

DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AUSTRALIA RESPONSE TO THE DISABILITY CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE 'OPTIONS PAPER'

About DEA

Disability Employment Australia's (DEA's) vision is for all people with disability to achieve their employment potential. Our role is to drive increased economic participation for people with disability, through advocating for more effective policy and co-designing world-leading employment services.

As the country's pre-eminent peak body for Disability Employment Services (DES), we represent the interests of disability employment stakeholders to government bodies, consumers, and employer groups. DEA has a responsibility to foster excellence, innovation, and flexibility of service within the DES program and disability employment in general. We support our members to achieve best practice service provision, and advise, advocate, train, inform and undertake events to strengthen and promote the sector.

We believe every member of society, including people with disability, should be fully involved in the community and have control over their own life choices. Participation in the open labour market is a crucial factor in realising these goals. We strive to inspire, challenge, and celebrate disability employment.

DEA has been a leader in the disability employment sector for a quarter of a century and our membership encompasses 70% of DES providers and over 80% of the program's caseload. Previously, DEA has liaised with government over critical changes and developments, including moving from block to case-based funding; developing the participant assessment model; uncapping DES; establishing a Disability Employment Hall of Fame; advocating for a National Disability Employment Strategy; and contributing to the Disability Royal Commission and NDIS Review.

DEA consulted extensively for the development of this response. This process included:

- Consulting with all DEA members around the draft of this paper.
- Consulting with the DEA Quality Framework working group of 12 DEA members to consult directly around the paper and the questions posed. Members comprised a mix of large, medium, and small providers as well as a mix of metropolitan and regional providers.
- Extensive dialogue with the Institute for Employability Professionals (IEP) and its Centre for Employability Excellence.
- Communication with both our membership base and wider affiliates through webinar, emails, and our recent Leaders' Forum.
- Feedback from the DEA Board (encompassing a mix of providers and many years of industry experience).

The DEA Vision for a Centre for Disability Employment Excellence

Purpose

We must start by asking, *'what is the question we are trying to solve'*? Ultimately, of course, it is about giving every person with disability the opportunity to unlock their fullest potential, including through sustained employment and meaningful careers. But to be specific, what is the Centre of Excellence (CoE) for?

In Australia, there is no dearth of organisations with useful experience, good intent, and excellent ideas regarding disability employment. We have no shortage of providers with hard-won lessons about frontline best practice, nor of researchers with world-class expertise, nor of engaged industry bodies and advocacy groups. What we lack, more than anything, is coordination.

If a university research project were to elicit a game-changing finding about how best to support people with psychosocial conditions into employment, how would it reach the frontline?

If another country were to commission and run a program that really *'shifts the dial'*, how would that be picked up and translated into an Australian context?

If a small rural provider developed a training approach that led to outstanding outcomes for people with disability, how could the lessons be drawn and developed into something scalable?

The problem is one of disaggregation and dislocation, where hundreds (perhaps thousands) of parties are undertaking (frequently excellent) work but doing so in silos, with a patchy evidence base and a view of best practice that is largely in the eye of the beholder. Despite this – it must be said – DES continues to exceed its government KPIs and is on track to help a record number of people with disability into 26-week outcomes this year. We can only imagine what can be achieved with more sharing and critiquing of evidence, greater collaboration, and improved coordination.

Therefore, the question the CoE is trying to solve is:

How can we best develop a coordinated approach to improving disability employment within Australia, which draws together the intent, expertise, and experience of the full range of interested parties into a well-aligned, co-designed, highly informed, and committed movement - led by people with disability?

The answer must be grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the Australian Disability Strategy and the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. It must also be inclusive of the full ecosystem of disability employment, rather than solely focused on DES.

Foundations

Based on the above purpose, DEA considers that a CoE should be built on the following foundations:

