A Business Case for Disability Employment Services

*The 2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey* showed graduates with a disability to be one of worst-performing equity groups, with only 62.8% reporting full-time employment, compared with 73.5% of students without a disability (p. 7). Barriers include poor employer attitudes, lack of accessibility, and lack of specialised employment services (World Health Organization, 2011). Anecdotally, low awareness of university careers services and Disability Employment Services (DES) may also be a factor. The University Specialist Employment Partnerships (USEP) program addresses this inequity by facilitating the provision of specialised and comprehensive employment preparation supports to students with disability throughout their final year of study and beyond.

# **Setting the scene – the problem being addressed**

Disability Employment Services (DES) are there to help people with disability, injury or health conditions find work and maintain employment. However, the *DES Eligibility, Referral and Commencement* state that full-time students are not eligible to be a part of the program (p.5). Hence, students with disability (SWD) are expected to complete their university studies, then go through the sign-up process for a DES before finally beginning their search for employment. This process may take some time. During the lapsed time, SWD miss out on graduate opportunities and may be unable to take part in individual job-search activities due to issues associated with their disability. This may put them at a disadvantage in the job market in comparison to their contemporaries without disability. Additionally, studies have shown a strong correlation between full-time employment and emotional and physical well-being (Rosenthal, 2012, p. 1692). In fact, systemic barriers which extend the length of time a SWD is unemployed may significantly impact their ability and state of mind to compete in an open job market.

When asked to reflect on their past experience of working with traditional DES providers, some SWD reported that DES consultants are unsure of the pathways that graduates are seeking and do not have connections with appropriate graduate employment or corporate business roles. Furthermore, a USEP consultant has an entirely different skill set to the traditional DES consultant. To illustrate, the advertisement for the traditional DES consultant asks for a candidate ‘passionate about enhancing customer experience, with a proven track record in meeting KPIs, building relationships and displaying a resilient can-do attitude’. In contrast, the successful candidate for the USEP consultant role must have ‘the ability to establish relationships with organisations that are likely to provide employment to graduates; resourcefulness to deliver skill-based training sessions and individual supports to build capacity for employment and to improve transitions and linkages into employment; and knowledge of the labour market, suitable graduate outcomes and experience in placing clients into graduate and corporate employment opportunities’. Indeed, the USEP consultant requires a more specialised set of skills as well as contacts with an entirely different set of stakeholders.

USEP addresses this significant gap by co-locating an employment consultant within the careers/disability team at university. This consultant is trained as a specialist in meeting the specific needs of graduating or graduated SWD seeking employment. They support SWD in their final year of study to help them prepare for the workforce, complete applications for graduate opportunities, and make key connections with employers who offer graduate and corporate roles. In short, the aim of USEP is to line up career opportunities for SWD so that they can gain employment upon graduation or very shortly after.

# **What is being done**

USEPwas first trialled in 2017 at Griffith University in a tripartite collaboration with National Disability Coordination Officers (NDCO) Program and Mylestones Employment. James Cook University, University of Tasmania, University of Wollongong, Western Sydney University, Southern Cross University, Flinders University, University of Queensland, University of the Sunshine Coast, University of Western Australia, Curtin University, Victoria University, The University of Adelaide and Federation University in conjunction with local DES have now taken up USEP to provide similar support to their students.

USEP provides currently enrolled university students and recent graduates with specialised support from a USEP consultant to find employment after graduation. The program aims to connect students with employment opportunities in a timely manner; promote strong linkages between stakeholders; and foster cross-referral and training of university careers and disabilities advisors with the needs of SWD in mind.

The USEP model currently relies on a DES providing in-kind services until the SWD has completed their studies. At this point, the DES may market themselves to the SWD in the hope that the student will sign up to the DES. A DES will not receive any financial benefit from placing a job seeker into employment without them being signed with the service (which they are unable to do until after the student graduates from full-time study, due to the caveat in the *DES Eligibility, Referral and Commencement Guidelines)*.

Results to date have shown great success, with students either having gained employment or commenced on a path to employment. It is important to state that the statistics cited below do not represent the entire true numbers. Since the inception of USEP, partners have been encouraged students to complete anonymous surveys to capture information about the effectiveness of the program, and attempts have been made to embed national research and metrics into the project. However, this often relies on funding and grants. Furthermore, data collection to provide an accurate snapshot is hindered by privacy, funding and capacity constraints. In addition, participation in the project is variable across partnerships and is dependent on staff and student uptake and promotion.

The USEP project did, however, collect interim data from 6 of the 10 university partners established in July 2019, which showed:

* 192 student referrals were received
* 151 students were eligible within the project’s scope
* 60 were currently working with USEP consultants
* 22 of these active students had been placed into degree-related work
* an additional 4 had been placed in work that was not directly related to their degree.

# **Benefits for a DES provider**

1. Through their work with a university, USEP consultants create and maintain strong relationships with key stakeholders including employers, peak industry bodies, and university staff (disability/careers advisors and key champions across all schools/faculties).
2. DES partners benefit from the specialised skills development of the USEP consultant, and the rich connections made with employers of graduate/corporate roles. Of course, USEP consultants bring their diverse skill set back to the office, enhancing collective learning within the DES.
3. USEP activity has resulted in the procurement of high-quality employment outcomes for SWD, which is illustrated in DES outcomes and star ratings.
4. Many DES partners have shared that they feel more connected to their colleagues and now have a greater understanding of the various supports provided by professionals within the university and across the disability sector.
5. The good reputation of the DES is bolstered as they create close partnerships with local universities.
6. A DES may capitalise on their USEP partnership by collecting testimonials, which could be used to support their marketing and promotional objectives.
7. A DES can point to the successful USEP partnership in tender applications to illustrate their commitment to their local community and to achieving solid employment outcomes for people with disability.
8. DES partners are given a unique opportunity to promote directly to SWD on university campuses.
9. Through their provision of USEP supports to SWD, DES partners can contribute to real systemic changes and equality for SWD seeking employment in line with their study.

# **References**

Disability Employment Service Eligibility, Referral and Commencement Guidelines V 1.4

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