



**REPORT**

# Help, but not real help

Mature age jobseeker perspectives on  
employment services in Australia

Seuwandi Wickramasinghe | Dina Bowman

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a non-government, community-based organisation concerned with social justice. Based in Melbourne, but with programs and services throughout Australia, the Brotherhood is working for a better deal for disadvantaged people. It undertakes research, service development and delivery, and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating learning into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by government and others. For more information visit <[www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)>.

Seuwandi Wickramasinghe is a Research Officer and Dina Bowman a Principal Research Fellow in the Work and Economic Security team of the Brotherhood's Research and Policy Centre.

This study was funded by the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation – Eldon & Anne Foote Trust (Innovation Grant 2015)

Published by

Brotherhood of St Laurence  
67 Brunswick Street  
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065  
Australia

ABN 24 603 467 024

T (03) 9483 1183  
[www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)

ISBN 978-1-921623-72-1

Suggested citation: Wickramasinghe, S & Bowman, D 2017, *Help, but not real help: mature age jobseeker perspectives on employment services in Australia*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

© Brotherhood of St Laurence 2018

Apart from fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism, or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 and subsequent amendments, no part of this paper may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publisher.

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	4
A note about mature age	4
<b>Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
Background	7
<b>2 From welfare to work: the Australian employment policy context</b>	<b>8</b>
Mature age jobseekers and the labour market	8
Australian employment services and mature age jobseekers	8
Mutual obligation requirements	9
Activation and assistance	9
Mature age jobseekers and active labour market policies	9
<b>3 Research method</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4 It's not working for mature age jobseekers</b>	<b>13</b>
Emphasis on compliance at the expense of 'real' assistance	13
Short-sighted approach to long-term unemployment	13
Disregard of jobseekers' aspirations and experience	14
Limited service engagement with employers	14
Mismatch between needs and support	15
Inadequate job-specific training	16
Mismatch of approved volunteer activities with jobseeker skills	17
Frontline staff 'too young' to help?	18
<b>5 Contradictions, conditionality and compliance</b>	<b>19</b>
Compliance rather than 'real help'	19
Conditionality and compliance as counterproductive	19
Short-sighted approaches to labour market disadvantage	20
Lack of focus on labour market demand side	21
Service standardisation: mismatch between needs and support	21
Age discrepancy	22
<b>6 Conclusion and next steps</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>25</b>

## Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation – Eldon & Anne Foote Trust (Innovation Grant 2015). We are grateful for their generosity.

The research team comprised Dr Dina Bowman, Dr Helen Kimberley (to December 2016), Agathe Randrianarisoa, Seuwandi Wickramasinghe, Nicola Flook (March–June 2017) and Chabel Khan.

The team acknowledges the vital contribution of mature age jobseekers, jobactive staff, employers and other informants.

We also would like to thank the Research Advisory Group members: Professor Simon Biggs, University of Melbourne and Brotherhood of St Laurence, chair; Penelope Fogarty, Department of Social Services; David Henderson (replaced by Janey Kuzma), Department of Employment; Hugh Horsfall, VECCI; Kieran Kearney, The Salvation Army Employment Plus; Marilyn King, Willing Older Workers (W.O.W!); Michael McGann, University of Melbourne; Pam Saunders, DHS; Simon Schweigert, RCSA; Tessa Thompson (replaced by Colin Harrison), NESA; David Thompson, Jobs Australia Limited; Alick Weber, LMCF.

A special thank-you must go to Janet Chimonyo, Jobs Australia Limited, for her support of this study and to Deborah Patterson for editing.

## A note about mature age

Definitions of 'mature age' vary considerably. In this study we consider jobseekers aged 45 or more to be mature age. This follows the Australian Human Rights Commission's 2013 *Final report of Access All Ages—Older Workers and Commonwealth Laws Inquiry*, which referred to 'older workers' as individuals over the age of 45.

Where different age ranges are used in other data sources that is specified in the text.

## SUMMARY

Australia's publicly funded employment services are not working for mature age jobseekers. While the rate of mature age unemployment is low compared to youth unemployment, their rate of long-term unemployment is relatively high. Mature age jobseekers also tend to be in long-term receipt of Newstart Allowance. Unemployed older Australians need real help to get and keep jobs, especially since the federal government is considering increasing the age of pension eligibility to 70, which would place additional pressure on mature age people who experience disadvantage in the labour market.

Building on previous research about mature age workforce participation, the Enhancing employment services for mature age jobseekers study aimed to explore how jobactive employment services might better assist mature age jobseekers to get work. The study entailed interviews with mature age jobseekers, jobactive staff and employers in four Victorian employment regions with high rates of mature age unemployment.

This report focuses on the analysis of semi-structured interviews with 30 mature age jobseekers about their experiences of employment services<sup>1</sup>.

### Key findings

Our research shows that there is disjunction between what mature age jobseekers say they need from employment services and what they get. What is required according to the jobseekers we interviewed are:

- well thought-out pathways to sustainable employment
- a skills assessment and recognition process
- more effective employer engagement
- relevant, employment-related training and specific training for digital job search, as well as wider access to funding for targeted training to fill skills gaps. For example, jobseekers may have basic computer skills but need specific training in an accounting software package or advanced word processing.

Jobseekers highlighted some of the contradictions inherent in the jobactive system that get in the way of what one jobseeker described as 'real help'. These contradictions include:

- **Emphasis on compliance undermines 'real' assistance**

Interviewees reported that appointments were dominated by form filling and paperwork, and as a result they considered appointments 'a burden that has to be maintained'. A focus on conditionality and compliance limits the ability of employment services to source appropriate job opportunities that match skills, target vocational training, and engage with employers to identify suitable jobs for mature age jobseekers.

<sup>1</sup> Companion reports focus on the perspectives of jobactive staff and employers.

## Summary continued

- Short-sighted approach to long-term unemployment**

Mature age jobseekers talked about being pushed to apply for low-paid, short-term jobs that did not match their skills or experience. Most of the interviewees were seeking full-time work and they were frustrated with the emphasis on work-first, even if it was unsuitable and insecure. They referred to a sense of powerlessness because they were directed to apply for jobs regardless of the type of work or industry, level of pay or commuting distance.

- Focus on jobseekers rather than employers**

Interviewees reflected on employment services' inadequate engagement with employers, which influenced the number and type of jobs to which they were referred. They speculated that a lack of employer engagement could be due to a lack of employer interest in or awareness of services offered by jobactive providers.

- Mismatch between needs and support**

Interviewees described the support offered by employment services as 'bandaidy' and 'short-sighted' as the job search activities and job preparation did not lead to paid work. Those interviewees with health conditions or disability observed that jobactive staff appeared to lack relevant understanding of disability and mental health conditions and this affected their job matching. Some interviewees from CALD backgrounds, particularly those from the Afghan Australian community, reported that jobactive staff had little awareness of cultural and faith-based practices and sensitivities and recommended a culturally diverse jobactive workforce.

- Insufficient job-specific training**

The general view among interviewees was that the training suggested by employment services was often unsuitable. Interviewees expressed overall frustration with training options because of the lack of connection between the training on offer and jobs. They highlighted a lack of targeted digital literacy training, lack of adequate funding for training, and lack of extra supports to engage in relevant training.

- Mismatch of approved volunteer activities with jobseeker skills**

Several of the interviewees undertook voluntary work to gain relevant experience in the hope of increasing their prospects of obtaining paid work. However, some said that they had been asked to discontinue, as their volunteer activities (such as volunteering at a school) did not fall under Centrelink's approved community projects/activities. These mature age jobseekers felt that the approved volunteer activities had little chance of opening up job opportunities.

- Frontline staff 'too young' to help**

A common observation by interviewees was that younger staff had limited relevant skills and experience. Mature age jobseekers referred to younger staff as 'regurgitating information' or 'reading off a script' and as being 'too young' to understand or assist them. These comments illustrate mature age jobseekers' own bias concerning younger workers and the assumption that age equates with experience and expertise. However, their comments also suggest gaps in staff training to work with mature age jobseekers.

## Next steps

This and associated reports highlight the contradictions that undermine the effectiveness of assistance offered to mature age—and other—jobseekers.

The current jobactive contract ends in 2020. There is an opportunity in the short term to strengthen support for jobactive staff and mature age jobseekers, in the medium term to inform the development of the next contract, and in the longer term to contribute to a re-imagination of assistance for unemployed workers—whatever their age.

This is one of three reports on mature age jobseekers and jobactive. Other reports focus on jobactive staff and employer perspectives. Together the research informed <[www.workingforeveryone.com.au](http://www.workingforeveryone.com.au)>, a website designed to shed light on the situation of mature age jobseekers and build empathy, explain the changes to the labour market over recent decades and provide tools for mature age jobseekers and those who assist them.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The labour market in Australia has undergone profound changes over the past thirty years. Economic policy and technological change have affected the labour market, with a decline in manufacturing (Borland et al. 2011) and increases in service sector employment and in insecure work. These changes have coincided with mounting political concern about the cost 'burden' of ageing baby boomers, with a focus on active ageing and an increase in the age of eligibility for the pension (Bowman et al. 2016a). This reflects the general shift late in the 20th century from the so-called passive provision of income support to active labour market policies with increasing obligations for the unemployed, including mandatory Work for the Dole, and application of punitive measures.

