



**Australian Government**

**Department of Social Services**

# **Establishing a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence**

**Options Paper  
October 2023**

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**This paper is an options paper, it is not Australian Government policy.**

## **Purpose**

The Department of Social Services (the department) is undertaking consultation and design activities to establish a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence (the Centre). This preparatory work was funded through the 2023-24 Federal Budget, and will progress the Australian Government's 2022 election commitment to establish the Centre.

This paper presents feedback received to date on the idea of a disability employment centre of excellence and seeks stakeholder views on potential models for the Centre, what it should focus on and its implementation. You can provide feedback on the questions raised throughout this paper, or any other issues related to the Centre by emailing [COE@dss.gov.au](mailto:COE@dss.gov.au).

This consultation is opening on 17 October 2023 and will close on 27 November 2023. If you would like to provide feedback after this date, please email [COE@dss.gov.au](mailto:COE@dss.gov.au).

## **What have we heard so far?**

The formation of a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence (the Centre) has been regularly recommended in consultation discussions with, and submissions to, the Department of Social Services (the department) by a variety of stakeholders in the disability sector. This includes submissions to the department on the [Disability Employment Strategy \(2021\)](#), the [New Disability Employment Support Model \(2022\)](#), and discussions with the Disability Employment Services (DES) Reference Group.

Below are the common themes that have featured in these discussions and submissions.

### **A 'one stop shop'**

Stakeholders have previously recommended the Centre should be a disability employment 'one stop shop' to access information, and include an evidence-based Community of Practice. This would synthesise case studies, foster best practice and outreach with employers, develop data and evidence, and mobilise networks.

### **Build evidence-based practice**

Stakeholders have previously recommended the Centre should:

- Publish high-quality research and commission new research that will continue to strengthen and guide practice.
- Undertake research and capacity building concerning particular cohorts with unique employment challenges.
- Promote evidence-based practice in employment for people with an intellectual disability.
- Translate research into practice guides.
- Be accompanied by a targeted research translation strategy. This might include a technical support function in the Centre to aid design and delivery of policy and practice in disability employment.

## **Build the capacity of employment service providers**

Stakeholders have previously recommended the Centre should:

- Build the capacity of the whole DES sector and provide tools, advice and support to employment service providers, and participate in quality assurance training.
- Address the capacity issues of employment providers for people with disability (including those with intellectual disability and high support needs) in regional, rural and remote areas.
- Develop training and professional development materials for employment service providers.

## **Have a key quality control function**

Stakeholders have previously recommended the Centre should:

- Have a key quality control function and an understanding of 'what does good look like' in disability employment.
- Adopt functions based on the model of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. This Agency could monitor the extent and effectiveness of compliance obligations of employment providers, and review, monitor and advise upon interactions with other government programs and undertake program evaluation.

## **Consolidate data**

One stakeholder recommended the Centre should be a place to consolidate data, and undertake further analysis and translation for all stakeholders. They stated this would provide the opportunity for DES providers to collaboratively provide anonymized data in a collective effort to raise the benchmarks across the sector.

## **Provide accessible information and resources**

Stakeholders have previously recommended the Centre should:

- Bring together all the evidence about what works to support people with an intellectual disability into open and self-employment.
- Develop information in accessible formats for people with an intellectual disability and their families to use for key life stages and transitions, which can be distributed through the specialist DES providers.

## **Enhance collaborative competition**

Some stakeholders have noted a competitive, for-profit system of disability employment does not work for people with disability and their families, and the Centre should support a better approach through collaboration, cooperation and information sharing.

Multiple stakeholders have recommended the Centre should coordinate a Community of Practice, with one identifying this would inform the Centre and providers about effective practice.

## Why do we need a Centre?

The department is interested in hearing from a broad range of individuals and organisations about the issues the Centre should seek to resolve, and the opportunities it presents. The department is focused on establishing the core functions of the Centre to increase the employment outcomes of people with disability and to increase the capacity of employment service providers and employers. Additional feedback regarding the Centre is welcomed and encouraged to help inform the formation of the Centre.

