

# Submission to Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services



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## INTRODUCTION

The *Getting Welfare to Work Research Team* welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee's first principles review of Workforce Australia, and the employment services system more broadly. The *Getting Welfare to Work* team comprises Prof Mark Considine, Prof Jenny M. Lewis, Dr Michael McGann, and Dr Sarah Ball from the University of Melbourne's School of Social and Political Sciences, along with A/Prof Siobhan O'Sullivan, from the School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales, and Dr Phuc Nguyen, from La Trobe Business School. Together with our industry partners and international academic collaborations, we have been studying the implementation of public employment service reforms for the past thirty years; not only in Australia but also the UK, New Zealand, and various parts of Europe. This has included detailed empirical investigations of frontline service delivery, the impacts of marketisation reforms on service provision, and the evolution of different regulatory methodologies from Star Ratings to outcomes-based payment models to the detailed contractual specification of services.

In Australia, we have been tracking the impacts of welfare reforms on frontline service delivery since the Working Nation reforms of the mid-1990s right up to the present-day (for further details about the team's collective work see [arts.unimelb.edu.au/employment-services](https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/employment-services)). This includes four major surveys of the Australian employment services workforce conducted in 1998, 2008, 2012, and 2016; repeated interviews with agency managers and frontline staff; and, most recently, an in-depth ethnographic study of four employment services offices and how they worked with a cohort of their most disadvantaged clients over a period of 18-months (O'Sullivan, McGann and Considine 2021). This mixed-methods, inter-temporal research is one of the longest-running programs of research on the frontline delivery of welfare-to-work internationally. It provides a detailed understanding of the changes in the reported priorities, servicing strategies, and behaviours of frontline staff over successive waves of reform along with a rich appreciation of the numerous structural barriers inhibiting the effective tailoring of support to long-term unemployed jobseekers with complex needs.

Our research, along with many other studies, shows that this is a cohort that Australia's employment services system has repeatedly failed. This is evidenced by the rising proportion of jobseeker payment recipients who are very long-term unemployed (See Appendix) and the fact that the hardest-to-help cohort of participants (previously classified as Stream C jobseekers) spend, on average, five years registered in the system. We have identified a range of structural factors contributing to these poor outcomes with the very long-term unemployed and hardest-to-help cohorts. Factors include the heavy size of advisors' caseloads, persistent under-investment in developing the professional competencies and skills of frontline staff, the increasing prioritisation of narrow 'work-first' strategies characterised by an emphasis on perpetual job-search motion, and an overall loss of differentiation between the approaches of providers who have increasingly 'herded' around a low-cost, standardised approach. Furthermore, these aforementioned barriers are themselves a product of the market governance, 'black box' approach to service commissioning that has been used to steer provider behaviour for 25 years.

As we have detailed in previous submissions (see Appendix) on the *Employment White Paper*, commissioning providers through periodic tenders for short contracts and incentivising them through threats of business reallocations, Payment-by-Results funding, and a performance measurement framework that focuses on tracking short-term placements invariably skews provider behaviour towards concentrating their resources on jobseekers who have relatively few barriers and who can be placed into immediate vacancies at speed. Longer-term investments in working relationally with clients and building relationships with employers are discouraged by the financial imperative to achieve payable results in the short-term. Also, investments in improving participants' functioning in domains such as health, housing and education—and in so doing, bring them closer to employment—are avoided if they cannot be assumed to deliver payable labour market attachments.

This has led us to the conclusion that the provision of enhanced employment services for more disadvantaged jobseekers requires a different policy setting to the quasi-market model that has dominated for the past 25 years. Tinkering with the payment model and other financial and performance incentives underpinning the welfare-to-work market model is not going to achieve the scale of change that is needed on the ground. Meaningful reform requires transformation of the employment services workforce and a turn towards much more relational forms of collaboration.

Rather than setting performance objectives and leaving it to providers to determine how best to achieve these in response to an array of contractual incentives, **government needs to become actively involved in the design and delivery of employment services on the ground.** In areas under-served by community organisations with the necessary place-based expertise, this may require government at either state, territory, or Commonwealth-level to assume the role of a direct service provider. This direct provider role brings the benefits of avoided transaction costs, a potentially more stable frontline workforce, and the dividend of understanding and expertise that accumulates over time from direct experience of working with the very long-term unemployed. In other areas with more established networks of community organisations, the optimal approach may be for government to pursue place-based partnerships with community organisations already involved in delivering a range of ancillary vocational programs and flanking social services, as well as with local employers and training organisations. Either way, the centralised outsourcing of services on a periodic 'set-and-forget' basis needs to give way to more place-based partnership approaches where government and providers from the private and community sectors actively collaborate on the design and implementation of service models. In short, the role of government must move beyond that of a purchaser of services delivered by others at arms-length. Government must become actively involved in putting its shoulder to the wheel of frontline service provision.

