



**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment**

Inquiry into mental health and workforce participation 2011

Submission by Lantern  
*Shining light on mental health*

Lantern (formerly Reach Out Mental Health) is a community based not-for-profit organisation providing quality services to people with mental illness and their carers, friends, family and the community. Lantern, through Reach Out Employment, has been offering services to job seekers who experience mental illness for over 15 years.

Lantern acknowledges the measures undertaken in the area of improving workforce participation by people with a disability. The opening statement of the terms of reference, 'Some Australians with mental ill health continue to encounter difficulties in accessing education, training and employment opportunities, and face barriers in educational institutions and the workplace' resonates with our experience in listening to the participants of Lantern & Reach Out Employment.

This submission by Lantern focuses on the experiences of people with a mental ill health and their experiences of finding, gaining and maintaining education, training and employment. People with mental ill health are a diverse group of people whose illness manifests and impacts on their lives in a variety of ways. Each individual has their own range of issues, complex and different. When seriously unwell, people can lose control of their life, their treatment and where they reside. For many this damages confidence and builds mistrust, suspicion, doubt, uncertainty, inability to plan and fear of the future. Life decisions can be overpowered by these feelings and directions abruptly rerouted. When venturing into education, training and employment time needs to be spent dealing with life issues that stand in the way of successful engagement. This is difficult to achieve alone.

**Barriers to participation in education, training and employment of people with mental ill health are complex and diverse:**

***Issues raised by participants of Reach Out Employment are:***

- Financial barriers to training, particularly with the TAFE payment changes making it costly to reskill if you have an original qualification higher than the subsequent qualification that will support re-employment
- Lack of training with work experience attached for participants to practice learned skills
- Inadequate support from training to the workplace. Theory does not always match practice in a new workplace. Training may not lead to work or voluntary work and so takes away the purpose of training – new achievement. There is a need for transitional training of individuals with current skills that need support to reengage with the workforce. There is a need for a significant increase in allocated funds for transitional training
- Insufficient funding for specialist courses that build the participants current skills, particularly in areas like specialist IT training
- The unwillingness of individuals to disclose a mental health issue due to fear of discrimination in the workplace
- The unwillingness of individuals to disclose a mental health issue due to personal belief that mental health issue has nothing to do with their work ability
- The inability to deal with the initial increase in anxiety created by the new job or training. Some leave after first few days and may never return
- The lack of suitable roles and or flexibility of hours of work for individuals with mental health issues
- Individuals are often unable to negotiate the TAFE system to access training
- Individuals are often unable to deal with the TAFE environment, which can be overwhelming; very busy, crowded, confusing and intimidating. Many feel unable to ask questions of tutors – at times feeling that they should know the answer, but sometimes because they don't have the capacity to think fast enough to ask the question at the relevant time
- Traditional training methods can be inappropriate; Training, education and work access for long term unemployed assume an ability to attend consistently. Little awareness, allowance and support is given to encourage participants back into the 'swing of things'  
*Participants need to relearn work ethics, including getting ready for work, transport, working a full day.....*
- The logistics of attendance to traditional facilities can be detrimental; Location of work, inability to negotiate public transport, lack of personal transport
- In some workplaces the lack of staff awareness implies a lack of understanding by staff in the workplace of the importance of time to settle into a role and learn and absorb role and work culture
- There is the need for greater flexibility with work and the pension payment system
- Individual can experience pressure to gain work which in turn can lead to stress which activates negative symptoms
- It is difficult to explain the life impact of a mental health issue – work place education for staff needs to be constant and up to date; additional funding is required for such practices
- For an individual, mental ill health is just one part of the whole person

Participants Quote: *"no excitement or pleasure in training without an outcome, like mixing water with water"*

### **Issues raised by staff of Lantern & Reach Out Employment are:**

- Participants at times aren't fully aware of the what they really want from work
- At times participants are unaware that the roles they used to be employed in no longer exist
- Support needs of many participants don't fit inside employment support criteria required by Centrelink or DEEWR At times the multiple and complex issues that a person has are not communicated on to services and so each service needs to explore these again
- Timelines stipulated by Centrelink don't allow for longer term occasional support to keep participants in their employment
- Centrelink does not support short timelines for educating and training that is often required to get a person into the ethic of training or work
- Participant often have multiple service supports but services often don't communicate re participant issues ie: participant may go into hospital, putting their connection to employment services in jeopardy
- Training and employment services should work more closely through the life of support of the participant
- Participants are often not able to access training because of inability to fit into a large group of people
- Anxiety often defeats the participants wants - I want to work but I can't cope with the thought of travelling on the train
- Participants often underestimate their ability to cope or do not get a chance to build up from a slow or smaller start. Small success builds confidence and capacity