Since the mid-1990s, government-funded employment services have undergone waves of reform driven in part by new public management approaches that institute government as a purchaser rather than a provider of services (Considine & O'Sullivan 2015). The current iteration of employment services, jobactive, which commenced in 2015, is delivered by for-profit and not-for-profit providers under contract to the federal Department of Employment.

Emerging research and administrative data suggests that publicly funded employment services are not achieving timely or sustainable employment outcomes for mature age jobseekers. Mature age jobseekers accounted for 27 per cent of the jobactive case load nationally in September 2017.<sup>2</sup> Forty-six per cent of jobseekers in receipt of Newstart Allowance are aged 45+ (DSS 2017a). While the rate of unemployment of mature age people is low compared to youth unemployment, once unemployed they tend to remain unemployed. The average duration of unemployment for jobseekers aged over 55 is 90 weeks, which is nearly twice as long as for those aged 25–54 and three times as long as for the 15–24 age group (Department of Employment (Ian Neville) 2016). The longer they remain out of work, the more difficult it is for them to get a job.

## Background

This research builds on a previous Australian Research Council Linkage study that examined workforce vulnerabilities in midlife and beyond. That study was conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Curtin University, the University of Melbourne and NATSEM, in partnership with Jobs Australia. Among other findings, the study identified factors that have affected employment services' support for mature age jobseekers, including:

- the de-professionalisation and routinisation of employment services, and reduced ability to effectively support mature age jobseekers due to contractual compliance
- unconscious bias against older workers and poor understanding of their needs and circumstances due to the age discrepancy between employment services frontline staff and mature age jobseekers
- a focus on placement of jobseekers in entry-level, low-skilled jobs requiring little experience or training (Bowman et al. 2016a).

Building on these findings, the present study aimed to identify strategies and resources to enable employment services to more effectively assist mature age jobseekers.<sup>3</sup>

This study entailed interviews with mature age jobseekers, jobactive staff, employers and employer groups, policy makers and employment service peak bodies. The research focused on four employment regions with high rates of mature age unemployment: Western Melbourne, North Eastern Melbourne and Inner/South Eastern Melbourne.

This report draws on the analysis of 30 interviews with mature age jobseekers.

<sup>2</sup> Definitions of mature age vary, which makes comparison of available data difficult. Here the Department of Employment defines mature age jobseekers as those aged 50 or more..

<sup>3</sup> The study produced the resources found at <[www.workingforeveryone.com.au](http://www.workingforeveryone.com.au)>

## 2 FROM WELFARE TO WORK: THE AUSTRALIAN EMPLOYMENT POLICY CONTEXT

New policy discourses on ‘active ageing’ encourage an extended working life to increase workforce participation of older adults and to restrain the cost to government of age pensions. In Australia, the 2015 *Intergenerational report* predicted that ‘more Australians will continue to lead an active lifestyle and participate in the workforce after they reach traditional retirement age’. The report’s authors considered this represented ‘a significant opportunity for Australia to benefit more from the wisdom and experience of people aged over 65’ (The Treasury 2015, p. ix). An extended working life is thus framed as both an individual and a national opportunity; but it does not represent unambiguous good news for mature age jobseekers.

### Mature age jobseekers and the labour market

Mature age unemployment remains low—around 3.9% (45–54 years) and 3.5% (55 years plus), compared with 13.3% for youth and 5.4% overall in November 2017 (ABS 2017); however, mature age jobseekers are most at risk of long-term unemployment (OECD 2017). The average duration of unemployment for those aged 55 or more is nearly twice as long as for those aged 25–54 and three times as long as for the 15–24 age group (Department of Employment 2016c).

Almost half (46%) of jobseekers in receipt of Newstart Allowance are aged 45+ (DSS 2017b). In September 2017 jobseekers aged 50+ represented 27% (or 191,098 individuals) of the jobactive case load, compared with 19% (134,599) aged 15–24 (Department of Employment 2017b).

Mature age jobseekers encounter some challenges similar to other jobseekers, but they also face specific challenges due to their age and the changed labour market. Over the past 40 years, the Australian labour market has undergone profound changes such as:

- changes to the standard employment relationship, and growth in part-time rather than full-time work
- globalisation, leading to offshoring of local jobs and increased competition for the remaining jobs in some industries
- increased automation due to technological change, resulting in a loss of jobs in some industries.

Mature age jobseekers may face particular challenges because of:

- outdated skills or skills and experience mismatched with industry demands
- lack of suitable skills assessment and retraining and upskilling opportunities
- lack of appropriate career advice or guidance, especially following redundancy and for those seeking to re-enter the workforce
- low digital competence, especially in using online recruitment and work-related software
- caring responsibilities, resulting in poor job prospects for older women with a fragmented working history (Vickerstaff 2010)
- low levels of English proficiency among postwar migrants who went straight to work without the opportunity to develop English language and literacy skills
- age discrimination and age stereotypes (Gray 2003; National Seniors Australia Productive Ageing Centre 2012)
- the impact of long-term unemployment. The longer mature age jobseekers are out of work, the more likely they are to remain unemployed (Vickerstaff 2010).

### Australian employment services and mature age jobseekers

Australia’s employment services have also experienced much change since the publicly funded and delivered Commonwealth Employment Service was progressively privatised in the 1990s. In 1994, the Keating government initiated reform to employment services with the strategic goals of ‘an accurate assessment of the needs of jobseekers’ and ‘an intensive plan to assist disadvantaged people’ (cited in Considine, Lewis & O’Sullivan 2011, p. 814).<sup>4</sup> The Australian Government has subsequently developed three iterations of employment services. Job Network was introduced in 1998 and was replaced by Job Services Australia in 2009. The current service system, jobactive, was introduced in July 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Disability Employment Services provide specific services to jobseekers with an assessed disability. With the closure of the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service in 2015, disability employment services are delivered by for-profit and not-for-profit organisations.

The jobactive program has four objectives: 'help job seekers find and keep a job, help job seekers move from welfare to work, help job seekers meet their mutual obligations' and 'jobactive organisations deliver quality services' (Department of Employment 2016b, p. 8).<sup>5</sup> Jobactive is delivered by 44 organisations across 51 employment regions and 1,719 sites, down from 90 providers in 2015 under the previous (Job Services Australia) contract. Not-for-profit organisations account for 55% of the service providers, down from 70% (Jobs Australia 2015).

## Mutual obligation requirements

Jobseekers in receipt of Newstart Allowance are required to meet a range of obligations, including actively seeking work and attending appointments with jobactive staff. Those aged 55 years or older may meet their obligations by engaging in at least 30 hours per fortnight of suitable paid work, self-employment, approved voluntary work or a mix of these (Department of Human Services 2017). Mature age jobseekers are also required to attend job interviews and accept increased hours of paid work, if offered, until they obtain a full-time job or cease payments (DSS 2016). While jobseekers with a temporary medical condition can have their mutual obligations reduced, they may still be required to do suitable work or engage in training or other activities (Department of Human Services 2017).

In the 2017 federal Budget, changed activity requirements for mature age jobseekers were announced, to commence from September 2018. Newstart recipients aged 55 to 59 years will be able to meet no more than half of their required 30 hours of participation by volunteering. Recipients aged between 60 and Age Pension eligibility age will have a new activity requirement of 10 hours per fortnight (up from zero), which can be met through volunteering (The Commonwealth of Australia 2017). A new Career Transition Assistance Program will be trialled in five locations from 1 July 2018 to support mature age jobseekers (Department of Employment 2017a). This program will provide reskilling opportunities for jobseekers aged 50 years and older in jobactive in five employment regions. It will include an intensive short course, with ICT training where appropriate, to build understanding of the labour market and foster resilience. The program will be rolled out nationally in 2020 (Department of Employment 2017a).

To some extent the current income support system and employment services system recognise the particular challenges facing mature age jobseekers, as they have slightly less onerous mutual obligation requirements in relation to hours of participation and the possibility of volunteering (when aged over 55). However, the changes in the 2017 federal Budget represent a sharpening of the requirements affecting mature age jobseekers.

## Activation and assistance

Active labour market programs are premised on the long-held assumption that jobseekers need to be incentivised to work or else they will simply rely on income support (Peck & Theodore 2000).

Hartley Dean provides a useful taxonomy of different approaches to active labour market policies, based on their differing understandings of responsibility. As he points out '[w]hen it is conceived on an inclusive/egalitarian basis ... welfare-to-work is concerned to promote active job creation' (2006, p. 12). In contrast, workfare policies tend to adopt coercive approaches premised on the idea that unemployed people need to be motivated or 'activated' in order to avoid idleness (Dean 2006).

