



Investing in local people and harnessing local communities

Summary of the progress report on
Victoria's Work and Learning Centres

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August 2014



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

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This summary is drawn from the full report *Investing in local people and harnessing local communities: a progress report on Victoria's Work and Learning Centres*, also written by Eve Bodsworth.

Published by

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Summary

About Work and Learning Centres

Work and Learning Centres support and enable the economic participation of Victorians facing disadvantage, particularly public housing tenants and other clients of the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS).

With a focus on creating learning and employment pathways for jobseekers, the WLCs provide personalised support, non-vocational training, career guidance and direct links to vocational education and training opportunities and employers in five local communities. The WLCs have been funded by the Victorian Government to operate for a three-year period until June 2015.

About this report

This summary presents early findings about the impact of the Work and Learning Centre (WLC) model implemented at five sites across Victoria (Carlton, Geelong, Moe, Ballarat and Shepparton)¹.

This research sought to gauge the efficacy of the model and to enable better understanding of what works for which clients and the elements that clients themselves identify as contributing to their outcomes.

The full report draws on two key data sources: research with clients conducted during 2013 and 2014, and analysis of program data.

Key messages from the research

Achieving successful outcomes

The WLCs have achieved considerable success given that most are at an early **stage of implementation**:

- **Training outcomes:** Most WLC clients have engaged in non-vocational (86%) and/or vocational (44%) training
- **Employment outcomes:** Most clients are achieving successful employment outcomes (536 had secured employment by January 2014)
- **Exit income:** Most clients exit the centres with higher incomes and lower reliance on income support
- **Life skills:** Most exit the centres with increased confidence, clear career plans and a better understanding of their skills and abilities.

A different approach

Harness local networks: WLCs utilise a different approach from other job services. They seek to build the human capital of individual jobseekers by leveraging their own community networks to access and secure jobs and training for jobseekers.

Focus on career planning, training and work: Based in areas of significant disadvantage and delivered by local not-for-profit organisations, WLCs capitalise on their local community, service and business networks to provide timely and intensive personalised support, tailored non-accredited training, career pathway planning, links to appropriate vocational training and access to local employers and employment opportunities.

¹ There was a staged rollout of centres, with Carlton and Geelong opening in January 2012, Moe in November 2012 and Ballarat and Shepparton in January 2013. The analysis focused on aggregated data from the five centres, due to their varying periods of operation.

Prioritise assistance to clients with multiple barriers: Many WLC clients are long-term unemployed and face multiple barriers to employment. They identify lack of training, skills and relevant work experience as leading barriers to economic participation.

Providing a second chance: Many of the WLC clients have previously been unsuccessful in finding employment, despite the best efforts of local job service providers. Job Services Australia providers struggle to gain sustainable outcomes for the most highly disadvantaged jobseekers. The high level of referrals from local providers to WLCs suggests that the WLC model offers a second chance for the more highly disadvantaged clients—a group that has been otherwise failed by the mainstream system. Given this, the outcomes achieved through the WLCs for these clients are especially positive:

- 41% of clients are referred to a WLC by their JSA provider, having been unsuccessful in gaining employment. Most of these clients have been looking for work for more than 6 months.
- 44% of these clients have been supported by their WLC to achieve a job placement, with 59% retaining employment for 16 weeks (a further 13% were employed but had not reached the 16 week milestone at the time of reporting).

Work and Learning Centre clients

Demographics

WLC clients are diverse in terms of age and birthplace.

- Just under half of all clients (44%) are younger than 26, with 39% aged between 26 and 45 years. There are similar numbers of men and women.
- Around two-thirds (63%) are Australian-born. Just over half of those born overseas are from countries in Africa, with Carlton WLC having the largest proportion of overseas-born clients.
- Work and Learning Centres work with very local communities. The majority of clients live within a few kilometres of their WLC. Carlton WLC has a more widespread client base than other centres; nevertheless just over half of its clients live in Carlton, Fitzroy and Collingwood.

Income support receipt

- Of the clients who supplied income support data, 51% were in receipt of Newstart Allowance; around one-quarter were in receipt of Youth Allowance; 13% were receiving Parenting Payments and 9% Disability Support Pensions.

Barriers to employment

- The main **client-identified barriers to employment** were lack of education, training and skills; lack of work experience; lack of transport; and health problems or disability.
- Most of the surveyed clients had been looking for work for more than six months and 42% were long-term unemployed—that is, looking for work for longer than one year. One in five (22%) were very long-term unemployed, having been looking for work for two years or more.
- The main reasons clients had left previous jobs were that their jobs were temporary or seasonal or no more work was available.