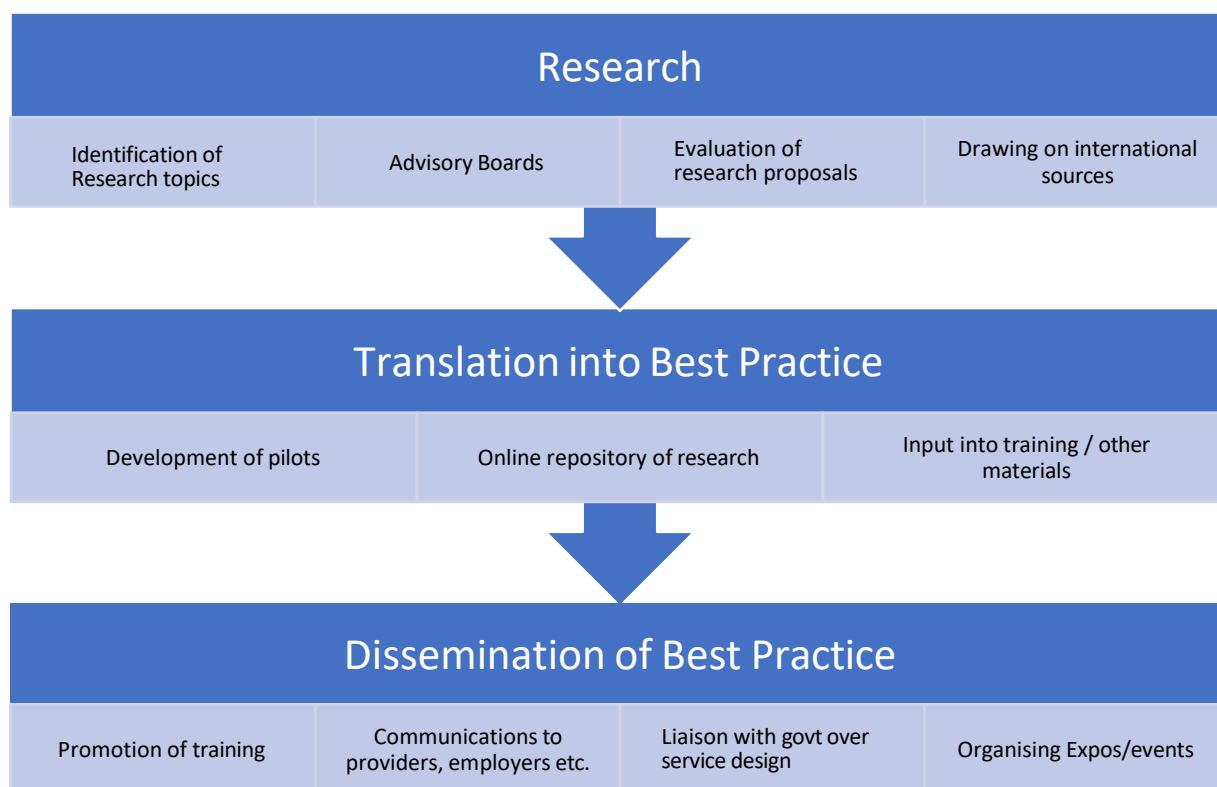
1. *Informed by research, focused on practice*
2. *Independent and credible with all stakeholders and co-designed by people with disability*
3. *Makes best use of existing assets*
4. *Connected to international evidence*
5. *Clear objective, expansive scope*
6. *Visible and highly proactive*

To explain each further:

1. Informed by research, focused on practice

The CoE must be involved in a full continuum, from the commissioning of research to reviewing its evidence to the translation into best practice into dissemination of that best practice. This does not mean that the CoE itself delivers each (or any) of these component parts but that it must ensure that each element is coordinated. Research is most useful in so far as it relates to practice. Likewise, practice is not best practice if it is not grounded in evidence.

The CoE must understand that central point, and therefore avoid being driven purely by either side of the continuum – either as a research centre or a training hub. The below diagram shows how such an approach could operate (Figure 1 - DEA CoE continuum):



This is just a selection of activities that the CoE could oversee/coordinate/undertake and is not intended to be exhaustive. From DEA's perspective, the key is that research and practice are brought into harmony.

2. Independent and credible with all stakeholders, and co-designed by people with disability-

In some ways, it is easier to list what the CoE should **not** be, before asserting what it should be. The CoE should not:

- Be a statutory agency – aside from the time and effort to set up such an agency, developing the CoE as a quasi-governmental arm will discourage the kind of candour and trust that should exist at the heart of a relationship between a CoE and its stakeholders. This is not to suggest that it is impossible for trust to exist between (for example) service providers and government, but providers are aware that they are beholden to government for long-term funding decisions and

there is a natural tendency to default to a parent-child relationship. This would not be healthy for a CoE. In addition, a statutory agency would need to build expertise and relationships from a standing start rather than utilising existing assets (see next point). While DEA can see potential value in a statutory agency which monitors and promotes quality through a regulatory function within employment services, this should be set aside from the CoE - which should stay well clear of regulation/compliance activities. Likewise, DEA would support a statutory function (however constituted) to monitor levels of disability within larger organisations (akin to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency), but this should also be seen as separate from a CoE, given it is a very different remit.

