



Australian Government

Department of Social Services

Disability Employment Centre of Excellence

**Consultation Report
April 2024**

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Social Services (the department) acknowledges the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia on which we gather, live, work and stand. We acknowledge all traditional custodians, their Elders past, present and emerging as we pay our respects to their continuing connection to their culture, community, land, sea and water.

Introduction

The Australian Government recognises that many people with disability face barriers to employment, preventing their full social and economic participation in Australian society. As at 2018, people with disability were more than twice as likely to be unemployed compared to those without a disability.¹

While there has been significant Government investment to increase employment for people with disability, more needs to be done.

Recognising this, in 2022, the Government made an election commitment to establish a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence (the Centre) to improve employment outcomes for people with disability by increasing the capacity of employment service providers and employers.

Previous discussion papers, consultation reports and submissions from consultations on the New Disability Employment Support Model and the Disability Employment Strategy (Employ My Ability) highlighted the need for a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence. This feedback proposed a range of objectives, roles and scope for such a centre. You can read these discussion papers and consultation reports at www.engage.dss.gov.au.

Consultation process

Between October and November 2023, the department undertook a public consultation on the design of the Centre. The department developed the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence Options Paper (options paper) to seek feedback on what the Centre should look like. Submissions closed officially on 27 November 2023, with late submissions accepted up to February 2024.

The options paper posed a range of functions the Centre could undertake, including:

- delivery of core and supplementary training models for employment services
- provision of training and customised support through a multi-channel system
- design of innovative practise and development of research-led practice programs
- distribution of evidence-informed best-practice tools and resources
- establishing an evidence informed practice base, and
- building and maintaining a knowledge base of what works and best practice.

¹ Employment Targeted Action Plan, Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031, 2021, p. 2.

Purpose of this document

This report summarises the feedback received from the public consultation on the options paper:

1. Why do we need a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence?
2. What should a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence do?
3. How should a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence work?
4. Who should the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence assist?

Submissions were received from a range of stakeholders, including:

- People with disability, their families and carers
- Academics
- Peak bodies
- Employment service providers
- Disability Employment Service (DES) Providers
- Australian Disability Enterprises (ADE) Providers
- Social Enterprises (non-ADE)
- Government departments, and
- Other interested parties.

The department received 89 submissions in response to the options paper released on DSS Engage on 17 October 2023. Input was also received through discussions held by the department with a range of individual stakeholders, and through forums, the department participated in during the consultation period. The department would like to thank everyone who provided a submission and engaged in meetings. Their input will contribute to the development of the Centre. The department would also like to note that the feedback received does not necessarily reflect the views of the department or Government.

Key feedback

Submissions provided valuable insights on why a Centre is needed, what the Centre should do and how the Centre should work. A summary is presented below.

The most common reasons listed on the need for a Centre is to:

- increase employment outcomes for people with disability
- undertake and analyse research and provide training and resources to disability employment service providers
- include disability expertise and lived experience
- foster collaboration, and
- increase the overall capability of employers and service providers.

Common points on what the Centre should do included:

- build capability of service providers and employers
- undertake research and analysis, and drive innovation
- influence policy and advocate for people with disability
- engage and collaborate across the disability employment sector
- provide quality control and standards
- support employer engagement
- promote inclusive work practices
- facilitate employment transitions, and
- increase public awareness.

Various submissions also shared consensus that the Centre should be implemented to provide evidence-informed resources and tools, ensuring it captures the latest research on what works in disability employment, and translating this so that it can be practiced by employment service providers, employers, people with disability and their families and carers.

Submissions were generally supportive of the Centre being a stand-alone institution, governed by a board or council with equitable stakeholder representation from the Commonwealth government, people with disability/advocates for people with disability, employment service providers and employers.

Why do we need a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence?

Most stakeholders shared the view that a Centre is needed to improve employment outcomes for job seekers with disability.

To increase employment outcomes for people with disability

Many submissions expressed concerns regarding labour force participation rates. Specifically, how employment rates of people with disability have remained persistently low for the last thirty years despite a sustained period of economic growth and structural changes, which should and could have benefited people with disability.

Feedback highlighted a range of issues present in the disability employment sector impacting employment outcomes for people with disability, including:

- misconception in what 'works' for people with disability in the workplace and the types of jobs people with disability are capable of doing
- there is no one solution to increasing disability employment, with a range of solutions required
- the way people with disability are prepared for work
- lack of training for disability service providers in supporting people with disability to find work
- inaccurate information around employment pathways and available employment opportunities
- lack of accurate data and insights around people with disability in the workforce
- high rate of staff turnover in the disability employment sector
- casual nature of available jobs and limited support to find sustainable and long-term work, and
- absence of choice and control of people with disability in their own employment.