Members of the research team have made a joint submission with Brotherhood of St Laurence and Centre for Policy Development on the options available for transitioning the role of government beyond a purchaser to a more active partner in, and direct provider of, frontline employment support. We have also recently made a detailed submission to the Employment White Paper consultation process, setting out at length the findings of our research on the weaknesses of the welfare-to-work market model. We have appended a copy of that submission to this document.

In this submission, it is not our intention to repeat the content of those submissions but to build on them by highlighting what we see as a further key issue for system improvement: building research and development capacity through sustained collaborations between researchers, policy officials, and practitioners.

## EMBEDDING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CAPACITY ACROSS THE SYSTEM

The Australian policy landscape in the welfare-to-work field is highly dependent for sustained intellectual support and policy research on the Department of Employment, a loose collection of academic researchers, and several independent centres and think tanks with much broader policy interests or short-term funding imperatives (Institute of Family Studies, Grattan Institute, Centre for Policy Design, Australia Institute, Melbourne Institute etc).

Most of the research relationships in the domestic arena depend upon commissioned one-off studies and evaluations. On the other hand, work on more complex system improvements depend upon market purchasing from the big commercial consulting companies.

All of these arrangements have their value but when looked at as an ecosystem there are some clear gaps when compared to other policy sectors or welfare-to-work arrangements in other jurisdictions where there are dedicated institutional arrangements for sharing research and evidence-based practice innovations between public employment services. Examples include the OECD's Local Employment and Economic Development (LEED) program, which has provided a platform for policy makers, community development practitioners, and researchers from around the world to share and evaluate new approaches to local development since the early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, at an EU level, the Network of European Public Employment Services was formally established in 2014 for similar purposes and to embed cooperation and mutual learning between employment services across Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Like the employment services sector more broadly, **Australia is over-reliant upon arms-length purchasing relationships between departments and groups of researchers.** This limits the development of practice-oriented capability in the broader policy environment and reduces the ability for the government to steer towards deep collaborations over time in the knowledge production aspect of policy development.

We would urge the Committee to give consideration to the R&D capability limits that this current configuration helps perpetuate. Among many deficits we would highlight the following:

- Weak cross-fertilisation of ideas and insights concerning the way systems such as Workforce Australia, NDIS, DES and Indigenous Employment improve over time;
- Stop-start approaches to research agendas and poor cumulative impact of research on the improvement of practice and standards across these sectors; and
- Loss of elite researcher depth from this field.

The problem is made worse by the low investment of most contracted service providers in research and development activities, and in a practice-based research program with long-run ambitions to change outcomes for the better.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.oecd.org/employment/leed/>.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.pesnetwork.eu/the-network/about/>.

Universities rarely invest in such collaborative institutes unless the Australian Research Council or similar funds provide the incentives for deep collaboration leading to practical outcomes.

The solution to this problem would be to examine some best-practice models for research-based collaboration which foster a shared interest in innovation across these programs using applied expertise from industry, government, and the academy. One option may be a formalised partnership with an independent university unit as a means of consolidating R&D capacity and providing key functions to the system as a whole.

An example of this kind of approach is the Centre for Local Innovation in Social and Employment Services at Aalborg University in Denmark.<sup>3</sup> The Centre, which was established in 2016, is a joint initiative between Aalborg University and four Danish municipalities that are directly involved in the delivery of employment services. The centre brokers partnerships between social science researchers, municipal managers, and frontline delivery staff to co-develop practice innovations and evidence-based service delivery models. Another, related example, is the Centre for Work Inclusion at OsloMet University in Norway.<sup>4</sup> The Centre is a partnership between the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (which runs Norway's public employment service) and the Faculty of Social Sciences at OsloMet, with the objective of undertaking evaluative research and disseminating knowledge about best practice models of employment support for particular cohorts to policy makers, service providers, and professionals working in employment services.

What would such a model do that we do not currently do?

- (1) Use available data on program impacts and provider strategies to produce better end-to-end understanding of what works and why.
- (2) Build an evidence-based culture of collaboration to assist government to shape and reshape policies.
- (3) Harvest the best international insight and comparative research to inform debate and decision making inside the policy network of public and private agencies.
- (4) Enable trials and experiments in the application of well researched insights to achieve government priorities.
- (5) Attract elite researchers to this sector and enable greater continuity of effort by the key parts of the policy making community.
- (6) Attract funding from government, universities, service agencies and philanthropic funds to sustain a focus on the biggest, hardest to solve delivery challenges.
- (7) Provide a stable platform that allows for ongoing, long-term collaborations between researchers, government departments, service providers, and other interested parties, to ensure excellent research and exchange between those interested in improving policy and service delivery.

We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss these issues regarding the need to embed R&D capacity across the system with the Select Committee, along with any other aspects of the team's research that may be of interest to the Committee.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.politics-society.aau.dk/research/projects/lises/about-lises/>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.oslomet.no/en/about/kai>.

## Appendix A: Employment White Paper Submission

### 1. INTRODUCTION

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This submission in advance of the forthcoming Employment White Paper is being made on behalf of the *Getting Welfare to Work Research Team*, which comprises:

- Prof Mark Considine, Prof Jenny M. Lewis, Dr Michael McGann, and Dr Sarah Ball from the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne;
- Associate Professor Siobhan O’Sullivan, School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales; and
- Dr Phuc Nguyen, La Trobe Business School, La Trobe University.