### **Issues re health implications:**

- Mental ill health is cyclic and / or episodic – workplaces and training institutions often don't allow for this
- In some cases mental ill health may not be curable but can be managed. If it is to be managed then all support networks need to be involved in that management, including education and workplaces. It needs to be a team approach
- Medication impacts, particularly in the morning. Lack of energy, sleepy
- Medication side effects like shaking and confusion require a slower work pace
- Cannot always know when they are unwell and so cannot plan for this
- Medication may relax but does not necessarily stop symptoms
- Change of medication may be a long and arduous task requiring substantial time away from work for up to 6 weeks
- Showing symptoms is not necessarily a sign of unwellness (all sorts of people talk to themselves, but if you have a mental health diagnosis and acknowledge that you are talking to your voices, others see this as weird or scary)
- There are many side effects of medication, like weight gain, that can be debilitating and restrict work ability. These issues cannot always be controlled by the normal fixes like diet, but participants may be discriminated against because of them
- Issues like confusion and the need to slow down to achieve are not compatible with the work

### **Issues re training & workplace:**

- Lack of understanding of mental ill health in the education, training and work place

- Lack of awareness by employers of ways to deal with mental health issues in the workplace
- Fear of employing a person with a mental health issue what might happen in the workplace
- No workplace policies re bullying and harassment
- Not enough incentives to employers to keep people in long term employment
- Lack of understanding of stigma and its impact
- Lack of flexibility in access to workplace and training institutions
- Lack of workplace training in small business
- Family & friends are sometimes ill equipped to support return to education and or work

**Ways to enhance access to and participation in education, training and employment of people with mental ill health through improved collaboration between government, health, community, education, training, employment and other services**

***Access and participation in education and work place would be enhanced by:***

- Education re mental ill health and its impact to all levels of the workplace, particularly management
- Further support for the development of workplace policy and procedures re harassment and discrimination
- Joint participation of training institutions and workplaces to ensure people with a health issue gain current qualifications, relevant to the workplace
- More personal support to address vocational and non-vocational barriers to employment,
- More support for people with mental illness who are at risk of losing or leaving their jobs, (what sort of support?)
- No qualifying period for jobs in jeopardy support – the first weeks of any new job are often when there is the greatest risk of losing the job due to increased levels of anxiety and stress associated with a new role.
- More access to assist with ongoing support in the workplace
- Review the funding models to address areas of discrimination and equal opportunity especially related to mental health. Currently individuals gain financial support if a current qualification is higher than any previously obtained qualification. For individuals with mental health concerns this policy can be prohibitive for the reemployment training required by the individual and consequently discriminatory
- Ensure that people accessing Disability Support Services have fast track access to a mental health plan if they don't already have mental health clinical support
- Establish stronger connections between all services working with people seeking education, training & employment
- Enable services to communicate with each other in the support of people with a mental health diagnosis
- Extend timelines of support and include occasional support for people with a mental health diagnosis who are working or in education
- Educate the general public in how to access relevant information about mental health issues
- Establish appropriate support to offer outreach type support that enables students to maintain their training and or education
- Offer smaller class sizes, offer classes outside the traditional education environment
- Offer easier access to information re training and education – perhaps within mental health services

**Strategies to improve the capacity of individuals, families, community members, co-workers and employers to respond to the needs of people with mental ill health.**

- Education, education, education. Stigma in regard to mental health issues will only subside with constant education in the general community
- Make mental illness more visible, therefore building awareness that this is just another health issue that some have in a variety of forms
- Supporting carers and families, not only to support them in their support but also in their lives. Stress management workshops, supported and facilitated groups, acknowledgement of the load that they carry
- Extend respite to excluded groups like people with mental ill health with no carer
- Develop better communication between services
- Fund use of social media channels as a method of personal contact – currently unfunded in employment services
- Educate the community\_in their community
- Fund programs designed to provide tailored support a specific group –i.e. Blossomproject is a program for young women with depression & anxiety and is currently unfunded.
- More early intervention – fund local services to provide mental health education programs into schools and workplaces
- More access to support to overcome barriers to employment, e.g. homelessness or threat of homelessness
- Increased support for people with mental illness who are at risk of losing or leaving their jobs
- More people with access to ongoing support in the workplace,
- Funding for research projects examining mental health and employment
- More information on mental health and employment for employers, employees, service providers and jobseekers
- More available community education on depression and anxiety as health issue before becoming a mental health issue
- Funding for service development, capacity building and innovation

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