### Increasing employment outcomes for people with disability

The unemployment rate for people with disability has not shifted in more than two decades and people with disability face a rate of unemployment three times that of people without disability. 46.6 per cent of people with disability of working age are currently not in the labour force<sup>1</sup>. In addition to this, people with disability face increased rates of discrimination, with nearly half (45.2%) of all employed people with disability reporting they had experienced unfair treatment or discrimination from their employer due to their disability in the past 12 months<sup>2</sup>.

### Increasing the capacity of employment service providers

People living with disability should expect and receive the best possible service to help them find employment. The Government recognises there is a need to refocus efforts to improve the quality of this support, particularly following concerns highlighted by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. The Centre will play a key role in helping the Government to work with providers to lift the quality of employment services and deliver better outcomes that ensure the experiences and views of people with disability are central to how quality is measured.

#### **Questions**

##### **1.1 Why do we need a Centre?**

##### **1.2 What should be the core functions of the Centre?**

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Employment characteristics of people with disability*, 24 October 2019, [Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018](#) | Australian Bureau of Statistics ([abs.gov.au](#)) [accessed 30 August 2023].

<sup>2</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (IncludeAbility), *Disability and employment in Australia*, [Disability and employment in Australia](#) | IncludeAbility [accessed 30 August 2023].

## Who could the Centre assist?

The Centre could assist the below groups:

### a) people with disability and their families

Australia has over 4.4 million people with disability (17.7% of the population), and almost half are of working age<sup>3</sup>. People with disability are more likely to experience poverty, live in poor quality or insecure housing and have low levels of education. Employment supports need to respond to participants' circumstances to provide the best opportunities for stable employment. To help, it is envisaged the Centre will place people with the disability at the forefront of its work to respond to the challenges they face in accessing equitable employment opportunities.

There are more than 2.65 million unpaid carers in Australia<sup>4</sup>. The Government recognises the important role families, friends and carers play in assisting people with disability. The department welcomes submissions from families, friends and carers to understand how the Centre can help them in their caring role.

### b) employment service providers

Employment service providers help people with intensive supports, building confidence and capability to prepare for employment, and providing ongoing support or services to keep the job. This may include working with an employee to access reasonable adjustments and other disability support. The Centre could work closely with employment service providers, across all funded employment services (for example, DES and Workforce Australia), to ensure they are demonstrating best practice in disability employment and creating suitable employment outcomes for people with disability.

### c) employers

Australian employers are the cornerstone of the Australian economy. The Australian Human Rights Commission's IncludeAbility project notes hiring people with disability can boost productivity and morale in the workplace, and can lead to improvements in profitability<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, the Business Council of Australia has advocated hiring more people with disability to use the untapped potential of the Australians with disability who are seeking employment as the nation grapples with workforce shortages<sup>6</sup>. The Centre could work closely with employers to ensure they are offering best practice in disability employment.

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Number of people with disability*, 24 October 2019, [Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#) [accessed 30 August 2023].

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Carers*, 24 October 2019, [Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#) [accessed 30 August 2023].

<sup>5</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *The economic and business benefits of employing people with disability*, [The economic and business benefits of employing people with disability | IncludeAbility](#) [accessed 30 August 2023]

<sup>6</sup> Business Council of Australia, *Improving employment outcomes for people with disability*, 15 August 2023, [Improving employment outcomes for people with disability - Business Council of Australia \(bca.com.au\)](#) [accessed 30 August 2023].

#### **d) supported employment services**

In October 2022, Minister for Social Services, the Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, held a Supported Employment Roundtable (the roundtable) with state and territory disability ministers, people with disability, family representatives, Australian Disability Enterprise representatives, peak bodies and other sector experts in attendance. During the roundtable, attendees developed and agreed a set of guiding principles for the future of supported employment, available [here](#). Disability Ministers from all jurisdictions have since agreed to the principles, and to work together on a plan to enact them.

The principles aim to ensure people with high support needs have informed choice and control, real options for employment and a range of support to meet their employment goals.

The Centre could help support the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, employers and others in the disability sector as they work to enact these principles.

#### **e) disability advocates**

Advocates for people with disability play a critical role in supporting individuals and driving systemic change. Access to evidence on best practice and accessible information and resources through the Centre could assist them in this role.

