



# Disability Employment Centre of Excellence

Submission in response to the Options  
Paper to the proposed model for the  
Disability Employment Centre of Excellence

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# Response to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence Options Paper

## Summary

- People with disability have remained chronically underrepresented in the labour market for the last thirty years despite policy commitments, intervention and investment. Governments cannot continue to rely on the same policy levers and expect a different result.
- While the Centre of Excellence is a commendable initiative, on its own it cannot address the systemic and structural barriers that prevent economic participation by people with disability. Labor market exclusion calls for coordinated action beyond disability specific and employment specific policy and practice, acknowledging intersectional disadvantage. The Centre must be part of a coordinated strategy across multiple levels – social policy, legislative, social security, education, employers – to ensure genuine and lasting change.
- Design and operation of the Centre should be determined by the priorities of people with disability, their families and representative organisations. Good governance will be critical to its success, with genuine power sharing with people with disability and their organisations.

## Introduction

This response has been coordinated by Melbourne Disability Institute (MDI) and Melbourne Social Equity Institute (MSEI) at the University of Melbourne. MDI and MSEI are interdisciplinary research institutes which broker connections between researchers at the university and communities, governments, and practitioners. MDI facilitates and supports interdisciplinary research that brings people with disability, their families, representative organisations and researchers together to co-produce research that addresses the complex and systemic barriers facing people with disability. MDI then focuses on how that knowledge can be translated into policy and practice to have real world impact. MSEI contributes to fairer societies through interdisciplinary research that makes a difference. Both institutes support community-engaged and co-productive research.

### **This response has been informed by expert input from:**

- Professor Jo Barraket, Director, Melbourne Social Equity Institute
- Professor Anne Kavanagh, Chair of Disability and Health, Disability and Health Unit
- Professor Keith McVilly, Professor of Disability and Inclusion
- Associate Professor Sue Olney UoM-BSL Principal Research Fellow
- Professor Kirsten Deane, Deputy Director, Melbourne Disability Institute

We commend the Department of Social Services (DSS) on continuing to progress plans for a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence. Improving the economic participation has been the subject of sustained advocacy from people with disability, their families, their representative organisations. As researchers committed to evidence-based reform, we support their call to advance policy, practice and knowledge that results in real meaningful and sustained change.

As noted in the paper, this diverse group of people remains chronically underrepresented in the labour market. Despite policy commitments and targeted interventions, investments, and incentives, little progress has been made in the last thirty years. As the paper emphasises, this situation runs counter to the rights of people with disability to economic and social participation and the right to receive quality services to achieve it. It also constrains national productivity. Persistent unemployment and underemployment undermine the health and wellbeing of people with disability, reducing their ability to work to their full capacity with impacts on economic productivity and health care costs<sup>i</sup>.

**Before answering the paper's key questions, we would make five observations about what has not been included for discussion.**

- 1 Economic participation must be broadly defined.**

What is not articulated in the paper is that people with disability also face inequitable barriers to business creation and entrepreneurship. Equitable opportunities for all people to contribute to our economy improves Australia's national capacity for innovation. Inclusion helps everyone.
- 2 The paper does not articulate the urgency of the problem.**

Labour force participation rates and the 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. The economic outlook is now however very different. In the last three years the effects of the COVID19 pandemic, war and international conflict, and more frequent natural disasters as a result of climate change have all had a significant impact on the economy.

The COVID19 pandemic continues to impact people with disability in all areas of life, including employment. International evidence shows that in times of crises people with disability are more likely to exit the labour market or work fewer hours than desired (underemployed) when faced with economic downturns, including due to COVID19<sup>ii</sup>. Young people with disability, who already face challenges establishing themselves in the labour market, may face additional barriers to entering the labour market at this time.
- 3 The paper does not emphasise the importance of meaningful, high-quality employment for people with disability.**

Simply getting a job is not sufficient. Research shows that Australians with disability are more likely to be in low quality jobs (e.g., jobs where they have little control over what they do), or underemployed and experience issues with fairness of pay compared to people without disability<sup>iii</sup>. These conditions mean they are more likely to exit the workforce and experience a deterioration in their mental health due to job stressors<sup>iv</sup>.
- 4 The paper does not address the intersection between labour market participation and welfare and social security.**

There is no mention of the impact of welfare conditionality, or the impact of moving between welfare and insecure or low paid work. The paper also does not address the significant costs associated with living with disability and its impact on economic participation.
- 5 The paper does not engage with the pervasive discrimination that people with disability face.**

This includes low expectations and discrimination getting jobs and within workplaces (e.g., from colleagues and less opportunities for career development). A concerted effort to tackle this systemic discrimination is required to shift the dial on employment rates for people with disability.