Mead (1997; 2005) and Murray (2015) in Britain and the United States suggest that a mix of 'hassle and help' is needed to motivate jobseekers into employment. However, Marston (2013) observes that for unemployed Australians in receipt of income support there is 'an overriding sense of the "hassle", but little sense of the "help"' (pp. 824–5).

## Mature age jobseekers and active labour market policies

Studies documenting jobseeker and frontline staff perspectives have highlighted that current and former iterations of Australia's employment services have had limited capacity to provide 'real' assistance to mature age jobseekers (Considine & Lewis 2010; Kossen & Hammer 2010; Murphy et al. 2011).

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion see the companion report on employment services staff perspectives

## *From welfare to work continued*

Mature age jobseekers require specific job search and job preparation assistance; targeted skills training; and counselling and personal support services (Kerr, Carson & Goddard 2002); access to flexible (re)training (Encel & Studencki 2004); suitable computer skills training (Elkin & Inkson 1995, cited in Gray (2003)); and reverse marketing (Handy & Davy 2007). Their needs vary depending on gender, socioeconomic background, health and level of education (Vickerstaff 2010). However, employment service providers often face a mismatch between jobseeker needs and a standardised service. The de-professionalisation and routinisation of Australian employment services have resulted in what is described as 'systemic carelessness' (Bowman et al. 2016a).

This component of the study considers mature age jobseekers' experiences and perceptions of jobactive. See the companion reports for insights from jobactive staff and from employers, employer peak bodies and other key stakeholders.

The next chapter describes our research methods and key characteristics of the mature age jobseeker sample.

### 3 RESEARCH METHOD

The *Enhancing employment services for mature age jobseekers* project comprises three complementary components of qualitative interviews with mature age jobseekers; with employment services staff; and with employers, employer peak bodies and other stakeholders. The study focused on four employment regions with high rates of mature age unemployment in metropolitan Melbourne.

This report focuses on jobseekers' perspectives. We outline the method for this component of the study below.

#### Method

We adopted a qualitative approach to examine the experiences, perceptions and motivations of mature age jobseekers. We asked about interviewees' work and personal circumstances, their experience and opinions of work capacity assessment, and their interactions with employment services including training and support<sup>6</sup>.

Thirty phone interviews lasting 60–90 minutes were conducted.<sup>7</sup> Using phone interviews reinforced confidentiality while providing consistent structure and encouraging interviewees to speak candidly (Cachia & Millward 2011). With consent, the interviews were audio-recorded. They were then transcribed, de-identified and analysed to identify themes and issues.

#### Recruitment

Potential interviewees were recruited by advertising in jobactive offices, community organisations and local newspapers. They completed a screening survey that was available on the Brotherhood of St Laurence website. It included questions about gender, age, length of time unemployed, employment service agency and location.

#### The sample

To ensure that the sample would correspond broadly to key characteristics of the mature age jobseeker population in the study's four areas, a sampling framework was developed based on Department of Employment data. Sample criteria included age, gender, CALD background, education, past occupation and length of time in receipt of Newstart Allowance.

Thirty individuals were selected in total. They included jobseekers from the Afghan (three) and Vietnamese (four) communities, which had high levels of mature age unemployment according to the Department of Employment regional data.

#### Sample characteristics

We interviewed 17 women and 13 men aged 45 years and over from a wide range of occupational backgrounds. The proportion of female participants in this study reflects the proportion of female mature age jobseekers in the Department of Employment regional data. Nearly half (13) the interviewees were between 55 and 59 years (see Table 1).

Table 1 Interviewees by age and gender

All participants	45–49 years	50–54 years	55–59 years	60–64 years	Total
Female	4	4	8	1	17
Male	1	3	5	4	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>30</b>

**6** The interview schedule is available on request from the authors.

**7** Interpreters were used for several interviews.

## Research method continued

Over half of the interviewees had been receiving Newstart Allowance for more than 12 months (Table 2). Most had some form of post-school qualification, including nine who had a bachelor or postgraduate qualification (Table 3).

**Table 2 Interviewees by age and time on Newstart Allowance**

Time on Newstart	45–49 years	50–54 years	55–59 years	60–64 years	Total
<6 months	2	2	0	1	5
6 months – 1 year	1	0	2	1	4
1–2 years	0	1	3	0	4
2–3 years	1	1	4	2	8
>3 years	2	2	3	1	8
Voluntary participant	0	0	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>30</b>

**Table 3 Interviewees by age and highest qualification**

Highest qualification	45–49 years	50–54 years	55–59 years	60–64 years	Total
No qualification	0	1	2	4	7
Trade or TAFE qualification	2	2	2	0	6
Non-trade vocational education	2	0	3	0	5
Diploma or equivalent	0	1	2	0	3
Bachelor degree or equivalent	1	1	2	1	5
Postgraduate	0	2	2	0	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>30</b>

### Access to transport

Although most of the interviewees (25) had a drivers licence, only 15 owned their own vehicles. Fourteen interviewees relied on public transport and walking, which took more time but was inexpensive compared to owning and maintaining a vehicle. One interviewee used a friend's car.

### Physical and mental health

Sixteen interviewees mentioned physical and/or mental health conditions that impacted on their ability to obtain and hold a job. Of these, 10 interviewees mentioned a physical health condition and 12 reported mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. In addition to the 16, three interviewees reported living with disability.

### Caring responsibilities

A third of the interviewees were primary carers for a parent, spouse or children. Six were non-primary carers for their grandchildren. Caring responsibilities had affected some of the female interviewees' workforce participation. For these women, it was difficult to find employment after long periods out of the workforce.

### Housing and living arrangements

Fourteen of the interviewees rented their homes (6 men and 8 women) and 13 were home owners (6 men and 7 women). Three did not provide details of their housing situation.

Fourteen interviewees lived with a partner and/or children. Nine lived alone (5 women, 4 men). Four lived with other relatives such as elderly parents and siblings and three lived with non-family (for example, a friend).

### Analysis

The researchers closely read the de-identified transcripts to identify initial themes. The team met to devise a thematic framework, which was used to code the transcripts. The coded transcripts were then reviewed as a group to refine the analysis and the transcripts were recoded.

### Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by BSL's NHMRC accredited Human Research Ethics Committee.

### Limitations

The study is limited to four employment regions in Melbourne but it is qualitative in nature rather than a comparative study. The sample group of jobseekers interviewed is small and consists of individuals who were keen to express their views. Nevertheless, it provides useful insights into the experiences and understandings of mature age jobseekers.

## 4 IT'S NOT WORKING FOR MATURE AGE JOBSEEKERS

The overriding experience of mature age jobseekers interviewed in this study was that they did not receive 'real help'; jobactive was not working for them. As one man put it: 'It's help, but not real help'.

The mature age jobseekers we interviewed<sup>8</sup> reported a mismatch between their needs and the services provided, with a lack of targeted support, insufficient or irrelevant training and approved volunteer activities unrelated to employment opportunities. Interviewees also reflected on the age mismatch between themselves and jobactive staff, who some thought were 'too young to help'. They also commented on the absence of employer engagement with jobactive.

### Emphasis on compliance at the expense of 'real' assistance

Consistent with previous research (Bowman et al. 2016a; McGann et al. 2015) most interviewees reported that monitoring and compliance activities were prioritised over actual employment assistance. This was reflected in the weight given to administrative tasks in their appointments, particularly form filling and paperwork related to their mutual obligation requirements. Far less emphasis was placed on 'real' help. Will, who was in his early sixties and had been on Newstart for more than two years, described appointments:

*It's a bit of a bland thing of just ticking the boxes and filling the forms in. They don't really sit down and ask you or watch you to see how are you with people or are you interested in a particular thing.*

Others viewed jobactive appointments as a waste of time, a 'burden that has to be maintained'. For example, Charlotte, in her early fifties, who had been on Newstart for less than a year, observed:

*They're not needed, they're not providing jobs, they're not training people, they don't assess people and they just herd people.*

Many interviewees criticised the mandatory requirement of applying for 20 jobs each fortnight, seeing it as a waste of time or even counterproductive. For example, Jack, in his early fifties, pointed out jobseekers end up applying for jobs without the relevant experience simply to make up the number, which limits their prospects of finding a job. It also means that employers have to deal with applications

from unsuitable applicants. As a bookseller who had been on Newstart for six years while working in casual jobs, Jack commented on the contradictions inherent in this situation:

*If there were enough jobs to go around in the fields that people are experienced in then there'd be no problem, but because you're told you've got to get this number of applications you've got to apply for positions you have no experience in. Employers must get a whole heap of applications from people who have just got no business applying for them.*

Patrick, who was in his late forties and had been on Newstart for less than six months, described the experience of 'looking for 20 jobs a fortnight ... like betting on a horse'. He proposed an alternative, suggesting that employment services should be:

*a bit more personalised ... if it's feasible. It should be a little bit more flexible, instead of just this mad rush to get you back into work under any circumstances.*

Several interviewees viewed the job search requirement as an arbitrary means of sorting out genuine jobseekers from those who 'maybe don't want to work'.