- Ignore People with Disability. As the Disability Royal Commission makes clear, people with disability must be the 'beating heart' of how disability services operate. At DEA, over 50% of our team have disability and this diversity is critical to how we operate. The CoE should be co-designed by People with Disability and include that perspective integrally in its operation thereafter.
- Sit within a much larger institution with a predilection toward either end of the continuum, such as a university or a large training provider (as explained above). Such an approach would be likely to create an 'ivory tower' which would not receive the buy-in from providers etc. In addition, it would be preferable for the CoE to be managed by those with an understanding of each element of that continuum, including (most importantly) how services are delivered in practice and how they are received by People with Disability.
- Generate returns for private shareholders. The CoE would be unlikely to receive enthusiastic support from some stakeholders including disability advocates if it were to generate profits for private organisations and should therefore be not-for-profit in nature.
- Over-index on any specific type of disability. While Intellectual Disabilities are mentioned multiple times within the CoE Options Paper, we should be aware that group constitutes 4% of the DES caseload, but over 14% of the NDIS participant caseload. Similarly, over 35% of the NDIS caseload constitutes Autism as their primary disability. The DES caseload is predominantly comprised of people suffering psychosocial and/or musculoskeletal conditions. Any CoE must encompass all types of disability, which of course includes intellectual/learning disabilities.
- Be operated by an organisation where running the CoE in itself offers them a significant competitive advantage e.g., a service provider or a training organisation.

What does this leave?

The CoE could be a new organisation, entirely independent from all current organisations, and that is an approach worth considering – although there may be simpler paths which do not involve a 'standing start'. In any case, the CoE should be non-statutory, not-for-profit, generic rather than specific to any disability, isolated from competitive advantage, highly inclusive of People with Disability, and fully able to oversee the CoE continuum depicted above.

3. Makes best use of existing assets

Australia is blessed with a rich, diverse, and mature ecosystem of organisations committed to disability employment. The first task of a CoE is to coalesce these parties and draw on their insights, experience, and prior work. DEA's view is that, however the CoE is constituted, it should have a dedicated Board/Advisory Board that represents this ecosystem. It could have representatives from:

- People with Disability – one idea could be to institute a specific Service Users Advisory Group, which is represented on the Board through one or more positions
- Government, including DSS, DEWR, NDIS and Department of Treasury, and potentially State/local representation
- Peak bodies – any peak with at least 25 members specialising in disability employment should be

represented

- Disability Representative Organisations – potentially represented by AFDO as the Peak for DROs
- Universities – perhaps on a rotational basis
- Employers – potentially including representative groups like the Australian Disability Network and Job Access, as well as one or more employers (an Employers Advisory Group would be another potentially beneficial idea)
- (possibly) International Labour Organisation, Global Business and Disability Network representative

Any CoE that fails to be inclusive of such a diverse group of stakeholders is likely to miss key perspectives, and it is this Board that should drive the work of the CoE forwards. This will provide the best impetus towards formalising a ‘movement’, which should be an objective for the CoE. DEA is fortunate to already have relationships with all these groups, and we find drawing on this wide range of perspectives to be invaluable in our work.

Similarly, the CoE should not look to replicate existing initiatives and projects, but instead must collaborate with them, learn, and strengthen their work. For example, if training packages have already been developed that promote good practice, the CoE should not look to duplicate or supersede that work, but instead be a key contributor to its success as part of service improvement processes and communications protocols.

4. Connected to international evidence

There is a wealth of information available internationally on research and best practice. While Australia has its own intricacies and exceptional qualities, it is far from unique, and the CoE should be heavily linked in with international bodies and sources of evidence. Leveraging this evidence and translating it into the Australian context may be one of the simplest, most immediate wins that can be achieved. Collaborative opportunities could include joint webinars, cross-border research projects, sharing of learnings, and potentially study tours/exchange programs.

For example, the CoE should be working closely with the following:

The Institute of Employability Professionals’ Centre for Employability Excellence – through a global remit, this Centre collects, catalogues, identifies, and signposts access to original research and best practice, providing valuable resources for researchers, commissioners, policy makers, employability delivery organisations and employability professionals. It comprises organisations from 12 countries, including Sweden, Australia, Canada, USA, UAE, South Korea, and the Netherlands, to contribute and benefit from the Centre for Employability Excellence, sharing ideas, research, knowledge, best practice, and effective delivery methods globally. DEA are a member and DEA CEO Peter Bacon is a Fellow of the IEP. The IEP is now moving into Australia and its Global CEO Scott Parkin will be a committed and important contributor to the CoE.

