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Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committees  
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Submission to: The adequacy of the allowance payment system for jobseekers and others, the appropriateness of the allowance payment system as a support into work and the impact of the changing nature of the labour market.

I welcome the opportunity to comment on the appropriateness of disbursement by the Commonwealth Department of Human Services. I have been subjected to the whims of casual employment for the majority of my working life and have a detailed experience involving both the situation of employment and underemployment.

We are fortunate in the present time in Australia to have almost the equivalent of total employment. The value of 100% true employment is not feasible due to economic constraints, or the rate of inflation which would plague us all, should this be reached. Therefore, the current event of prosperity within Australia should give us ample opportunity to reflect on and improve the situation of those who are most marginalised.

There is a need to acknowledge the sacrifice of those who remain underemployed. Due to their hardship, the rest of us are able to live a life without exorbitant inflation rates and in relative comfort. The question that is framed by this knowledge, includes; "how do we adequately compensate people who have the misfortune to be in a position of underemployment?" I would like to think that within Australia, the very least we could do is assist all people to live comfortably, with as much dignity and sovereignty as possible. The Commonwealth's Social Inclusion Principles are designed with these very aspirations in mind. In light of recent policy statements on inclusive practices, it may be considered very poor form to cut allowances to those most deprived during an economic boom. I would applaud moves to relieve disparity in this country by boosting and indexing any allowance given to a person who is underemployed. However, to achieve such visionary objectives we need to move beyond our current approach.

I think it is not possible to place a value on the cost for the individual of underemployment, however, I strongly recommend we could make recompense by directly seeking opinion on all aspects of underemployment in an ongoing manner. It would be erroneous, of course, to seek opinion without allowing it to steer a betterment of the situation and the system in which we reside. This reflection would allow resurrection of individual autonomy that is compromised by state support, with a view to social advancement for all citizens who seek to make a living.

Given the prosperity in Australian conditions, we are very well placed to become the leaders in assisting people to successfully maintain a good standard of living as they navigate their entire life course. It would be pertinent in a time of rapid development, and changing labour needs, to discover the life course requirements of our people. This exploration must begin with those who are most excluded from

the job market. Their experience will best inform the most pressing and successful changes to a life course system of earning a living. Excluded individuals need to have the opportunity to improve their life chances by giving feedback to alter the system which is currently excluding them. This investigation should also only end when those who are excluded no longer exist.

It may be a very good time to reconsider the “work approach”, so we may go beyond the current work framework and strive to become the world leaders in providing sustainable careers to our people across the entire life course. This would include a vision of adequate time for developing a career, the resources to access lifelong learning, the opportunity to be involved in communities and society, for carer and career to be in similar places on the labour spectrum, and to allow respite to those who are ill and injured without penalty. Let us show that we value care for ourselves and others as much as we do labour. The labour market without time for care is a fiction, the time to care for ourselves and others must lie in harmony with labour.

At this time, it would appear instead of these intentions we have a rather bloated unemployment industry, feeding on the deprivation of the unemployed. Should you require further details on how the unemployment industry isn't working, I would be happy to inform you of the alarming details of my case. It is a poor assumption to believe that the continuation of the unemployment industry can assist marginalised people, as deprivation continues for some despite the length of implementation and good economic conditions. It is an even poorer idea that the unemployment industry will be able to take on the onerous task of life course earning; a vision which is encouraging rather than punitive. It is time to move beyond a deficit model of employment allocation constructed from citizen complaint and adopt a vision of a successful society through reassuring mechanisms.

Some suggestions from overseas include a “career account” which an underemployed person may direct funds from for training, a resume, or an entire course, wage subsidies, or even to cover the costs of volunteering. Preliminary outcomes show this is more cost effective when directed by the citizen than when enacted by a representative such as an unemployment agent. This may be a more supportive, cost effective and market driven approach than our current system. It will not, however, be effective if people's experiencing underemployment have their existence concurrently undermined by inadequate restitution.

I do not have all the answers for the intricacies of good life course mechanisms for earning and care; these will have to come from others in a similar situation to mine. I wish you well in continuing to seek opinions from those most marginalised to improve our system of living and earning for all citizens.

Sincerely