The mature age jobseekers we interviewed wanted to work but many had little faith in the capacity of jobactive staff to help them find work. For example, Sophie, in her late forties, who had been on Newstart for more than three years observed, 'You still have to go and look for jobs yourself'. Archie, in his late fifties, who had also been on Newstart for more than three years, summed up a common attitude: 'They don't do a hell of a lot for you'.

### Short-sighted approach to long-term unemployment

Most of the interviewees were seeking full-time jobs and were keen to get sustainable employment. The work-first approach that directs people into jobs, even if the jobs are unsuitable and insecure, was a source of real frustration for these mature age jobseekers. As Cassandra, who had been 'cycling on and off Newstart for 20 years', put it, 'It's so short-sighted'. Daisy, in her late fifties, a former lecturer who had been on Newstart for almost three years, expressed her frustration with the system, which she characterised as, 'Any job will do, we just want you off unemployment'. She asked, 'Do you think we want to be on unemployment?'

<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the interviewees quoted throughout this report.

## It's not working for mature age jobseekers continued

Many said they were not getting the help they needed to secure suitable employment. As Patrick explained:

***They don't really care about what sort of employment, whether it's suitable or if I'm interested in doing it. It's just get employed and get employed now!***

This drive towards immediate employment led to a disregard for people's skills and experience, resulting in a lack of job matching with many steered towards low-skilled or unskilled work. As Jimmy, in his late fifties and on Newstart for less than a year, observed:

***The big challenge is that they are there to give specific jobs, like labour[ing] jobs. If you are looking for professional jobs, they don't help you in that area.***

Sara was in her late fifties and had a Diploma in Architectural Drafting. She was looking for work in that sector but recounted how jobactive staff referred her to jobs in aged care and forklift driving. Likewise, Penny who had qualifications in science and business management was sent to work as a barista in a café and Charlotte, a former nanny currently looking for work in a call centre, was referred to jobs in warehouses.

### Disregard of jobseekers' aspirations and experience

Interviewees reflected on the emotional impacts of the gap between the help they needed to get suitable work and what they received. For example, Daisy, who was in her later fifties, explained: 'We want to stay off unemployment and we want to feel like a human being, a contributing human being'. And to do that required 'helping us find jobs that fit our skills [and] our strengths'.

Instead, interviewees observed that the current employment services system denied their individuality and humanity because their preferences and aspirations were not recognised. Charlotte emphasised the importance of having a service that 'looked at you individually', to find 'a job that would keep you' that was 'suitable for you and the employer in a line of work where you would fit', and lastly but most importantly, where 'you would be happy'. Interviewees described their experience with jobactive providers as one of feeling 'powerless' and ignored in the face of employment decisions—being required, for instance, to apply for and accept jobs regardless of the low pay and long travel (sometimes up to 3 hours of travel each day). As Amy

put it: 'I didn't feel that I was being heard'. Penny explained: 'They have total control over you. Whatever they say, you do—you have to. Everything there, one-way street.'

Interviewees talked about feeling at the mercy of a system that made no sense to them. For example, one woman recounted how she had had her payments suspended for not attending an appointment that was scheduled on a day that she was working.

Confirming previous research, interviewees described their experience with jobactive as feeling like 'a cog in the wheel' or 'a small fish in the big ocean'. Not surprisingly, they expressed frustration, anger and hopelessness. Penny, who had been self-employed and was now long-term unemployed, claimed that 'the system is smothering me'. She also said:

***The business models [of jobactive] are not working. Not working, and it's causing a lot of unspoken ... pain and suffering.***

For mature age jobseekers, the harm of unemployment is compounded by disregard of their experience and skills and a sense of being processed or 'herded' rather than receiving 'real help'.

Such comments reflect the sense of being processed ('tick and flick') rather than assisted that was identified by Bowman et al. (2016a). They also reflect the gap between what mature age jobseekers want and what they get. As Bowman and her co-authors pointed out, mature age jobseekers are not homogeneous. Different groups—such as those who have previously worked in white collar occupations, those who are returning to the workforce after taking time to fulfil caring responsibilities, and those who have been made redundant due to economic changes—need specific types of support, and yet there is little time or capacity to provide this under the current system.

### Limited service engagement with employers

At the same time, interviewees observed that the shortage of suitable jobs was the 'elephant in the room'. The limited variety of jobs advertised through jobactive services compared with online job boards, the lack of strategies to market jobactive services to employers and a lack of reverse marketing of jobseekers directly to local employers were all identified as problems.

Reflecting on his experience of more than six months on Newstart in his early fifties, Mark commented:

*I would have thought that if you are an employer working locally and you had a vacancy you would actually post it [with] these [jobactive] agents and they [agents] would look at their catalogue of prospective unemployed people with a skill base, and they would put you in contact. [But] no, nothing at all.*

Others, such as Billy who had previously worked in administration, speculated that the problem could be employers' lack of interest or awareness of jobactive providers:

*I just feel maybe there's a disconnect there between what employers see their role as, perhaps ... Maybe the employers out there don't know enough about these job network agencies. I'm just wondering whether a lot of companies just steer clear of them or just don't know about them.*

This comment reflects the very low level of employer use of publicly funded employment services. According to the Department of Employment, only 6% of employers recruit via jobactive for low-skilled vacancies (Department of Employment (Ian Neville) 2016).

Penny, with her training in business management, observed that jobactive providers should be more proactive in identifying and publicising available jobs:

*They don't try and look for work for you. We need someone who's going to actually look for work for you, to help you look for work.*

These mature age jobseekers wanted to be introduced to relevant employers rather than to continue unsuccessfully looking for work on their own.

## Mismatch between needs and support

Outcome payments for jobactive agencies depend on the stream into which the jobseeker has been classified (A, B or C) and whether the outcome is short or longer term (at 4, 12 or 26 weeks) (Department of Employment 2016a). Paradoxically, mature age jobseekers are often classified as Stream A, which provides little incentive for job agencies to invest time or resources in assisting them (see companion report for a more detailed discussion of jobactive streams and how they affect service provision). With high case loads and pressure to perform competitively, there is a risk that agencies will focus on those most likely to gain a job quickly and thus trigger an outcome payment.

## Lack of tailored support

Most interviewees expressed overall dissatisfaction because jobactive providers failed to offer support tailored to their different needs. This was particularly true for jobseekers who experienced mental health conditions, lived with disability, or came from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD).

Interviewees reported that in their experience jobactive agencies focused their efforts on self-presentation, job search assistance (for example, résumé preparation or access to internet-connected computers and printers) and practical assistance (such as with myki (travelcard) costs to travel to job interviews). However, they noted a lack of tailored support, observing that the jobactive agencies they had used did not identify job opportunities that matched their skills, or provide targeted vocational training or career guidance. Interviewees described the support offered as 'bandaidy' and 'short-sighted' as the job search activities and job preparation did not lead to paid work. Some understood the problem as systemic. For example, Penny argued that the competitive approach to the delivery of employment services 'causes their own staff to be stressed, to meet profit measures that are not always aligned to the customisation of their clients' need'.

## Jobseekers with disabilities or mental health issues

Centrelink assesses claimants' capacity to work<sup>9</sup>. Jobseekers who are not deemed eligible for Disability Employment Services are referred to jobactive and classified into either Stream A, B or C. Although mature age people are more likely than younger age groups to have chronic health conditions—the National Health Survey 2004–05 showed that 54% of 55–64 year olds had a chronic disease, compared with 21% of 25–34 year olds (AIHW 2009, p. 7)—these conditions may not be assessed as affecting their capacity to work.

Several interviewees observed that jobactive staff lacked knowledge and awareness of health issues and disability or how these might affect the ability to undertake certain types of jobs. For example, Sara, who had post-traumatic stress disorder, complained that staff were unable to recognise the impact of her mental health on her ability to work in particular jobs:

<sup>9</sup> See guidelines at <[https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06\\_2017/des\\_eligibility\\_referral\\_and\\_commencement\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2017/des_eligibility_referral_and_commencement_guidelines.pdf)>.

## It's not working for mature age jobseekers continued

*They offered also aged care and I said psychologically I can't deal [with it], because probably of the war and everything that's happened, I can't deal with people that are helpless or older and people in need, unfortunately I would love to help, but not that kind of job, I can't handle, like I'm not in state of mind. And first I need help myself.*

### Jobseekers from CALD backgrounds

In spite of the Department of Employment's recognition of the need for specific strategies to assist CALD jobseekers (Jobs Australia 2017), mature age CALD jobseekers in this study, particularly those from the Afghan Australian community, reported that jobactive staff had little awareness of cultural and faith-based practices and sensitivities. For example, Amina, in her forties and on Newstart for more than two years, explained that better understanding of different cultures was essential to avoid referrals to jobs that conflict with jobseekers' core values:

*We cannot do every kind of job ... Don't tell me to serve alcohol, for example, I'm not allowed to do that. They should assess on a cultural value.*

Jimmy suggested a diverse jobactive workforce including staff from many cultural backgrounds would enhance inclusive support, observing:

*They are not well equipped to serve people from different backgrounds ... They need to have people from different backgrounds in their agencies.*

Mature age jobseekers are not a homogeneous group. They have diverse needs and challenges in seeking work. However, the current employment services system is ill equipped to provide the tailored approaches that are required.

