



Preparing for what?

The administration of Youth Allowance Activity
Agreements for young job seekers

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and
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A report for Centrelink Youth and Student Community Segment



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Foreword

The Brotherhood of St Laurence aims to work with others to create an inclusive society—that is free of poverty—in which everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

The Brotherhood undertook this study—jointly funded with Centrelink Youth and Student Community Segment—because we are interested in how the administration of policy impacts on the most disadvantaged members of society. We are particularly interested in how job seekers are assisted in their transition from welfare to work and what strategies are in place to help young job seekers find work.

The study also allowed the Brotherhood of St Laurence to strengthen its relationship with Centrelink, the service delivery agency of the Federal Government, and to develop our expertise in income support and youth issues.

Finally it provided a chance to document young job seekers' views of the administration of Youth Allowance Preparing for Work Agreements. This report provides policy makers and administrators with an opportunity to make improvements—suggested by young people as well as Centrelink officers and the youth workers who liaise between the two—to the implementation of Youth Allowance policy.

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In particular, we would like to thank the Centrelink officers who, as members of the advisory group, helped us understand the complex relationships between and the responsibilities of, firstly, Centrelink and the Job Network and, secondly, Centrelink and its client departments, the Department of Family and Community Services and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

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We also wish to thank the Centrelink Customer Service Officers from the four areas, the workers in the youth support services and those young people who generously gave their time and knowledge to make this project possible.

While we acknowledge these contributions, the authors take full responsibility for the findings and the accuracy of our work.

Acronyms

CSC	Customer Service Centre
CSO	Customer Service Officer
CSP	Community Support Program
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
EC	Employer contact
FaCS	Department of Family and Community Services
IA	Intensive Assistance
JPET	Job Placement Education and Training
JSCI	Job Seeker Classification Instrument
PFWA	Preparing For Work Agreement
PSP	Personal Support Programme
YA	Youth Allowance

Summary

The aim of this study was to explore the administration, by Centrelink, of Preparing For Work Agreements (PFWA) to unemployed young people (18–20 years) in receipt of Youth Allowance (YA), to determine how well they were tailored to the individual. The study was conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) and funded jointly with Centrelink Youth and Student Community Segment.

Open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews allowed 21 young job seekers' perceptions of the administration of PFWAs by Centrelink officers to be explored. In addition, seven youth workers through whom the job seekers were recruited and nine Centrelink officers from four Customer Service Centres in the three Centrelink Areas in Victoria were interviewed.

One strength of the study was that the youth workers and Centrelink officers confirmed many of the issues raised by the young job seekers.

Due to the recruitment through youth support agencies, the majority of the job seekers interviewed faced multiple barriers to employment and may not represent the total population. This means the results cannot be generalised to the wider YA population. However, the problems with the administration of PFWAs to this disadvantaged group identified in this study do require further attention.

Key findings

The key findings can be broken into two parts: young job seekers' experiences with and opinions about Centrelink administrative processes, and the impact of these on the development and content of Preparing For Work Agreements.

Centrelink

Centrelink provided job seekers aged 18–20 years with their main connection to the participation support system, but the role of Centrelink as a referral gateway was not well understood by all of the 21 young people interviewed.

This misunderstanding about Centrelink's referral capacity may have influenced the perception of Centrelink's helpfulness in finding work. It is not within Centrelink's capacity to cover associated costs; it can only refer to community agencies that may or may not have brokerage funds. Where activities to reduce barriers to work had been identified by the job seeker, their lack of access to these was often attributed to Centrelink.

Most young people appreciated the access to loans, income support payments and referrals to courses and job search assistance when provided by Centrelink.

The attitudes of Centrelink officers towards young people were perceived to vary, from accepting and helpful on the one hand, to judgmental and unhelpful on the other.

Poor communication skills and negative attitudes on the part of some Centrelink staff contributed to difficulties in establishing rapport. Some young people were consequently reluctant to disclose relevant information, leading to inaccurate assessments of their job readiness.

Many YA customers preferred to have an adult with them during the claim process, partly to provide help in completing forms and partly because they felt more comfortable with the whole process when they were not alone.

Negative experiences and long waiting times meant that some young people were reluctant to deal with Centrelink directly. Instead, they would go elsewhere, particularly to workers in youth agencies, for assistance and to sort out mistakes with the administration of YA. These workers said they spent a lot of time on Centrelink business, which may have reduced their capacity to focus on other issues.

The loss of designated youth staff at the Centrelink sites included in this study was perceived by youth agency workers and some Centrelink officers to have had negative impacts on the delivery of Youth Allowance. Firstly, young people no longer are guaranteed to see an officer who understands the specific issues related to young people and youth services. Secondly, youth workers are no longer able to easily contact Centrelink officers with expertise in YA to sort out problems for their YA clients.

