

Graduates with Disability in Australia:

Partnerships for Success – USEP

*Exploring the development, history and learnings*

*of University Specialist Employment Partnerships: an NDCO initiative*

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# Summary

University Specialist Employment Partnerships (USEP) is a partnership model that seeks to utilise existing staff to create additional graduate employment opportunities for university students with disability. The model integrates staff from a Disability Employment Service (DES) with staff within the university who provide internal career and disability supports and services to students. This tripartite collaboration between the NDCO Program, universities and a selected DES makes a one-on-one accessible employment service available at university to students with disability in the critical year prior to graduation, delivered by DES staff.

The project was conceived after focus groups and discussions elicited this type of partnership as an option. The gaps and issues relating to efforts of this nature were investigated further by surveying 220 DES consultants, identifying ways in which some of the factors currently preventing this work could be addressed.

After testing at James Cook University in Townsville and Griffith University on the Gold Coast with pilot provider Mylestones Employment, the model became available in a limited capacity for other universities around Australia. The aim is to create a national network of partnerships that share learnings and good practice, for the benefit of graduates with disability, while learning about the types of supports that best make an impact for students with disability seeking graduate work. USEP is active at 13 universities, in partnership with 7 DES providers.

Data gathered in 2019 showed, with caveats, that USEP was producing graduate opportunities for students. Issues facing partnerships were student uptake, internal promotion efforts in a noisy environment, a need for stronger national collaboration, resourcing barriers both in financial and human capital (at universities and at DES providers) and the competing demands within equity group performance at a policy level. Some of these barriers are addressed at the national level by National Disability Coordination Officers (NDCOs), who set up a community of practice for consultants in 2019 and started advocating with state and national employers, including government departments.

A lack of specific funding that adequately enables the delivery of USEP is an ongoing factor which remains unaddressed and poses potential risks to continuance of the service model and project. DES providers often work in-kind to meet the needs of the model. The 2 current policy related recommendations from USEP are that:

* the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) implements changes to the DES Eligible School Leaver Guidelines to provide specific measurable funding relating to tertiary graduates; this will fund DES to work with university graduates prior to graduation (as opposed to present in-kind arrangements), supporting a viable market economy for quality service delivery
* there is investment in data analysis regarding the Disability Support Pension (DSP) and degree utilisation to produce economic modelling to inform funding of support for national programs and projects, starting with this cohort.

This paper explores USEP-related data gathered about the participation and graduate employment of students with disability in the context of providing individualized, specialist graduate employment focused services on campus (or on-line) utilising DES staff. There is an exploration of the formation of USEP including related projects, and environmental scans and summaries potentially useful for people working in this field.

# INTRODUCTION

## Purpose

This paper has been written to present information gathered during the exploration, creation and establishment of various trials of University Specialist Employment Partnerships (USEP) with Disability Employment Service (DES) providers and universities. It explores the development and experience of USEP and unpacks policy and practice ideas for addressing systemic barriers to enable more equitable opportunities for graduates with disability.

## Scope

The scope focuses specifically on partnerships between universities and DES from the perspective of USEP. There is relevant data and structured analysis of environmental, funding and policy factors that impact the employment success of university graduates with disability.

## Method

This information presented within draws on multiple sources of survey information. Development of the USEP model was based on and informed by 2 surveys distributed to frontline DES employment consultants in 2016–2017 and 2018–2019. The first survey identified DES employment consultant experience and skill gaps when working with universities, which were addressed through the development and testing of the USEP model.

The second survey was performed in 2018–2019 and surveyed 331 DES employment consultants (one excluded – erroneous data, making 330 valid responses) to understand role tenure, current skills and training needs regarding access to tertiary education and graduate employment. While USEP was trialled with a few selected DES providers, it is important to understand the needs of the DES sector to explore the possibilities of options for all providers.

Data relating to students with disability that have participated in USEP is drawn from an anonymous intake questionnaire provided by the DES employment consultant to the student during USEP service delivery. No survey or questionnaire used in this paper constitutes academic research, and this paper has not been written in affiliation with any partner university.

The data examined in this paper was gathered to inform continuous improvement in project design and focus areas for USEP and is presented here to provide insight into the experiences of the project and the potential for further research and analysis.

