



# Beyond supply and demand: addressing the complexities of workforce exclusion in Australia

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## **Abstract**

Workforce exclusion is a complex and enduring problem in Australia, with some groups of job seekers more likely to be disadvantaged in the labour market than others. We identify a dominant unemployment narrative of 'work first' that surrounds unemployment interventions, and ignores the nature of disadvantage and its relationship to workforce exclusion, and reduces unemployment to a simple matter of labour market supply and demand. This approach privileges immediate economic productivity and exit from welfare payments over sustainable attachment to quality jobs. We examine fourteen programs for disadvantaged job seekers under one national provider network. Data was gathered from eleven semi-structured telephone interviews and eight evaluation reports and analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo. Our findings challenge the dominant narrative and argue that both ends of the supply and demand equation need to be examined, stressing the importance of a partnership-orientated and capacity building focus on the unemployed person, and the significance of quality employment with long term support. We identify the importance of acknowledging job seekers' strengths, aspirations and preferences, and of job seekers having agency to determine their own pathways with support from service providers.

**Key words:** workforce exclusion; disadvantaged job seekers; unemployment; employment support; job seeker training

## Introduction

Workforce exclusion is a complex and enduring problem. Australia's unemployment rate is currently 5.8 *per cent* nationally (ABS, 2014a), but the youth unemployment rate is a far higher 12.5 *per cent* (ABS, 2014a). The number of long-term unemployed youth has more than tripled since 2008 (Brotherhood of St. Lawrence, 2014). In the recent Federal budget, the Treasurer Joe Hockey declared a plan for addressing youth unemployment by imposing 'earn or learn' obligations on young job seekers as well as a six month waiting period for claiming welfare benefits for those under 30 years of age (Department of Human Services, 2014).

In post-Budget media, Senator Eric Abetz, the Minister for Employment, labelled youth unemployment in particular a 'scourge' and that those who shirk the opportunity of 'work for the dole' did not deserve welfare payments (Abetz, 2014a). In so doing, he identified that some unemployed people are *deserving* of government assistance, while others are not. This notion that some unemployed could work but choose not to (Howe, 1998) was further underpinned by the Minister for Employment's comments that 'there is no right to demand from your fellow Australians that just because you don't want to do a bread delivery or taxi run or a stint as a farmhand that you should therefore be able to rely on your fellow Australian to subsidise you' (Abetz, 2014b).

Instead, Abetz urged young unemployed people to go to Tasmania and work as fruit pickers, thus advocating low-paid, insecure, seasonal work over being unemployed while seeking opportunities in their own communities. These new federal policies privilege immediate productivity over all other aspects of life and suggest that unemployed people should be prepared to move anywhere and do anything in order to be economically productive. Abetz further noted that 'It is just not acceptable to have job seekers sitting at home on welfare when employers keep saying they can't find enough workers' (Abetz, 2014a), the implication being that the solution to unemployment is one of matching supply and demand: that reducing unemployment is simply a matter of matching unemployed people to employment vacancies.

This dominant supply and demand narrative, which implies that some unemployed people are undeserving, lazy and too particular about the work they are prepared to do, has been challenged by researchers and welfare advocacy groups who note that such rhetoric ignores the effects of cycles of disadvantage and the importance of community and family connections. Critics note the tensions between a work-first focus on the short-term goal of getting people off of welfare, and the objective of overcoming workforce exclusion through attachment to sustainable employment (Davidson, 2011). Changes in approaches to youth unemployment, as flagged in the recent budget, have been noted as being particularly punitive. For example, John Spoehr from the Australian Workplace Innovation and Social Research Centre

(WISeR) reports that the new policies would create further disadvantage, rather than addressing youth and inter-generational unemployment:

There's no evidence that they will work, those punitive measures are likely to create further disadvantage where very high levels of disadvantage currently exist. Pushing down youth wages, pushing down the minimum wage and forcing young people to be more mobile are very negative, punitive ways of trying to solve the problem (Spoehr, 2014).

Youth are not the only group that are disadvantaged in the Australian labour market. People from non-English speaking backgrounds, Aboriginal people, people with low levels of formal education, low literacy and numeracy, and people experiencing mental health issues are also disadvantaged (Davidson, 2011; DEEWR, 2011, 2012; Fowkes, 2011). Furthermore, being long-term unemployed in itself is a barrier to future employment, as employers value work experience and continuous work history. As a result, job seekers suffer 'scarring' from being unemployed, paying long-term costs financially and in terms of their personal well-being (Layard, Nickell & Jackman, 1991; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg & Kinicki, 2005). Indeed, once a person has been unemployed for 12 months, their risk of continuing to be unemployed for another year is around 50 *per cent* (DEEWR, 2012; ACOSS, 2012).

This paper undertakes an investigation of interventions that positively contribute to work participation and building work readiness in disadvantaged job seekers. We present the practice principles which underpin successful employment and pre-employment programs and services, and discuss how successful unemployment interventions demonstrate a commitment to moving beyond a simple supply and demand paradigm, whereby a job vacancy plus an unemployed person is construed as a simple arithmetic solution to workforce exclusion.

