need to be independent and well-prepared once she left school.

As she grew older, Emily's parents and teachers encouraged her to start thinking about further study and the kind of job she would like. Emily had a broad range of interests and hobbies, so she decided that she would apply for university and study for an arts degree to give her the flexibility to explore various subjects before making a decision about her career.

In the meantime, the careers advisor at her school arranged some part-time work so Emily could get some work experience in the same way her sighted peers did. The robust adoption of accessible information and communication technology (ICT) procurement policies by all levels of government meant that most computer systems and software used in the private sector were also accessible. It was not difficult to find a local business prepared to give Emily some work experience so that she was able to learn about the basics of workplace expectations and requirements.

During her last year of school, Emily's parents and teachers encouraged her to make contact with the disability support staff at a number of universities. When she did, they all assured her that the online learning systems and course content would be accessible and that there would be ample supports if she needed any reasonable adjustments made. They explained to Emily that universities had all adopted accessible ICT procurement policies for their online learning systems and had implemented international accessibility standards in the document formats used for their course content.

After Emily's exam results came out, she received offers from a number of universities. Once she had accepted an offer, she used funding from her NDIS plan to arrange for an orientation and mobility instructor to familiarise her with the public transport route from her home to the university.

Emily's study program included both on-campus and online components. Overall, she enjoyed studying at uni, and because she did not have to spend time and energy dealing with accessibility barriers, she was able to become involved in campus social life and write for the student newspaper. She found that she had a keen interest in public policy and public interest advocacy.

After graduating, Emily decided to study for a Master's degree. During the semester break she moved out of home with the encouragement and support of her parents, who wanted her to be independent. Emily found what she called the "Goldilocks apartment" – not too far away from mum and dad, but not too close either. When Emily was at school, her parents had encouraged her to explore the kitchen and cooking, and she was eventually able to prepare meals for the family from time to time. Once she was living by herself, cooking was already a familiar activity for her.

With her Master's degree completed Emily began to think about employment. She successfully applied for a government graduate program. She already had a good knowledge of word-processing software and was a competent touch typist, so she quickly became a productive member of the team. At the end of the program, Emily applied for a number of jobs in the public service and the private sector, and she received several offers to choose from. The work experience she had gained while at school, as well as her participation in the graduate program, greatly helped to put Emily in the best position to secure a job.

When Emily started work, she had thus already been preparing for most of her life: she had good technology and keyboarding skills, she was comfortable in social situations, and she had high self-esteem and feelings of positive self-worth.

Her employer was located in a new building that incorporated a lift system with a touchscreen interface, but there was an "accessibility mode" that included audio output. After a bit of practice Emily was able to use the lifts easily and independently. She was pleased to find that the rooms in the building had tactile and braille numbers on the doors, and it was easy for her to locate particular meeting rooms. There were also a number of Bluetooth beacons strategically placed around the office space. These beacons transmitted information to her smartphone about her current location and how to find other points of interest in the building.

The department's learning management system was accessible as the result of its accessible ICT procurement policy. Emily was able to participate in professional development activities on an equal basis with her sighted colleagues. After two years working in the department, Emily successfully applied for a more senior role.

This required her to relocate to another building in a different suburb. While she had to become familiar with new transport routes, she found the overall accessibility of the new workplace was as good as her previous one. After she obtained Job Access funding for an updated braille note taker and some minor workplace modifications, she was able to adapt quickly and focus on the requirements of the new role."

Emily's story is a dream to the majority of Australians who are blind or have low vision. However, it is a dream that a COE must help become a reality. Emily's story makes it

clear that “job-readiness” and positive employer attitudes are not enough to guarantee positive employment outcomes. The physical workplace must be accessible, and IT systems and processes must comply with accessibility standards. We know of people who are blind or have low vision who have accepted offers of employment in government departments only to find that the computer systems they require to do their job are not accessible using assistive technology. They had all the skills needed, their employer had positive attitudes, but they still could not do the job as the result of accessibility barriers completely beyond their control or ability to influence. Other clients have told us that they were not even able to get to their job interview because the building had an inaccessible lift destination control system.

We have almost two decades’ worth of research into the barriers that prevent or limit the employment of people with a disability, including people who are blind or have low vision. We don’t need a COE if all it does is conduct further research that simply reminds us of what we already know.

A COE must, if it is to be of any use at all, be a microcosm of the wider reality that it is seeking to achieve. It must, therefore, be co-designed with, under the leadership of, and staffed by, people with a disability. Its physical location must be fully accessible to people with different disabilities; its IT systems must comply with all relevant accessibility standards, and the way it organises and conducts its activities must also be fully accessible to staff with a range of disabilities, including staff who are blind or have low vision. These are some of the necessary conditions that must be met by society in general for people with a disability to have equal access to employment opportunities, and if a COE does not model how these conditions can be implemented in practice, then it is hard to see how it could achieve its purpose. We are not aware of any COE or research institution in the disability space in Australia that currently fulfils all these requirements, so an employment COE would necessitate a thoroughgoing transformation of the culture of such centres, especially if the COE were to be located, physically or structurally, within a university.

At the same time, we think there is merit in exploring the feasibility of establishing a COE whose location would be distributed across a number of businesses whose practices demonstrated excellence in successfully eliminating particular barriers to employment. Such an approach may give the COE more credibility than one whose location was quarantined from the mainstream employment landscape.

Regardless of the model used to establish and operate the disability employment COE, it will be essential for it to have strong links with the disability sector, and to determine its research agenda based on discussions with organisations in that sector, representing a range of disabilities. If the COE focuses exclusively or primarily on one disability, then it will not be a disability employment COE at all.

## **About Vision Australia**

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia's most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include: registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care Aids and Equipment, Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support, Seeing Eye Dogs, National Library Services, Early childhood and education services, and Felix Library for 0-7 year olds, employment services, production of alternate formats, Vision Australia Radio network, and national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped, Spectacles Program for the NSW Government, Advocacy and Engagement. We also work collaboratively with Government, businesses, and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and fully exercising rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 30,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of our organisation. Vision Australia is well placed to advise governments, business and the community on challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, with people who are blind or have low vision representing the voice and needs of clients of our organisation to the board and management.

Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 15% of total staff having vision impairment.