# Background

## Students with disability in higher education

### Access and participation rates

Students with disability are the fastest growing equity group in Australian universities (Koshy, 2019). The 2013–2018 growth in number of students with disability is 50%, compared to the overall growth of number of students participating in higher education at 12.6%, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Growth of number of students participating in higher education

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Grouping or equity category | Growth (2013–2018) % |
| Students with disability | 50.0% |
| Indigenous | 42.9% |
| Low socio-economic status (low SES) | 21.1% |
| National (all students) | 12.6% |
| Non-English speaking background (NESB) | 12.5% |
| Women in non-traditional areas (WINTA) | 12.2% |
| Regional | 7.9% |
| Remote | 6.9% |

Source: Australian Government (2019) as cited in Koshy, P. (2019), adapted to show rankings highest to lowest.

In 2018, 6.45% of students in higher education in Australian universities shared information about their disability with the education provider. Students with disability in Australia as a share of all university students has been increasing yearly since 2009, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Higher education – students with disability enrolment share (%) in Australia

Source: Australian Government, Microsoft Power BI tool (2020)

This growth of students sharing information about their disability is also reflected in other overseas higher education markets, specifically the United Kingdom (13.2% of all university students reporting disability) and the United States (19.4% of all undergraduates reporting disability) (US Department of Education, 2019).

A government-led UK insight brief titled *Beyond the bare minimum* discusses opportunities for better resourcing for the 13.2% of students attending UK universities who report a disability and was based on a large-scale review of supports for students with disability in Higher Education in England (Institute for Employment Studies, 2019). Despite its strengths, the underlying research paper and the insight brief do not specifically address employment.

The Office for Students in the UK responded to *Beyond the bare minimum* by reviewing the provisions of financial supports to universities, allocating an additional GPB40 million towards development and implementation of inclusive practice, in addition to direct financial support to students with disability based on the existing loadings.

In Australia in 2020, there was a policy shift towards inclusive practice. However, no additional funding has been forthcoming to facilitate this effort (Australian Government, 2020), and the funding is similarly focused on access and participation, not graduate employment.

This rapid trajectory seen globally, as well as in Australia, creates growth in a category of graduates, many of whom, at the time of writing, do not have access to graduate careers on an equal basis to their peers, albeit with some minor improvements made in recent years (Swayn, 2020).

### Graduate employment rates

Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) first asked graduates whether they had a disability in the 2005 Graduate Destinations Report (Graduate Careers Australia, 2005). This aligns with the introduction of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DSE) and was a turning point in data collection about where graduates with disability go after university.

In 2006, discussions about student characteristics began to emerge including a section about graduates from overseas (Graduate Careers Australia, 2006). The data story for graduates with disability in GCA reports began in 2007 – 15 years after the *Disability Discrimination Act (1992)* and 2 years after the DSE.

Figure 2 shows one reliable indicator across a long period of time: students who are currently seeking full-time work, broken into students with disability vs all students. This is arguably reliable because it focuses on the contrast between intentions and outcomes, and therefore is not as dependent on the job market as other indicators like the full-time or part-time employment rates of individual cohorts. The gap between students with disability and those without has always been present in this indicator.

**Figure 2:** Seeking full-time employment – students with disability (SWD) vs all students (All)

A further full breakdown is shown in Table 2, with the gap itemised. This data was extracted by reviewing each archived Graduate Destination Survey, 2007–2015.

**Table 2:** Students currently seeking full-time work, measured 4 months post-graduation

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Students with disability | All students | Gap |
| 2007 | 22.8% | 15.5% | 7.3% |
| 2008 | 23% | 14.8% | 8.2% |
| 2009 | 26.7% | 20.8% | 5.9% |
| 2010 | 33.7% | 23.8% | 9.9% |
| 2011 | 33.8% | 23.6% | 10.2% |
| 2012 | 30.7% | 23.9% | 6.8% |
| 2013 | 30.7% | 28.7% | 2% |
| 2014 | 38.4% | 31.9% | 6.5% |
| 2015 | 43.8% | 31.2% | 12.6% |

The respondents include either students who are unemployed and seeking full-time work or students who are working casually or part-time and seeking full-time work. This provides a reliable indicator that students with disability are wanting full-time work and not getting it at the same rate as the all-student average, over previous decades. For interest, there is more to explore in the Graduate Careers Australia archives.

Most recent data from 2019 and 2020 from the Social Research Centre via the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching’s Graduate Outcome Survey (QILT-GOS) continues to demonstrate a persistent gap in employment outcomes.

## Disability Employment Services (DES)

### What is DES?

DES is funded by the Australian Government and is a free source of support for people with disability to find and maintain work when eligibility criteria are met. The service went through a revision in 2018 with the intent to shift the focus further on the participants’ employment success (Australian Government, 2018).