Our submission addresses the critical topics of labour force participation and improving outcomes for those who face challenges in employment, focusing in particular on the role of employment services in contributing to these policy objectives - an area we have extensive expertise in. Our team and our partners in the UK, the Netherlands and Denmark have been studying the implementation of public employment service reforms for the past thirty years; not only in Australia but also the UK, New Zealand, and various parts of Europe. This has included detailed empirical investigations of frontline service delivery, the impacts of quasi-markets on service provision, and the evolution of different regulatory methodologies.

In Australia, we have been tracking the impacts of welfare reforms on frontline service delivery since the Working Nation reforms of the mid-1990s right up to the present-day Workforce Australia reforms. This includes four major surveys of the Australian employment services workforce conducted in 1998, 2008, 2012, and 2016; repeated interviews with agency managers and frontline staff; and, most recently, an in-depth ethnographic study of four employment services offices and how they worked with a cohort of their most disadvantaged clients over a period of 18-months (O’Sullivan, McGann and Considine 2021). The data collected explains changes in the priorities, servicing strategies, and reported behaviours of frontline staff over contract periods and provides an understanding of numerous structural barriers to realising the level of comprehensive and tailored support that is required by jobseekers with high levels of disadvantage.

Since our team commenced its work, Australia’s employment services system has evolved from a mixed model of public, private, and community sector delivery to one of the world’s only fully privatised employment services system; a market model that is today delivered by just 44 providers compared with the more than 300 agencies that were operating in the late 1990s.

This is indicative of the enormous degree of consolidation and convergence that has occurred in Australian employment services over recent decades, with our research further indicating a loss of differentiation between the for-profit and not-for-profit providers remaining in the market. For instance, of the 113 different items that we surveyed frontline employment services staff about in 2016, there were no statistically significant differences in response between staff employed by a for-profit provider and those employed by a not-for-profit provider on over 90 per cent of the survey items (Considine et al. 2021). Put simply, compared with 20 years ago, there are far fewer providers for jobseekers to choose between and less and less remaining to distinguish one provider’s practices and approaches from those of another.

Far from the vibrant palette of dynamic, innovative, and personalised employment services that was promised by advocates of marketisation, our research instead indicates that Australia's employment services system has largely evolved into a monochrome landscape of broadly homogenised service provision. We have concluded on numerous occasions that the system does not operate optimally due to the burden of red tape (for example see Considine et al 2014a); a lack of service diversity (for example see Considine et al 2014b and Considine et al 2014c); and a lack of flexibility or service tailoring (for example see Considine et al 2020 and Considine et al 2019).

A full list of the team's publications is provided in the Appendix, although the following are of particular relevance to the issues addressed in this submission:

- *Buying and Selling the Poor: Inside Australia's Privatised Welfare-to-Work Market* (2021, Sydney University Press)
- Considine, M., O'Sullivan, S., McGann, M., & Nguyen, P. (2020). 'Locked-in or Locked-out: Can a Public Services Market Really Change?' *Journal of Social Policy*, 49(4), 850-871.
- Considine, M., O'Sullivan, S., McGann, M., & Nguyen, P. (2020). 'Contracting personalization by results: Comparing marketization reforms in the UK and Australia.' *Public Administration*, 98(4), 873-890.
- *Getting Welfare to Work: Street-Level Governance in Australia, the UK, and the Netherlands* (2015, Oxford University Press)
- *Enterprising States: The Public Management of Welfare-to-Work* (2001, Cambridge University Press).

The team has also previously made submissions in response to the Australian Government's (2018) *The Next Generation of Employment Services* discussion paper. Many of the topics addressed in this submission were also previewed extensively in that submission<sup>5</sup>, and it is our conviction that these issues remain as pressing today as there were several years ago (notwithstanding the latest Workforce Australia reforms). Key amongst these is the ineffectiveness of the existing employment services system in supporting highly disadvantaged and very long-term unemployed participants to move into sustainable employment, as reviewed below.