#### **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?**

#### **What models exist?**

There are numerous models for Centres of Excellence that exist both domestically and internationally, and operate in the private-sector, government, and not-for profit sectors. The below are possible models that have been taken from existing examples.

## Research Centre Model

Research centres are formally structured units, often within a university, with the purpose of advancing collaborative research, research training, research dissemination or exploratory research. Research centres provide significant collaborations between universities, publicly funded research organisations, other research bodies, governments, and businesses in Australia and overseas, all to support outstanding research.

The Centre could provide a focal point of expertise in disability employment research. It could achieve this through collaborations between universities, publicly funded research organisations, other research bodies, governments, businesses, advocacy and advisory or representative bodies. It could tap into evidence from practitioners (such as allied health experts) or the applied experience of program providers (for example, the Commonwealth's [JobAccess](#) program).<sup>7</sup>

The Centre could produce practical tools and training programs for DES providers, supported employment services and open employers to use and to ensure they are administering 'best practice' in disability employment.

The Centre could act as a physical or virtual focal point in a university or operate as a stand-alone research body. The Centre could be non-aligned and independent from Government, and operate a board to oversee the governance and operations of the Centre.

The funding arrangement of the Centre of Excellence could be a mixture of funding from the Commonwealth Government, State and Territory Governments, the private sector and the philanthropic sector. The Centre could operate a similar funding model to the Grattan Institute, where initial funding was provided by the Federal Government in the form of an endowment, and then ongoing funding is received from the private sector and the philanthropic sector. Another option could involve a commitment for ongoing grant-based funding by the Federal Government for research-based training tools for DES providers to ensure they are administering best practice, and to build their capacity.

Both the Australian Research Council (Centre of Excellence) and the National Health and Medical Research Commission (Centre of Research Excellence) have programs to fund research-based centres of expertise. Examples include the [ARC Centre of Excellence in Indigenous Futures](#) and the [Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health](#). There is also the example of the new [National Disability Research Partnership](#).

## Clearinghouse Model

A clearinghouse is a central repository that collects, organises, disseminates and translates research into action for people who are interested in or working in a specific field. A clearinghouse is supported by sector experts and may be linked to specific research centres, government departments or non-profit organisations.

Clearinghouses usually involve a website with updated publications, data, research, practice guides, and evaluation material. An example of an existing clearinghouse includes the [Indigenous Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Clearinghouse](#).

This option would be relatively fast and cost-effective to implement in comparison to other options. However, it could also be viewed as a less proactive model to build the capabilities of employment service providers.

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<sup>7</sup> JobAccess is the national hub for workplace and employment information for people with disability, employers and service providers. It includes a telephone advice line, access to workplace modifications and supports through the Employment Assistance Fund, the National Disability Recruitment Coordinator, Complaints Resolution and Referral Services and National Disability Abuse and Neglect Hotline.



The department is open to adopting some functions of this option into the Centre of Excellence model, however it believes there is expectation for the Centre to play a more active role in the disability employment sector.

### **Evidence-Informed Training Hub**

The Centre could be a training hub of experts on disability employment including allied health professionals and training experts. The hub could conduct training based on best practice research and evidence, and undertake tasks to build capability, disseminate knowledge, deliver training and undertake promotional activity to change community attitudes. It could engage at a local level with employers and services providers.

Training could be nationally recognised and leverage and work with existing JobAccess services and networks by establishing links or partnerships with practice experts, relevant research bodies, and suitably qualified training and assessment personnel. JobAccess could be expanded to include a Centre and look to leverage the existing infrastructure of JobAccess, support access and awareness through fewer entry points and to maximise the value for money.

Depending on the topic and audience, training hubs can provide either accredited or non-accredited courses, or a combination of both. Accredited courses provide a national recognised qualification upon completion and are VET Accredited by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA). Non-accredited courses are designed to teach relevant skills that enable employees to perform their job more effectively, typically in a shorter period.

Some examples of training hubs include the [Black Dog Institute](#) accredited training and online learning, the [Queensland Centre for Mental Health Learning](#) and the [Early Childhood Australia Learning Centre](#).