### Inadequate job-specific training

Like job matching, much of the available training did not fit these jobseekers' needs. The mature age jobseekers we interviewed said that they were offered in-house training in job search techniques, and some accredited training such as certificates in forklift driving or hospitality. However, interviewees expressed overall frustration because:

- training didn't directly link to their job aspirations
- computer skills training was not tailored to need

- there was inadequate funding to access training
- training 'should be leading to real jobs'.

Interviewees considered that training offered by jobactive providers was aligned to meeting contractual obligations rather than to employment. For example, Patrick, who had worked in construction and had back problems, said:

*But all I can say, the reason they are ... putting me through courses, is to show they're doing something. They're mostly a waste of time.*

Mature age jobseekers were reluctant to take up training unless it was relevant and led to 'real jobs'. Sara, in her late fifties, pointed out that mature age jobseekers couldn't risk spending time on training that did not lead to employment:

*For us it's important to have some guarantee that you are going to get a job, because you are not young anymore. If I study I'm expecting to be employed in that field, not to look unsuccessfully for a job for years.*

Interviewees also noted an absence of training support for those who needed to change occupation. Lizzy, in her sixties, explained:

*If you were a bricklayer or something and you just can't do it anymore, you're going to have to try and do something that you've never done before in your whole life, so just to be able to get more training and things like that would be really helpful.*

Mature age jobseekers may need to seek work in different occupations for a variety of reasons. For example, it may be because they can no longer physically do their previous work, because their job no longer exists due to technological change, or because industries have closed and production has moved offshore. They need specific assistance to identify transferable skills and suitable opportunities for employment.

### Lack of targeted digital literacy skills training for job searching

Interviewees reported a common misconception among jobactive providers that all mature age jobseekers had basic digital skills and so did not need a digital literacy assessment. Charlotte, who had been a nanny, explained:

*The agencies don't test you anymore because it's like asking somebody whether you can use a toaster: of course I can use a toaster, you don't test somebody for that ... Nobody asks you, 'Are you computer literate?'*

Without an assessment of their skills, some mature age jobseekers feel lost. As Charlotte put it, 'You're just swimming in the system, or you're drowning in it because they don't address that issue'. Another interviewee, Will, who was in sixties, felt it was important to check digital skills:

*So it's a big assumption from my point of view, thinking everybody who's got an email address knows how to use it. Well, you can send it but it doesn't mean they know how to turn it on and respond.*

On the other hand, Cassandra pointed out that age doesn't necessarily equal lack of digital literacy:

*I think they just all lump us into the same sort of basket: you're over the age of 25, you must know nothing about technology and you must be afraid of it. It's not always the case.*

Mature age jobseekers vary from active users of technology to others whose usage is limited to specific tasks.

### Inadequate funding for training

Interviewees also complained that jobactive services did not have adequate funding to support training courses outside the approved agency list. Although jobactive staff provided referrals to training programs, in Victoria jobseekers with tertiary qualifications are ineligible for subsidies through the Victorian Training Guarantee<sup>10</sup>. Yet many have qualifications that are outdated or will not assist them to secure current employment opportunities. This mismatch between Commonwealth and state policies disadvantages jobseekers who are tertiary qualified but need to change careers. As Daisy, who had postgraduate qualifications, pointed out:

*I just have no money, and the government says, 'Well you're too highly qualified, so we're not helping you'. So, there's that.*

Lack of funding meant that jobseekers often had to cover their own retraining costs. Given the inadequacy of Newstart payments, even a relatively inexpensive course can create financial pressures. Referring to a short accredited coaching course, Penny explained:

*It cost \$360 that I have had to find. Now that just means that we've decided that we will skip two days of eating, or we just won't pay the electricity bill on time. We've taken hits in other areas because I felt that by doing this at least it's a chance for me to actually take a step back into a work environment.*

Interviewees also pointed to the need for assistance with other costs associated with training. Suzette, who was now unemployed in her early fifties after spending many years as a carer, explained:

*There's not any form of assistance for, say, myki fares, to get you there [or to cover] the cost of a short course. In my case I need new glasses, reading glasses in particular, so [it's a] barrier, not being able to see well enough to read.*

Mature age jobseekers can be trapped in a catch-22: without financial support they find it hard to retrain, but without relevant qualifications they remain disadvantaged in the labour market.

### Mismatch of approved volunteer activities with jobseeker skills

Several of the interviewees had taken up voluntary roles to gain relevant experience in the hope of increasing their prospects of obtaining paid work. However, some had been asked to discontinue as their volunteer activities were not offered by Centrelink's list of approved not-for-profit community organisations. For example, Melanie, who had worked previously as a school integration aide but had since spent more than a year on Newstart, recounted how she was asked to discontinue her volunteering at the local school. Instead, she was asked to volunteer at an opportunity shop. Melanie was disappointed:

*I thought, 'That's the only way I can get back into the school, if I offer my services'. Being my parish, I know the people, I know how the school works, and I had to ring them up and say, 'I'm sorry, I can't come anymore' because Centrelink would not approve me doing the two days that I had offered as a volunteer, and they told me I had to go and do some charity work in an op shop or something, and I thought that's not really going to get me a job.*

<sup>10</sup> The Victorian Training Guarantee is a government subsidy for training and upskilling workers: within it, workers aged 20 years or over are eligible for training for any qualification higher than those they already have. There are also restrictions related to citizenship/residency status and to the number of courses a person can undertake at the same time

## It's not working for mature age jobseekers continued

Although the jobactive consultant was aware of Melanie's frustration, she was unable to assist: 'She can see my point, and I don't know that there's much that she can do to get me into a school'. Like the mature age jobseekers, jobactive staff are constrained by the regulations of the employment services system.

Paradoxically, strict compliance and mutual obligation measures can reduce the employability of mature age jobseekers by diverting them into volunteer activities that have no connection with their skills, knowledge and previous work experience—and no link to employment opportunities.

Changes to participation requirements in the 2017 federal Budget will mean that those aged between 55 and 59 years will no longer be able to meet their obligations (while potentially gaining relevant work experience) solely by doing volunteer activities.<sup>11</sup>

### Frontline staff 'too young' to help?

Other research has highlighted the age mismatch between job services staff and mature age jobseekers (Bowman et al. 2016; McGann et al. 2015) which can result in the perception of lack of empathy (McGann et al. 2016). A common observation among the mature age jobseekers in this study was that younger jobactive staff had limited skills and experience to perform their work role. For example, Tamara, who had worked in community services and was now in her late fifties, commented:

*I don't think they're skilled enough. I might be ageist now and think that they're too young.*

Mature age jobseekers associated staff skill and experience with their age and length of time in the workforce. Younger staff were perceived as 'reading off a script' and as too young to provide real assistance. Describing a friend's experience with jobactive staff, Charlotte said:

*They're all younger than his daughter and they're trying to advise him on something that he's already done. He's been through the system and they're just regurgitating information.*

To some extent, Charlotte's comment illustrates mature age jobseekers' own (perhaps unconscious) bias against younger employment services workers. The age discrepancy between them and the staff can compound the shame they feel as older unemployed people because their situation runs counter to the assumption that age brings higher status and respect. Will explained:

*It would be an embarrassment for a 50 or 60-year-old to say to a 20-year-old, 'I can't read' or 'I don't know what that word means'.*

Older jobactive staff were preferred, as they were considered better able to empathise due to similar life experiences. Melanie explained:

*Staff are usually very young, under 30 years, but if they were a bit older, they would have been maybe able to better understand where you're coming from. Because they would have gone through that same sort of work experience, life experiences.*

These findings confirm and add to previous research that identified the age mismatch between employment services staff and mature age jobseekers as an issue. More diverse staffing of publicly funded employment services is required to minimise misunderstanding. Furthermore, it is important to foster intergenerational awareness to break down ageist stereotypes.

<sup>11</sup> The ministerial media release states: 'Job seekers 55 to 59 years (approximately 40,000) will no longer be able to meet 30 hours of activity requirements through volunteering alone—flexibility will exist for some recipients in areas of high unemployment.'

