An analysis of employment services for people with disabilities in
Finland, Sweden and Australia

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This paper describes and discusses employment policies and programs for people with a disability in Finland, Sweden and in Australia. This is done while recognising the dominant economic and social policies of many Western countries continue to place considerable pressure on the development and maintenance of employment programs for people with a disability, particularly for those people with high support needs and intellectual disability. The discussion notes that these policies often result in tension between the simultaneous achievement of person-centred principles for people with a disability, and a desire for improved service efficiencies and accountability. As a means of identifying issues that may be central to the reconciliation of the tension mentioned above, several aspects of these countries' respective support programs are identified that may assist policy-makers and service providers in this process of reconciliation.

Introduction

Human services for people with a disability are being increasingly challenged to provide quality services within the context of two powerful and potentially conflicting forces: person-centred values and economic-based reforms (Schalock, 1999 in Parmenter, 2002). For example, in Australia, major reforms are currently being implemented in the disability employment sector as the Commonwealth Government seeks to minimise costs and maximise employment outcomes through the introduction of case-based funding and a range of quality assurance measures (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2004). In that country, employment services are expected to be more efficient, more effective, more customer-focused and more outcome-based. At the same time, there has been greater emphasis on transparency, accountability and enhanced quality.

The policy of economic rationalism, which has partly driven the above reforms, has forced community organisations to evaluate what they are doing, and to demonstrate improved measurable outcomes for their consumers (Pusey, 2003). However, the focus on the achievement of quantifiable outcomes, and the move to outcome-based funding models, has raised legitimate concerns that people with high support needs may be denied access to some services. That is, that as employment services for people with a disability come under pressure to demonstrate productivity-based benefits for their employees, then those least able to improve their productivity may be disadvantaged. Indeed, there is evidence that the participation of people with high support needs in Australian employment support programs is decreasing, and at the same time, participation in community access (non-employment) programs funded by state governments is increasing (Australian Healthcare Associates, 2001). Clearly, people with a disability who want to work should have an opportunity to do so. However, within the current policy environment, the challenge facing the Australian government is to create employment opportunities for every citizen who wishes to work, including those with a significant disability.

Many other countries are faced with similar problems. That is, a growing demand from people with disabilities for equal access to employment, and insufficient resources to create and support employment opportunities to satisfy existing and future demand (O'Reilly, 2003). It is within this context that this paper is framed. Specifically, the paper seeks to describe and analyse employment supports for people with a disability in two northern hemisphere countries, Finland and Sweden. Comparisons and contrasts between these countries are made, and with the situation in Australia, as a means of developing insight into contemporary responses to employment supports for people with a disability, as well as

evaluating the effectiveness of these measures. Although the majority of people accessing employment programs for people with a disability in the selected countries do not have intellectual disability, the continuum of employment supports utilised in these countries are used by all disability groups. Consequently, the terms ‘disability policy’ and ‘people with a disability’ are used unless a specific reference to ‘intellectual disability’ is appropriate.

Method

The countries of Finland and Sweden were selected for several reasons. First, Scandinavian countries have had a long history of liberal attitudes to people with a developmental disability. The development of the principle of normalisation and its export to other Western countries is one of the best known examples in this area (Perrin, 1999).

A second reason for including these countries is that both may be considered to be welfare states, although they approach their goals in different ways. The aim of the European Employment and Social Policy is to promote a decent quality of life and standard of living for all in an active, inclusive and healthy society (European Commission, 2000). However, in Finland the major focus of disability policy is still very firmly about passive social protection and income support, rather than active labour market programs which encourage independence and participation in the open labour market for people with disabilities. Sweden on the other hand has a more inclusive approach and actively seeks to provide meaningful employment for all of its citizens. Both countries adopt a holistic approach and all people with disabilities, including those with high support needs, can access education, employment and accommodation services (even if they are provided in institutional settings), if they so desire.

This is different to the situation in Australia where the trend in both federal and state government policy is to encourage individuals and families to take greater responsibility for their own well being, for governments to provide some welfare services through a process of mutual obligation, and for access to government services to be limited, usually by economic factors (Australian Productivity Commission, 2003).