Qualitative data was gathered from semi-structured interviews with operational staff and managers at agencies within the national Anglicare network, and from program evaluation reports. This evidence supports a counter narrative to the dominant narrative presented above. We propose that for interventions to be successful, they must address the whole person as someone with aspirations, preferences and capabilities, and they must respect social and community connections, and build human capital to underpin sustainable outcomes.

## **Background and literature**

### ***Workforce Exclusion in Australia***

In the wake of the global financial crisis, Australia has a lower unemployment rate than many other OECD nations, at 5.8 *per cent* (ABS, 2014a). However, this national figure does not capture the unequal geographic distribution of unemployment or that some groups of Australians are more likely to face disadvantage in accessing employment opportunities than others. Whilst some assumed that the mining boom and productivity growth would create wealth that would be distributed nationally, allowing all Australians to share in the country's financial prosperity, this has not been the case (Denniss, 2011).

Currently 18.8 *per cent* of unemployed people are now considered to be long-term unemployed due to being unemployed for twelve months or more (ABS, 2014b). The long-term unemployment rate is even higher among young people (24 years and under) and those who have not completed Year 12 (ABS, 2011). Despite the internationally low headline unemployment rate, Australia has one of the highest rates of jobless families in the OECD (Productivity Commission, 2012) with 1.3 million jobless families (ABS, 2012). This is an especially significant fact, given that experiencing social disadvantage at school age has been shown to perpetuate disadvantage in later life, with lower earnings and high levels of employment insecurity as well as poorer health and well-being (Lamb & Rice, 2008).

As Cortis, Bullen & Hamilton (2013) note, even when disadvantaged job seekers do access employment opportunities, their transition from welfare to work is rarely sustained for the long-term. Instead, they argue that job seekers typically move between unemployment and jobs with low skills requirements, poor pay, fluctuating or a low number of hours, and few options to develop their skills in order to gain more secure, better paying job roles (Chigavazira, Bowman & Scutella, 2013; Richardson & Miller-Lewis, 2002; Perkins, Tyrrell & Scutellal, 2009; Wilkins, Warren, Hahn & Hough, 2011; Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia, 2012). People cycling back and forth between unemployment and poor quality employment has been associated with poor mental and physical health (Butterworth, Leach, Rodgers, Broom *et al.*, 2011; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg & Kinicki, 2005), but this is a hidden story beneath headline unemployment statistics.

### ***The dominant 'work first' narrative***

Davidson (2011) notes that there are two dominant approaches to engaging with unemployed people in OECD nations. One he refers to as the 'human capital' approach, and the other as the 'work first' approach. The human capital approach emphasises capacity building in unemployed people, while the work first approach

emphasises intensive and immediate job searching (Loedemle & Trickey, 2001; Bruttel & Sol, 2006).

The introduction of the Job Network in Australia in 1998 saw a move away from the human capital approach in favour of the work first approach (Davidson, 2011). The Active Participation model was introduced with Employment Services Contract 3 (2003-2006), which incorporated the concept of mutual obligation, whereby job seekers were required to meet their obligations through participation in employment, training or 'work for the dole'. These changes marked a broader neo-liberal shift towards a focus on coupling rights to individual responsibility (Waring, Ostenfeld, Lewer & Burgess, 2001). In 2009, the scrapping of the Job Network and introduction of Job Services Australia saw a reduction in the overall budget available to assist unemployed people into employment as well as a move to a more punitive approach, with increased penalties for non-compliance with participation requirements (Considine, Lewis & O'Sullivan, 2011; Davidson, 2011, Davidson & Whiteford, 2011). The reduced funding available for job seekers has increased the focus on cheaper intensive job seeking support, and away from more expensive investments in human capital such as training and work experience placements (Davidson, 2011). These changes have been accompanied by a fee structure for employment service providers that encourages the pursuit of short-term employment outcomes (Davidson, 2011).

The federal government has promoted work for the dole participation as a path to skills development and employment. However, research by Borland & Tseng (2011) demonstrates that work for the dole programs reduce employment outcomes, in large part because they reduce the time available for engagement in active job seeking. Furthermore, the Government's financial incentives to workers who move in order to seek work have been shown to have little impact on reducing jobless numbers (Productivity Commission, 2014). Even when there are employment opportunities at the destination end of a relocation, lack of support and lack of social network and community connections can cause the relocation to ultimately fail (Productivity Commission, 2014).

The 'earn or learn' focus which has been cemented in the recent Federal budget has also been demonstrated to have negative consequences for unemployed people. Welfare advocates have been critical of 'training churn', whereby unemployed people are encouraged to attend funded training programs without consideration of their work preferences or suitability for the work (Chigavazira *et al.*, 2013; Brotherhood of St. Lawrence, 2011). This has resulted in low levels of training completion and low levels of conversion to employment outcomes. The Brotherhood of St. Lawrence (2011) identified that 44 *per cent* of their unemployed clients had obtained two or more qualifications in the previous five years (Brotherhood of St. Lawrence, 2011: 25). It should also be noted that funded training for job seekers is typically for

industries with high rates of casualisation and insecurity of employment. So, even if job seekers are successful in completing training and gaining employment, it may not provide them with long-term economic stability.