## 2. LIFTING PARTICIPATION AND REDUCING BARRIERS FOR THE LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYED

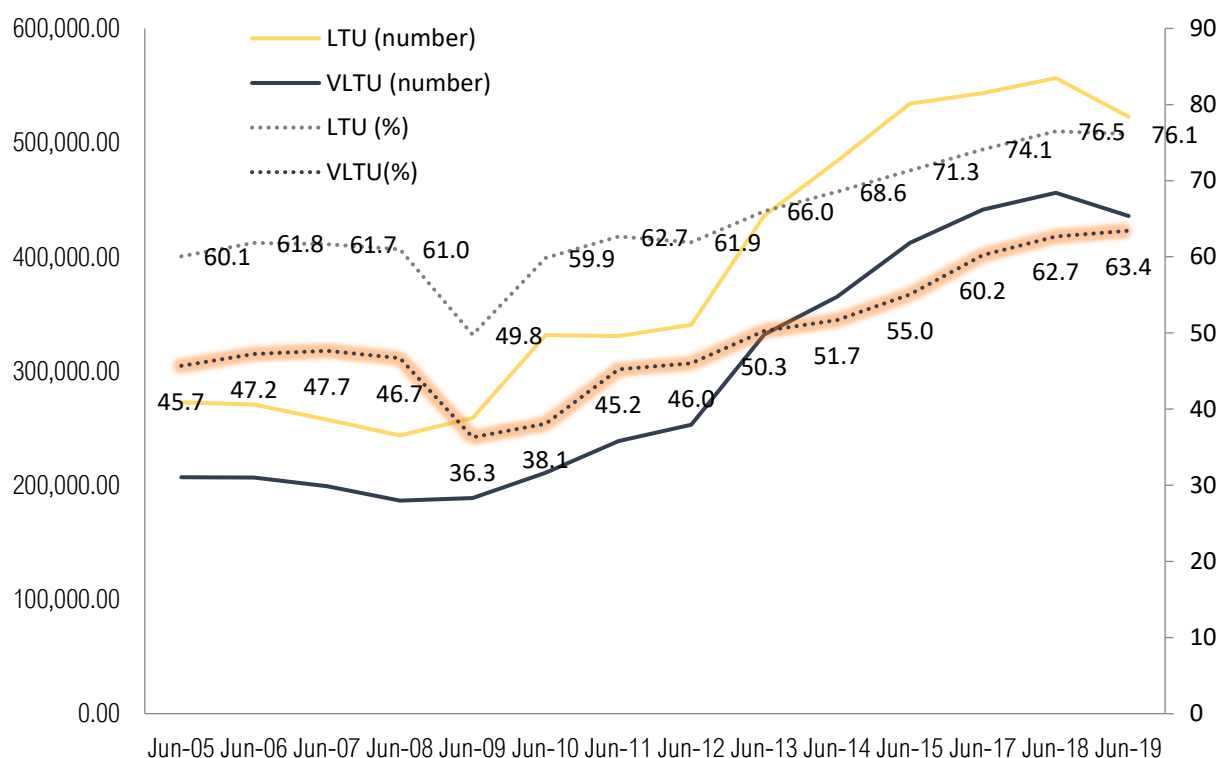
Australia's employment services are moderately successful at supporting newer welfare recipients and those who are short-term unemployed to return to employment. However, as ACOSS's Peter Davidson (2014) has observed, the issue of 'long-term' unemployment has historically been the 'Achille's heel' of Australia's employment services system. Davidson coined this term in response to the poor performance of Job Services Australia providers in placing long-term jobseekers (those on payments for 12 months or more) into work. However, as shown in Figure 1, the problem of long-term unemployment has only deepened in more recent years with an estimated 76 per cent of Newstart recipients in receipt of income supports for 12 months or more in June 2019, and 63 per cent in receipt of income support payments for 24 months or more. By contrast, in June 2011, just under 63 per cent of Newstart recipients had been in receipt of income supports for 12 months or more while just 45 per cent had been in receipt of income support payments for 24 months or more.

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<sup>5</sup> The submission is publicly available at [https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/2947382/Improving-Outcomes-for-Disadvantaged-Jobseekers-2018.pdf](https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/2947382/Improving-Outcomes-for-Disadvantaged-Jobseekers-2018.pdf).



Figure 1: Duration on Newstart Allowance



Note: Extracted from DSS Payment Demographic Dataset (for 2014 to 2019), available from <https://data.gov.au/dataset/dss-payment-demographic-data> and from DSS Statistical Paper Series, Characteristics of Income Support Recipients: A Statistical Overview (for 2005-13). Long-term Unemployed (LTU) refers to people in receipt of income supports for 12 months or more. Very long-term unemployed (VLTU) refers to people in receipt of income supports for 24 months or more.

Other than brief spikes in short-term unemployment during the global financial crisis (2008-10), there is a long-run historical trend of deepening long-term unemployment among those on jobseeker payments. The corollary of this is that newer claimants – the short-term unemployed – are being supported to return to employment relatively quickly whereas those who have been on income supports for a sustained period are being left further and further behind. This is further reflected in the data that has been published on the characteristics of those jobseekers who are assessed as being furthest from employment and in the ‘hardest-to-help’ cohort of employment services participants. In the previous Jobactive system, these were the jobseekers in so-called Stream C, which accounted for about 16 per cent of the overall Jobactive caseload (Australian Government, 2018). Among the Stream C cohort, an estimated:

- 44 per cent have been in the employment services system for over five years
- 88 per cent have been registered with employment services for at least a year (Australian Government, 2018).