Data were collected from relevant government departments responsible in some way for disability and employment, and also from international organizations that may influence the development of policy and legislation in Finland, Sweden and Australia. Examples of these sources are the Ministries of Labour, Education, Social Protection, Health and Welfare, the European Commission (EC), the Council of Europe, the United Nations (UN), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Data were also collected from representative organisations working with and for people with disabilities, including government and non-government organizations involved in the provision of employment support services for people with disabilities. In addition, a convenience sample of Finnish and Swedish participants at the 6th Conference of the European Union of Supported Employment, held in Helsinki in May 2003, were surveyed. The survey comprised five open questions about past, current and future trends in employment support services in the participant's country. The survey was translated into Finnish for some participants. Thirty-two questionnaires were sent to Conference participants by email (17 Finnish and 15 Swedish participants). A total of eleven surveys were returned (five from Finland and six from Sweden) following the initial request and a subsequent reminder.

Finland (Suomi)

Overview

Finland is a republic, which became a member of the European Union in 1995. It has a population of 5.2 million people with a low population density of 17 persons per square kilometre. In 2002, Finland had a labour force of 2,610,000 people (Ministry of Labour, 2002). Finland has a very homogenous population with 98.2% of the population of Finnish descent.

Finland enjoyed a sustained period of economic growth and social development during the 1980s, which was negatively impacted by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Economic growth was negative from 1990 to 1993, and unemployment levels increased from 3.4% in 1990 to 18.4% in 1993 (Ministry of Labour, Finland, 1995, in Thornton & Lunt, 1997). Following this difficult period, Finland has undergone significant economic restructuring, and helped by the success of information technology companies, it has enjoyed high levels of economic growth and improved prosperity. However, despite some success, economic restructuring has failed to address high levels of unemployment. In 2002, the unemployment rate was 9.1% (Statistics Finland, 2003).

Economic restructuring has created major changes in the demand and structure of work with many traditional jobs disappearing and others being replaced by temporary and short-term work. Between 1997 and 2001, the general level of unemployment fell by 25%, but during the same period the number of unemployed job seekers with disabilities increased by 12%

(Ministry of Labour, Finland, 2002). Active labour market policy and training policy has been developed to combat unemployment. In 1997, some €350 million (over 0.3 % of GDP) was used for the vocational rehabilitation of people with disabilities, including sheltered employment (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, 1999). In 2000 the European Union issues a directive that requires EU member states to introduce policies to outlaw unfair discrimination (direct and indirect) on the grounds of disability in the fields of employment and training, on the principle of equal treatment. Finland therefore introduced legislation in 2004, which prohibits discrimination in employment and vocational training on the basis of age, ethnic or national origin, nationality, language, religion, belief, opinion, health, disability, sexual orientation or other personal characteristics (Non-Discrimination Act 21 2004).

Education is widely valued within Finnish society and participation rates in adult education are high compared with European Union and OECD averages (Ministry of Labour, Finland, 2002). Finland is considered to be a Nordic welfare state with universal social rights based on citizenship. This model promotes redistribution of income and social equity and is characterised by an extensive public sector and high levels of taxation. Its legislation emphasises the responsibility of the public sector to organise services and guarantee equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

Social welfare and disability

The Ministry of Labour is responsible for employment in general, including the employment of people with disabilities, through a network of 183 local employment offices. It is primarily responsible for vocational rehabilitation services. The Ministry provides economic incentives to employers, the retraining of workers who become disabled and financial assistance for people with disabilities to establish their own business (Thornton & Lunt, 1997). The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health is responsible for the development of social welfare and health care legislation and services. They are in charge of the planning, guidance and monitoring of services including sheltered employment and have some responsibility for vocational rehabilitation. Finally, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the administration of vocational education and training, including special vocational training for people with disabilities.

Disability pensions are paid to eligible people and people with disabilities not receiving a disability pension are paid a disability allowance as compensation for costs associated to the disability. The rehabilitation system in Finland is complicated, because

there is separate legislation, which obliges social welfare and health care, labour, educational authorities and the Social Insurance Institution to cooperate in coordinating rehabilitation services.