A further criticism levelled at the work first approach is that it assumes a level playing field, whereby all unemployed people can obtain work if they are incentivised to do so. In adopting this stance, work first approaches ignore social disadvantage and multiple barriers to employment faced by the most disadvantaged job seekers. They also ignore the evidence that factors associated with social disadvantage also affect job seekers' ability to retain employment (Cortis *et al.*, 2013; Murphy, Murray, Chalmers, Martin & Marston, 2011). Not only this, but the approach focuses exclusively in the supply end of the supply and demand equation. In doing so, it ignores specifics, such as the need that many job seekers have for entry-level positions, especially with regards to younger people (Cull, 2011).

The dominant work first narrative, with its focus on finding work or ad hoc training exercises, rather than building appropriate skills and capabilities to find and sustain work for the long-term, has been challenged by researchers and advocacy groups in Australia. In the next section, we present this critique, and an alternative view of unemployment services and interventions. We also examine the best practice principles for achieving employment pathways which have been identified by previous research.

### ***An alternative narrative and best practice principles***

To counter the work first approach, critics have argued for a 'life first' approach. That is an approach that firstly acknowledges the considerable barriers which unemployed people face in finding pathways into employment, and secondly that puts multi-faceted interventions in place to build skills and capacity to achieve sustainable outcomes. A number of service delivery strategies have been identified in the academic and the grey literature as assisting in addressing barriers to employment. The former Australian Social Inclusion Board identified four key elements that needed to be included in service delivery models. These were: sustainability, individualised approaches, incremental progression into employment and accessible services (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011). The Australian Social Inclusion Board maintained that how people were treated by service providers was important and that barriers to employment needed to be addressed alongside skills development and job seeking in order to break the cycles of disadvantage (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011).

In their investigation of the effectiveness of employment programs, Perkins and Scutella (2008) identified that the most effective programs used a case management model, provided post-employment support, had low case loads and provided tailoring

of services based on individual need. Effective programs also had strong links with local employers and other support services. Importantly, the effective programs focused on placing people in quality jobs with good employment conditions.

Cortis *et al.* (2013) also highlight the importance of post-placement support, citing American evidence that support for as long as three to five years has been demonstrated to be advantageous in retaining disadvantaged workers in employment. Such support was noted to include job coaching and mentoring, peer support, personal development, and career guidance (Hershey & Pavetti, 1997; Kellard, Adelman, Cebulla & Heaver, 2002; Hendra, Dillman, Hamilton, Lundquist, *et al.*, 2010). Cortis *et al.* (2013) also note, in their research with employers and employment services providers, that job seekers often lack an understanding of the work environment. For example, job seekers may experience issues with the importance of getting to work on time, keeping the employer informed if they are unable to attend work, and the following of basic policies and procedures, such as those around occupational health and safety (Cortis *et al.*, 2013). The research also identified that this lack of workplace knowledge leads to assumptions that recruits were lacking in work ethic or disinterested in the work. These assumptions then increased the risk that workers from disadvantaged backgrounds would be dismissed (Cortis *et al.*, 2013). Yet workers often lack this knowledge due to unfamiliarity with workplace environments, as a result of being out of work for extended periods, or as a result of coming from an inter-generationally unemployed family.

A life first approach to unemployment interventions shifts the 'unemployment narrative' away from blaming job seekers for their dependence on welfare. Instead, this approach acknowledges the effects of disadvantage and the often multiple barriers to employment faced by job seekers from disadvantaged backgrounds. This counter narrative examines both the supply and demand side of the employment equation (both the vacancy and the unemployed person) and advocates for investment in human capital and engagement with job seekers and employers to create opportunities. Importantly, this approach acknowledges that workers have capacities, hopes and preferences and that people have important attachments to their families and local communities, which do not always make relocating for work practical, desirable or sustainable.

The current research engages with this debate by undertaking an investigation of employment and pre-employment programs, along with programs that assist in unemployment intervention without having employment as a specific final objective.



## Method

### ***Methodological approach***

This research adopted a qualitative approach to the investigation of the research question, *what service delivery factors or approaches best support employment pathways for some of Australia's most disadvantaged job seekers?* The qualitative approach is recognised for its ability to elicit in-depth, complex and subjective data from small sample groups, though a limitation of such an approach is the ability of such methods to provide representative data (Neuman, 2000; Sarantakos, 1998). However, this limitation was not a significant concern in the current research, given that the focus was on identifying best practice and innovation rather than determining the norm.

Data was gathered from semi-structured interviews as well as evaluation reports that had previously been produced for some of the 14 programs included in this research. The semi-structured interviews used broad, open-ended questions to prompt conversation and allowed for interesting avenues of investigation to be pursued with follow up questions by the interviewer. Interviews were conducted over the phone and audio recorded with the permission of participants. The evaluation reports were analysed and data was extracted which corresponded with the topics covered under the interview schedule in order to generate comparative data. All data from interviews and the evaluation reports was imported into NVivo to support the thematic analysis. The analysis used a combination of *a priori* codes generated from the literature review and open coding to allow new themes to emerge from the data. Quotes from the interviews and other sources were identified as examples to best illustrate the identified themes.