How clients engage with WLCs

This research found that disadvantaged jobseekers in these communities are being referred to WLCs by mainstream job service providers or are taking their own initiative to seek support to find a job. **WLCs are therefore providing a second chance for those who have been failed by the employment services system.**

- **Voluntary engagement:** A feature of the Work and Learning Centre approach is that clients engage with the service voluntarily.
- **Dual JSA and WLC clients:** Some 65% of clients are also clients of local Job Services Australia (JSA) providers, yet choose to attend the WLC.
- The most common source of referrals to WLCs is local JSA providers, with 41% of clients having heard about the WLC through employment service providers. The next most common source of referral is word of mouth (36%).
- A small number of clients engaged with WLCs because they were not eligible for mainstream employment assistance due to the type of Centrelink payment they received or other factors, despite wanting to work and facing significant barriers in securing employment.

Work and learning pathways

The WLCs focus on enabling clients to establish work and learning pathways. These **pathways are tailored to individual clients' aspirations and circumstances** and take into account the need to find a job in the short term, while working towards longer-term career goals and sustainable employment.

Non-vocational training and support outcomes

Since many clients have limited work experience (or no *Australian* work experience), the **centres have developed tailored, non-accredited learning opportunities** which focus on vocational preparation, general employability skills, industry-specific work preparation, personal development and confidence building. The accessibility of these courses has resulted in very high attendance, with **86% of clients taking part in some form of non-accredited training, and a high completion rate of 93%**.

A focus on employability, including increasing client confidence, reliability, ability to get on with others and problem solving, provides clients with skills that will assist them to remain employable in the future, even if their current employment does not continue.

Vocational education and training outcomes

The centres have been successful in assisting clients to gain further qualifications. As of January 2014, **44% of WLC clients had engaged with accredited training, and over half of these have completed their training**. The majority of these clients (54%) were engaging in education and training at Certificate III level or higher.

Outcomes from linking clients to employers and job opportunities

Despite the significant challenges facing WLC clients, by January 2014, **536 clients (49%) had secured employment. Over half (54%) of these (290) were still employed 16 weeks later**. This level of employment outcomes should be viewed as a considerable success when considering that the main referral pathway for these clients was from other employment services (JSA providers) and their experiences of long-term unemployment and other barriers.

Overall, analysis indicates that the WLCs have been successful in enabling their clients to obtain more sustainable jobs with more hours and better conditions than before. Since clients have been assisted to identify possible career paths and navigate the labour market as well as links to jobs and training, it is likely that the employment outcomes achieved will be sustained in the longer term.

Other outcomes

Compared with clients entering the WLCs, clients exiting them have:

- lower reliance on income support
- higher incomes

- increased confidence
- increased life satisfaction.

While these outcomes are very positive, it is too early to determine whether these changes, particularly changes to income, will lead to clients moving out of public housing. Survey results suggest that housing affordability remains an issue, even for employed WLC clients.

Conclusion

The Work and Learning Centre service delivery model seeks to build human capital within disadvantaged communities through leveraging local community networks and trust. This study provides initial insight into the effectiveness of this approach. These insights also have broader application.

Recent research has identified the increasing need for services that are responsive to local circumstances and, crucially, harness the capacities of communities to identify and solve their own problems. Strong civic communities require the building of social trust and reciprocity, which is achieved through collaborations between local communities, institutions and central government (Padley 2013). Based on trust between local community-based service providers and the communities in which they operate, the WLCs are able to link into and harness networks to create opportunities for clients. The WLC model also provides an example of intersectoral collaboration predicated on the notion that local community organisations are best placed to build relationships within particular communities. They do so more easily, and with greater flexibility and innovation, than large public sector bureaucracies (Sullivan et al. 2013).

As more clients exit the five WLCs, more comprehensive analysis of the outcomes achieved will become possible. Further study will be necessary to ascertain clients' longer-term employment retention and advancement and the impact of employment on their housing, particularly for public housing tenants. However, this preliminary snapshot indicates that this innovative approach is having a real impact on the lives of many Victorians.

References

Padley, M 2013, 'Delivering localism: the critical role of trust and collaboration', *Social Policy and Society*, vol.12, no. 3, pp. 343–54.

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