Our most recent book, *Buying and Selling the Poor* (O’Sullivan, McGann, and Considine, 2021), is based on an ethnographic study of how four of the best performing employment services offices in Victoria and New South Wales were trying to progress this cohort of participants into sustainable employment. What we observed was that the threshold for being a ‘high performing’ agency in relation to this cohort was extremely low; that the ‘success story’ employment services offices included cases where

agencies placed less than five per cent of their Stream C cohort into 26-weeks or more of employment. As we observed in that study, ‘being consistently ranked among the best performing Jobactive agencies does not necessarily mean that those agencies are achieving a particularly high rate of employment outcomes with their Stream C clients’ (O’Sullivan, McGann, and Considine 2021: 61).

### Need for substantive personalisation (comprehensive tailoring)

In our previous submission on *The Next Generation of Employment Services*, we outlined several structural features of Australia’s employment services system that mitigate against the possibility of delivering the kind of intensive, personalised approach that is widely regarded to be critical to achieving sustainable employment outcomes for the long-term unemployed. **Research suggests that jobseekers with high levels of disadvantage benefit from intensive support, coordinated by skilled caseworkers who can tailor support on an individualised and personalised basis (Fuentes & Lindsay, 2015; Lindsay, Pearson, Cullen, & Eadson, 2018).** Sainsbury (2017) refers to this as ‘substantive personalisation’ in that services should not only treat jobseekers as individuals from the perspective of showing greater interactive sensitivity but, more particularly, they should see that actual services are ‘tailored to individual needs and the wishes of participants’ comprising elements of advice and support that both match the work goals and aspirations of clients while addressing their individual needs or barriers (Sainsbury 2017: 57).

Importantly, substantive personalisation describes much more than frequent face-to-face appointments and regular labour market counselling by an employment consultant. On its own, the provision of job counselling is unlikely to significantly improve outcomes or enhance the employability of highly disadvantaged jobseekers with multiple and complex barriers (Borland 2014). Rather **substantively personalised case management requires a holistic and integrated approach to support ‘that takes account of the full circumstances of the individual’ and enables a coordinated, inter-agency approach to improving outcomes through the capacity to simultaneously address vocational and non-vocational issues (Borland, Tseng, and Wilkins 2013).** The intervention model requires that standard employability services are integrated with, and complimented by, a range of other holistic services ‘addressing the full range of barriers to work faced by jobseekers’ (Lindsay, McQuaid and Dutton 2007). Under a substantively personalised model, case managers act as key brokers, coordinating support from multiple services (e.g., vocational training, allied health, housing, and other welfare services) according to client need. They also play a pivotal role in coordinating this inter-agency support so that vocational and non-vocational goals are aligned, and support is complimentary between services. Investments in building relationships with clients and external support services are therefore a critical component of substantively personalised employment support along with a flexible approach to service delivery.

However, **long-standing problems of growing caseloads, workforce de-skilling, and convergence towards routinized and low-cost servicing strategies remain deep structural barriers to achieving substantively personalised employment services in Australia.** These problems, which are reviewed in detail in Section 3, can in turn be seen as a function of Australia’s ‘set and forget’ commissioning model, which is underpinned by a focus on allocating employment services on the basis of hard competitive contracting and Payment-by-Results rather than more relational forms of contracting or collaborative commissioning. The upshot is an employment services market that is dominated by a relatively small number of multinational human services organisations and transnational not-for-profit organisations with their established and ingrained ways of working; ways of working that are proven

to be largely ineffective in terms of enhancing the labour market inclusion of participants with multiple and complex needs.

### From marketisation to collaborative partnerships

Based on our own research, but also informed by wider international experience with quasi-market designs in countries such as the UK (see Sainsbury 2017; Fuertes & Lindsay 2015; Bennet 2017), the Netherlands (see van Berkel 2017), Denmark (Larsen & Wright 2014), and Ireland (McGann 2023), it is our view that reforming employment services for the benefit of the very long-term unemployed cannot be adequately achieved without a fundamental reset of the welfare-to-work market model.

Tinkering with the financial incentives and payment models used to motivate providers to perform is not going to achieve the scale of change that is needed on the ground. **Meaningful reform requires transformation of the employment services workforce and a turn towards much more relational forms of collaboration between the public and private sectors.** Rather than setting performance objectives and leaving it to providers to determine how best to achieve these in response to an array of contractual incentives, **government needs to become actively involved in the design and delivery of employment services on the ground.** This can be in partnership with contracted providers, and what form employment service provision should take must also be localised to the specific features of the labour markets they operate within and the different characteristics of the populations they serve. In short, the centralised outsourcing of employment services on a periodic basis needs to give way to more place-based partnership approaches where government and providers from the private and community sectors actively collaborate on the design and implementation of employment services.

## 3. STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO SERVICE DIVERSITY, INNOVATION, AND TAILORING

The provision of more flexible and tailored employment services has been a long-standing goal of reforms to the Australian employment services system, and was a key driver behind the partial contracting-out of employment services in the mid-1990s and subsequently full privatisation in the early 2000s. Contracting-out service delivery to community and private-sector agencies was inspired by the belief that contestability could simultaneously improve the efficiency and quality of employment services, as competition would motivate agencies to innovate and become more flexible in how they delivered services. However, our research points to several related factors that have contributed to the poor performance of the system in supporting more highly disadvantaged jobseekers, and which have prevented the delivery of flexible and substantively personalised employment services: growing caseloads, workforce changes (including de-skilling), and an increasing reliance on standardised approaches to working with clients (see Considine et al. 2018b, 2015; Lewis et al. 2016). We argue that these barriers to service tailoring are endemic to quasi-markets in employment services more broadly and not just a product of the Australian experience of contracting-out.