Work is highly valued in Finland and, in principle, all citizens have the right to work. The inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in Finnish society and the provision of equal opportunities are widely accepted policy goals. For the purposes of this paper people with disabilities and their employment status can be conceptualised in two ways in Finland. First, people receiving disability pensions and benefits who are not usually considered part of the active labour market. People in this category can participate in mainstream and specialist labour market programs and may be registered with the Ministry of Labour for vocational training and rehabilitation. The second group are job seekers with disabilities registered as unemployed with the Ministry of Labour and seeking work. This group of job seekers, with lower support needs, are considered to be part of the active labour market and have access to a range of labour market programs.

It is widely recognised that the comprehensive social welfare system available in Finland, and in particular, the disability pension is a significant barrier to the movement of people with disabilities into the open labour market. After intense lobbying from organisations such as the Finnish Association on Mental Retardation and VATES Foundation, two organisations actively promoting the introduction of supported (open) employment into Finland, the government introduced changes to the National Pensions Act in 1999 to allow people receiving disability pensions to suspend their pension for a minimum 6 months, and a maximum 2 years (adjusted to 5 years in April 2002), if they wish to seek employment in the open labour market. Job seekers with disabilities choosing this option then transfer to another benefit, such as a rehabilitation allowance, and are then considered part of the labour force. The VATES Foundation is a non-government organisation established in 1993 by service providers to promote employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Finland. The foundation set up the Finnish Network for Supported Employment (FINSE) in 1995, and represents Finland as a member of the European Union of Supported Employment (EUSE). The Foundation has been actively involved in the promotion of supported employment in Finland, participating in many government working parties, and managing pilot projects funded by the European Social Fund

Labour market programs for job seekers with disability

Although the integration of people with disabilities into the labour market is a policy objective, Finland's National Action Plan for Employment (Ministry of Labour, 2002),

contains only one short paragraph (7 lines), about people with disabilities (section 4.1.4, Combating discrimination and promoting social inclusion). Labour market programs for job seekers with disability include labour market training, vocational rehabilitation, employer subsidies and unpaid work experience (Manilla, 2002; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, 2002). Employment options for people with a disability in Finland are now discussed.

1. Sheltered Employment

The Finnish system of sheltered employment is complex and is influenced by several different pieces of legislation targeting different groups of people. At the time of writing, there is a major review of legislation taking place with the objective of simplifying and clarifying the legal status of existing and new services. Sheltered workshops are generally considered as part of the social welfare system, rather than the employment system. In 2000, approximately 14,000 people participated in work activities in sheltered workshops and a further 3000 participated in integrated sheltered employment (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2002). This makes sheltered employment the largest and most common employment option for people with disabilities.

Sheltered workshop programs range from sheltered “productive” workshops providing paid employment for people with disabilities with lower support needs (employees receive between 87% and 98% of minimum wages (Thornton & Lunt, 1997), to integrated sheltered employment where employees continue to receive financial support from the state but are found a work placement with an employer in the open labour market, to unpaid sheltered work activities (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, 2002).

2. Social Firms

These are businesses created for the employment of people with a disability or other job seekers disadvantaged in the labour market. Every worker is paid a market wage appropriate to their work – whatever their productive capacity. The development of social firms and social enterprises as an alternative to traditional sheltered workshops has gained a great deal of momentum throughout Europe, however there has been much debate about what constitutes a social firm and how they differ from traditional sheltered workshops. In January 2004, the Finnish government introduced legislation on Social Firms designed to clarify their status in Finland. This legislation was aimed at improving the employment of people with disabilities and long-term unemployed people; to define a social firm so that it can be distinguished from other companies; and to define the subsidies for social firms. According to the Finnish Network of Social Firms (SOFI Network), established by the FPED (VATES)

Foundation in 1998, prior to the introduction of the legislation there were 10-20 organizations in Finland claiming to be social firms. However since the introduction of the new legislation only one organization had registered as a social firm by February 2004. Supporters of this model believe it is a viable alternative to more traditional models. However, critics see it as a way to re-badge sheltered workshops without really addressing the concerns of segregation and low wages.

3. Supported (Open) Employment

Supported (Open) employment is defined as people with disabilities working in the open labour market and receiving support from an external agency to secure and maintain employment. Workers have a legal employment contract and receive wages and conditions of employment similar to those received by other similar workers. Supported employment was introduced to Finland as a pilot project in 1995. By 2003 it had still not progressed to program status and therefore no legal status, despite a great deal of effort by many in the disability field.