The World Association of Supported Employment (WASE) – this organisation takes the ‘global’ definition of supported employment, which relates less to sheltered workshops, while Australia uses the term open employment and more to providing specialist support to people with disability to support them to find and keep jobs, including through high-quality on-the-job support. Established for over two decades and truly global in scope, its Board includes members from Canada, Northern Ireland, Australia, USA, Chile, and Australia. Last year WASE held a global conference in Vancouver, attended by over 600 delegates from around the world. DEA CEO Peter Bacon sits on the WASE Board and DEA has been awarded the opportunity to host the next World conference, in 2027.

The ReAct Partnership – this UK-based collaboration is an industry-led centre for action research and continuous improvement within the Restart (mainstream UK employability program) Scheme. The Partnership shares and evaluates practice and evidence on “what works” to help improve performance and outcomes for participants, the long-term sustainability of job placements and the impact and value for money of employment services. It is funded by eight major service providers in the UK (including Ingeus, Maximus, and Jobs22 which are linked to Australian organisations) and is managed by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), working with the Institute of Employability Professionals (IEP) and the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA). Its work on investigating shared cross-provider approaches to employers, for example, may be of particular interest.

Other International groups - such as the Harkin Institute, the International Labour Organisation, Global Business and Disability Network, and the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) and other institutions such as the Virginia Commonwealth University.

5. Clear Objective, Expansive Scope

The remit of the CoE should be for all People with Disability. The CoE should have a clear objective statement and an expansive scope. It should not be limited to DES, when we know that many people with disability who wish to work are on the caseloads of Workforce Australia and NDIS or are not accessing services at all. That said, DES will clearly be a key element given its status as Australia’s specialist disability employment service. Therefore, it would be unwise to consider *only* the way that DES is delivered in terms of the CoE’s activities. It should also include graduate employment, self-employment, education, and pathways into employment.

That said, the CoE’s activities should be limited to the continuum detailed in Fig.1. Resultantly, under no circumstances should the CoE attempt to deliver services directly and should be excluded from doing so under its constitution. This will ensure it is trusted by stakeholders and not treated as a potential competitor, as well as mitigating the risk of any potential ‘mission creep’.

As such, it is unlikely to become the definitive place for either employers or people with disability to go to receive the support and services they require, however they should receive both useful information and clear signposting regarding where best to go and what is available.

Clear rules around objectives and scope should be set out through the design process and enshrined in a constitution - thereby ensuring clarity and fostering trust for all stakeholders.

6. Visible and highly proactive

The work of the CoE should not be hard to find, and accessibility for all must always be sought. Naturally, this includes ensuring that all materials developed are available in a range of formats including ‘easy read’ and accessibility for any website that is developed. Likewise, information and projects developed must be held prominently and disseminated publicly. This will likely require a specific website, and there may be potential to make agreements with organisations that have well-established communication channels for the distribution of information etc. It would be worth considering whether the CoE should be allocated a budget by government to fund specific education/awareness/promotion campaigns.

The CoE should not assume that people will come looking for its work, but instead be highly proactive in its communications strategy, including potentially through a network of sub-groups (which could be

convened on thematic grounds or perhaps on a cohort basis). Becoming an ‘ivory tower’, isolated from practice and practitioners, must be avoided at all costs.

Our Vision in Summary

If followed through, these six foundations will underpin a CoE that will embody the purpose that we have defined above and provide the connecting tissue that we are currently missing between service providers of all different stripes; People with Disability and their advocates; employers; research institutions; and government. It is DEA’s view that the ideas and approach set out above will best place the CoE to fulfil this critical role.

APPENDIX A – ANSWERS TO DSS’S SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

Questions

1.1 Why do need a Centre?

1.2 What should be the core function of the Centre?

The goal of the Centre for Disability Employment Excellence should be to improve ideas, capture and disseminate best practice/evidence/research, generate collaborative discussion, increase the capacity and quality of employment services, and ultimately improve employment rates for people with disability. This is also covered in detail on Page 2. As per the Australian Government’s ‘Working Future – White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities’, the Centre of Excellence will provide examples of best practice and support not only for job seekers but also employers and employment service providers. The Centre of Excellence should encompass all employment service types for people with disability including DES, Youth and Employment Supports within NDIS, supported employment entities, social enterprises, and any other relevant services. Some of the core functions could include (but not be limited to):