### Growing caseloads

A key factor inhibiting substantive personalisation of service delivery is the growing size of caseloads. In our most recent survey (2016), frontline employment services staff reported servicing an average caseload of 148 clients per consultant (Lewis et al., 2016) compared with a mean caseload size of 114 jobseekers per consultant in 2012, and 94 jobseekers per consultant in 2008 (Considine et al., 2015). **The higher caseloads observed are partly a consequence of the maturation of Australia's Active**

Participation model – which has widened the requirement for welfare recipients to be formally engaged in job services, and more intensively – coupled with profit-maximisation strategies on the part of providers looking to deliver services at lower cost. One way of achieving this is to service more clients per consultant, but at the expense of the time available to spend individually servicing clients and addressing their barriers (Borland, Considine, Kalb, & Ribar, 2016). With larger caseloads, there is also less time available for consultants to coordinate with other support services such as allied health services and to contact employers which, as we have argued, is a critical component of the model of substantively personalised support. This has become a systemic issue that has been further aggravated by the substantial amount of time that frontline employment services staff appear to be spending on administrative and compliance-reporting activities.

Our research suggests that frontline staff spend between a quarter and a third of their total time each week on compliance and administration activities (Considine, O'Sullivan, & Nguyen, 2014; Lewis et al., 2016). This heavy compliance burden reduces the amount of time that frontline employment services staff can spend working one-on-one with clients. At the same time, the level of contact that case managers have with employers and other support services appears to have declined in recent years and is relatively minimal in comparison to the amount of time spent on compliance and administration. For example, in the 2016 survey, frontline staff reported spending less than 5 per cent of their time each week on working with other service providers while only 10 per cent of their time was spent contacting employers. Similarly, the proportions of frontline staff who reported being in either daily or weekly contact with employers, welfare agencies, or training providers was also down on our previous 2012 survey (Lewis et al. 2016) indicating a reduction in collaboration across agencies and with employers and training providers.

### Workforce de-skilling

Another key trend in Australia's contracted-out employment services system has been the substantial workforce changes that have occurred over the past twenty years. These impact the skill-levels and age profile of those delivering frontline support. **Our data point to a de-professionalisation of the employment services sector workforce as the nature of frontline work has become more standardised and routine, with less and less emphasis on the discretionary tailoring of services and tools to enact customised plans.** This runs contrary to the goal of substantively personalised employment support, which depends on case managers' professional expertise and capability of working with clients in a holistic way (Lindsay, McQuaid, and Dutton 2007).

There has been a notable shift in the age profile of frontline staff, with a substantial decline in the numbers of workers aged in their mid-30s to mid-50s and a corresponding increase in the employment of much younger workers. While this shift was most pronounced during the 10 years of the Job Network (Considine et al., 2015), it has not reversed, with less than half of the frontline workers we surveyed in 2016 being aged between 35 and 54 years (Lewis et al., 2016) compared to nearly 70 per cent of those surveyed in the late 1990s.

Allied to this has been a marked decrease in the proportion with a university degree from just under 40 per cent in 1998 to less than 20 per cent in 2012 (Considine et al., 2015), although this increased marginally to just over 25 per cent in 2016 (Lewis et al., 2016). On-the-job training, whether through programs run in-house or informal training by colleagues is by far and away the main form of training that frontline workers report receiving to do their jobs, with a considerable number indicating that



they received no training at all. For example, in the 2016 survey, over 12 per cent of respondents reported that they had received no training to do their job whereas a little under half reported receiving informal training from colleagues (Lewis et al., 2016). This suggests that sizeable numbers of frontline employment services staff have limited expert training (for example, qualifications in social work, health sciences etc) in how to work with highly disadvantaged jobseekers in an integrated way.

### Service standardisation

One explanation for these workforce changes relates to how the nature of frontline work has changed, with workers increasingly relying on highly standardised assessment tools and IT driven systems when deciding how to work with clients. For instance, over 60 per cent of employment services staff surveyed in 2016 reported that they use standard client classification tools and checklists when deciding how to work with jobseekers and 42 per cent reported that the answers to standard sets of assessment questions were ‘quite’ or ‘very’ influential in determining what activities are recommended for their clients (Lewis et al., 2016). By comparison, in 1998, less than 30 per cent of frontline staff reported relying on standardised client classification tools or checklists while just over 20 per cent indicated that answers to standard assessment questions influenced what activities they recommended to jobseekers to much extent (Considine et al., 2015).

