

Graduates with Disability in Employment Policy and Programs

*Maximising the potential of people with disability in the* *workforce.*

# Summary

This submission to the National Disability Employment Strategy consultation provides background information and recommendations to improve transition of graduates with disability into appropriate and meaningful employment, as a significant lever to improve the employment outcomes of all people with disability in Australia.

This submission has been prepared by David Swayn, Elicia Ford, Debbie Rooskov, Caroline Krix and Gary Kerridge, who are employed as National Disability Coordination Officers. The NDCO Program is an Australian Government initiative which aims to drive change so that people with disability have equitable opportunity to access, participate and achieve their goals in tertiary education and subsequent employment. The views presented in this submission do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government.

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# Introduction

People with disability represent a rapidly growing cohort of graduates across Australian Universities, TAFE, and other VET providers, and are emerging as capable talent - ready to begin their careers. However, these individuals are not attaining qualification related work on an equal basis as peers without disability.

As the Australian labour market sees a growing vacuum of entry level jobs[[1]](#footnote-1), it is now more critical than ever that disability employment policy and programs are strengthened to ensure that people with disability have equal access to opportunities that fully build, enable, and utilise their education and skills at all organisational levels.

A review of the National Disability Employment Strategy consultation paper “the paper” revealed that tertiary education was discussed once, in the context of educating the practitioners who support people with disability (providing disability awareness training in courses relating to career guidance).

This submission has been prepared to demonstrate the significant opportunity available in a growing cohort of people with disability who have tertiary qualifications. The recommendations provided in this submission align with the focus areas of the future employment strategy:

1. **Lifting employer engagement, capability, and demand:** providing employers with the tools and abilities to confidently hire, support and develop more people with disability.

2. **Building employment skills, experience, and confidence of young people with disability:** ensuring young people with disability are supported to obtain meaningful work and careers of their choice.

3. **Improving systems and services for jobseekers and employers:** making it simpler for job seekers with disability and employers to navigate and utilise government services and driving better performance from service providers.

4. **Changing community attitudes:** changing people’s perception and expectation about the capability of people with disability in the workplace.

This submission focuses specifically on policy options that will strengthen supports to enable success for graduates with disability. Case studies demonstrating the benefits of providing specialist individualised career development supports to tertiary students and graduates with disability are provided (Appendix A).

# Background

In 2019, there were 78,630 students with disclosed disability studying at TAFE, 70,495[[2]](#footnote-2) at other private training providers, and 74,500[[3]](#footnote-3) in Higher Education institutions - for a total of 223,625 people with disclosed disability enrolled to complete qualifications ranging from a Certificate I to a Doctor of Philosophy in Australia.

Enrolment of people with disability in tertiary education is consistently outpacing the all-student average and is the fastest growing equity cohort in tertiary education[[4]](#footnote-4) now representing 6.57% of students in Vocational Education and training (VET) and 6.72% in Higher Education[[5]](#footnote-5). However, for this cohort, graduate employment rates have never reached parity[[6]](#footnote-6) with their peers without disability.

At University, 81.4% of graduates with disability were likely to be working in any form compared to 87.2% for students without disability (2019)[[7]](#footnote-7). Employment rates for TAFE graduates with disability are alarming – 49.1% of TAFE graduates with disability are employed post-study, compared to 74.2% of their peers without disability[[8]](#footnote-8).

To address these gaps, the National Disability Coordination Officer Program (NDCO Program) launched two trial projects: University Specialist Employment Partnerships (USEP) in 2017, and TAFE Specialist Employment Partnerships (TSEP) in 2020. The trials ask Disability Employment Services (DES) providers to allocate a suitably qualified staff member to work on campus (or via a method that suits the student) with students in their final year before graduation (Higher Education), or in the transitional time of their VET qualification. This is often outside of funding allowances and was undertaken to test efficacy of a quality, transitional career support in tertiary education provided at the appropriate time and place.

These trials are now at a point where they require direct government collaboration to leverage project learnings for systemic impact, and information about the issues and the options to remedy issues are provided in this submission.

# Issues requiring resolution

## 1: DES eligibility guidelines

Project information from USEP and TSEP indicates that the Disability Employment Services guidelines are not in alignment with providing direct, specialist support to University and VET graduates with disability to utilise their qualifications. This is stifling the ability for a free-market economy to emerge and provide needed services, limiting quality options for students with disability.

Failure to rectify this gap in a national and systemic way may have far reaching impacts, from the loss of opportunity to build diverse workforces (especially at the senior or leadership level), to a loss of future taxation income, potential increase in welfare outgoings, increased health care costs of the unemployed. Most importantly it may represent a missed opportunity to change the narrative and improve employment outcomes for future generations, by enabling this cohort of future leaders.