### ***The programs***

The programs included in this research were operated by agencies within the Anglicare network. Anglicare is one of the largest providers of social and community services in Australia with over 40 agencies operating in every state and territory, delivering a variety of social services, many to disadvantaged job seekers. Within the national suite of Anglicare services, a variety of activities exist which contribute to overcoming workforce exclusion, whether directly in the form of pre-employment programs and training, or indirectly through addressing barriers to employment. The size, broad service scope, agency diversity and geographical presence of Anglicare gave the research a sound basis for exploring key innovations in building work readiness and facilitating employment outcomes. The scope of the programs included in the research allowed for a broad determination of what service delivery factors were effective in supporting the work participation of disadvantaged client groups.

In all, 14 programs were included in the research. These programs are aimed at a range of target client groups including youth, Aboriginal people, women, migrants and refugees, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, the inter-generationally unemployed, and people with health conditions and disabilities. More general programs aimed at disadvantaged job seekers and the long-term unemployed are also represented. The programs are located across five states and territories, in metropolitan and rural locations. Some programs had previously been evaluated which lead to the inclusion of eight evaluation reports into the analysis.

## ***Participants***

Interviewees were recruited via an email invitation from Anglicare Australia's CEO, following which respondents self-nominated to participate in the research. Some participants were operational staff and others were managers. An Information Sheet was provided to all participants and formal written consent obtained prior to each interview commencing. Overall, 11 interviews were conducted with operational managers and frontline staff working within the nominated programs. Interviews were conducted via telephone and lasted an average of 25 minutes.

In addition, eight evaluations reports were included in the analysis. Five of these related to programs that the self-nominated participants were employed on. The analysis of three programs therefore relied on an evaluation report only, five programs on both interview and report, and the remaining six programs interview only (14 programs in total).

This research was approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee.

## **Key findings**

The research investigated programs which support a broad range of job seekers who are workforce excluded and disadvantaged in the labour market (Davidson, 2011). Of the 14 programs included in this research, three primarily had an education focus, seven had an employment focus and four programs had a narrower focus, assisting clients with specific barriers to employment. The programs therefore assisted disadvantaged job seekers either directly and indirectly in building work readiness. Programs differed on target demographics, metropolitan vs. rural location, duration of program, and the extent to which programs were structured. While some programs were able to provide quantitative and/or qualitative evaluation data, others provided us with some success stories to illustrate the ways in which they work with their clients and the results they have been able to achieve.

Furthermore, clients often required job seeking skills, financial management skills and training in workplace behaviour and working with others. Notably, though program workers talked about ‘work readiness’, they did not imply that all barriers to employment had to be addressed for someone to be considered work ready. Rather, this term reflected that material needs had been met, allowing the unemployed person to start to consider their future pathways into employment, while other perhaps less pressing barriers were being addressed at the same time. Some programs did require clients to be more ‘work ready’ than others, but this was due to their clarity around what additional support they could reasonably offer clients within their programs.

In this section, we draw on our qualitative research to detail the key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of strategies that work to assist clients experiencing workforce exclusion. The themes are grouped under two broad headings of 1) acknowledging the person at the centre of workforce exclusion, and 2) acknowledging the circumstances that surround the person (see below for an overview of themes).

<b>Acknowledge the person at the centre of workforce exclusion</b>	<b>Acknowledge the circumstances that surround the person</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge aspirations &amp; strengths</li> <li>• Address the whole person</li> <li>• Acknowledge differences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life First (Case Management &amp; Advocacy)</li> <li>• Connection (Social &amp; Community)</li> <li>• Quality Employment</li> <li>• Sustainability</li> </ul>

### ***Acknowledging the person at the centre of workforce exclusion***

This group of themes focuses on the person and acknowledging them not just as someone with a range of barriers, problems and issues, but as someone with strengths and aspirations and something to offer their community as well as a future employer. Overwhelmingly, clients were considered an active agent in navigating their pathway into employment, with support. Programs noted that pathways are not necessarily linear and they can include trying out different education or employment options, changing direction, and accessing services again after a period in education or employment. As noted by Cortis *et al.* (2013), work for the most disadvantaged in the Australian community is often typified by periods of casual, short-term or precarious employment as well as periods of unemployment, which may require job seekers to re-access employment services at various points over time.

- ***Acknowledge Aspirations & Strengths***

Counter to the dominant narrative that job seekers are lazy or lacking in ambition, most programs stressed the importance of identifying and acknowledging the aspirations of clients. In two examples from the interviews, clients were supported to follow their musical ambitions. In one program supporting job seekers with chronic health conditions, a young man was encouraged not to dismiss music as an avenue for future employment. The program workers supported him to apply for a music course to develop his talents further. In a similar way, a client at a youth education and employment service was encouraged to pursue his musical talents as an employment pathway with great success, as the program worker notes:

We have got one student who has released a single with Paul Kelly and regularly performs music in clubs around Melbourne (Interview 3).