The current trajectory will not change – and may in fact worsen – unless there is significant intervention. Continuing to rely on the same policy levers will not produce the desired result – there must be a coordinated strategy across multiple levels (e.g., social policy, legislative, employment services, employers, workplaces, school and post-school education) in order to ensure genuine and lasting change.

So, while we support calls from advocacy organisations to establish a Centre of Excellence, we also support their calls for a more coordinated multifaceted response to address the entrenched discrimination and disadvantage people with disability face in seeking and maintaining high quality employment. The work cannot be done by a single entity or institution. To put it bluntly the Centre cannot change the dial on its own. In fact, as we outline below, if its purpose and scope are not clearly articulated it will fail under the weight of expectation and its impact will be limited. The Centre must be clearly situated in the broader ecosystem of labour market policy, welfare policy and disability policy.

We have organised this response around the questions presented in the Options Paper, clustering these where responses are linked. Given the early-stage thinking presented, we have kept our responses brief. Named contributors may be contacted via MDI or MSEI should any elaboration be required.

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

Any Centre should first and foremost serve the needs of people with disability, followed by their families and supporters, and then broader society. We would suggest priority is given to responding to gaps in knowledge and practice needed to generate employment, employment pathways, sustained and decent work for people with disability, with a strong focus on those who experience the greatest disadvantage. This should include people with intellectual disability, people with psychosocial disability and people with disability who experience intersecting forms of disadvantage and discrimination.

From a systems perspective, we suggest the framing presented in the Options Paper would benefit from recasting, to recognise the determinants of inequities in economic participation, and the systems levers needed to respond. At the moment the paper is overly focussed on employment services when they are not the main pathway to employment for people with disability. and does not address the multiple systemic barriers to employment people with disability experience. As a starting point, we would suggest:

- (a) Recognition of the need to address ‘upstream’ factors that drive social exclusion and inequities experienced by people with disability. Factors that contribute to marginalisation in labour markets begin well before working age. These include, for example, early years education, socio-economic factors, family and safe and affordable housing, geography, and intergenerational experiences of education and work. These are not simply factors that need to be addressed ‘for’ people with disability, but systemic factors that drive societal norms and practices that underpin exclusion and discrimination. For example, without addressing factors such as housing security and transportation many people with disability are unable to participate in the labour market<sup>v</sup> This suggests a need to work with other service sectors so that ‘wrap around’ services and supports are provided to support people with disability to find and maintain meaningful work.

- (b) A much stronger focus on employers rather than employment service providers in the listed stakeholder groups. Inclusive employment is developed, practised and grown by people with disability, their organisations, employers and business creators. Employment services whether mainstream or disability represent only one small part of the employment ecosystem. Indeed, recent evidence from people with disability to the Disability Royal Commission, various government inquiries as well as research all overwhelmingly challenge the value of the current employment service system to people with disability. This Centre should be involved in the stewardship of systems change needed to create a more inclusive future.
- (c) A framing of economic participation that recognises the role of business creation – including self-employment, micro-entrepreneurship, social enterprise, cooperatives and employee-owned firms – and the role of all employing sectors (including government and the not-for-profit sector) in inclusive employment and jobs creation. The introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme has opened opportunities for business creation that have not been well explored or supported. The stakeholder focus in the paper is on employment services and larger-scale business employers, which excludes key stakeholders in our economic and industrial systems. It also ignores those employers – particularly governments, not for profits and social enterprises – which research has shown to be historically more inclusive than large corporations.
- (d) Acknowledgement of secondary or post-compulsory educators and educational institutions in the stakeholder group. Education is one of the greatest societal levers for equitable economic participation). Work experience, educational pathways and vocational learning are all important inputs to the employment system.
- (e) Acknowledgement of the role of different levels of government in our industrial system as employers, regulators, and procurers. Brief mention is made of the Commonwealth, but governments (including local governments) are not listed as a stakeholder group. There should be a key role for government as an exemplar employer in line with recommendations from the UN and ILO.
- (f) Acknowledgement of unions and other industrial bodies beside the Business Council of Australia as stakeholders to this endeavour.
- (g) The importance of collaborations with researchers and evaluators to generate knowledge to inform action. There is a dearth of information about what works despite considerable investment in program to improve economic participation among people with disability<sup>vi</sup>