- **Collation of best practice** from both services and research bodies and the dissemination of this best practice around employer education and engagement, preparing people with disability for work, placing people with disability into work and keeping them in work.
- **Supporting the development of high-quality research**, commissioned to tackle identified issues, and curated into easily accessible resources.
- **Drawing on international research around best practice**, for example the Virginia Commonwealth University research on employment for Intellectual Disability, Autism and Acquired Brain Injury clients and the Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice.
- **Overseeing detailed case studies** from high performing providers, including those with proven excellence at supporting specific cohorts e.g., intellectual disability/autism, so we can codify and learn from their best practices.
- **Providing input into best practice training**, including the potential for further accredited learning. This would include the defining of curricula and supporting/publishing evaluations of effectiveness.
- **Regular events** via a mix of online and face to face events and forums. Action learning sets are great examples of how to identify and tease out employability delivery best practice and to solve identifiable issues at source. Round tables and networking events linked to a specific topic work well for face-to- face discussion and sharing of ideas.
- **A repository for guidance and shareable resources.** We see this as essential for enabling interested parties to learn and benefit from best practice, ideas etc.
- **Moderated online forums/Ask any questions**, where organisations can seek out the information they require.
- **Writing and maintaining a history of disability employment in Australia.**

Questions

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

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

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

The Centre of Excellence should assist the entire disability employment ecosystem. It should primarily work with Employment Service Providers that work with People with Disability as stated in Point 5 above. This includes services such as DES, employment supports in the NDIS as well as supported employment via Australian Disability Enterprises (ADE) and Social Enterprises that employ people with disability as core to their business model. There is also scope for Workforce Australia and Community Development Program (CDP) services to access the COE as they have thousands of clients on their caseloads with disability.

The Centre needs to co-ordinate and partner as much as possible to be able to effectively produce best practice that will increase the employment rate for people with disability. Please see points 2 and 3 of the CoE 'Foundations' above for further details as to how DEA sees this working optimally.

Questions

3.1 What are your views on the models presented?

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

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

Our model of a Centre of Excellence is described in the first part of the document in Points 1 to 6. The most suitable model for the CoE is a continuum that is 'informed by research, focused on front line best practice'.

In terms of the models presented in the paper, DEA does not think the research centre model would be viable for a COE. While high quality research is vital, it is far more useful when translated into practice. Universities are not well placed to oversee that translation. Universities, however, have a place in the continuum of a Centre of Excellence. A university can contribute to the work of a Centre of Excellence – for example research, evaluation of current pilots, collection of employer best practice.

As stated in Part 2 above, the COE should be not operated by an organisation where it offers a significant competitive advantage over a service provider or a training organisation. There is a danger that a training hub may become very siloed and miss out on opportunities to connect with research and international evidence.

The Clearinghouse Model would be too passive in terms of driving excellence and best practice.

The CoE should not be a statutory authority or agency as it is not suitable (See Point 2 on Page 3-4). As a statutory authority, it would report to Government. This could easily lead to another body that could contribute to regulation for providers and been seen as an audit body and not a Centre of Excellence.

Questions

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

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

4.3 What elements of the proposed role of the Centre or its functions should be prioritised?

Some of these points are covered in more detail in the first part of this response. The Centre of Excellence could be a standalone institution or part of another organisation but have separate governance arrangements. The Centre of Excellence will need to establish key priorities and objectives once established. A coordinating body should be at the heart of a Centre of Excellence. This body needs to be able to drive activity and have expertise in the dissemination of best practice. This body also needs to drive best practice.

As expressed in point 2, this could be a newly established institution or it could sit within an existing institution, which satisfies the requirements of a CoE, defined by DEA as:

“non-statutory, not-for-profit, generic rather than specific to any disability, isolated from competitive advantage, highly inclusive of people with disability, and fully able to oversee the CoE continuum depicted above”.

Whether sitting within a new or existing structure, the CoE would require its own infrastructure around governance and need to appoint a Board of Directors. Clear governance arrangements must also be set out, including through a robust constitution, and this Board must be responsible for adherence with this Constitution as well as other facets of good governance e.g., AICD principles, financial management etc.

The following elements that should be prioritised once the COE is operational:

- Overarching objectives, functions, and governance arrangements of the COE.
- Collation of academic (including international) research into disability employment and any recommendations from this research.
- Development of research ideas.
- Collation of current best practice and dissemination.
- A COE symposium of key stakeholders including People with Disability, Employers, Universities, Government officials, Advocacy Groups and Service providers.

The broader disability sector needs to be actively engaged in the CoE on an ongoing basis. There needs to be viable and tangible engagement of the Disability Sector. This can be done via bringing together the broader sector via the development of a Centre of Excellent symposium in the first year of operation. Thereafter, activities will be driven according to Strategies and plans developed by stakeholders and signed off by the CoE Board, described above.