Instrumental in the development of USEP was current knowledge and understanding of DES working operations, and these constraints were heavily considered. However, the USEP model does not directly integrate with the DES funding model and subsequently may remain financially unattractive and/or nonviable to some providers. This paper aims to inform a systemic solution that produces the best possible results for students with disability.

DES provides individualised service to more than 250,000 Australians with disability and is hosted across multiple providers, reaching a large proportion of locations in Australia (Australian Government, 2018). This extensive coverage creates availability of a significant number of frontline staff able to work with people with disability who have tertiary level qualifications or are wishing to engage in tertiary education. This represents a potential opportunity for cross-training between the tertiary education sector relating to disability and DES. For these reasons, this workforce offers a reasonable option for implementing a national model of graduate career support for universities, albeit with some hurdles to overcome.

### DES experience: working with universities

Results from a 2017 National Disability Coordination Officer (NDCO) stakeholder survey focusing on the DES consultant experience working with universities is supplied below. This information was used initially to inform USEP early project conception and drew out some of the key gaps and opportunities for DES to work with university graduates with disability, in a way that maximises the training and capacity of the frontline staff.

Key findings from the survey – perspectives from DES consultants (n=187):

* 79.78% of DES consultants reported either not knowing about or not working with universities to directly register graduates with disability after study (there were not many current efforts – some had tried and failed).
* 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 work at small businesses, either local or regional (69.95%), and only 1.64% reported large to multinational businesses as their main placement locations.

All respondents (n=220) were asked what they thought the main barriers university graduates with disability face when trying to get a graduate job. As respondents could select more than one, the following presents a balanced view of issues from the perspective of DES:

* Employer attitudes – 70% felt employers lack knowledge and/or skill to hire people with disability
* 58.2% thought there was a lack of a national approach to promoting graduates with disability to employers
* 44.5% selected ‘lack of early assistance’ – students are unable to register with DES until after they finish full-time study
* Societal expectation – 23.7% felt there is not a high expectation that people with disability will gain employment after study
* 25% selected ‘lack of wage subsidies to incentivise big employers’
* 15.5% felt students are not proactive and do not seek their own work
* 3.6% provided additional written responses.

This data suggests the gaps and barriers to address relative to DES and university cooperation (as at 2017) from the DES perspective were:

* low levels of known linkages with universities
* lack of specific skillsets regarding supporting graduates with disability to find work
* limited experiences working within a university setting
* relatively low lived experience of undergraduate study
* low levels of successful partnerships, where partnerships were attempted.

This first data collection allowed us to hone and inform USEP to address the identified gaps in knowledge, skill and training to build a bridge between universities and the funded employment service for people with disability.

### Training needs: disability confidence and higher education

In a broader sense, yet related to USEP, a 2018–2019 NDCO survey of DES stakeholder needs drew out a very clear overall request for better training regarding supporting people with disability in their tertiary education goals. Responses were received from 331 consultants, with one erroneous response removed.

####  Disability confidence and disability awareness training

Disability confidence was one of the measurements and was used as a comparison across several questions throughout the survey. Respondents were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being not at all, and 5 being very confident) for the question, ‘I feel confident working with people with disability’.

The results:

* 58.1% of DES consultant respondents have completed disability awareness training.
* Overall disability confidence of respondents was 4.30/5.
* 71.6% of those who reported a ‘5’ have completed disability awareness training.
* Respondents who have completed disability awareness training were more confident, averaging 4.48 (192) vs those who have not at 4.05 (138).

The NDCO Program has free disability awareness training available via its website: [www.disabilityawareness.com.au](http://www.disabilityawareness.com.au)

#### Training requirements relating to tertiary education

DES consultants were queried on their training requirements on key issues relating to tertiary education and people with disability in the workforce (n=330):

* 84.5% of consultants wanted further training about access and inclusion in the workplace for people with disability.
* 83.6% of consultants wanted further training around how to support people with disability to gain a traineeship or apprenticeship.
* 77.5% would like further information/training on how to support a person with a disability in their tertiary education goals.

Coming from an employment-focused program, this is a strong response and a solid indication that DES consultants want more training and information about supports and options available for people with disability as they engage in tertiary education.

#### Role tenure and training delivery

The 2018–2019 survey asked, ‘How long have you been working in this role?’. The results are depicted in Figure 3. This question may help to guide how and when training should be delivered (e.g ongoing, annual professional development, as induction-related materials or a combination of similar methods).