## 2: Focus in government policy and employer practices

There is a notable lack of focus about ensuring graduates with disability are recognised and targeted for employment by employers and are reflected in disability employment strategic/corporate plans and government policy. This lack of focus extends to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and related funding provided through the Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grants, as recently highlighted in the recommendations provided to the agency by the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme[[9]](#footnote-9).

This cohort of graduates represents an opportunity for Australia to target efforts to support our national and international goals relating to the improvement of employment outcomes for people with disability. It is important to clarify that the NDIS will not resolve all issues relating to all Australians with disability, with only 10% of people with disability likely to be eligible for the scheme. Broader policy enablers and/or programs are required.

## 3: The future of work

The changing nature of work will continue to require tertiary qualifications for an increasing number of roles in high demand occupations[[10]](#footnote-10) including relating to automation[[11]](#footnote-11). This makes it now imperative that the National Disability Employment Strategy has a focus on improving qualification attainment and graduate employment outcomes for people with disability.

The success and sustainability of multi-billion-dollar systems and services, such as the NDIS and DES are undermined if these systems are not seamlessly linked with and through the education and training system, and with industry, including forecasted changes in the labour market.

# Supporting Information

The underlying data supporting this submission is drawn from a larger background paper on the [University Specialist Employment Partnerships](https://www.usep.com.au/graduates-with-disability-in-australia-partnerships-for-success-usep/) alongside preliminary project data from [TAFE Specialist Employment Partnerships](https://www.usep.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TSEP-DATA-July-20-Jan-21.pdf), available on the [USEP website](https://www.usep.com.au/).

It is important to note that the following surveyed students have voluntarily engaged in the trial services, without any incentive other than the potential to gain specialised support relating to their disability, their qualification and graduate employment.

## Survey results: students accessing USEP and TSEP

A survey of 93 University students with disability who have engaged in USEP service trials so far, revealed that:

* The student’s scope of study is very broad – from a Graduate Certificate in Supply Chain Development to a Doctor of Philosophy. There were few duplicate degree titles
* 53.7% of respondents did not have any degree-related work experience. Of these, a slightly larger proportion were represented by students who are on a Disability Support Pension (DSP)
* Less than half (44.1%) of respondents had completed any paid work at all whilst at university.
* 74.1% are seeking work directly related to their degree. 4.3% said they were not. The balance was unsure or will take any employment opportunities.
* 78.4% were not working at all at the time of responding
* 35.5% were on a DSP
* 23.6% were not in receipt of government payments

An equivalent survey from TSEP shows similar results for VET students with disability seeking support to obtain employment:

* Student scope of study was very broad - from Certificate II in General Education to a Certificate IV in IT
* 73% were not working at all
* 22% had casual employment
* For those that were employed, 60% were working less than 8 hours per week
* When commencing with the project trial, 43% were not registered with a service to assist them to look for work
* 36% were linked with a DES, 13% were linked with Jobactive, and 9% were receiving NDIA assistance

Students across the VET and Higher Education projects revealed that the main types of individualised support they were seeking included:

* Advice about how to talk about an injury/illness/disability with employers.
* Guidance regarding how to get started searching for a career after university
* Finding out how to identify employers who are equipped to provide an inclusive workplace
* Advice about when to discuss an injury/illness/disability with employers
* Learn about options and supports available after university to secure employment
* Coaching about the job interview and how to succeed in these

This survey data presents evidence that there are students with disability in tertiary education (incorporating Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education) who want specialised, tailored support to get a graduate job. The currently available responses rely on in-kind arrangements and are only available at a small number of VET and Higher Education institutions in Australia, meaning that there is no nationally resourced service waiting to meet this need.

The data presents information about several factors which can be addressed:

* A limited amount of qualification related work experience from students who engaged in the service trials
* A direct desire for specific, individualised support that is otherwise unavailable beyond collaborative partnerships like USEP or TSEP
* A specific list of the types of supports the students are looking for, ready to guide any future funding or programs.

## Compounding factors present in survey results

The data also highlights issues relating to income support or lack thereof, and eligibility post-study for DES services, including:

### 1: Income support and eligibility

For students who are not on an income support payment, yet have a disability and require support, a gap is broadening with pending changes to guidelines for eligibility for Disability Employment Services from July 1, 2021. The change will exclude participants who are not recipients of income support from DES[[12]](#footnote-12). Our survey data indicates that there are students with disability who are not on income support yet are seeking specialised employment support to put their qualifications to work who would benefit from equal access to services.

This policy related exclusion of a cohort of people with disability relative to income support, or lack thereof, may create complex issues, including the potential for compounding the youth unemployment gap and compounding disadvantage for people with disability. As an example, individuals with disability who are temporarily financially supported by family will be prohibited from accessing the individualised supports required for them to be competitive in the workforce if this change is not reversed.

### 2: Students on Disability Support Pensions

For students on the DSP, there are direct short term and long-term economic imperatives and benefits to government to invest in supporting these students to reach their employment goals.