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

The strategic remit and priorities should be driven first and foremost by the priorities of people with disability and their representative organisations in collaboration with other stakeholder groups. As a guiding principle, we would suggest the Centre's remit should be led by what people with disability, their families and disability representative organisations say is needed, informed by available evidence and with consideration to the funding and resources available. As noted above, the persistent unemployment and underemployment of people with disability in Australia is a wicked problem, which the Centre alone cannot solve. However, a targeted contribution to knowledge with strong convening and knowledge dissemination practices could help move the dial.

The governance of the Centre will be key to its success. The involvement of people with disability, their families and representative organisations at all levels from governance to staffing will be essential. The governance structure in particular should enable genuine power sharing and collaboration. People with disability and their organisations must be actively engaged in design, governance, and delivery in both strategic and frontline roles. More details on preferred models are outlined in responses to question 3.

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

This question reflects the heavy – and as suggest above, misplaced – emphasis on employment service providers in the Options Paper. While the employment services system is indeed a barrier to accessing and retaining decent work for people with disability, we note:

- (a) Service providers are one (diverse) group within a larger employment services system, the weaknesses of which have been extensively reviewed and critiqued in multiple past inquiries and recent and forthcoming reports;
- (b) The employment services system is nested within a larger suite of services systems – including, for example, other social security provisions, NDIS, housing, and state education services which interact to have profound effects on the barriers and opportunities to economic participation of people with disability; and
- (c) As discussed above, stimulation of inclusive employment is predominantly an effect of people with disability and their organisations working with employers across all sectors, the business ecosystem, and our innovation settings and culture.

The Centre should generate actionable knowledge, tools and cross-sector relationships to ensure change occurs across multiple systems to meet the aspirations and needs of people with disability – rather than simply rely on the employment services system alone.

In broadening the Centre's scope, the Centre should create, coordinate and share longitudinal data to support targets for change and evaluation of national and industry performance. It should enable demonstration projects that explore how to do things differently, to support rapid learning (and 'fast failure' where new approaches don't work) and foster shared commitment to change. And it should actively convene learning partnerships within and across different areas for systems change to enable sharing of knowledge, building of action coalitions, and diffusion of better practice. There should be a



focus on funding data collection and research where evidence is absent or unclear. But notably there are many areas where the evidence is clear but there is a large gap in translation to practice. There is for example a large body of evidence on the effectiveness of job customisation in securing meaningful and decent work for people with an intellectual disability. But practice is limited in Australia. The Centre should distinguish between the two needs and ensure a differentiated strategy to address.

### **3.1 What are your views on the models presented?**

The models presented are disparate in their purposes, their legal structures and their functions. Applied research, research and information aggregation, and regulation are very different functions.

As noted in the paper, it is unclear what a regulatory body would be regulating in the stated context. If the purpose of the Centre is to support increased economic participation by people with disability, it is unclear how a regulator alone would achieve change. A reporting function may be useful for a regulatory body but again reporting alone is unlikely to result in meaningful change given the structural and systemic barriers that exist. Should the Government be considering further legislating rights and responsibilities of inclusive employment in the future, regulatory arrangements would be a matter of response to that legislation. Our considered view is that a regulatory body is not the right “fit” for stated purpose.

While a clearinghouse function is an essential feature of knowledge management in a digital age, again it is our view that a clearinghouse alone would be insufficient to generate change and would require more resources the paper appears to suggest. A Clearinghouse would require significant curation and would not be useful unless an assessment of the quality of the evidence was made. There are also substantial gaps in evidence which a Clearinghouse would not be able to address.