**Figure 3:** Years working as a DES consultant (shown in 3-year blocks)



The results returned relatively few consultants reporting more than 3 years of experience. To set the culture of expectations regarding higher education, disability employment consultants who are early in their career may benefit from upfront information regarding ways they can support people with disability throughout their studies and onwards to graduate employment.

Consultants within the USEP network have regular access to a graduate employment focused community of practice which shares ideas, resources, training, and links with graduate employers to support their specialist roles. However, this information presents options outside the scope of the USEP project for exploring systemic embedding of training in the DES system that may have broad positive impacts for students with disability in tertiary education regardless of USEP participation.

# Formation of USEP

## USEP development, trial and purpose

USEP was designed in late 2016 and first trialled in mid-2017 at Griffith University in a tripartite collaboration with the NDCO Program and Mylestones Employment. Since 2017, the project has grown nationally to comprise 13 university partners and 7 DES partners who are selected through an expression of interest process. The project was developed in response to the persistent and pervasive systemic issues affecting the graduate employment outcomes of students with disability, as highlighted in this paper.

USEP aims to bring about systemic change, particularly in relation to students receiving timely and appropriate support through equity-focused interdisciplinary teams who understand the additional complexities that students with disability face in gaining employment.

The project logic for USEP was to develop a scalable solution to the provision of graduate career support for students with disability, to enhance both university and DES capability through shared learnings and collegiality while contributing practice-based evidence to influence and inform relevant public policy.

## USEP stakeholder consultation and project reviews

Stakeholders were consulted broadly in the development of USEP. This consultation included phone or video conversations, desktop reviews and email exchanges with project leads and subject matter experts, including graduates with disability. This was undertaken to learn from current and historical, local and international sources with similar equivalent projects and services, including:

* Churchill Fellow, Mark Glascodine
* NDCO Willing and Able Mentoring Program (archived)
* NDCO historical projects and activities in Pathways (conference) abstracts
* Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET)
* Australian Network on Disability (AND) Stepping Into and PACE programs
* MyPlus Consulting and MyPlus Students’ Club, UK
* Association on Higher Education and Disability’s employment subcommittee, USA
* Workforce Recruitment Program, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), USA
* Business Disability Forum, UK
* Association for Higher Education on Disability (AHEAD) Ireland’s Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) program
* Lime Connect
* Tremplin, France.

The consultations and reviews highlighted that there is yet to be an effective and scalable solution to providing specialist, universal, free, expert, ongoing career advice and graduate employment support for students with disability at university in Australia or abroad.

## Historical projects to support graduates with disability

The historical review of projects that attempted to address this gap provided key insights into what was effective and what was not, particularly from related work undertaken by the NDCO over time. One of the earlier collaborations on record was facilitated by the Regional Disability Liaison Officer program (RDLO) – an Australian Government initiative – with a DES. In a 1996 conference brief, it was described as follows:

We are working with Cheryl of the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service. Cheryl identified that students had poor knowledge of and were not inclined to use disability services and lacked sufficient work experience, but usually had very good job seeking skills e.g. resume writing. After addressing these issues there has been almost 100% placement. The project is ongoing. (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, 1996)

Drawing on conference abstracts from Pathways, the following are employment-related projects listed in the year they were presented (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, 2020):

1991 A joint project of Griffith University, University of Queensland and Queensland University of Technology. Funded by Department of Education and Training and staffed by an Education Project Officer with goals to improve access to university study and to postgraduate employment for people with disabilities. Outcome unknown.

1991 *Search for a career for disabled people*. A guidebook released by employment provider, Whitehorse Employment.

1991 *Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service (CRS) cadetships – cadetships in the CRS for students with disability*. 23 cadets appointed in 1991.

1994–1996 *University to employment: current strategies and future directions*. A report about the experiences, concerns and main supports regarding graduates with disability and transition to work.

1996 *Addressing the issues for students with disability*. Collaborative project between the CRS, RDLO and a university.

2002 *Employers making a difference in partnerships with Australian National University (ANU): becoming disability confident*. A collaborative agreement between ANU and organisation Employers Making a Difference (EMAD).

2002 *RDLO/university: Willing and Able Mentoring (WAM) program*. National partnership to create mentorship opportunities for students with disability.

2004 *Flinders Employment – a service for graduates with disability*. Partnerships to help create more employment opportunities for students with disability.

2005 *Australian Network on Disability: Stepping Into program*. Provides internship opportunities for students with disability.