Clients in this program and other youth programs included in this research were encouraged to create a 'personal vision' or an action plan, and to engage in goal setting to assist them in achieving financial and personal independence. Interviewee 3 noted that staff were not called 'case workers', but rather 'youth development workers', to emphasise their role in seeking out, encouraging and developing talent, including leadership. In a micro business program, migrant and refugee women came with ideas for establishing their own small business or developing a business that they had already started. This program provided coaches and trainers who were careful not to presume what clients' aspirations or needs were, but rather let the client determine their own direction with training, support and mentoring. The concept that clients are the active agents in creating their own pathways, with programs and services there to support the process, was repeated in many of the interviews and evaluation reports included in this research. The acknowledgement of aspirations and agency align with the strengths-based approaches that underpin many of the programs. The strengths-based approach emphasises the positive in a job seeker rather than focusing on deficiencies or 'problems' (Rothman, 1994; Weick, 1983; Weick & Pope, 1988).

Several interviewees noted the pointlessness of forcing clients down unsuitable pathways and were critical of job services agencies who they identified from client feedback as undertaking this practice. One interviewee observed that disadvantaged job seekers who were told they *had* to attend Certificate 3 courses in Aged Care or Community Services, in order to meet their obligations, were often not able to translate these qualifications into employment outcomes. This was a result of being ill-equipped for the type of work, uncertain about what the work entailed, or uninterested in that type of work. As one interviewee argued, clients need to be interested in the type of work they are being considered for, or it will ultimately be an unsustainable pathway. Clients who are forced down employment pathways not of

their choosing use up their allocation of training funding, making it difficult to pursue other avenues of employment for which they are more motivated and better suited.

One interviewee stressed the importance of worker attitudes to client outcomes. His agency conducted some in-house research and identified that where workers believed that clients were capable of working and had capabilities to offer an employer, they were more successful in placing that person. As he reported:

If I don't believe that person has the capacity to work and this person has all these barriers to work, the person you are working with will pick up on that belief system, that belief may not be valid, not challenged and it impacts on how I work with that person (Interview 4).

Ultimately, acknowledging aspirations and strengths and supporting clients to determine their own pathways through education and employment is about recognising and building on the human capital clients already possess.

- ***Address the whole person***

Programs reported delivering specific job seeking and job skills training but also a range of interventions and training that focused more broadly on all aspects of job seekers' lives. Some of this training was to address specific barriers clients face, but some was aimed at building capacity rather than addressing deficits. Examples of such training and support included: depression management; dealing with difficult emotions; communication skills; positive parenting; fitness programs; sex education and relationships; cooking and nutrition; completing tax forms; budgeting skills; computing skills; motivational skills; and interpersonal skills. These training initiatives acknowledge that all aspects of life can impact on a person's ability to gain and sustain employment and be financially independent of welfare support. As one interviewee noted, her program's holistic approach to supporting clients was about breaking cycles of disadvantage:

Our key underlying principle is that we want people to be able to be sustainable. We want to break the cycle of poverty and be able to help people to help themselves. We want to resource people, give them not just solutions for today but the capacity to help themselves in the long-term (Interview 7).

In one interview with a senior manager, the manager concurred that a holistic approach is required to address long-term disadvantage. He reported that his agency is now adopting a broader social inclusion stance to all of their programs, as opposed to an exclusive workforce inclusion focus. His agency aims to impact clients' lives on five outcome measures, being: education and training; employment; community connection and civic contribution; financial security and literacy; and

health and well-being. This holistic framework acknowledges the whole person and the contribution that they can make to their community beyond employment. It is also an approach that fits broadly within a life first framework in valuing other aspects of disadvantaged people's lives than their employment status. As the interviewee stated:

No matter what service people access, we want to achieve these five outcomes. We see that those five social inclusion outcomes are the key to addressing long-term disadvantage (Interview 4).

In another example of a holistic approach, one of the youth programs in the study reported that they had recently supported a young female client to achieve her dream of international travel. In exchange for her round-the-world ticket, she was required to run activities and study groups for her peers as part of the program's 'something for something' deal. This example provides evidence that valuing life experiences, not just work experiences, is important for building independence and other important life skills. These skills and capacities in organisation and planning, financial management, communication, leadership and interpersonal skills are then expected to benefit future education and employment pathways and deliver sustained independence.

- ***Acknowledge differences***

As stated earlier, some programs and services investigated by this research were highly structured. One such example is a pre-employment program that ran for 11 months in a rural area. As the training program was a Certificate 1 qualification, considerable structure and assessment was required to meet the syllabus. However, the program did include some more tailored elements. Clients met with a life coach and worked through her 'I am Amazing' program to acknowledge their individuality and previous achievements, as well as to develop goals for the future. Furthermore, the program trainers were able to assist clients in addressing barriers such as mental health issues, with referrals to other services. Trainers could also direct clients to additional non-accredited training to address life skills such as cooking and nutrition.

At the other end of the structure spectrum, a street outreach program aimed at youth was entirely unstructured, with service provision tailored to the individual needs of each client. The frontline interviewee from this program described it as:

Informal, flexible, relational but [also] intentional and deliberate. Not just to be lovey-dovey and warm and fuzzy and friendly ... [but to] bring an attitude of ... how do we move forward? We try and be led by them and what they want ... look at higher needs first ... food, clothing, stable accommodation. We try to restore some dignity to them and help them

to believe in themselves again and feel valued (Interview 5).

In addition to providing for material needs and supporting clients through crises, the program also addresses clients' physical and mental health needs and assists clients with access to educational and employment opportunities.