Hyvärinen, Vesala, & Seppälä, (2002) identified that 16% (56) sheltered workshops claimed to offer supported employment services for their clients. However, in early 2002 only 123 people were being supported by these workshops in the open labour market. Pirttimaa and Saloviita (2003) surveyed job coaches in 96 organisations they had identified as involved in supported employment. Just 22 job coaches were supporting 52 workers in supported employment, which was less than the 68 workers supported in 1998. Only half of the people in supported employment earned a minimum wage of more than €5 per hour. This figure is disputed by the VATES Foundation, which claims that their research identified 33 units providing supported employment places for 880 people, of which 230 were in employment (Ylipaavalniemi, 2003). Sixty- three per cent of the people involved in supported employment had a developmental disability. Forty-five per cent of the supported employment units were run by NGO's and the balance by municipalities. Irrespective of the real figures, it must be said that supported employment is yet to become a major alternative for most job seekers with disabilities in Finland.

Responses from survey participants

Common themes across the five respondents were that:

- the introduction of supported (open) employment had been significant and that although its success had been limited there was some optimism about its impact in the future.
- community attitudes towards workers with disabilities had improved, although they were not yet treated equally. People with disabilities were now very visible in the community

and this is an important factor in changing negative attitudes and perceptions. One respondent believed there was now a greater focus, at least in some circles, on the ability of the person rather than the disability, and this was seen as a significant improvement.

- there are a number of barriers to employment that include salary (employers are reluctant to pay equal salaries even where the job match is good), employer attitudes and the disappearance of manual and entry level jobs especially for people with intellectual disability. The issue of salary reflects an attitude held by many employers, and even by some working in the disability field, that workers with disabilities cannot be equally productive.

Several respondents viewed the growing shortages of labour due to an aging population as a positive opportunity for people with disabilities to enter the open labour market.

Sweden

Overview

Sweden is a constitutional monarchy, which became a member of the European Union in 1995. It is widely regarded as the most successful Nordic welfare state and its citizens enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world. It has a population of 8.9 million. In 2002, approximately 12% of the population were foreign born, and 25% were either foreign born or had parents who were foreign born. Sweden's economy is the largest of the Scandinavian countries.

In 1991, Sweden entered its most severe recession since World War II, experiencing a few years of negative growth and rising unemployment. However, economic restructuring was conducted without significant changes to the comprehensive social welfare system, and the problem of unemployment was addressed by the introduction of a comprehensive range of active labour market programs.

Social welfare and disability

The Swedish concept of disability focuses on the relationship between the person and the environment, rather than as a personal characteristic. Therefore, in the context of labour market policy the term 'occupational disability' is used and it refers to any job seeker who has difficulty securing or retaining employment due to intellectual, physical or mental disability, medical condition, illness and accident.

The aim of Swedish disability policy is full participation and equality for all its citizens. Therefore, employment policies for people with disabilities are considered as part of the general labour market policy, which is based on the principle of universal entitlement to

work. The main responsibility for the delivery of labour market services for job seekers with disabilities rests with labour market authorities within the Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communications. In 1994 a special ombudsman was established to monitor disability issues, and in 1999 legislation was introduced which prohibits discrimination in the labour market on the basis of disability (Prohibition of Discrimination in Working Life of People with Disability Act SFS 1999:132)

The National Labour Market Administration (LMA) is responsible for the coordination and development of labour market policy. In 2002, the budget for the LMA was €6,780 million, of which 13.7% was specifically targeted at labour market services and programs for people with disabilities (National Labour Market Administration, 2003). Swedish labour market policy is based on the principle of activation and skill enhancement. This provides a focus on training and practical work experience, with the intention to permanent work rather than passive payment of cash benefit (National Labour Market Administration, Sweden, 2003).

The positive trend in employment has also been reflected in the employment of people with occupational disabilities. The number of people with occupational disabilities registered as unemployed dropped from 32,800 in January 2000, to 16,800 in January 2002 (Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communication, Sweden, 2002). According to Bergeskog (2001), Sweden has the highest participation rate (65%) of people with occupational disabilities among OECD countries.