2006 *Careers and Employment workshop*.Three recommendations of actions that we can do now.

2008 *Enhancing graduate attributes for students with a disability*. A pilot aimed at improving the success rate for students with a disability in gaining and maintaining employment.

2012 *Career networking for students with disability*. Flinders University.

2012 *Education to employment*. Workshops, a website and resources building the skills and linkages between tertiary disability service and career and employment service providers.

2013 *Ready for work.* A position paper written by Mark Glascodine & Julie Farthing.

2016 *It’s time for some common sense when employing people with disability*. Enabled Employment.

2018 *A collaboration between WISE Employment and Swinburne University to improve employment outcomes for students living with disability*. GradWISE.

Within this list there are notable collaboration attempts between DES and universities. One of the missing links in the puzzle of longevity can be drawn from this – that there is a lack of a distributed, decentralised effort that does not require a single driving force. Similar issues were also well outlined in Farthing & Glascodine’s *Ready for Work* report (2013).

Many of the efforts were or are still effective, and others have fallen by the wayside as individuals change their roles or focus on other efforts. This lends credibility towards the need for a national, collaborative and decentralised effort so students with disability benefit equally across Australia, with both funding and policy supporting this effort in an ongoing manner.

## Funding environment

Currently, there are no specified government funding sources for:

* **universities** to adequately resource specialised support relating to the employment of students with disability
* **DES** – guidelines prevent full-time students with disability from registering with DES for support; part-time students can register, but the operating environment is not designed to focus on graduate careers (view student responses to USEP survey for comments regarding experiences with DES and graduate roles)
* **employers** to learn about and create inclusive graduate employment processes or link directly with students with disability while they are still studying (the exception to this is the work JobAccess (<https://www.jobaccess.gov.au/>) undertakes; JobAccess has provided specific professional development and content relating to graduates with disability including information sessions at university and webinars, often in collaboration with the NDCO Program)
* **graduates** to purchase private or independent advice relating to disability and work(with the potential exception of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), for those eligible, where a provider market niche may emerge for this).

USEP has not received specific funding but has received some project support funding from the program as needed, in line with the program’s strategic objectives.

## The USEP model

The USEP model is currently being converted to an online resource, allowing universities and DES providers to engage together in building a local network. It is scheduled to be made available on the USEP website (<http://www.usep.com.au>) in 2021.

## USEP data

### Scope for research and collection

While surveys and questionnaires have been conducted, there is a lack of formal research-based data collection for USEP. As of September 2020, the first research component has been embedded into USEP to better draw out the needs of graduates with disability as they seek work in Australia. This will enable the project to provide stronger commentary about options and opportunities for graduates with disability.

Attempts have been made to embed national research and metrics into the project, most hinging on funding and grants. Collaboration with a private research firm was proposed to build and manage a dashboard for the project. However, this remained unfunded across multiple grant applications. Beyond national intake questionnaires, local partnerships were advised to agree upon their own data and reporting models in the absence of a national model.

During the process of evaluating options for funding a project like this, it became apparent that there was no specific funding stream available with the economies of scale, structure or flexibility to equip a national response to the employment gap for graduates with disability.

The USEP project did, however, collect interim data from 6 of the 10 partners 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.

This sample size is not large enough to be used as representative of students with disability in higher education. Data collection to provide an accurate snapshot is hindered by privacy, funding and capacity constraints across the network. Further, participation in the project is variable across partnerships dependent on staff and student uptake and promotion.

However, since the project’s inception an anonymous student questionnaire has been offered to participating students by the USEP consultant after a first discussion. Completion of the questionnaire is voluntary and has so far resulted in 93 students giving us valuable data to inform and drive the project, which is included in this report.

This questionnaire has since progressed to being incorporated within existing academic research, and there is work underway regarding pre- and post-study surveys to evaluate the student journey beyond the capturing of anecdotal experiences.

The revised student questionnaire collects information about students (current) and graduates who access USEP. The questionnaires provide cross-reference capability between national Developing Employability research and the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) fellowships focusing on students with disability. Further analysis will be made available after sufficient collection and analysis is undertaken.

### Data from the USEP questionnaire

The USEP anonymous questionnaire implemented in July 2019 was designed to determine opportunities to hone the trial and learn about the types of supports students prefer or require across multiple partners. It also included questions about demographics, disability, study type and mode, and other relevant items.

The following respondents only represent a portion of participants who have accessed USEP, and so should be used with caution when drawing inferences about students with disability accessing specific career supports in higher education. It can be used to gain some insight into the needs of the students accessing USEP.