In our view the Centre should be independent of government and serve multiple complementary functions including research, training and policy analysis. All of these activities should be co-produced with people with disability.

The selected structure should be clearly guided by purpose and underlying principles. The NDRP principles are an example, noting that the NDRP’s function is to facilitate disability research and capacity strengthening (<https://www.ndrp.org.au/principles>). We suggest these should include:

- Independence from government and industry
- Multistakeholder governance, with genuine agency and power sharing with people with disability and their representative organisations
- A model that allows the Centre to draw on and invest through a variety of research organisations
- A focus on action orientated research co-produced with people with disability to move beyond problem diagnosis to possible solutions.



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

Yes. Structural insights from which the establishment of the Centre could draw that are not mentioned include applied research initiatives established under the Cooperative Research Centre program, and independent medical research institutes.

In terms of the Centre's purpose, there are useful lessons to be drawn about more and less successful experience from existing and emerging multi-institutional models that link research and practice. Insights could be drawn from: the National Disability Research Partnership; the Centre for Research Excellence – CRE-DH; the National Centre of Excellence in Intellectual Disability Health; Technical Assistance Centers (US); and the Inclusive Design for Employment Access Social Innovation Laboratory (IDEA) (Canada), among others.

### **3.3 What can the Government take from existing models of Centre of Excellence? What should be ruled out?**

While the 'Centre of Excellence' terminology is somewhat broadly used, we note the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence program mentioned in the Options Paper has a specific purpose and selection process which is not consistent with the goals of the proposed Centre. Learning from examples of integrated research and practice initiatives listed above include:

- the importance of multisector governance with genuine agency and power sharing with people with disability and their representative organisations
- equitable resourcing to support the active engagement of people with disability and disability representative organisations
- governance and incorporation which supports independence
- effective coordination and planning for data access and use across sectors and government agencies. This should include drawing on initiatives already underway – most particularly the National Disability Data Asset

We suggest the most relevant model is the National Disability Research Partnership which is being launched as a public company limited by guarantee in early 2024. This model was decided upon after review of current models such as CRCs, ANROWS, AHURI etc. The governance structures ensures that people with disability have real power in the activities of the NDRP and that government and service providers do not have undue influence.

The majority of Board Directors will have a disability, including the Chair. The NDRP will be responsible for funding research according to an agenda developed with the disability community, to strengthen research capacity particularly among people with disability, and knowledge mobilisation. It will work across the entire disability and research ecosystem to generate further investment in research. Organisational members include organisations that conduct research, represent and/or advocate for people with disability, their families and carers and government. All member organisations must agree to the Member Charter which aligns with the NDRP principles. Professor Kavanagh is Co-Director of NDRP Establishment phase (and Director of the CRE-DH) and is happy to elaborate further.

While the functions of the CoE may be different we are of the view that the NDRP model has been well researched and is best fit for purpose for the aspirations of this CoE. The governance structure must enable the voices of people with disability to be elevated and so the CoE is not dominated the priorities of service providers or employers.

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

We support calls from advocacy and disability representative organisations to ensure the Centre is independent of government. In the interests of creating purpose-specific public value, we would suggest that organisational independence and strong governance involving people with disability and disability representative organisations is prioritised in the structure. Other considerations should include:

1. Effective cross-sectoral ownership and multi-stakeholder governance to support Centre outcomes
2. Legal and regulatory structure that allows for both philanthropic support and access to Category One research investment
3. Centre industrial and procurement arrangements that contribute to inclusive employment and business activity of people with disability

## Endnotes

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<sup>ii</sup> Employment and Economic Well-Being of People With and Without Disabilities Before and After the Great Recession

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<sup>v</sup> Devine A, Vaughan C & Kavanagh A. "If I had stable housing, I would be a bit more receptive to having a job". Factors influencing the effectiveness of Disability Employment Services reform. *Work* 2020;65(4):775–787. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32310208/>

<sup>vi</sup> Kavanagh A, Brown D, Dickinson H, Mallett S, Marck C, Weld-Blundell I. (2021). *Evidence review: Strategies to increase employment and economic participation for people with a cognitive disability*. The University of Melbourne.