As an example, from the USEP survey data collected: 33 students receiving the Disability Support Pension (DSP) have directly requested specialised support to obtain either full time (mostly) or part time work to utilise their qualification. If these students do not meet their graduate employment goals the direct cost to government of just these 33 survey respondents remaining unemployed, in receipt of the DSP for 5 years after graduation is $3,691,974. The direct cost to the individual of not meeting these goals is unquantifiable, as is the cost to potential employer who may benefit from harnessing these individuals’ potential in their workforce.

### 3: NDIS unlikely to bridge the gap

The low levels of disclosed NDIS supports relative to the student population accessing USEP and TSEP, demonstrates that the NDIS is unable to bridge this gap for all students with disability and a broader systemic response is required.

These requests for support can be addressed through a combination of avenues (not just Disability Employment Services). However, a starting point for making meaningful progress on this is to make changes that allow adequate funding to flow from the piloted work of USEP and TSEP, now that the scoping work has been undertaken by the NDCO Program in collaboration with TAFE’s, Universities and DES providers.

## Disability Employment Staff Capacity: Working with Universities

In 2017 a NDCO stakeholder survey was conducted focusing on Disability Employment Services staff on their capacity and confidence working with graduates and their relationship with universities to inform the USEP trials. 330 DES staff across Australia completed this survey; key findings showed:

* 79.78% of DES consultants reported that they either did not know about, or that their local office does not work with Universities to directly register graduates with disability after study.
* 68.40% of DES consultant respondents had no experience at all working in a University setting.
* 82.52% of DES consultant respondents did not have a relationship with either equity or careers staff at their local university. 15.85% of this makeup included where there was no local university.
* Only 23.49% DES consultant respondents had a degree or postgraduate qualification themselves, bringing forward a potentially low representation of lived experience of the student perspective.
* Consultants mainly placed their current clients in to work at small businesses – either local or regional (69.95%) and only 1.64% reported large to multinational businesses as their main way of placing customers.
* 58.2% thought there was a lack of a national approach to promoting Graduates with Disability to employers
* Societal expectation – 23.65% felt that there is not a high expectation that people with disability will get employed after study

Disability Employment Service staff also advised that they would benefit from improved training on supporting people with disability in their tertiary goals:

* 84.5% of consultants wanted further training about access and inclusion in the workplace for people with disability
* 77.5% would like further information/ training on how to support a person with a disability in their tertiary education goals

The information provided by DES staff reinforces the need for universally embedded training and supports for DES consultants to support people with disability to reach their full potential in tertiary education and subsequent employment.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations, which will address the issues raised throughout this submission, are offered for inclusion in the National Disability Employment Strategy:

### Recommendation 1

Create Eligible Tertiary Leaver guidelines for Disability Employment Services to include full access for students transitioning from tertiary education to work, to support a strong market economy for quality services provided to graduates with disability. Policy makers could consider a licensing system for providers to manage quality in this specialised field, like mental health specialist contracts.

The recommendations in the National Disability Employment Strategy must also remove the pending exclusion of people with disability who are not in receipt of income support and for people with disability who may receive a 30+ hour work capacity from DES, to ensure students are not excluded from needed services.

### Recommendation 2

Improve tripartite communication and collaboration between Disability Employment Services, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (and subsequently participants) and Tertiary Education providers, peaks, and regulators to:

* Streamline and integrate supports and options for students with disability across the education and employment lifecycle, and
* Recognise the significant value tertiary education can play in helping to realise equitable employment goals for people with disability in Australia.

The NDCO Program can support and collaborate in this process, however broad national policy support across areas of responsibility is required, like recommendations provided to the NDIS by the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme[[13]](#footnote-13).

### Recommendation 3

Specifically fund and enable JobAccess to specialise in working with Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training providers, and all employers (small, medium, and large) to ensure that employment opportunities are equally accessible for students with disability.

This recommendation focuses on creating employer demand by ensuring employers have accessible recruitment strategies and understand the talent pipeline emerging from Australia’s tertiary institutions. It is complimentary to recommendation one, where individualised supports are present for students.

# Conclusion

This submission provides options which support a significant raising of expectations about people with disability and employment in Australia, including building an awareness of the array of talented individuals that graduate from our tertiary institutions. There are policy related options available to the Australian Government to adequately resource this sector to build disability employment results.

The recommendations provided directly contribute to planned commitments within the portfolios:

* *The Statement of Continued Commitment: National Disability Strategy 2010-2020*
* *The Disability Employment Advisory Committee outputs – 2020-2021*
* *The Pending National Disability Strategy and likely education and employment outputs 2021-2031*

And are underpinned by legislation and international commitments:

* *The Disability Standards for Education (2005)*
* *The Disability Discrimination Act (1992)*
* *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 24 and 27*

The NDCO Program is currently funded until June 2022 and program officers are presently available to policy makers and relevant departments to explore the options in this submission further as required.