The use of these tools and systems enables contract and agency managers to provide more detailed direction about how workers should do their jobs. These arrangements promote agency efficiency – particularly in the context of an annual average turnover rate of staff (41.9%) that is more than two and a half times the economy-wide average (NESA 2016). But they make it more likely that complex clients will receive an inadequate ‘stock standard’ service, with growing numbers of frontline staff reporting that their computer system tells them what steps to take with jobseekers and when to take them (Considine et al. 2018b, 2015; Lewis et al. 2016). In 1998, only 17.4 per cent of frontline workers ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that their computer system told them what steps to take with jobseekers and when to take them. However, by 2012, this proportion had reached 50 per cent (Considine et al., 2015) and a similar proportion of those surveyed in 2016 likewise ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that their computer told them what steps to take with jobseekers and when (Lewis et al., 2016). Since 2008, about two-thirds of those surveyed have consistently indicated that they feel the IT system they use strongly dictates how they do their job. There has also been a sizeable increase in the proportions who report that the decisions they make about jobseekers are determined to a ‘good’ or a ‘great deal’ by standardised program rules and regulations, from just under 57 per cent in the 1998 survey to just below 82 per cent in our 2016 survey.

Taken together, these findings indicate that **consultants working in Australia’s out-sourced employment services sector previously enjoyed a higher degree to autonomy to tailor services, but this has been displaced by an increased routinisation and automation of service delivery** - especially over the 10 years of the Job Network - but it has remained a defining feature of service delivery even under subsequent contracts.

In the initial years of Job Network, the government largely took a ‘black box’ approach to commissioning providers. Agencies were overwhelmingly left free to decide what requirements should be imposed upon jobseekers, and what level of services should be offered to individual clients. However, agencies and frontline staff used this discretion to target their most job-ready clients, moving them quickly into job search activities – which was seen as a low-cost strategy of helping those

with minimal barriers get a job - while more highly disadvantaged jobseekers received often only very cursory attention (Considine et al., 2015). Practices of 'creaming' and 'parking' became endemic during the first two Job Network contracts (Fowkes, 2011; Thomas, 2007), and the government responded by moving towards a stronger regulatory regime with greater powers to recover payments from providers deemed to have breached contractual requirements or misspent allocated funding in Jobseeker accounts. More detailed regulations about minimum servicing standards were added into subsequent contracts, along with prescriptive guidelines about how Jobseeker account funding could be spent. Departmental contract managers began to monitor providers more closely in relation to various aspects of service delivery such as the ratio of clients to case managers and the frequency of contact with clients.

As Australia moved towards an Active Participation model, under Minister Abbott, prefaced on enhanced job searching and other behavioural requirements - backed by the threat of sanctions for non-compliance - the government also became increasingly interested in monitoring providers to ensure such conditionality requirements were being enforced. This scrutiny of providers was facilitated by the development of more sophisticated IT-based data sharing information systems. An example is the ESS Web interface that frontline workers use to record multiple dimensions of their work - from client-meetings to activity agreements, to jobseeker account (employment fund) spending, to clients' job-searching and compliance history - and which enables the decisions of individual frontline staff to be reviewed by agency and contract managers. Agencies risked disqualification from future business, both through periodic business reallocations and subsequent contracting rounds, if they were judged to have breached contractual requirements or misused funds. In a context 'where every transaction is visible' (Fowkes, 2011), coupled with greater contract compliance scrutiny and 'recovery activities' to reclaim payments from non-compliant agencies, our research indicates that agencies and their staff became gripped by a fear of non-compliance. They responded by embracing new forms of service standardisation 'as a way to minimise risks' and of ensuring organisational viability within the market (Considine et al., 2011, pp. 826, 827).

This embrace of new forms of service standardisation had two effects. Firstly, it reduced flexibility in the provision of service delivery but, secondly, it also eroded diversity between agencies. Our research indicates a decline in the number of significant differences between agency types over time in relation to their service delivery methods and organizational activities (Considine et al., 2015). It also shows an increasing orientation towards activating jobseekers through 'work first' strategies and enforcing compliance through the threat of sanctions.

Quasi-market designs have unintendedly produced new forms of service standardisation and 'herding' around 'work first' strategies, illustrating the acute tension between contractual and funding pressures to secure immediate job entries and program goals of enhancing the longer-term employability of those furthest from the labour market. Certainly, a percentage of more disadvantaged clients can be found jobs by these same routine methods and that is evident in the official statistics. But the percentage remains low, and the durability of placements remains fragile without a more customised approach.

## 4. REFORMING EMPLOYMENT SERVICES TO ENHANCE PARTICIPATION

To address the limitations of previous models in assisting more disadvantaged jobseekers, a further redesign of Australia's employment services system was undertaken in July 2022. Under the new Workforce Australia model, newer income support recipients and jobseekers closer to the labour market now predominantly self-service online with face-to-face services redirected towards those with more complex employment barriers and greater need of personalised support. In addition, there have been changes to the performance framework (Star Ratings have been replaced) and payment model (higher upfront payment) to incentivise providers to make greater investments in supporting more disadvantaged clients.