*"The current Disability Employment Service network is well established, but the providers need more help understanding disability, so they can help their patrons to better understand their disability, how it changes them and affects their ability to find and maintain employment. To explore if they can continue doing similar jobs, or if they need to look at different options better suited to their current circumstances."*²

Several submissions written by people with disability, their families and carers emphasised the need for meaningful employment and noted lived experiences of being placed in roles that were unsuitable.

These submissions noted the employment system needs to improve its capacity to recognise the skills and interests of individual job seekers with disability and more effectively tailor these to job vacancies. It was considered that doing this would greatly increase economic participation of people with disability in a range of industries.

² Anonymous submission to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence- Options paper 2023

Many submissions stated that physically inaccessible workplaces and community and employer attitudes continue to create barriers to employment. Several submissions emphasised the need for education on the stigma that surrounds employing people with disability and labelled this as a major issue the Centre should address.

“Australia needs a new approach to disability employment to overcome the entrenched barriers which exclude people with disability from the workforce”.³

Submissions also raised the need for the Centre to play a role in bringing stakeholders together to fully understand the benefits inclusive hiring practises can bring to an organisation.

To undertake and analyse research and provide training and resources to the sector

Some submissions suggested that the Centre should engage in research and evaluation, while at the same time providing practical training and resources to the sector.

“While research, training and programs related to disability employment already exist, a Centre of Excellence could provide an easy-to-access, centralised hub of information for a range of stakeholders, actively promote and foster best-practice approaches, and build organisational capability.”⁴

Submissions also noted that the Centre should not duplicate existing effective services but work with these to complement each other to better strengthen the disability employment sector.

Submissions raised the lack of understanding around the failures of the sector and ways to improve them. It was indicated that this has contributed to cycles of poor decision making around employment of people with disability. To curb this, feedback suggested the Centre invest in in-depth research to better understand these failings, and further, use this to develop innovative ways to enhance the sector.

To include expertise and lived experience

Some submissions highlighted the Centre needs to provide access to all employment pathways and types of disability, suggesting this could be done through employing people with disability and lived experience and tapping into their insights to contribute to the Centre’s work.

To foster collaboration

Several submissions indicated that the sector does not work together or cooperate in a way that increases employment opportunities for people with disability. The notion of using the Centre to implement partnerships between employers, disability employment providers, the Commonwealth and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was a common theme amongst feedback provided.

³ Submission by Australian Disability Network (formerly Australian Network on Disability) to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence- Options paper 2023

⁴Submission by Volunteering ACT to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence- Options paper 2023

To increase the capability and capacity of service providers and employers

Numerous submissions reinforced the need for capacity building of service providers and employers so they can better assist people with varying types of disability and support them into appropriate roles.

Feedback highlighted the need for the Centre to encompass:

- a bringing together of what works within disability employment
- centralised hub of information accessible to a range of stakeholders
- promotion of best practise approaches surrounding the delivery of employment supports
- a 'one-stop-shop' for information, research, training and evidence based resources to support people with disability into employment and accessible to a range of stakeholders; and
- a coordinated approach to share existing knowledge and learnings on employment pathways.

What should the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence do?

The options paper sought feedback on what the core functions of the Centre should be.

Feedback received noted the core functions for a Centre should be to:

- build capability
- undertake research and analysis and be innovative
- influence policy and advocate for people with disability
- engage and collaborate
- support DES providers deliver quality services
- support employer engagement and promote inclusive employment practices
- facilitate employment transitions, and
- increase public awareness and allow for intersectionality.

Further detail describing each core function is provided below.

Build capability

Multiple submissions noted the Centre should strive towards enhancing the capabilities of DES providers and employers in supporting inclusive employment.

To build capability, many submissions recommended the development and delivery of comprehensive training programs would be required, both accredited and non-accredited. Submissions noted that any training developed would need to be tailored to the nuanced needs of supporting employment for people with disability and that regional and remote training needs would need to be addressed to ensure nationwide accessibility.

“Training developed for employment service provider staff should be both practical and theoretical, fit for purpose, and dynamic, based on the latest and ever-changing research”.⁵

Undertake research and analysis and be innovative

Some submissions also sought the establishment of the Centre as a leading entity in disability employment research, focusing on innovative practices and effective strategies for workplace inclusion.

There was also some support for the Centre to commission and conduct research that expands the evidence base for best practices in disability employment. Some emphasised using already available research and evidence to focus on the translation of research into useable and practical guidance for the disability sector.

The need for collaboration with domestic and international partners to bring radical changes and improvements in employment strategies was noted by some respondents.

⁵ Submission by atWork to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence - Options paper 2023

Several submissions flagged the need for a central repository for data on disability employment, facilitating informed decision-making and strategy development, including the collection, analysis, and dissemination of data related to employment trends, outcomes, and effective practices.