Note: The questionnaire stated that this was not a questionnaire for research purposes and was not affiliated with any Australian University.

#### Main findings of the USEP student questionnaire (n=93)

* The student’s scope of study is very broad – from a Graduate Certificate in Supply Chain Development to a Doctor of Philosophy. There were only a few duplicate degree titles.
* 53.7% of respondents did not have degree-related work experience. Of these, a slightly larger proportion were represented by students who are on a DSP.
* Less than half (44.1%) of respondents had done any paid work while at university.
* 74.1% are seeking work directly related to their degree. 4.3% said they were not. The balance is unsure or will take anything.
* 78.4% were not working at the time of responding.
* 35.4% wanted full-time work, 25.8% wanted part-time work, 2.1% wanted casual work and the rest were unsure or will take anything.
* 37.6% were willing to relocate for work.
* 88.2% are or were enrolled to study on campus.
* 60.2% were full-time students, 35.4% part-time students and some were ‘Other.’

#### Are USEP participants on income support?

Students were also asked about whether they were on income support:

* 35.5% were on a DSP.
* 23.6% were not in receipt of government payments.
* 16.1% were on Newstart Allowance.
* 11.8% were on Austudy.
* 6.5% were on Youth Allowance.
* 6.4% responded ‘Other’ (this includes non-disclosure and Carer Payment).

Students on a DSP represent a significant proportion of questionnaire respondents. Further investigation is advisable regarding the DSP and higher education to gain an understanding of the experiences of these students post-graduation.

Of the respondents on DSPs, 16 also later selected that they would like to find full-time work, 12 requested part-time work, 4 said casual work, and one said ‘Any.’ This suggests greater opportunity for individuals on the DSP to maximise their full potential, where adequate resourcing and supports are put in to place to facilitate the requests for work. The direct cost of these 33 students remaining on the DSP for 5 years after graduation without reaching their work goals is $3,691,974.

#### USEP student experience with DES

Students were also asked if they had worked with a DES before, and about their experience. 51.6% of students had not worked with a DES before. For those that had, their experience is listed below.

Within the negative responses, there were specific references to DES (pre-USEP) in relation to graduate careers:

* *I felt they didn't really listen to me and were just pushing me into work when I really wanted pursue my studies. I hope that the USEP program will be better for me as the consultant will be more aware of how to access academic roles.*
* *I would like to change as I don't feel my current provider is grad focused.*
* *Previously was with [provider]. I felt they didn't listen to my needs and just tried to put me in any job even if it wasn't suitable or what I wanted.*
* *They didn’t look. They placed me in the hard basket.*
* *Terrible. At the time I had severe anorexia and was asked to work in food service.*

All 5 positive responses regarding pre-USEP experiences with DES are as follows:

* *My case officer helped guide me towards study, in the hope of finally seeking employment within the social work sector and primarily in the mental health field.*
* *Excellent.*
* *Good.*
* *It was great to support any finance enquiries to disability people who have difficulties.*
* *Great. Had an experience with my provider and could not fault the support.*

Answers from this sample lend some credibility to the need for the creation of a specialist service stream (or streams) that focus on people with disability regarding putting their degree to work.

#### Key support needs of USEP students

One main aim of this questionnaire was to determine why students have opted to work with USEP. What is it within the potential of the service offering that they are most looking for? How can we use this information to better inform universities and other providers to offer the types of support graduates need to find work?

Students were provided with a list of possible responses with an opportunity to type in their own additional responses. The options were informed by an understanding of the issues facing students with disability and were formulated with peer feedback regarding suitability. This resulted in a balanced representation across the options provided to students, shown below.

* Advice about how to talk about my injury/illness/disability with employers (47)
* Guidance regarding how to get started searching for a career after university (45)
* Finding out how to identify employers who are equipped to provide an inclusive workplace (44)
* Advice about when to discuss my injury/illness/disability with employers (44)
* I'd like to learn about options and supports available after university to get into work (42)
* Coaching about the job interview and how to succeed in these (42)
* Somebody to talk through anything that pops up when I start work that I may not be certain about how to address or handle (42)
* Guidance about how to self-advocate and negotiate with an employer regarding my disability/illness/injury/health condition (42)
* Somebody to keep me motivated and on track with my career searching (31)
* I'd like to get industry related work experience on my resume as I am in my final year (28).

