A Business Case for University Specialist Employment Partnerships

The *2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey* confirmed graduates with a disability to be one of the 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 providing specialised and comprehensive employment preparation supports to students with disability throughout their final year of study and beyond.

# **Rationale**

Research demonstrates that the national enrolment share for students with disabilities (SWD) into university-level education has risen significantly in the past decade (Koshy, 2016). Circumstances which have led to this increase include a greater awareness of access and pathways, increased support for students (Koshy, 2015, p. 10), and more flexibility in learning modes offered to students (Kent, 2015). Despite the increased access to university, SWD experience greater challenges in securing employment after graduation in comparison to their peers without a disability. As mentioned in the summary above, the *2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey* confirmed 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).

In light of the results from the *2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey*, it is apparent that graduate employment for students with disability is experiencing an equitable deficit. Research also reveals that 31.7% of SWD who are in full-time employment feel their skills are being underutilised in their role, opposed to 26.8% of students without disability *(p. 28, 2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey).* USEP addresses this major systemic barrier and offers an integrated model focusing on graduate employment for students with disability (SWD) in line with their skill level and career aspirations.

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

Currently, the Australian Government allocates funding to a mix of large, medium and small for-profit and not-for-profit organisations that are tasked with supporting people with disability and aiding employers to put in place practices that support the employee in the workplace. These organisations, known as Disability Employment Services (DES) are there to assist people with disability, injury or health conditions find work and maintain employment. However, the *DES Eligibility, Referral and Commencement Guidelines* state that full-time students are not eligible to be a part of the program (p. 5). Hence, 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 several weeks or months. During the lapsed time, SWD miss out on graduate opportunities and may be unable to take part in traditional job-search activities due to issues associated with their disability. This alone may place 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 SWD are unemployed may significantly impact their ability and state of mind to compete in an open job market.

SWD were asked to reflect on their past experience of working with traditional DES providers. Some SWD reported the DES did not work to secure employment which matched their career aspirations and qualification level. Examples of poor job match and DES service provision were not aimed at one particular DES provider or even a particular geographical region. Rather, they seemed to be reflective of the DES system as a whole. Unfortunately, DES consultants are unsure of the pathways that graduates are seeking, do not have connections with appropriate graduate employers and do not receive training around how to work with participants pursuing employment in graduate or business roles.

The 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; 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 through the co-location of the USEP 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 students with disability 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.

# **Background and Overview**

USEPwas first trialled from mid-2016 at Griffith University in a tri-partite collaboration with the National Disability Coordination Officers (NDCO) Program and Mylestones Employment. James Cook University, University of Tasmania, University of Wollongong, Western Sydney University, Southern Cross University, University of the Sunshine Coast and Flinders 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.

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 are not an entire data representation. Since the inception of USEP, NDCOs have urged USEP partners 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 across the network. In addition, participation in the project is variable across partnerships and is dependent on staff and student uptake and promotion.

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

* 192 student referrals were received
* 151 students were eligible within the projects or programs 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.

# **USEP program in the university**

USEP aims to build a connection for SWD between the university and employment sector through timely and appropriate employment service supports. USEP survey results (completed by SWD undertaking the USEP program) demonstrate that there is no particular qualification that a SWD embarks upon. USEP SWD are undertaking qualifications in every discipline from Arts to Science to Education and more, and at undergraduate and postgraduate level. It simply is not possible for the USEP consultant to be a specialist in all fields. Therefore, to successfully place a SWD into employment, the USEP consultant must 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). In practice, this activity has resulted in the procurement of high-quality employment outcomes for SWD. At the same time, university and DES staff have benefitted by adding to their skillset. Many university partners have shared with the USEP team, the fact 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. The cross-training and natural upskilling that will occur from the co-location of the USEP consultant on campus and their involvement in university activities will promote strong linkages with employment and university services (eg careers/industry nights, open days). University Careers Advisors and Disability Advisors in turn will become more skilled in the types of supports available within an employment environment.

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 with anticipation that the student will sign up to their particular DES. A DES will not receive any immediate financial benefit from placing a job seeker into employment without the SWD being signed-up with the DES 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)*.

# **Support for USEP partners**

This activity has been led and facilitated by the NDCO Program, funded by the Australian Government, which worked strategically to assist people with disability to access and participate in tertiary education and subsequent employment. To ensure that this important project remained successful, NDCOs worked to provide consistent supports and resources to USEP partners. There is a website ([www.usep.com.au](https://protect-au.mimecast.com/s/N46uCjZ12Rf6xWXrc5V0IW?domain=usep.com.au)) which showcases positive case studies and allows partners to feel connected. Partners also share their stories and experiences at regular community consultations.

# **References**

Disability Employment Service Eligibility, Referral and Commencement Guidelines V 1.4

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