These two programs represent opposite ends of the structured continuum, but both still demonstrate the importance of tailoring services and programs to meet clients' unique aspirations and needs. Many of the other programs stressed the importance of acknowledging difference by service tailoring, via both individual assessments and ongoing communication with clients. As one interviewee stated, 'everyone is at a different place' (Interview 7). Importantly, clients' lives change during the course of their attachment to services and programs, so new needs may develop as well.

### ***Acknowledging the circumstances which surround the person***

This group of themes focuses on the circumstances that surround a person who is workforce excluded. The dominant work first narrative blames job seekers for their own workforce exclusion and attributes them with characteristics such as being lazy, lacking in ambition and trying to avoid work participation in favour of living off the public purse (Howe, 1998). This group of themes moves beyond the focus on the individual, to acknowledge the structural barriers to employment for disadvantaged job seekers. These themes further highlight the contributions a job seeker needs from employment services and employers in order to successfully access and sustain paid employment.

- ***Life First (Case Management & Advocacy)***

Many of the services and programs included in this research acknowledged that some clients have so many complex and compounding barriers to employment that addressing some of these major barriers is essential to clients ultimately engaging with employment preparation activities. As already discussed, some services support clients who are homeless or lacking in basic material resources. For such clients, looking for employment in the immediate term is not something they have capacity to do, given that they have no way of paying to get to work, no way of cleaning their clothes to appear presentable at work, and nowhere safe to sleep. Other clients face family violence or have drug or alcohol dependencies issues or mental health issues. For such clients, a life first approach is essential in order to build capacity so that they can engage with employment preparation and build work readiness in the future. As the street outreach worker reported, clients do want a 'normal' life, and that includes employment and having financial and social resources, but when they are lacking basic material needs, they can't think about their higher order needs:

We see people who seem to be carrying a huge weight around. They just want to be like a normal person, have a regular life; have their own home and a job. They have aspirations but they almost seem unachievable (Interview 5).

Similarly, another youth homelessness program worker reported that clients need to be 'stabilised' and 'made to feel safe' (Interview 2). She reported that this often takes three months before they can start to engage a client further, as it takes this long for them to really believe that they are safe and that the housing is a resource they can rely on.

At the other end of the spectrum, one service reported that they use a 'work first' approach. This program identified employment as the main pathway to eliminating social exclusion, as work provides clients with multiple resources beyond money, such as social resources and skills development. Nonetheless, the program worker interviewed did acknowledge that their program is not suitable for everyone, and some clients' barriers made them unsuitable for program participation (Interview 8). Despite the work first approach, the program did offer case management support, usually for about 12 months. Therefore, even the most work-focused program included in this research still acknowledged that clients have life barriers that need to be addressed, even when they are 'work ready'. The program supports clients with barriers while actively engaging in job seeking, work experience placements and paid work. The majority of other programs also offered case management and advocacy support to their clients. While some services had a wide range of expertise in-house, other programs referred clients out to secondary services for specialised support, such as psychological services. This theme highlights that though clients have aspirations and strengths, they do also have multiple needs to address within their lives, and that these needs are not simply related to the absence of job vacancies.

- ***Connection (Social & Community)***

An important aspect of many of the programs included in the research was that of an attention to social and community connection. Youth programs in particular emphasised the importance of clients participating in group activities and learning from and sharing their own talents with their peers. As one client from a youth education program reported, social connection with peers and tutors is an important aspect of the educational process:

You can't really learn everything from a computer and you can't absorb it. Things get into my head better if someone is speaking it, rather than me just reading it all, and [it helps] to have other people around me learning the same thing. And it's easier to pay attention as well



(Myconos, 2014: 16).

Several programs specifically included community-based projects to assist clients in re-engaging with their community. For example a program for disadvantaged job seekers partnered with their local TAFE in a project called 'River to Recovery'. The aim of the program was to build boats and row them 500 km down the River Murray. The participants in this community program were socially isolated and had mental health issues. The project was declared to be successful on many fronts by the senior manager interviewed. The project assisted clients in overcoming social isolation and building interpersonal and team-based working skills:

People became more connected to their community through this group, they became more connected to TAFE.....For some of those participants this has been a spring board to other things...some people are going back to education, some people have become more involved in advocacy issues (Interview 4).

The partnership with the TAFE was also beneficial as some of the participants subsequently reconnected to education after working alongside TAFE staff throughout the project. In addition, the confidence building aspect of the project led some of the program participants to become more involved in mental health advocacy.

Another program aimed at migrants and refugees used social capital as part of their program logic. In doing so, the program developers recognised the importance of assisting clients to build networks and relationships with people in their community, as this can be an important means by which job seekers identify employment opportunities. In a rural based program, a community centre that ran an employment preparation and accredited learning program also recognised the benefit of bringing people in the community together. As a result, they ran a community café where people could have a free coffee and a chat with volunteers. Furthermore, the program also ran a community garden where people could build skills and relationships as well as make a positive contribution to the physical environment of their community.

- ***Quality of employment***

As highlighted in the literature review, the dominant supply and demand narrative, with its simple work-first focus, employs a numerical simplicity which ignores the lack of entry-level positions for young people and the lack of willingness on the part of employers to take on young people, the socially disadvantaged, and long-term unemployed (Cull, 2011). Employers typically consider such job applicants as 'high risk', and may be reluctant to provide opportunities to such job seekers. This results

in socially disadvantaged job seekers engaging in periods of low quality, highly precarious employment that may not provide them with regular or sufficient hours, or with sustainable employment (Cortis *et al.*, 2013).