However the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, (2004) reports a recent survey conducted by Riksförsäkringsverket, (the Swedish National Social Insurance Board) , revealing that the level of education of people with disabilities was lower than that of others, and that those who studied frequently encountered obstacles to their studies, only 22 per cent worked on the open labour market, and half lacked occupational activities.

Education and training

The Swedish education and training system is flexible with courses provided on weekends and evenings, and also offered over extended time periods. In 2002, the central government provided SEK 350 million (€38 million) to municipalities for adult education, of which 10% had to be spent on people with occupational disabilities. Additional funds are also provided to municipalities by central government for Särvox (Adult education for the intellectually disabled), and trade unions and disability organisations received SEK 50 million (€5.45 million) for outreach educational activities (Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communication, Sweden, 2002). Adult education can be classified as

labour market training and is therefore provided free of charge, with participants receiving additional activity allowances.

Employability Institutes (Arbetsmarknadsinstitut) are primarily work preparation and vocational training centres, which provide intensive counselling and rehabilitation for job seekers. Some institutes provide services for all job seekers, but 20 institutes are specifically for job seekers with occupational disabilities.

Labour market programs for job seekers with disability

Mainstream labour market programs are open to job seekers with or without disability, however, a range of special measures are available for people with occupational disability. Sweden has three main categories of labour market programs targeting job seekers with disabilities, subsidised employment, sheltered employment and supported employment.

1. Subsidised employment

In January 2002, 58,400 people with occupational disabilities were employed in the open labour market under a scheme that provides grants to employers (Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communication, Sweden, 2002). This program is only for people whose working capacity is so reduced due to physical, mental, intellectual or socio-medical disabilities, that no other employment is possible. Job seekers are referred to vacancies by the public labour office and a wage subsidy negotiated with the employer. Employers can receive up to 80% subsidy of wages, or alternatively a job coach based on a wage of up to SEK 13,700 ((€1500) per month. The program has been in place since 1980.

2. Sheltered employment

SAMHALL is a government owned group of companies responsible for the majority of sheltered employment in Sweden. It was established under the Sheltered Employment Act (1980) and became a limited company in 1992. It consists of 24 county foundations providing employment to persons with occupational disabilities from 800 workplaces in 300 locations throughout the country including sheltered workshops, enclaves and contract work. Its activities are concentrated in industrial manufacturing (60%) and service industries (40%). Legislation states that 40% of the employees of SAMHALL must have a severe disability. In addition to a job with a salary equal to labour market norms, employees receive personal development support and training.

In 2001, SAMHALL employed 26500 people, of whom 93% had an occupational disability. SAMHALL generated revenue of SEK 8.5 billion (€27 million) in 2002, of which half came from the central government and half from its business activities. The grant

from the central government covers 85-90% of the wages paid to employees (The SAMHALL Group, 2003). Rehabilitation is also an important goal and there is a target of moving 5% of its workforce each year into the open -labour market. In 2001, 5.7% of the workforce moved into jobs in the open labour market.

3. Sheltered work in the public sector (Offentligt Skyddat Arbete, OSA)

This program was introduced in 1985 and is targeted mainly at people with socio-medical and psychiatric disabilities. People are placed into jobs mainly with municipalities, but sometimes with central government authorities, and they receive a normal wage. A subsidy of up to 100% of wage costs is paid to the employer participating in this program although there is no obligation to provide ongoing work. The main objective of the program is preparation and rehabilitation enabling people with disabilities to eventually find work in the open labour market.

4. Supported employment (SIUS)

Supported employment is defined as employment in the open labour market with support provided by a job coach. It was introduced as a pilot project in 1993 and as a national program in 1998. In 1998 about 500 people with disabilities were participating in pilot programs supported by 100 job coaches and a total budget of SEK43 million (€4.7 million) (Wadensjö, 2002). A national Association of supported employment was established in 1997 (Svenska Föreningen För Supported Employment (SFSE)). This organisation is also a member of the European Union of Supported Employment (EUSE).

There are also a number of smaller targeted programs including support to self-employment, temporary public sector jobs, and work experience.

Responses from survey participants

For the six Swedish respondents:

- there were mixed views on changes during the past five years ranging from no change to a concern that fewer people, especially those with significant disabilities, are working in the open labour market. Structural changes to the labour market had reduced opportunities for people with disabilities in both the open labour market and in sheltered workshops.
- there were also mixed opinions on the issue of community attitudes. Some felt there was no change over the past five years, but others believed that the general community is more informed about disability issues and this has lead to greater acceptance and inclusion.