Interestingly, no single service-stream option was selected by more than 50% of respondents, with students engaging with the service for various reasons (mostly seeking expert advice about disability, careers and graduate employment).

The ‘Other’ responses are listed in entirety below:

* *Resume building*
* *Other family supports outside uni*
* *I’m constantly getting to interviews but missing out by one person – I’m having trouble determining what is going wrong and need advice*
* *How to identify my attributes*
* *Course guidance, not yet in final year, need support*
* *Help with resume building and applications*
* *Help with applications and finding employers*
* *Advice on locating jobs with employers who are open to providing reasonable work adjustments and flexible work options and locating jobs suitable for people with a disability*
* *Building confidence*
* *Assistance to find suitable academic roles*
* *More assistance with being linked with jobs*
* *Guidance about how to change DES and get extra support*
* *How do you get your research recognised and broaden people’s thinking?*

These questions have been further explored in the current iteration of the survey, to be offered to all future USEP students as part of research into the needs of graduates with disability relative to work.

# The student experience

## Interactions with USEP consultants

Students work in a relatively intensive manner with USEP consultants. While traditional university career services are equipped to provide short-term support regarding employability, resume writing and applications, USEP aims to provide disability confident, ongoing specialised and individualised support until employment is secured.

The model stipulates that the support is provided by a staff member who is disability confident and able to support a student to talk about their disability with employers, negotiate or support the workplace adjustments process, and be a bridge between the student and traditional careers services options if necessary.

This means that consultants build strong relationships with the students during their last year of study and after graduation and understand their journey across the search for work or structured graduate opportunities. The benefits of specific, tailored support are evident in the following case studies.

### Student case study 1

‘Student’ had just completed his bachelor’s degree in Government and Public Management. He did this as a career change due to having worked in construction. He could not return to this line of work as he had an ongoing health condition and consequently needed to undergo a complex medical procedure which made construction work unsuitable. He was already with a DES provider but was unhappy as he felt they were not listening to him and were referring him to low-skilled jobs rather than considering his qualification.

The USEP consultant worked with him to understand what he wanted and to determine his support needs. He was linked to [USEP provider] for DES and advocated for him with the careers team, as they were negotiating graduate roles in local government.

USEP prepared information for the employer and the careers representative about the student’s condition and his support needs. USEP worked with him to prepare the application and for the interviews. He started in a graduate role and has already instigated and executed 2 new workplace procedures.

He is well supported and has time off for medical checks and treatments as needed. His contract will end, but they really like him and are working with him to find ways within the budget to keep him on.

### Student case study 2

‘Student’ was great to work with and connected with USEP last year. They were studying to be a lawyer but had a mental health episode halfway through their studies, which meant their Grade Point Average (GPA) plummeted and never recovered sufficiently to achieve very high grades again, even after returning to study following treatment for ADHD and anxiety.

They came to USEP upset and distressed as they had tried to apply for some jobs/graduate positions but was not competitive for employment in law and was concerned about discussing their disability and stigma, so we had a lot to work though. We explored different avenues for using their legal education and ways to talk to employers about their GPA and support needs.

We worked on applications and preparation for their recent assessment centre in [large Australian city].

They advised me last month that they have been successful and are moving to a new city to be a graduate in the [high profile department].

‘Student’ was a perfect example of why USEP works, as their support wasn’t solely disability or careers but a combination of both. ‘Student’ was embarrassed and anxious and needed a level of compassion, understanding and nonjudgement. ‘Student’ also needed that extra career counselling that the careers team doesn’t always have capacity to deliver.

### Student case study 3

‘Student’ approached the USEP consultant with some concerns about how she would talk about dyslexia with an employer. During discussions, the student shared some challenging experiences disclosing this information in the past, particularly during school. The student was studying in a technical, science-based field and was concerned that:

* she may not be smart enough
* dyslexia might impact her studies too much
* people might not understand her or might alienate her
* it wasn’t worth it
* she may not be able to get through the degree.

The USEP consultant supported the student to build her confidence and skill in discussing dyslexia with an employer and provided one-on-one support to apply for roles together. Pre-interview coaching was provided, and over many mock interviews the student built her confidence to drive this discussion.

The consultant supported the student into and across three short-term or contract graduate roles, with a permanent position secured after the fourth. The student moved towns to work for a government department, with the lead provided by the USEP network.