'Job seekers 60 to Age Pension age (approximately 45,000) who currently have no activity requirements will be required to have 10 hours per fortnight of activity requirements which can all be met through volunteering'

<https://www.mhs.gov.au/media-releases/2017-05-09-fairer-welfare-system-supports-more-people-work>

## 5 CONTRADICTIONS, CONDITIONALITY AND COMPLIANCE

Our findings suggest that the effectiveness of support provided to mature age jobseekers is undermined by the contradictions of the Australian employment services system. Here we focus on six key issues:

- compliance rather than 'real help'
- conditionality and compliance as counterproductive
- short-sighted approaches that value short-term employment outcomes over long-term outcomes
- lack of focus on labour market, demand-side issues
- service standardisation: mismatch between needs and support
- lack of understanding of needs due to unconscious bias of staff and mature age jobseekers.

### Compliance rather than 'real help'

The mature age jobseekers we interviewed reported that employment services prioritised compliance requirements over 'real help'. This claim is echoed in other studies (Kossen & Hammer 2010; Murphy et al. 2011).

Writing about an earlier version of employment services, Job Network, Considine, Lewis and O'Sullivan (2011) explain that employment services are likely to redirect their resources towards local administration due to strict contractual obligations, thereby limiting the capacity to provide one-on-one assistance to jobseekers. Within this kind of service framework, the mature age jobseeker and employment service provider relationship is underpinned by compulsion: the parties 'come together because they are required to do so ... [not] because the unemployed person believes that the employment service will offer them the assistance they need' (Bowman et al. 2016a, p. 656). And jobactive providers are also constrained by contractual obligations affecting the services they can provide to jobseekers<sup>12</sup>.

### Conditionality and compliance as counterproductive

Despite the assumption that a marketised system will provide choice and quality through competition, the mature age jobseekers in this study expressed feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness and a sense of not being heard. This reflects other research about the wider psychological impacts of unemployment. The deficit model that underpins active labour market programs is based on assumptions about the inadequacies of the unemployed (McDonald & Marston 2008; Peck & Theodore 2000). People in receipt of income support are presumed to be 'doing nothing', 'inactive' and 'dependent' (Murphy et al. 2011) and therefore to require activation. Wright argues that the unfounded belief in 'chosen worklessness' and 'dependency' 'constitutes an additional layer of remoralisation of welfare that occurs at implementation level and may result in direct discrimination and disempowerment' (Wright 2013, p. 832).

As a result, mature age jobseekers may be viewed as 'choosy', and 'unwilling to apply for jobs they considered inadequately paid, uninteresting, unpleasant, inconvenient (mainly in terms of distance from home) or unsuitable' (Marston 2013, p. 822). Of course this perception does not recognise that jobseekers may need to consider the trade-off between (for example) short shifts and long travel time, between casual hours and caring commitments.

However, attitudes to employment are also related to opportunities; and a lack of opportunities can lead to less expressed desire for employment and less jobseeking (the discouraged worker effect) (Ginn & Arber 1996). Encel and Ranzijn (2007, p. 147) suggest that the severity of long-term unemployment among mature age jobseekers 'means that they are likely to become discouraged and drop out of the labour force altogether'. According to the most recent ABS survey, in 2013 there were 112,400 discouraged mature age jobseekers (ABS 2014). Other studies observe that having to perform irrelevant job search activities and accept unsuitable employment can impact on the motivation and capacity to self-actualise (Newton et al. 2012; Wright 2013). As Marston points out, 'feeling despondent in the face of rejection by employers, anger in the face of bureaucratic indifference or feeling a sense of shame about living in

<sup>12</sup> This is explored in the companion report focusing on jobactive staff perspectives.

## Contradictions, conditionality and compliance continued

poverty can be understood as predictable lived effects of long-term unemployment' (Marston 2013, p. 821).

The mature age jobseekers we interviewed wanted to work, but they talked about being perceived as difficult, lazy or choosy. They wanted assistance to get suitable work so they could live decent lives.

### Short-sighted approaches to labour market disadvantage

Within jobactive, service providers are obliged to find the quickest route possible for jobseekers to gain employment. The mature age jobseekers in our study reported that emphasis on immediate employment steered them towards low-paid and low-skilled jobs with little or no career planning and support.

Accepting temporary, low-skilled jobs can carry considerable risk and opportunity cost for jobseekers seeking permanent long-term employment (Handy & Davy 2007). This can trap people in a succession of short-term, low-paid jobs rather than acting as a stepping stone to better-paid, ongoing employment (Mooi-Reci & Wooden 2016).

Moreover, expecting mature age jobseekers to take up short-term work with lower pay and status can send a negative signal about their long-term employability (Gray 2003). Ingold and Stuart's (2015) regional survey and interviews with private and third sector small and medium-sized enterprises and business interest groups in England, Wales and Scotland indicated that low-skilled work is typically not viewed by either employers or jobseekers as a step towards long-term career progression and development.

Studies also suggest that placing jobseekers in temporary work can be problematic as many are likely to return to unemployment at the end of their contract (Handy & Davy 2007). Contrary to the aim of moving jobseekers off welfare, within a work-first system mature age jobseekers frequently move in and out of welfare and experience the 'revolving door' effect (Peck & Theodore 2000) that negatively affects their long-term economic security. This revolving door of employment and unemployment poses a particular risk for older women, whose later life financial security can be further threatened (Handy & Davy 2007) as they are likely to have limited economic resources due to an interrupted work history.

It is important to note that not all Newstart Allowance recipients are unemployed. The *Social Security Act 1991* definition of unemployment for the purposes of eligibility for income support allows a certain amount of earnings from part-time and insecure work (DSS 2017c). Several interviewees were long-term recipients of Newstart, despite having some paid work. For example, Cassandra is a secretary who completed tertiary education in her thirties. She has been 'cycling on and off Newstart for 20 years'. Newstart fills the gaps between jobs and tops up her income when she cannot get enough work. Now in her fifties, she says it gets harder and harder to find work: employers 'think I'm old and ugly'. She explained the impacts of intermittent and insecure employment:

*All the jobs are insecure so they can and will fire you because they don't like the fact that you looked at them sideways. There is no conceivable way that I could possibly make ends meet on Newstart. There's no money to pay the electricity, there's no money to pay the gas and there's no money to look for a job ... I'm actually watching my future being chewed up while I try to find a job.*

“

**The mature age jobseekers in our study reported that emphasis on immediate employment steered them towards low-paid and low-skilled jobs with little or no career planning and support.**

“

The jobseekers we interviewed referred to ‘the elephant in the room’—the lack of suitable jobs.

Jobseekers like Cassandra are ‘trapped in temporary work’ and so need the safety net of income support. However, employment services and income support policies still appear to be based on the assumption that jobseekers will find ongoing employment that provides economic security.

### Lack of focus on labour market demand side

The jobseekers we interviewed referred to ‘the elephant in the room’—the lack of suitable jobs. While some reflected on government policies and the impacts of globalisation, others felt that the lack of jobs was due to inadequate engagement with employers. Employer engagement is a critical aspect of active labour market programs; but so far measures to involve employers, such as the Restart wage subsidy program<sup>13</sup>, have had limited effect, suggesting a significant gap between policy and practice (Australian Human Rights Commission 2016; McBride & Mustchin 2013).

Department of Employment research shows that a very low percentage of employers engage with jobactive to fill low-skilled positions (Department of Employment (Ian Neville) 2016). Interestingly, interviewees believed that jobactive providers’ failure to engage with employers meant that employers were unaware of the services offered by jobactive. Overseas research suggests that this lack of engagement can lead to a critical information gap about employers’ needs and requirements, resulting in providers offering less relevant skills development and training (McBride & Mustchin 2013). On the other hand, focusing too narrowly on employer requirements—such as preferred criteria for candidates—can lead to discriminatory recruitment practices (Handy & Davy 2007; Ingold & Stuart 2015). As one interviewee noted, jobactive staff might be influenced by the age and gender stereotypes of some employers. Bowman and co-authors (2016b) suggest that employers continue to focus on a rather narrow view of fit, which can disadvantage older jobseekers. Meeting employer

requirements can also encourage providers to prioritise the most job-ready candidates in their caseloads (Ingold & Stuart 2015), resulting in practices of creaming and parking.

Ingold and Stuart (2015) further highlight that active labour market programs can negatively affect employer behaviour. For example, increased job search requirements for jobseekers and performance outcomes for providers can lead to employers receiving large numbers of job applications from unsuitable candidates. This in turn can create a negative perception about the quality of service, reducing the likelihood of employers using it.<sup>14</sup> In our study, mature age jobseekers noted that employers might not show much interest in using jobactive providers if they were inundated with unsuitable applications and so assumed that most candidates coming through jobactive are low skilled. Interviewees suggested that employers may also perceive jobactive staff to lack the skills needed to identify and source suitable candidates.

### Service standardisation: mismatch between needs and support

In their 2013 review of sector submissions to the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, Davis and Giuliani (2013) concluded that Australian employment services (Job Services Australia) were ill equipped to assist highly disadvantaged jobseekers into employment.