- a number of barriers were identified including employer attitudes to and knowledge of disability, unemployment, insufficient and uncoordinated support, and a lack of real job opportunities
- support services were generally considered good, but they are often not available for long enough. However, one respondent stated that what was needed was jobs and not more support services
- two programs were considered to be the most valuable, subsidised employment and supported (open) employment.

Australia

Overview

Australia is a constitutional democracy with a Governor-General exercising executive power. The estimated population in 2002 was 19.7 million, an increase of 250,000 (1.3%) over the previous year (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2004a). In March 2004, 9.5 million people were employed in Australia. Of these, 6.8 million were employed full-time (working 35 hours or more) and 2.7 million were employed part-time (working less than 35 hours). Changes in the unemployment rate in recent decades have been dominated by economic recessions in the early 1980s and 1990s, and successive periods of economic recovery. The unemployment rate rose to 10.7% in 1992, generally declined over the remainder of the 1990s, and stood at 6.1% in mid 2003 (ABS, 2003).

Following the Second World War, Australia embarked on a rapid process of migration from European countries, and more recently from Asian and other countries, that had a significant impact on the cultural mix of the country. A social policy called multiculturalism has dominated over the past few decades. A feature of this policy is the inclusion and celebration of cultural difference in Australia. Overseas migration accounted for 54% of the increase in Australia's population in 2002 (ABS, 2004).

Social welfare and disability

The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services provide a Disability Support Pension to people with a recognised disability and whose ability to work is significantly impaired. The latter is defined as an inability to work for at least 30 hours per week at award wages, or be retrained for work, for at least two years. This pension may be supplemented with a Mobility Allowance designed to assist people with a disability to access community services. In 2003, this combined assistance totalled \$A6.9 million. Pension payments are adjusted in line with an index of inflation and are designed not to fall below

25% of average male weekly earnings. The Disability Support Pension of \$A440 a fortnight for a single person was received by over 673,000 individuals in June 2003 (ABS, 2004).

There has been on-going public concern about the size of the welfare budget in Australia. Both of the major political parties have broadly supported the notion of 'mutual obligation', although there are arguments over the extent to which this policy should be implemented. Broadly, this policy is based on the premises that people need to be encouraged to move off welfare payments as soon as possible, and that in some cases it is reasonable for welfare recipients to provide community service for their welfare benefits (e.g. work for the dole programs).

Labour market programs for job seekers with disability

In 1983 there was a major review of employment services for people with disabilities leading to the publication of "New Directions Report of the Handicapped Programs Review" (Grimes, 1985). This in turn led to the introduction of the Disability Services Act (DSA)(1986), which clearly supported the development of integrated employment options for people with disabilities as an alternative to the traditional segregated services provided in sheltered workshops and activity therapy centres. Additional federal legislation such as the Human Rights Commission Act (1981), followed by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Act (1986) and the Disability Discrimination Act (1992), supported by state legislation such as the Equal Opportunity Act (1984), have further reinforced the political and legal climate for improved employment opportunities for Australians with disabilities. The DSA was expected to lead to the closure of Australian sheltered workshops and the movement of people with disabilities into the open labour market. Although this has not occurred, the number of people in sheltered workshops is declining. In 1993, there were 24,276 people with a disability working in sheltered workshops, 67% of people supported under provisions of the Disability Services Program (Parmenter, 1999). This number had declined to 17,191 in 2001(Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2003).

The Commonwealth Government is responsible for the provision of employment services for all Australian job seekers and provides mainstream labour market programs and specialist employment programs which are targeted specifically at people with moderate and severe disabilities. Many people with disabilities are able to participate in mainstream employment on award wages, however some people because of their disability require additional assistance and this is provided by the Disability Assistance Program (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (2000).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) separates these specialist employment services into two main categories:

1. Supported employment services support and employ people with moderate and severe disabilities within the same organization. Typically these services are provided in segregated settings such as sheltered workshops (business services) with token wages. However, other more integrated options such as enclaves and work crews may also be provided.
2. Open employment services, which support people with moderate and severe disabilities to secure and maintain competitive jobs in the open labour market. Workers receive equal wages and conditions of employment in most situations. However, there is provision under the supported wages system for workers with disabilities to be paid productivity based wages (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2000).