Furthermore, a central repository for data would also provide stakeholders with access to meaningful data insights to guide program development and evaluation.

Influence policy and advocate for people with disability

Several submissions indicated support for the Centre to inform and influence policy making to improve disability employment outcomes.

Several stakeholders suggested research findings and stakeholder feedback should be used to advocate for policy reforms. In addition, engagement with policymakers at all levels was suggested to ensure that disability employment strategies are evidence-based and aligned with best practices.

Engage and collaborate

The submissions also stated a strong desire for the Centre to foster a collaborative environment among all stakeholders involved in disability employment, including service providers, employers, people with disability, and their families.

“The Centre should promote collaboration across employers, employment service providers, community organisations and other stakeholders, highlighting the significance of collective efforts for sustainable impact”.⁶

Stakeholder engagement and collaboration could include creating platforms for dialogue and exchange, such as forums, workshops, and online communities that encourage the sharing of experiences, challenges, and successes to cultivate a community of practice.

Support DES providers deliver quality services

Many submissions noted the need for high quality DES services delivery and suggested the centre plays a role in supporting DES providers deliver high quality and consistent services, in alignment with the [DES Quality Framework](#).

Support employer engagement and promote inclusive employment practices

Various submissions identified the need for an increase in the number of employers providing sustainable and inclusive employment opportunities for people with disability.

To achieve this goal, a number of submissions recommended the development of resources and tools for employers to navigate the process of hiring and supporting employees with disability, with case studies promoted to highlight successful employment of people with disability. Guidance on workplace modifications, accommodations, and on boarding processes was also suggested.

⁶ Submission by Prospect to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence – Options Paper 2023

Several submissions also indicated the desire for the promotion of inclusive employment practices, including working to create workplaces that are accessible and welcoming to people with disability and advocating for systemic changes that support diversity and inclusion.

Facilitate employment transitions

Many submissions noted that the Centre could play a leading role in supporting the transition of individuals from supported to open employment, aligning with the principles of social and economic inclusion.

One submission specifically called out the need for the Centre to support people with disability who seek to be self-employed and those who choose to participate in unpaid work opportunities, as pathways to paid work, such as internships and student work experience placements.

Increase public awareness and allow for intersectionality

Multiple submissions noted strong support for the Centre to implement campaigns to raise public awareness about the capabilities and value of people with disability in the workforce, aiming to shift societal attitudes and dispel myths surrounding disability employment.

There was also support amongst submissions to ensure that the Centre's initiatives account for intersectionality, particularly focusing on the unique challenges faced by First Nations people with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse peoples, women and other underrepresented cohorts.

Overall, the submissions highlight that the Centre could be positioned to play a pivotal role in transforming the landscape of disability employment in Australia. Through its comprehensive functions and strategic objectives, the Centre could assist to address critical gaps, foster innovation, and promote inclusivity, ultimately contributing to enhanced employment outcomes for people with disability and a more inclusive society.

How should the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence work?

What model should the Centre use?

The options paper outlined numerous models for Centres of Excellence that exist both domestically and internationally, operating in the government, private and not-for-profit sectors, including:

- research centres
- clearinghouses
- training hubs, and
- statutory agencies.

Many submissions stated that the impact of the Centre would be limited if it only focussed on a single model. Therefore, most of the submissions recommended that the Centre be formed as a combination of an evidence-informed training hub with a research function. The majority of stakeholders also recommended the Centre should not overlap with effective existing mechanisms such as JobAccess.

“Having a Centre of Excellence is all well and good - but if some stakeholders don't interact with it, does it risk becoming redundant? Worse - if stakeholders feel they are being superseded, excluded or ignored by the Centre, they may actively avoid sharing information and create silos that harm the initial intention. It is incumbent upon whatever structure or whatever governance sits above the Centre, it is created based on inclusivity, transparency and trust. It must be open to all and provide accessibility to everyone, regardless of their purpose. There must be an open-door policy and it must be unwavering in its purpose”⁷.

A stand-alone institution

The majority of submissions recommended the Centre be implemented as a stand-alone, independent institution. Reasoning for this included:

- greater clarity on the Centre's role
- independence from Government to ensure impartiality
- greater likelihood of balancing the needs of all stakeholders in the sphere of disability employment, and
- providing greater comfort to some organisations or individuals that they do not need to engage with a government or university body.

Submissions suggested that the Centre would require government funding to operate but should have independence from Government direction. Many recommended partnership arrangements with research institutions, industry and relevant government institutions for the stand-alone entity, with the final goal for the Centre to be truly independent and financially self-sufficient in the long-term.

⁷ Submission by CVTG employment to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence – Options Paper 2023

One submission highlighted that while the Centre needs to be independent it needs to be sustained by government through long term funding commitments. They also highlighted that while being housed in an existing organisation is feasible, conflicts of interest would need to be addressed to ensure the Centre is meeting its purpose and acting with integrity.