### Student testimonials

Students have provided written feedback via the USEP website or direct to their consultant to share their experiences with the project. Some of these communications are as follows:

(Consultant) has been a great help in finding work. So far she has assisted me in gaining confidence in looking for work after all the years of struggling with looking for employment. I believe the program has been useful to students like myself, with a disability, to gain confidence and assistance into getting a career in relation to their field of studies.

I would like to let you know that since working with you, I have achieved so much. I have my confidence back and I feel I am a valued person with a lot to contribute to any organisation that needs to employ someone with my skills and qualifications. (Consultant), you have transformed me and opened doorways that I did not think possible. You are amazing. Your mentoring and delivery of service has restored my confidence to an outstanding level. I feel working with you will take me further. I truly believe that your service is the doorway from graduate to successful career.

Being able to access the USEP program has been very beneficial in my transition from student to graduate. (Consultant) provides fantastic guidance and support around disability disclosure, understands barriers to employment and assists with strategies to overcome these. I see this as a unique service unable to be provided by traditional careers or disability services.

While there is positive feedback, it is important to ensure that the ethos of quality and the focus on graduate employment is not lost during the expansion of a project of this nature. The project is developed to circumvent some structural roadblocks when it comes to universities working with DES and the word of warning is in the student feedback regarding their experiences with employment services prior, and the associated risk that these experiences may be repeated without stringent quality controls monitored by the provider and university.

# Conclusion

The collaboration between DES and universities is only one potential avenue for providing support to graduates with disability. Through the experiences so far, it is apparent that more can be done across several broader fields, including:

* improving societal understandings of disability and who graduates with disability are, to pivot towards the maximisation of human potential
* building employer understandings of who people with disability are and how to create welcoming environments for graduates with disability including in graduate intake processes
* procedural (guideline) enablers within structures like DES that support frontline staff to provide excellent services to graduates with disability
* whole-of-university understandings about students with disability in relation to careers and success
* working with students to understand disability in their own context, and to understand the available options, supports and adjustments for their specific circumstances.

The 2 current policy related recommendations from USEP are that:

* the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) implements changes to the DES Eligible School Leaver Guidelines to provide specific measurable funding relating to tertiary graduates; this will enable DES to work with university graduates prior to graduation, supporting a viable market economy for quality service delivery
* there is investment in data analysis regarding the DSP and degree utilisation to produce economic modelling to inform funding of support for national programs and projects, starting with this cohort.

For the USEP project, adequate data collection has now begun, and universities are actively exploring their options for providing better resources and services for graduates with disability. We hope to use this information to create better options and to play a part in supporting stronger outcomes for this cohort.

There has been a notable increase in visible efforts and projects from universities around Australia relative to graduates with disability, and ongoing collaboration and shared learnings are occurring for the benefit of students. USEP looks forward to continuing to contribute to this discussion.

# Next steps for USEP

USEP is maintained by a project team consisting of NDCOs, who will support the objectives until at least June 30, 2022. There is a national community of practice for frontline consultants, a discussion list and a website (www.usep.com.au).

The project works towards a collaborative project plan, with the next deliverable being a ‘blueprint’ for universities and DES to set up and manage their own partnerships using the learnings gained so far to guide their success.

The USEP surveys will gather valuable information regarding the needs of students with disability as the project continues, and this data will be used to inform policy and advise practice where appropriate.

Part of the ongoing nature of the project will be to bring forth good ideas, practice and collaboration from national and international partners and experts on the topic of employment for graduates with disability.

In late 2020, the NDCO Program hosted leading expert Helen Cooke (CEO MyPlus UK) for a series of free webinars open to all career practitioners in Australia, relating to building skills to support students with disability. This kind of activity is expected to be ongoing until 2022 to support Australia’s career practitioners and universities to foster improvements for students with disability independent of partnerships like USEP, providing broad options.

One of the project risks for USEP is quality management as the project grows, without attracting separate funding to sustain the leadership and administrative functions needed to implement at scale. There is also the variable nature of the DES contract, which historically changes frequently relative to demand for the program, government objectives and policy outcomes through review processes.

At a service delivery level DES partners over time have advised that the in-kind servicing required by the model is not financially sustainable in the short to medium term, even if it is very beneficial to the student - meeting them at a time and place that suits their needs and circumstances. This paper has produced potential options to remedy this immediate barrier.

In a longer-term view, an environment where all career practitioners are disability confident and adequately financially resourced to give one-on-one advice in a manner like the arrangement of USEP may lead to a more inclusive experience for students with disability, recruiters, and university staff and all students in general, regardless of equity group membership or lack thereof. The groundwork and documentation for this project aims to contribute to this.

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