Despite the introduction of jobactive in 2015, the insights from participants in our study suggest that little has changed, as they reported a lack of targeted support, particularly for jobseekers with a disability, with a mental health condition or from a CALD background. They also reported a lack of job-specific training to address skills and knowledge gaps. Poor quality training and inadequate training opportunities are concerns shared with mature age

<sup>13</sup> Restart is the Australian Government wage subsidy introduced in 2014 to encourage businesses to employ mature age jobseekers.

<sup>14</sup> This is explored further in the companion report on employer perspectives.

jobseeker participants in other studies (Encel & Studencki 2004; Kerr, Carson & Goddard 2002; Kossen & Hammer 2010). Skills assessment and relevant training are critical for older jobseekers. However, many mature age jobseekers are unable to engage in training or retraining due to the high costs and strict eligibility criteria that limit their access to subsidised training under state-funded schemes such as Victoria's training guarantee.

### Age discrepancy

The concerns around the age mismatch between frontline employment services staff and mature age jobseekers identified in this study have also been noted in other studies as contributing to a lack of empathy and unconscious bias against mature age jobseekers (Henkens 2005). Studies reveal a shift towards younger, less qualified frontline employment services staff (Considine & Lewis 2010). There is concern that this shift reflects de-professionalisation and routinisation of the sector, with an associated lack of discretion (or flexibility) that affects service delivery to disadvantaged groups such as mature age jobseekers (Bowman et al. 2016a).

As Bowman et al. (2016a) found in their earlier study, mature age jobseekers may perceive young employment services staff as lacking skills due to their limited work history and life experiences. To some extent these perceptions of younger staff may reflect jobseekers' own prejudices against younger people. Nevertheless, the authors question the appropriateness of relying on a largely inexperienced workforce to translate the principles of 'activation' and 'compliance' into practice when dealing with jobseekers with extensive work histories and considerable life experience.

Our analysis found that mature age jobseekers interviewed in this study were not only keen to work but also keen and able to identify areas that require improvement if publicly funded employment services are to achieve their aim of enabling Australians to find decent ongoing work.

## 6 CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Changes to the labour market affect some groups, such as mature age jobseekers, more than others. Older jobseekers want to work but our research suggests that they are not getting the help they need.

Our study showed that mature age jobseekers need assistance that is better attuned to their circumstances and interests and opens up realistic pathways to sustainable employment. They would also benefit from improved assessment and recognition of their existing and transferable skills, specific training for digital job search and for suitable jobs in growing sectors of the economy, and from more effective engagement with employers.

This report is complemented by two other reports that focus on jobactive staff and employer perspectives. The research as a whole informed <[www.workingforeveryone.com.au](http://www.workingforeveryone.com.au)>, a website designed to shed light on the situation of mature age jobseekers and build empathy, explain the changes to the labour market over the past four decades, and provide tools for mature age jobseekers and those who assist them.

This and associated reports highlight the contradictions that undermine the effectiveness of assistance offered to mature age—and other—jobseekers. Given that the current jobactive contract ends in 2020, there is an opportunity in the short term to strengthen support for jobactive staff and mature age jobseekers, in the medium term to inform the development of the next contract, and in the longer term to contribute to a re-imagination of assistance for unemployed workers, whatever their age.

“

**Our study showed that mature age jobseekers need assistance that is better attuned to their circumstances and interests and opens up realistic pathways to sustainable employment.**

## APPENDIX – WORKING FOR EVERYONE

**working for everyone**

Home Stories Work has changed Working It Out Tool Resources About

**Hear the stories of mature age job seekers, understand how work has changed and access tools to support job seeking**

As Australia's workforce grows older, we want to make sure that finding a job is accessible, achievable and works for everyone.

Bruce's story – Impact of industrial changes



[View Story](#)

Suzette's story – Impact of caring responsibilities



[View Story](#)

Find out more about what it's like to be a mature age job seeker in Australia.

[Read more stories](#)

This study produced a website  
[www.workingforeveryone.com.au](http://www.workingforeveryone.com.au)  
 for mature age jobseekers and  
 for those who assist them.

The website brings together

- stories and animations illustrating the diverse experiences of mature age jobseekers
- an infographic describing how the world of work has changed since the 1970s
- an interactive tool that enables jobseekers to create a personalised action plan for their job search
- guides and fact sheets to help mature age jobseekers and employment services staff.

## REFERENCES

- ABS 2014, *Persons not in the labour force, Australia, September 2013*, Cat. no. 6220.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, viewed 7 September 2017, <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6220.0>>.
- 2017, *Labour force, Australia*, Cat. no. 6202.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- AIHW 2009, *Chronic disease and participation in work*, Cat. no. PHE 109, AIHW, Canberra.
- Australian Human Rights Commission 2016, *Willing to work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability*, Australian Human Rights Commission, Sydney.
- Borland, J, Considine, M, Kalb, G & Ribar, D 2011, *What are best-practice programs for jobseekers facing high barriers to employment?*, Policy brief no. 4/16, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, Melbourne.
- Bowman, D, McGann, M, Kimberley, H & Biggs, S 2016a, 'Activation and active ageing? Mature-age jobseekers' experience of employment services', *Social Policy and Society*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 647–58.
- 2016b, "Rusty, invisible and threatening": ageing, capital and employability', *Work, Employment & Society*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 465–82.
- Cachia, M & Millward, L 2011, 'The telephone medium and semi-structured interviews: a complementary fit', *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 265–77.
- Considine, M & Lewis, JM 2010, 'Front-line work in employment services after ten years of new public management reform: governance and activation in Australia, the Netherlands and the UK', *European Journal of Social Security*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 357–70.
- Considine, M, Lewis, JM & O'Sullivan, S 2011, 'Quasi-markets and service delivery flexibility following a decade of employment assistance reform in Australia', *Journal of Social Policy*, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 811–33.
- Considine, M & O'Sullivan, S 2015, 'Introduction', in M Considine & S O'Sullivan (eds), *Contracting-out welfare services: comparing national policy designs for unemployment assistance*, Wiley Blackwell, Oxford.
- Davis, S & Giuliani, G 2013, *What did you say? Independent report to the employment services sector*, E-focus, Heidelberg, Vic., viewed 14 June 2017, <<https://www.e-focus.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Giuliani-G-Davis-S-2013-What-did-you-say-independent-report-final-Dec-2013.pdf>>.
- Dean, H 2006, *Activation policies and the changing ethical foundations of welfare*, presented to the ASPEN/ETUI conference: activation policies (EU), Brussels, 20–21 October.
- Department of Employment 2016a, *Evaluation strategy for jobactive*, Department of Employment, Canberra, <<https://docs.employment.gov.au/documents/evaluation-strategy-jobactive>>.
- 2016b, *More jobs. Great workplaces. Corporate plan 2016–17*, Department of Employment, Canberra.
- 2016c, *Newstart and mature age jobseekers*, Department of Employment, Canberra.
- 2017a, *Career Transition Assistance Program*, Department of Employment, Canberra, viewed 24 August 2017, <<https://www.employment.gov.au/career-transition-assistance-program>>.
- 2017b, *Employment region data*, Department of Employment, Canberra, viewed 24 August 2017, <<http://lmip.gov.au/PortalFile.axd?FieldID=2739692&xls>>.
- Department of Employment (Ian Neville) 2016, *Overview of the Australian labour market: challenges and opportunities*, presented to the NESA National Conference 2016, Canberra, August.
- Department of Human Services 2017, *Mutual obligation requirements*, Department of Human Services, Canberra, viewed 6 June 2017, <<https://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/enablers/mutual-obligation-requirements#a1>>.
- DSS 2016, *Guide to social security law: 3.2.8.10 Mutual obligation requirements for NSA/YA job seekers overview*, Department of Social Services, Canberra, viewed 6 June 2017, <<http://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/3/2/8/10>>.
- 2017a, *DSS Demographics March 2017*, Department of Social Services, Canberra, <[https://www.data.gov.au/dataset/dss-payment-demographic-data/resource/adbe8196-5669-4f33-b01a-65b04ad41b55?inner\\_span=True](https://www.data.gov.au/dataset/dss-payment-demographic-data/resource/adbe8196-5669-4f33-b01a-65b04ad41b55?inner_span=True)>.
- 2017b, *DSS Payment demographic data*, Department of Social Services, Canberra, viewed 6 April 2017, <<https://data.gov.au/dataset/dss-payment-demographic-data>>.
- 2017c, *Guide to social security law: 1.2.1.10 Newstart Allowance (NSA) - Description What is NSA?*, Department of Social Services Canberra viewed 12 December 2017, <<http://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/1/2/1/10>>.
- Encel, S & Ranzijn, R 2007, 'Age and employment', in A Borowski, E Ozanne & S Encel (eds), *Longevity and social change in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Encel, S & Studencki, H 2004, 'Older workers: can they succeed in the job market?', *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 33–7.
- Ginn, J & Arber, S 1996, 'Gender, age and attitudes to retirement in mid-life', *Ageing and Society*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 27–55.
- Gray, LI 2003, 'Mature job-seeking in New Zealand: a political economy perspective', PhD thesis, Communication and Journalism, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
- Handy, J & Davy, D 2007, 'Gendered ageism: older women's experiences of employment agency practices', *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 85–99.
- Henkens, K 2005, 'Stereotyping older workers and retirement: the managers' point of view', *Canadian Journal on Aging*, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 353–66.
- Ingold, J & Stuart, M 2015, 'The demand-side of active labour market policies: a regional study of employer engagement in the Work Programme', *Journal of Social Policy*, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 1–20.
- Jobs Australia 2015, *State of play: jobactive employment services 2015–2020 tender results*, Jobs Australia, Carlton South, Vic., viewed 14 December 2017, <[https://2-jobsaustralia.cdn.aspedia.net/sites/default/files/final\\_sop\\_-es\\_2015-2020\\_tender\\_results.pdf](https://2-jobsaustralia.cdn.aspedia.net/sites/default/files/final_sop_-es_2015-2020_tender_results.pdf)>.
- 2017, *Successful strategies for Indigenous, CALD and ex-offender job seekers*, Jobs Australia Carlton South (Vic), viewed 12 December 2017, <<https://www.ja.com.au/news/successful-strategies-indigenous-cald-and-exoffender-job-seekers>>.
- Kerr, L, Carson, E & Goddard, J 2002, 'Contractualism, employment services and mature-age job seekers: the tyranny of tangible outcomes', *The Drawing Board: an Australian Review of Public Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 83–104.