Governance

Several submissions recommended an independent approach utilising a board or council with equitable stakeholder representation from the:

- the Commonwealth government
- people with disability and advocate organisations
- employment service providers, and
- employers who are interested in employing people with disability.

One submission recommended the Centre adopt a similar governance structure to that of the Oversight Council of the [National Autism Strategy](#), to bring together diverse stakeholders including individuals with disability, Disability Representative Organisations and Disabled People's Organisations, and experts in disability employment, to ensure that decision-making processes are informed by a broad range of perspectives.

Statutory agency

Some feedback suggested establishing the Centre as a statutory agency to provide quality control, independent evaluations and other types of regulatory functions. A statutory agency could have a level of independence from government and be able to enforce decisions made by a regulator or decision maker.

This model could elevate the importance of disability employment with the public and with business. Additionally, as recommended by one stakeholder, the Centre could evolve into an agency similar to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency or the Australian Human Rights Commission.

One stakeholder highlighted that the statutory agency model is counter-intuitive. A more effective approach could focus on leveraging existing structures like the proposed DES Quality Assurance Framework to strengthen accountability and drive systemic improvement without the complications and delays often associated with increased bureaucracy.

Another stakeholder recommended not having a statutory agency, given the existing compliance requirements already placed on DES providers.

“Australia’s employment services are compliance heavy and administratively burdensome. Shifting any of these functions over to a new CoE will inevitably shift some of the focus from the key objective of improving employment outcomes for people with a disability.”⁸

⁸ Submission by Jobs Australia to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence – Options Paper 2023

Where should the Centre be located?

Submissions noted that a physical location for establishing the Centre would depend on its focus, model and goal. Many submissions emphasised the importance of the Centre being accessible regardless of location, and available to everyone. The submissions also shared the view that online presence of the Centre should be fully accessible, and all information, resources and tools should be developed and accessible in multiple formats.

How should the Centre engage with stakeholders?

Feedback acknowledged that there are a number of stakeholders who are committed to supporting inclusive employment. The Centre must prioritise engaging with a broad range of stakeholders to provide relevant advice that is pivotal to increasing the employment rates of people with disability.

The Centre should work to provide information, and advocate for all stakeholders involved in the disability employment sector. Feedback suggested the key stakeholders for the Centre be:

- people with disability, their families and carers
- employers
- DES, Workforce Australia, NDIS and other service providers, and
- educational institutions such as universities.

The importance of education for stakeholders was highlighted as a way to improve understanding of employing people with disability and implementing best practice models of disability employment, training and professional development. Whilst the Centre needs to include information and training materials, programs could also be delivered through the Centre that target increasing the skills of people with disability, employment service providers and employers.

Much of the feedback received advised that the Centre should be co-designed with a broad range of people with disability, their families and carers to ensure the Centre can adequately achieve its objectives.

Service providers

As with employers, feedback suggested there should be information available for service providers to share insights, success stories and challenges. Information should also be provided to service providers with clear, practical advice on how best to work with employers to support people with disability in employment.

Training should also be made available to service providers to ensure they have increased confidence when supporting people with disability into employment.

Employers

A large proportion of feedback indicated that an employer focus is key to the Centre's success. The Centre should provide advice to employers and businesses to increase their confidence and capability to employ people with disability.

Ensuring that employers understand the barriers that people with disability face increases the likelihood that workplaces will be inclusive and accessible. Information could be contextualised and targeted to small, medium or large employers both online and through workshops and focus groups. This could include employer communities of practice and development of case studies on 'what works' when employing people with disability.

Some respondents indicated the Centre should also facilitate collaboration between employers and employment service providers. Feedback suggested that partnerships could be formed between the Centre and employer peak bodies to collaborate on potential research and training opportunities for employers.

Educational institutions

Feedback suggested that the Centre work / partner with educational institutions, such as universities and schools, to highlight updated research on best practice approaches to inclusive employment and to undertake further research on different aspects of disability employment.

The Centre could also work with educational institutions to develop the training programs for employers, service providers and people with disability.

The department also heard that the Centre could highlight key data and targets for disability employment to stakeholders.

Who should the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence assist?

All submissions agreed that the Centre should focus on improving employment outcomes for people with disability. There were some variations in the feedback regarding what parts of the disability employment system the Centre should focus on including:

- people with disability and their families
- employers
- employment services
- disability support services
- peak organisations, community organisations and disability advocates, and
- education and training providers.

The majority of submissions highlighted the need for people with disability to be part of the design, implementation and ongoing work of the Centre.

Next steps

The feedback provided through submissions and other consultations will be used to inform the Government's consideration on the design and implementation of the Centre.

More information will be available on the Department of Social Services website when available www.dss.gov.au.