Furthermore, employers do not always do the right thing by their workers. As a result, obtaining employment is no guarantee of stability, or of a secure attachment to the workforce. In an example from the street outreach program, a young female participant became the first person in her family to finish year 12 after which she secured an office-based entry-level role. However, two years down the track, the employer was failing to pay her at the appropriate level (she had had no pay rise in the two years) and there had been interpersonal problems in the workplace as well. These problems left the young worker frustrated but fearful of looking for alternative employment (Interview 5). The moral of the anecdote is a simple one: not all employment is good employment, and negative employment experiences can entrench risks of workforce exclusion rather than contributing to positive long term outcomes.

One program included in the study used a labour hire model in order to overcome employers' lack of willingness to take a risk on disadvantaged job seekers and secure quality employment for clients. The program was conducted in partnership with a major bank, and resulted in the agency bearing all the employment risk as the workers were employees of the agency not the bank. Migrant and refugee clients were rigorously screened before attending interviews at the bank and were then provided with a 6 month work placement. Other employees at the bank received cultural training in order to support the migrant and refugee workers, and the agency provided on-going support throughout for both the employer and those on work placement. The work placements acknowledged the existence of a 'productivity gap' at the beginning of the placement but aimed to reduce this over the course of the 6 months. As a result of this labour hire arrangement and support, the agency has built a strong relationship with the employer and 80 *per cent* of those placed have become employees of the bank.

This example demonstrates that disadvantaged job seekers have a lot to offer potential employers if they are provided with quality opportunities, with support, and with time to learn the requirements of the role in a secure, learning environment. Other researchers have called for more partnerships of this kind to create opportunities for disadvantaged job seekers (Borland, 2014). The example of the bank employment model demonstrates the potential contribution of high quality pathways and positions to sustainable outcomes.

- ***Sustainability***

Many of the programs stressed the need for job seekers to be supported once they were placed in employment, which aligns with previous research findings (Perkins &

Scutella, 2008; Cortis *et al.*, 2013; Hershey & Pavetti, 1997; Hendra *et al.*, 2010; Kellard *et al.*, 2001). Post-placement support requires the co-operation of the employer and the client's supervisor or manager. Such support needs to be handled sensitively as it could set the client apart in the workplace in a negative way. Again, approaches to building capacity and building on strengths are better than approaches that stress what the client is not able to do. Post-placement support offered by programs included in the study was not necessarily for a set period of time and was generally envisaged to reduce as clients gained confidence and competence in their new job role.

In an example of the ways in which support can assist disadvantaged job seekers to achieve sustainable outcomes, an asylum seeker and refugee program placed four job seekers at a local library. The work placement was for up to 12 months and included ongoing support tailored to each individual to assist them to build capacity. The placement was part of a traineeship that allowed the job seekers to gain a qualification as well as work experience. Furthermore, the work place allowed job seekers to practice their English and engage with their local community as well as providing exposure to Australian workplace culture, and networks that build opportunities.

In the previously cited migrant and refugee women's micro-business program, clients were provided with ongoing support as they set up and developed their own businesses. Many of the women were also allocated a business mentor. These mentors were professional, managers or businesswomen from their own community. The mentors met with the women regularly and provided their expertise and support as well as additional opportunities for the women to practice their English.

These examples illustrate the practice of supporting exits from workforce exclusion, and of creating the right supports and relationships around a client to provide them with the resources to sustain an employment placement. One specific aspect of being able to sustain employment that came up many times in both the interviews and the reports reviewed during this research was the issue of transportation. Disadvantaged job seekers typically rely on public transport which may be limited in rural areas or not run at compatible times with hours of employment. This was particularly the case with care, cleaning, retail and hospitality work that may require weekend and atypical hours of employment.

Some programs addressed the issue of transportation by paying for bus tickets, while others took more comprehensive approaches. A worker from a youth program reported that they have volunteers who provide young people in the program with driving experience and support. In addition, the program funds the mandatory two paid lessons with a professional instructor in order to assist program participants with obtaining their driving licenses. In another program, participants who have a job offer

can participate in a loan initiative whereby they are provided with the funds to buy a car and pay the money back on favourable terms over a three year period. Such initiatives help disadvantaged job seekers overcome a major hurdle to sustainable employment. These initiatives recognise that sustainable workforce inclusion and attachment is about much more than 'getting a job'.

### ***Summary of Findings***

The programs included in this research make significant contributions to building work readiness and achieving education and employment outcomes for disadvantaged job seekers. The programs differ on many levels, but are consistent in recognising the centrality of wrap around support to sustainable employment outcomes, in a way that reveals a deeper complexity to workforce exclusion than is accommodated by 'supply and demand', punitive or 'work first' paradigms.