While it was not a focus of this study, a repeated theme was the time and effort required establishing the eligibility for YA to be paid at the independent rate because it was unreasonable for the young person to live at home. However Centrelink has mandatory assessment procedures that require comprehensive investigation of a young person's circumstances prior to payment being granted.

Preparing For Work Agreements

Young people in the study generally did not understand the purpose of PFWAs and did not know they could negotiate the activities included within them. The process of completing the PFWA during the first interview (where eligibility to YA is also determined) meant that Centrelink staff had little time to identify both vocational and non-vocational barriers, especially of those young people who do not readily disclose relevant personal information. It seems unlikely that PFWAs prepared during this process were based on an accurate assessment of the capacity or job readiness of all claimants.

While all young people had been referred to Job Network providers for job matching, few had ongoing contact with them, few were confident that their vocational barriers were being addressed or that they were being connected to appropriate job vacancies.

The PFWAs we examined mainly contained job search activities, with relatively infrequent inclusion of other 'capacity-building' activities such as training or volunteer work.

The PFWA was often understood by both YA customers and youth workers to be a list of required job search activities that provided the basis of a possible breach, if the job seeker failed to comply.

The computer-based processing of YA applications appeared to contribute to the generation of a standard model of PFWA that primarily included job search activities. This automated system seemed to lack triggers to identify potential non-vocational and vocational barriers to employment.

As a result, PFWAs appeared to motivate young people to look for work but did not increase their capacity to get work or develop work-related skills. The sample of young people included one-third who had not completed Year 10 and only one-third had completed Year 12. They faced a range of barriers, yet the PFWA appeared to do little to address these.

While the inclusion of part-time work as a Mutual Obligation activity is negotiated with the young person (either to look for, or for those already with such work, to find and undertake), there was some confusion about its inclusion in PFWAs.

Centrelink does not appear to have a quality assurance process to ensure that PFWAs include activities that reflect the vocational and non-vocational barriers that prevent the entry of marginalised young people to long-term employment.

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that:

- Centrelink needs to do more to ensure young job seekers understand its assessment and referral role and its relationship with the Job Network.
- Some Centrelink officers require better interpersonal skills to develop rapport with YA job seekers that is essential for accurate assessments of job readiness.
- Some Centrelink officers require better knowledge of the youth labour market and youth services necessary for the design of effective YA PFWAs.
- The computer-based ‘Preparing for work’ format can result in inaccurate assessments of barriers to employment and the generation of ‘standard model’ PFWAs that are not tailored to individual needs.
- The time available to process YA applications and to negotiate PFWAs is not sufficient to design a PFWA that reflects, in particular, the employment barriers and long term goals of the marginalised YA job seeker.
- Young job seekers often lack the information, skills and/or confidence to negotiate activities better suited to their needs.
- As a result of these processes, PFWAs focus on job seeking activities and do little to assist disadvantaged young people address non-vocational barriers.

Recommendations

1 Improved access to Centrelink information and services

R1.1 Redesign letters, forms and written materials

Engage young people and youth agencies in the redesign of letters, forms, and printed information for young people.

R1.2 Investigate ways to enable greater face to face contact time

Separate interviews to complete PFWAs (as suggested below, R2.5) may enable greater face to face contact time to devote maximum resources to those with the highest needs. Risk-based assessments may ensure adequate resources are devoted to the most disadvantaged and triggers to identify those with non-vocational and vocational barriers could be developed to stream vulnerable job seekers to longer interviews and reduce times for those not at risk.

R1.3 Promote the designated Youth and Student line to the Centrelink call centre

The dedicated Centrelink Youth and Student line should allow young people to feel more comfortable in contacting Centrelink by phone and to have greater confidence in the information or advice they receive. Few knew of this and it should be better promoted to young people.

2 Tailoring service delivery to the needs of young people

R2.1 Ensure the lack of designated youth officers is not having a detrimental effect on the delivery of YA to job seekers (18–20 years)

Areas are urged to consult with Centrelink personnel, local youth agencies, young people and their families to ensure marginalised YA job seekers (18–20 years) in particular, enjoy equal access to PFWAs that are effectively tailored to meet their individual needs.

R2.2 Ensure CSOs with an interest in working with young people have the expertise to do so

Centrelink needs to provide ongoing training and skill development to CSOs who express interest in delivery of YA.

R2.3 Develop an Initial Contact strategy for YA job seekers

Ensure that from the first point of contact young people are informed about the administration of Youth Allowance (see R1.1) and that their first experience is as helpful and inclusive as possible.

R2.4 Introduce a pre-grant seminar tailored for YA applicants

Ensure that YA applicants understand the scope and flexibility of activity testing of YA by tailoring the pre-grant seminar to their needs.