### **Statutory Agency**

The Centre could be established as a statutory agency to conduct research, undertake regulatory functions of disability employment service delivery, report on outcomes and undertake evaluation. It could also have a role in collating voluntary reporting from businesses and making results public. As a statutory agency, the Centre could have a level of independence from the responsible minister or the executive government and be able to enforce decisions made by a regulator or decision-maker.

This model may 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.

A relevant consideration is the significant timeframe required to implement this model, including developing the legislation it would take to establish the agency. The focus of the agency is likely to be more 'regulatory' in nature (requiring careful design to avoid duplication with other regulatory bodies) and may have less emphasis on research and training to lift provider and employer capability.

### **Questions**

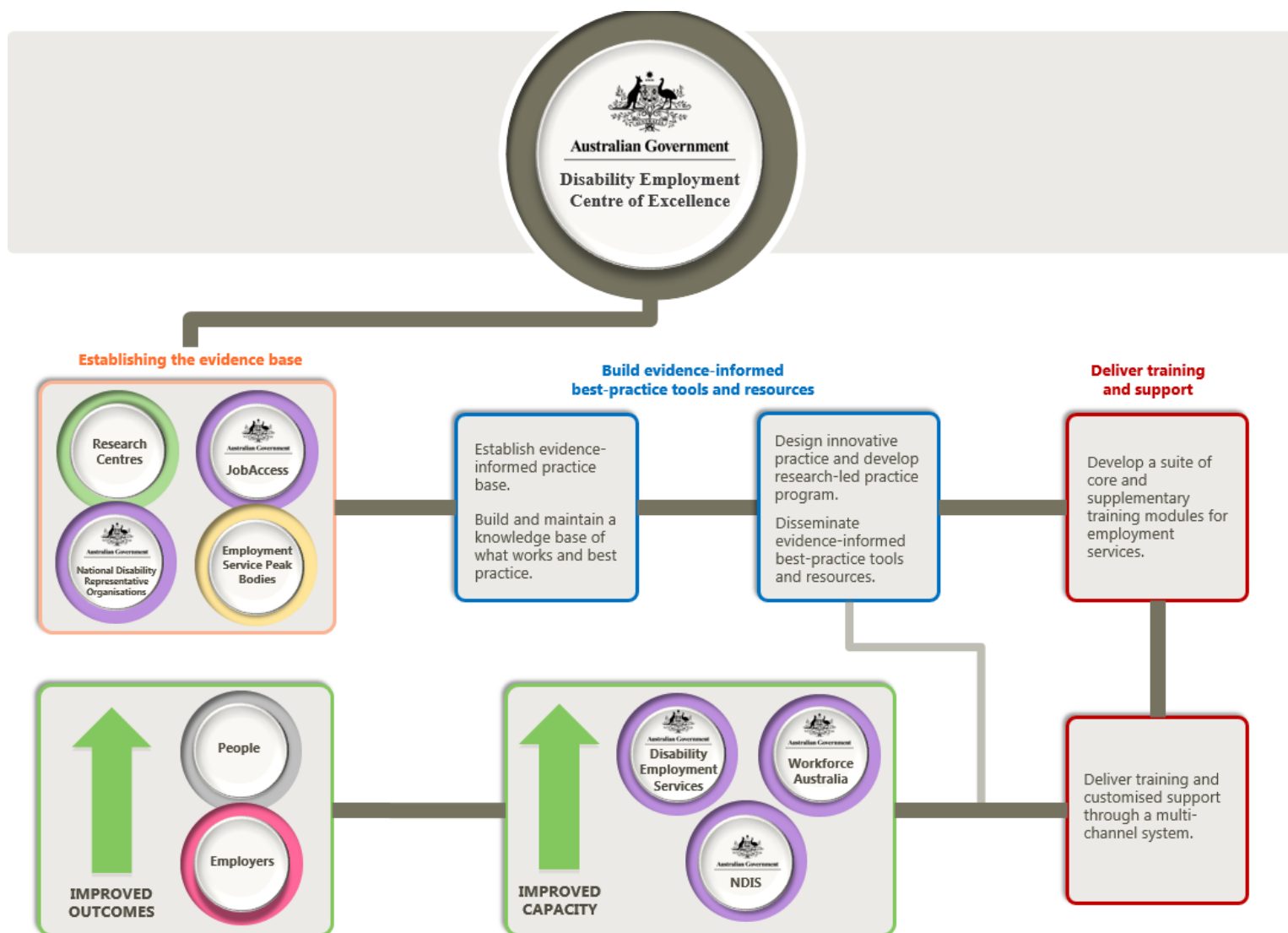
**3.1 What are your views on the models presented?**