We very much welcome this renewed focus on improving outcomes for the hardest-to-help jobseekers. However, we remain doubtful that the Workforce Australia reforms will achieve the level of change that is required. The reforms have done little to dislodge the marketised approach that has dominated employment services commissioning for more than 25 years. The vast majority (31 out of 44) of Workforce Australia providers are the same organisations that delivered the previous Jobactive contract. Where new providers have entered the market, these have predominantly been small providers who have won contracts for only one or two regions. In essence, under the new Workforce Australia system, the bulk of employment services will continue to be delivered by the same group of multinational human services firms and transnational not-for-profit organisations as before. The profile of the frontline workforce in terms of the skill levels and experience of case managers is also likely to remain similar given the continuing emphasis on Payment-by-Results and the short time period of providers' initial licenses.

As a general principle, it is our view that **longer contracts contribute to stability within the sector**. This is advantageous for jobseekers and frontline staff alike. From the perspective of jobseekers, it means fewer service interruptions. For frontline staff, it means greater job security. This in turn means that providers may be able to attract more skilled workers to the sector and may also be able to invest more heavily in both their workforce and in highly disadvantaged jobseekers. It is our view that **greater job stability, improved career progression opportunity and better remuneration would allow the sector to attract a more diverse range of skilled staff who in turn would be optimally positioned to assist jobseekers**. However, the Workforce Australia providers have initially only been granted a three-year licence to deliver employment services. Their ability to continue delivering services beyond that is subject to annual performance review and whether they are assessed as being a high, medium, or low-performing provider (the licenses of low-performing agencies will not be renewed). This means that providers are under considerable pressure in the short-term to quickly deliver results which, in turn, risks **under-investment in jobseekers with complex barriers to employment and the career progression for frontline staff**.

One of the main criticisms of the previous Jobactive system's results-based payment model, as well as the Star Ratings framework that has been used to measure providers' performance since the early 2000s, is that both engrain an emphasis on short-term results that detracts from investing in supporting the long-term unemployed. Profit-maximising motives necessarily require agencies to favour easier to help clients. **Longer-term investments in building the employability of harder-to-help clients through, for example, housing support or drug and alcohol recovery services, carry too much financial risk for providers in cases where they cannot reliably predict that these investments will result**

**in job outcomes within the time span over which their performance is measured.** While addressing non-vocational barriers such as homelessness, poor mental health, and drug addiction promotes employability and leads to positive individual outcomes in the long-run, employment services providers only receive payments for employment and educational outcomes. Accordingly, there are few incentives for providers to invest time or money to address complex non-vocational barriers beyond referring clients to external support services that are funded by local or state governments (Olney 2016). Building inter-agency networks and investing in substantively personalised and holistic support is perceived as too fraught with risk, especially when the provision of support is funded on the basis of expected job outcome payments or financed by borrowing against future commissions.

Our research clearly shows that even non-profit providers are not immune from the short-term rational incentives embedded in quasi-market designs towards orienting service delivery around those clients closest to employment. Community-based agencies and non-profit providers have either fallen by the wayside as the market share of third-sector organisations has diminished, or competitive funding pressures have caused them to adopt the business models and servicing strategies of their for-profit counterparts.

Although the Workforce Australia payment model includes higher upfront servicing fees compared with the Jobactive contract – providers now receive an initial \$1,200 engagement fee compared with a \$250 servicing fee paid every six months - outcome payments continue to account for the vast bulk of the payments that providers can earn. It also seems to us that the new licensing system will create an environment in which agencies are equally focused on ways in which they can maximise results in the short-term. Doing so will be critical to securing license extensions and remaining viable in the market, and it is very possible that the needs of jobseekers will end up playing second fiddle to the immediate need to demonstrate performance for the purpose of contract extension.

In our view, **the provision of enhanced employment services for more disadvantaged jobseekers requires a different policy setting to the quasi-market model that has dominated for the past 25 years.** Any separate program for the most disadvantaged job seekers should be organised along non-profit lines with an employer-based system for work retention and an integrated approach to rehabilitation, health support and appropriate training. Investment in their transition back to work will necessarily need to be larger and longer, which the incentive systems of for-profit schemes arguably militate against. It will require an inter-agency approach to coordinating case management and holistic support around client and employer needs that is most likely to be achieved via localised service delivery partnerships working in close cooperation with employers (see, for example, Borland et al. 2016). We believe this is a good moment for the Australian system to re-align the core value of the mainstream system towards job matching and motivation, and to design a further program for the most disadvantaged jobseekers based on higher levels of individualisation, coordination with employers and relevant service providers, smaller caseloads, and a more highly qualified employment services workforce.



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# APPENDIX B

The University of Melbourne, in conjunction with our colleagues at the University of New South Wales and La Trobe University, has a long-standing research program on the reform of employment services which began in 1998 with surveys of frontline staff working in the employment sector in Australia, the UK, the Netherlands and New Zealand. Since 2008, in partnership with the National Employment Services Association (NESA) and Westgate Community Initiatives Group (WCIG), we have been closely monitoring reforms in Australia and other countries, using surveys and interviews. A selection of publications from these research projects are listed below, several of which are available via our website: <https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/employment-services>.

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