We have identified that an acknowledgement of the person at the centre of workforce exclusion is essential for effective engagement with disadvantaged job seekers. This means that recognising each person's strengths, preferences, aspirations and need for support is critical. We have also identified that an acknowledgement of the circumstances which surround a workforce excluded person cannot be ignored, as a simple 'work first' approach can lead to outcomes which cannot be sustained. Within the programs investigated by this research, disadvantaged job seekers were able to access a broad array of supports and referrals to other services in order to address their barriers. Many of these services included the recognition that social connection and service to the community are important aspects of overcoming the social exclusion that often goes hand in hand with being unemployed and disadvantaged in Australia. Importantly, we identify that quality employment and sustainable attachment to the paid labour market requires an investment in building relationships with local employers, and in longer term support as people entrench their attachment to the workforce.

### **Conclusions – Implications for Policy and Practice**

This research has identified themes and insights which emerge from the experience of service delivery which undermine dominant narratives about unemployment and workforce exclusion. Such narratives, which cast job seekers as lacking in motivation and ambition, and as unwilling to seek a solution to unemployment by taking any job anywhere, are ill conceived in the face of the evidence which emerges from this study, and in the face of the evidence available from the literature.

Job seekers have aspirations and strengths, but they need support to develop these into sustainable employment pathways. A narrow 'job first' focus privileges immediate economic productivity and focuses on short-term outcomes that get job seekers off of welfare at the expense of durable and sustainable change. One

interviewee sums up the futility of this approach to unemployment intervention, which treats workforce exclusion as a simple arithmetic problem of supply and demand, and of a willingness to accept whatever is supplied:

The supply and demand argument is an interesting one as I can't count the number of anecdotes I have heard: 'I don't know why people aren't going for jobs. I saw a sign up at my local Bunnings .... why are not they just going for that job?' But it's not as straight forward as 'oh...there is a hole, let us put that person in that hole'. Employers might get hundreds of applicants ... they screen people out ... I hear stories of young people submitting over a hundred applications and not even getting an interview ... that breeds its own despair (Interview 8).

We have identified the fact that approaches to intervening in unemployment and embedded workforce exclusion need to acknowledge both the workforce excluded person and their circumstances. They need to account for the complexity of joblessness. In practical terms, this means approaching the job seeker with partnership in mind, and building relationships where unemployed people's strengths and aspirations are acknowledged, respected and used to determine future pathways.

We also acknowledge that social exclusion often goes hand in hand with workforce exclusion and have highlighted different programs' efforts to marry breaking down social exclusion with the process of creating pathways to employment. More partnerships with community groups and TAFEs will assist disadvantaged job seekers to build both work and social capacity. The importance of this should not be downplayed, given that employers expect applicants to have interpersonal and team-working abilities in order to perform many job tasks and responsibilities.

Our research highlights the significant successes of supported work placements, especially when they incorporate training for a *meaningful* qualification and the opportunity to gain ongoing employment, such as in the bank-agency partnership. Notably, this partnership was achieved on a labour hire model whereby the employer was sheltered from employment risk until the agency had supported job seeker capacity sufficiently to reduce performance gaps. Though such a model inevitably requires higher levels of investment and employer support, the conversion rate to employment in jobs with good working conditions was significant in the model which we investigated. Other training needs to be more strongly linked to genuine employment opportunities if such initiatives are not to be mere exercises in meeting mutual obligation requirements. Work placements during training could help disadvantaged job seekers build skills and establish networks to assist them in gaining future employment.

On a practical level, transport remains a major barrier to disadvantaged job seekers who rely on public transport. Obtaining support to obtain a driving license, such as in the youth program example, and affordable loans to buy a car, are key means by which workers can sustain work attachment. More schemes such as these would support disadvantaged job seekers who lack the funds to achieve car ownership independently, and also open up work options over a broader geographical area than that available to people relying on public transport.

All of the strategies highlighted here require more investment and longer-term support for the most disadvantaged job seekers if they are to move away from short term employment interspersed with periods of unemployment. These interventions appreciate the complexity of workforce exclusion, and they appreciate the capacities of unemployed people. They recognise the necessity of focussing on the person in a positive, partnership-orientated and capacity building way, and of acknowledging the circumstances which surround the person. They recognise that quality services and quality jobs are at the heart of durable employment outcomes. This recognition, and this move beyond 'work first' solutions to unemployment, which operate on the premise of simply matching labour force demand and supply, is a constructive step away from simple analyses of unemployment being a product of indolence. It is a step towards appreciating and harnessing the ambitions of workforce excluded people.

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5. Stepping Stones, Brotherhood of St. Lawrence, VIC
6. I just want to work Training Program, St. Luke's Bendigo, VIC (discussions also held regarding River to Recovery Project & the Early Years Program)

7. Centre for Work & Learning, Brotherhood of St. Lawrence, VIC (discussions also held regarding Given the Change Program, Refugee Program in partnership with ANZ Bank, & ASEP Asylum seeker employment program)
8. Educational First Youth Foyer, Brotherhood of St. Lawrence & Hanover, VIC
9. Caroline Springs Youth Project, Brotherhood of St. Lawrence, VIC
10. Parents as Career Transitions Program, Brotherhood of St. Lawrence, VIC
11. Sustainable Living Program, Anglicare Sydney, NSW
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13. Better Health for Self-Management Course, Anglicare Southern Queensland
14. Connect Centre, Work Ventures, NSW