**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?**

## Establishing the core functions of the Centre

The below diagram provides an overview of the core functions the Centre could establish in the initial phase of implementation:



## **What are the next steps towards implementation?**

The department is looking to establish core functions of the Centre to ensure it has strong foundations.

The department is interested in working collaboratively with the sector to establish these functions, and to allow the Centre to build on these into the future.

The core functions include:

- establishing, developing and maintaining the evidence base ;
- building evidence-informed best-practice tools and resources; and
- delivering training and support (non-accredited and accredited options) to build the capacity of employment service providers.

### **Establishing, developing and maintaining the evidence base**

The Centre can work with both domestic and international research bodies to establish, develop and maintain the evidence base in disability employment research. Some examples of these bodies include the Melbourne Disability Institute at the University of Melbourne, the Centre for Social Impact, the Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health, the National Disability Research Partnership (NDRP) and the employment research section of the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA).

Regular collaboration with people with disability is also critical to ensure the Centre makes a real-life difference for employment outcomes.

The Centre should work across all Government services providing employment assistance supports to people with disability including DES, Workforce Australia, NDIS, and the Community Development Program. Working across all these services provides the opportunity to upskill employment consultants and planners to work more effectively with people with disability and employers to improve employment outcomes.

The department expects the Centre to hire a collaboration lead who will focus on building and retaining relationships with existing research bodies, peak bodies, employment service providers, employers, Government departments and agencies, and various other stakeholders.

### **Building evidence-informed best-practice tools and resources**

The Centre could look to build an evidence base of 'best practice' research in disability employment. The Centre could create partnerships with existing institutions, such as the National Disability Research Partnership (NDRP), and utilise research to inform the creation of tools and resources.

The Centre could use existing research from other research institutions. The department is interested to hear what topics could form its evidence base. Examples of topics include:

- the barriers people with disability face in finding and retaining employment;
- best practice employment supports, including customised employment;
- specialised support for First Nations people with disability
- disability discrimination in disability employment;
- the tools available to build the capacity of employment service providers;
- the career growth of people with disability into management positions; and

- the transition of people with disability, such as from high-school/university into employment and from supported employment into open employment.

The Centre will need to be resourced with appropriately skilled staff to enable partnerships with research institutes and to translate relevant research into practical tools and resources.

### **Deliver training and support to build the capacity of employment service providers**

Using this evidence-base, the Centre could translate research into practical tools and resources to improve the employment of people with disability.

The Centre could partner with universities and/or training organisations to develop training they other organisations can deliver. It could also directly deliver training, requiring the Centre to have appropriately skilled staff to develop and deliver accredited and non-accredited training. Ultimately, the Centre could consider working with the Australian Skills Quality Authority to establish itself as a registered training organisation (RTO) and deliver relevant Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses.

The department is interested to hear what training and support could look like. Examples include:

- the creation of modules for staff in employment service providers to complete;
- delivering VET courses and qualifications, such as certificates and diplomas.
- a specialised phone-line or messaging service for employment service provider staff to contact expert staff in the Centre when required;
- training presentations to employment service provider staff; and
- developing training modules for private-sector enterprises to use.

### **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?**

## Appendix 1 – Research List

Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Carers*, 24 October 2019, [Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#) [accessed 30 August 2023].

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Australian Human Rights Commission, The economic and business benefits of employing people with disability, The economic and business benefits of employing people with disability | IncludeAbility [accessed 30 August 2023]

Business Council of Australia, Improving employment outcomes for people with disability, 15 August 2023, Improving employment outcomes for people with disability - Business Council of Australia ([bca.com.au](#)) [accessed 30 August 2023].