From an international perspective it is important to clarify the terminology used in Australia. Sheltered workshops are commonly called ‘Business Services’ and provide supported employment for people with disabilities. The terms “open employment” or “competitive employment” are used in Australia to describe services supporting people with disabilities to work in the open labour market. In other parts of the world these latter services are called supported employment.

Major reforms are currently being implemented in the disability employment sector as the Commonwealth Government seeks to minimise costs and maximise employment outcomes through the introduction of case-based funding and a range of quality assurance measures. A new quality assurance system, Disability Service Standards and Key Performance Indicators for disability employment services and rehabilitation services took effect from July 2002. Under the new system, to receive funding disability employment organisations and rehabilitation service funded by the Commonwealth Government must be independently certified as complying with the Standards and Key Performance Indicators by December 2004 (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2004).

In 2001 the Commonwealth was funding 301 open employment outlets, providing support to 37,559 people (16,078 in employment and the remainder seeking work), 460 supported (sheltered) employment outlets providing support to 17,191 people and 59 outlets providing both open and supported employment for 5,602 people (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2003). In addition the department also funded 160 service outlets of the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service. In 2003-04, over 70

000 people with moderate to severe permanent disabilities were assisted by disability employment assistance services (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2004).

Discussion

Making international recommendations about employment policy for people with a disability at anything beyond the global level is risky because such policy recommendations operate within the historical, cultural and economic milieu specific to individual countries. In addition, the three countries reviewed in this paper all have extensive legislative protection and employment programs for people with a disability, as well as what may be regarded as successful market economies. Most developing nations do not have the luxury of this position. Regardless, there are some features of policy in the three countries reviewed in this paper that warrant identification because they serve to highlight issues that many countries (both developed and developing) may wish to explore in the process of reconciling the rights of people with a disability with the process of economic reform.

Restructuring of the labour market has occurred in Finland, Sweden and in Australia, although most of the economic rationalist policies adopted by the Australian government are not as evident in the Scandinavian countries. Nevertheless, Sweden and Finland are faced with serious political, social and economic challenges to the concept of the Nordic welfare state (e.g. ageing populations), and their ability to continue to provide comprehensive social welfare is under threat.

There has been a trend in Australia in recent years for individuals with a disability, and their families, to take greater personal responsibility for their welfare, and for government to provide support only in exceptional circumstances. This contrasts sharply with social policy in Finland and Sweden. A disadvantage with the approach taken in these Scandinavian countries is that people who have the capacity to greater independence may get caught in the 'social security web'. Despite its limitations, the Australian system of open employment has provided many Australians with disabilities with real work opportunities and greater independence. The 'trade off' for Australia has been the precarious status of people with high support needs in the labour market.

Although countries such as Sweden have successfully included large numbers of people into the open labour market this may not have improved the attitude of employers to people with a disability. The comprehensive use of long-term subsidies may reinforce negative perceptions held by employers that people with disability are less valuable than

other workers. Financial incentives will be valuable, and in some cases necessary, to meet additional costs incurred by employers. However, changing attitudes through improved job matching, and the promotion of workers with disabilities as productive and valuable employees, may have more long-term benefit than the sole use of financial incentives.

While the manner in which services are provided may differ across the three countries, the types of employment programs available for people with disabilities are generally similar. Sheltered workshops (or their equivalent), still provide work or work-related activities for a substantial number of people, especially for those with developmental disabilities.

The work activities provided in sheltered workshops in Finland and Sweden also bear considerable similarities with sheltered workshops (business services) in Australia (i.e. packaging, woodwork, sewing, assembly, and light manufacturing), and many sheltered workshops extend their activities through work crews and enclaves working on contract, mainly in service industries. The sheltered workshops of Finland share some features of the Activity Therapy Centres, which were part of the service system in Australia prior to the introduction of the DSA. This is especially so for workshops providing work activities for people with intellectual disabilities.