The authors of this submission are committed to ensure education and employment policy is driven in collaboration with people with lived experience of disability, and lived experience is present on the author panel.

For more information about the NDCO Program, please see<https://www.dese.gov.au/access-and-participation/ndco>.

# Appendix A

## Case studies from USEP and TSEP

The following are a small collection of case studies from the pilots and trials of University Specialist Employment Partnerships and TAFE Specialist Employment Partnerships which highlight the value of specific, skilled individualised supports at the graduate level relating to disability and employment.

At present, this type of intervention is not directly funded, and Disability Employment Services providers engaged in the model are required to provide in-kind servicing where students are ineligible for supports under the model. There are ongoing risks of this sort of partnership arrangement disbanding, without significant attention and investment at the program level.

Some names or other personally identifying details in some case studies have been altered.

### CASE STUDY: Employer negotiations in Higher Education

Despite a long battle with mental health concerns, Susan graduated university with a Bachelor of Information Technology. Susan was keen to find employment where she could utilise the skills learnt in her course, whilst also maintaining positive mental health. This led her to join the USEP program, where an experienced consultant created a plan for employment, aimed at connecting Susan with employers experienced at supporting staff with mental health concerns.

Through networking directly with employers, Susan and her USEP consultant negotiated work experience, allowing Susan to gently adjust to the workplace and its demands.

After only 4 weeks the USEP consultant was able to convert this experience into a paid Graduate Software Developer position. Susan now receives on-going support through the USEP program, to help her maintain good mental health and achieve positive work outcomes during her induction period.

University Student, Bachelor of Information Technology

### CASE STUDY: VET to change careers.

After 15 years as a baker, followed by a career break, Liz decided to take the plunge into study. She was motivated by a desire to update her skills and get a job that she loved. After careful consideration, she enrolled as a mature age student in a Cert IV Mental Health and has since completed a Cert IV Community Services and Cert IV Youth Work.

Throughout her course, Liz had an underlying concern that, due to her age and absence from the workforce, it may be more difficult for her to become employed. Liz arranged a consultation with the support advisor at TAFE, who referred her to the TSEP program.

Along with her TSEP consultant, Liz revamped her resume, honed her interview skills and was supported to directly connect with employers in her chosen industry. Happily, after an exhaustive application process, followed by a panel interview, Liz was offered a job in line with her qualifications, starting her new position as a community services officer two weeks’ later.

TAFE Student, Cert IV Community services and Cert IV Youth Work

### CASE STUDY: Individualised support in Higher Education

“What I have found the most valuable in the USEP program is the one-on-one support provided. I have had a dedicated 'case manager' who has worked with me. She has supported me all the way through the program, encouraging me, providing advice and feedback, wise counsel, and valuable contacts to assist me in applying for and obtaining employment.

Through the program, I have been supported in updating my resume to reflect current employer preferences and I have had the opportunity to participate in mock interviews with experienced and knowledgeable staff.

This has provided me with invaluable experience, feedback, encouragement, an understanding of an employers’ perspective on employment and suggestions on how to best answer questions in an interview. Having someone on your side during the job-seeking process is such a blessing especially when you have a disability that makes it difficult for you to find work.”

University student, Master of Early Childhood

### CASE STUDY: Advice and support at the right time and place in VET.

22 year-old, Israel, is currently completing a Cert IV Preparation for Health & Nursing. He joined the TSEP program after having experienced some difficulty at his part-time job, which resulted from him not having the proper disability supports in place. Unfortunately, Israel’s employment ended suddenly, which left him bereft of confidence that he could effectively participate in employment.

On the other hand, Israel’s experience of TSEP was positive from the start, the consultant listened respectfully to his needs, and helped him to develop a plan to achieve his work goals. Additionally, TSEP supported Israel in other ways, for example, helping him to understand his Centrelink obligations, and linking him directly to employers.

Connections with hospitals where Israel wanted to work proved vital in not only securing Israel’s dream job, but in implementing on-the-job supports, to ensure that he has everything he needs to work effectively.

When asked if he would encourage other students to explore TSEP, Israel is a strong advocate,

*“Yes, go for it! You don’t know what supports are out there if you don’t ask the questions. I received so much advice and now I have long term support with employment even when I finish TAFE. It’s great to know I don’t have to do it all alone!”*

TAFE Student, Cert IV Prep for Health & Nursing

### CASE STUDY: Strengthening networks in Higher Education

“I started with USEP Program in 2019 and it has been a tremendous help. The USEP consultant assisted me with job applications in making the right impression. The consultant referred me to professionals and agencies in my area of interest, providing me with valuable opportunities for networking that led to a job offer.”

University student, Bachelor of Science

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