Kossen, C & Hammer, S 2010, 'Mature-aged job seekers' experiences of Centrelink and the Job Network services in an Australian regional centre', *Australian Journal of Career Development*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 45–53.

Marston, G 2013, 'On "Activation workers' perceptions": a reply to Dunn (1)', *Journal of Social Policy*, vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 819–27.

McBride, A & Mustchin, S 2013, 'Creating sustainable employment opportunities for the unemployed', *Policy Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 342–59.

McDonald, C & Marston, G 2008, 'Re-visiting the quasi-market in employment services: Australia's Job Network', *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 101–17.

McGann, M, Bowman, D, Kimberley, H & Biggs, S 2015, 'Too old to work, too young to retire': a summary of the ARC linkage project *Understanding and addressing workforce vulnerabilities in midlife and beyond 2012–2015*, University of Melbourne and Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne, <[http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/7905/4/Workforce\\_vulnerabilities\\_in\\_midlife\\_and\\_beyond\\_research\\_summary\\_2015.pdf](http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/7905/4/Workforce_vulnerabilities_in_midlife_and_beyond_research_summary_2015.pdf)>.

Mead, LM 1997, *From welfare to work: lessons from America*, Choice in welfare no.39, Institute of Economic Affairs, London.

— 2005, *Government matters: welfare reform in Wisconsin*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

Mooi-Reci, I & Wooden, M 2016, *Casual employment and long-term wage outcomes*, presented to the Conference of the European Society of Population Economics, Berlin, 16–18 August.

Murphy, J, Murray, S, Chalmers, J, Martin, S & Marston, G 2011, *Half a citizen: life on welfare in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.

Murray, C 2015, *Losing ground: American social policy, 1950–1980*, Basic Books, New York.

National Seniors Australia Productive Ageing Centre 2012, *Barriers to mature age employment: final report of the Consultative Forum on Mature Age Participation*, National Seniors Australia Productive Ageing Centre, Melbourne.

Newton, B, Meager, N, Bertram, C, Corden, A, George, A, Lalani, M, Metcalf, H, Rolfe, H, Sainsbury, R & Weston, K 2012, *Work Programme evaluation: findings from the first phase of qualitative research on programme delivery*, Research report no. 821, Department for Work and Pensions, Sheffield, UK, viewed 6 June 2017, <<https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/pdf/rrep821.pdf>>.

OECD 2017, *Connecting people with jobs: key issues for raising labour market participation in Australia*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Peck, J & Theodore, N 2000, "Work first": workfare and the regulation of contingent labour markets', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 24, pp. 119–38.

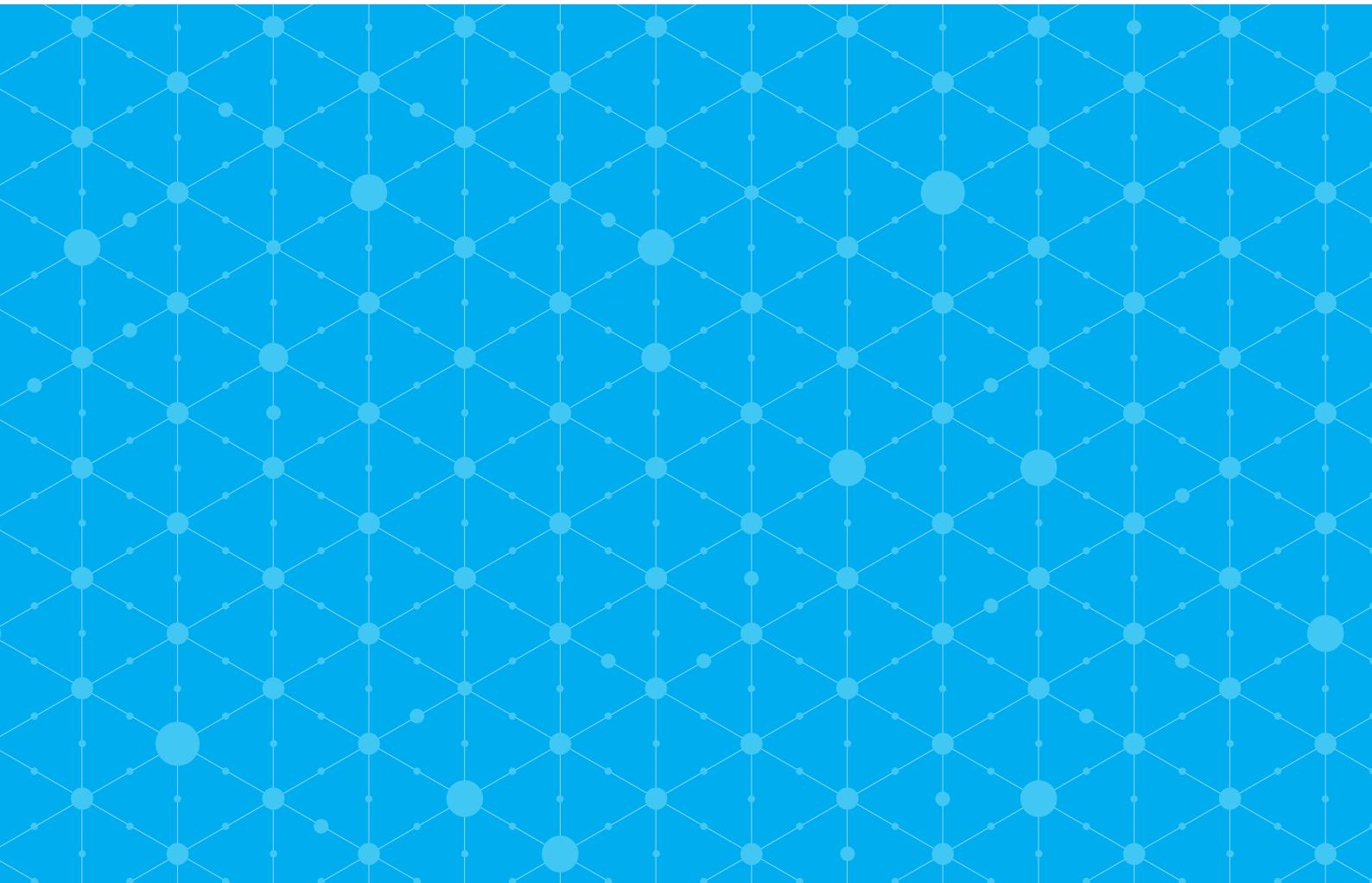
The Commonwealth of Australia 2017, *Budget 2017–18: Budget measures Budget paper no. 2*, The Commonwealth of Australia, Parkes, ACT, viewed 6 June 2017, <<http://www.budget.gov.au/2017-18/content/bp2/download/bp2.pdf>>.

The Treasury 2015, *2015 Intergenerational report: Australia in 2055*, The Treasury, Canberra.

Vickerstaff, S 2010, 'Older workers: the "unavoidable obligation" of extending our working lives?', *Sociology Compass*, vol. 4, no. 10, pp. 869–79.

Wright, S 2013, 'On "Activation workers' perceptions": a reply to Dunn (2)', *Journal of Social Policy*, vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 829–37.





## Contact us

### Research & Policy Centre

Brotherhood of St Laurence

67 Brunswick Street  
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065  
Australia

T (03) 9483 1183  
E [research@bsl.org.au](mailto:research@bsl.org.au)

[bsl.org.au/knowledge](http://bsl.org.au/knowledge)