Sheltered employment is also important in Sweden. However, Sweden appears to have overcome many of the issues of concern in Australian business services, such as low wages, lack of meaningful work and limited transitions to open employment. The ability to provide meaningful employment in Sweden has been possible because of a sound national economy and a substantial financial commitment by the Swedish government. For example the SAMHALL group reported income of SEK8.5 billion in 2002 of which half was provided by the Swedish Government (approximately €465 million) (The SAMHALL Group, 2003) . They also report that 93% of their 26500 employees have a functional impairment, so the government funding amounts to an average of €18,870 per person.

Supported (open) employment has so far had little success in Finland. There are few independent agencies, as exist in Australia, and most supported (open) employment projects are managed by sheltered workshops that have little incentive to make them succeed. Another issue currently being debated in Finland is the concern that many people with disabilities will end up working in the lowest paid, unskilled and least attractive occupations. For example, Saloviita (2000) asks if supported employment is a conservative employment policy where marginalised people living on social security benefits are pushed to entry level, low skilled jobs with wages below the minimum level.

This concern about creating a class of ‘working poor’ has influenced the limited development of supported (open) employment in Finland because people with disabilities are anxious about entering an uncertain labour market, and some parents fear that their son or daughter may be exploited. The provision of generous income support for people with disabilities is important and is central to the social welfare policies of Finland, but this provides little incentive for people with disabilities to risk a move to open employment. This was also a concern in Australia when the concept of open employment was first promoted. However, many studies have confirmed that people employed in the open labour market enjoy a better quality of life than those employed in segregated settings (Eggleton, Robertson, Ryan, & Kober, 1999; Holloway, & Sigafos, 1998; Parmenter, 2002).

In Sweden, the model of open (supported) employment is also relatively limited, but integrated employment for many people with disabilities has been achieved through the use of the subsidised wages program, much like open employment. Some research on the comparison of the costs per placement of this model with the costs of the open employment placements in Australia would be valuable. However, on face value, it appears that the Swedish system requires far greater levels of funding than those currently provided in Australia.

An interesting feature of the Swedish system is the commitment of the Swedish government to the principle of life long learning. It is acknowledged across all three countries that job seekers with disabilities generally have lower levels of education than the wider workforce, and this is obviously a factor in the type of work they are able to secure. Government support for the vocational training and development of employed and unemployed Australians has diminished over recent years. This in turn has reduced the ability of Australian people with a disability to participate in adult education and vocational training that is essential in today’s dynamic labour market (Australian National Training Authority, 2000).

A key concern raised by specialists in all three countries is the demise of low skilled jobs, which traditionally have attracted people with developmental disabilities. Improving the level of education and training available for people with developmental disabilities may improve their employment opportunities. Sweden has already taken steps to improve access to education and vocational training, and Australia would do well to follow this lead. Giving all people with disabilities access and support to participate in education and life-long learning should be given greater consideration.

Conclusion

The issue of provision of employment opportunity for people with high support needs remains a contentious issue in Australia. In Sweden and Finland, most people with high support needs do not work, although they can participate in work activities if they choose. In fact, in Sweden the right to participate in day activities including work is guaranteed by legislation for people with intellectual disability or autism spectrum disorders if they are not in education (Lag (1993:387) om stöd och service till vissa funktionshindrade). The right to a day placement for people with intellectual disability also exists in Finland. However, most of these activities are provided in day centres, which were largely phased out in Australia from the late 1980s. This situation, combined with economic pressures on business services in Australia that has led to the perception of people with high support needs as unproductive, has significantly reduced the employment options for this group. Perhaps Australia can learn from the experience of Sweden where a variety of employment options, albeit heavily subsidised, are available for people with high support needs.

All three countries included in this paper have developed market economies and enjoy a healthy economy and high standard of living. Even in these circumstances many people with disabilities are not able to access the support they require to participate fully in the labour market. This highlights a major challenge for nations with developing and transitional economies, who lack the economic capacity to create a comprehensive range of employment options for people with disabilities. Experience in Australia and in other countries has shown that many people with disabilities can succeed in the open labour market if they are given the opportunity and support to do so. This significantly improves the independence and quality of life of people with disabilities and reduces the cost to governments of service provision especially of institutional alternatives. Although working in the open labour market may not be the preferred option for everyone, a successful supported employment program has the potential to create real employment opportunities for many people with disabilities and perhaps release scarce resources for the development of alternative employment options for people with higher support needs.

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