R2.5 Separate the design of PFWAs from the YA application

Develop the PFWA at a separate interview, perhaps with a member of the Participation team, in order to provide more time to build rapport and collect relevant personal information. It would also allow the YA applicant to think about their goals or discuss the PFWA with family or friends before having to complete it. This would lead to a more accurate JSCI score and a PFWA better tailored to the needs of the job seeker especially where multiple barriers to employment exist.

R2.6 Introduce indicators to identify YA applicants (18–20 years UTLAH) who may not be able to complete application process for independent rate

Develop and implement risk indicators to identify young people between 18 and 20 years of age who require assistance to apply for the independent rate of YA (UTLAH). Referral to a social worker should be offered to those at risk.

R2.7 Establish a quality assurance process for PFWAs

Institute a quality assurance process to ensure that PFWAs are individually tailored and include activities that enable disadvantaged job seekers to overcome employment barriers and develop skills.

3 Partnerships with all levels of government and the community to achieve better outcomes for young people.

R3.1 Develop out-servicing arrangements with youth agencies

Centrelink should outpace CSOs to local youth agencies on a regular (weekly) basis to improve the access of disadvantaged young people to Centrelink services.

R3.2 Improve links between Customer Service Centres and local youth services

To maintain a focus on local youth issues, local barriers to youth employment and local youth labour markets, Customer Service Centres should:

- work with the existing youth services network in the community to develop local strategies to ensure PFWAs reflect the needs of YA customers
- develop partnerships with schools, business and agencies to promote Centrelink information and provide opportunities for Centrelink personnel to meet with members of the community to address the needs of unemployed youth.

R3.3 Develop protocols for sharing information with local youth (and other) services

Protocols need to be developed between Centrelink CSCs and local youth agencies to oversee the sharing of information about YA customers (with the person's consent and meeting privacy guidelines). This will improve the quality of information held about young job seekers and enable PFWAs to be better matched to their needs.

Introduction

The transition phase between school and work is critical for the long-term employment outcomes of young people. One of the objectives of Youth Allowance (YA), payable to unemployed people 16–21 years, is to support this transition and to encourage them to participate in post-compulsory education and training.

The Preparing for Work Agreement (PFWA) is an Activity Agreement under the Social Security Act 1991, administered by Centrelink. PFWAs are prepared by Centrelink Customer Service Officers (CSOs) in negotiation with the unemployed YA customers prior to payment of income support. They include activities the job seeker is required to undertake to remain eligible for income support and describe what Centrelink will offer the job seeker to improve their chances of employment.

Youth Allowance policy recognises that job search is not always the most appropriate activity for unemployed young people and that further education, training and skill building could better equip some job seekers to gain employment. Therefore, more flexible activity testing (than that applied to older job seekers) has been introduced for YA job seekers, to enable combinations of and movement between study and work.

In 2000 YA PFWAs replaced the Activity Agreements introduced under YA legislation. At the same time PFWAs were extended to job seekers in receipt of Newstart Allowance. Anecdotal evidence raised some questions about the flexibility of YA PFWAs and the extent to which they are being tailored to meet the individual needs and circumstances of young job seekers aged 18–21 years. Similarly, little was known about how these young customers regard the PFWA or how they regard interaction with Centrelink staff in its design.

The aim of this study was to explore the administration of PFWAs to ensure they are tailored to the individual needs of YA job seekers (18–20 years) during such a critical transitional phase.

The objectives of this study were:

- to investigate YA job seekers' perceptions of their PFWAs and the impact of the process of their administration by Centrelink
- to investigate the perceptions of youth workers who often liaise between the YA job seeker and Centrelink
- to investigate Centrelink officers' perceptions of PFWAs and the process of administration
- to make recommendations to Centrelink to improve the administration process.

This study was conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and funded jointly with Centrelink Youth and Student Community Segment.

Background

Policy context

Welfare to work

Major changes have occurred to the way income support is made available to people who are unemployed in Australia. These changes have been driven by policy shifts based on the assumption that the previous social support system contributed to joblessness and social isolation. As a result, income support programs are now expected to direct people to work; and they use penalties and incentives to maximise participation in work. The number and scope of requirements for someone in Australia to receive unemployment benefit has expanded significantly since the early 1990s. This policy shift was clear in the vision of Australia's future social support system described by the Reference Group on Welfare Reform in Australia:

It must ensure that people are actively engaged socially and economically, including in the labour force, to reduce the risk of long-term social and economic disadvantage for themselves and their families. (McClure 2000, p.3)

The Reference Group recommended more conditions be placed on the receipt of income support, within a service delivery system that is more flexible and individualised and aimed at assisting into work those with the greatest disadvantage.

Youth Allowance

Youth Allowance is an income support payment made by Centrelink on behalf of the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS). In 1998 YA replaced five different income support payments including Newstart Allowance (NA), Youth Training Allowance and Sickness Allowance for those under 21 years. These various income support arrangements for young people were perceived to be inefficient and unfair and to include disincentives for young people to undertake full-time education or training (FaCS 2001).

Currently, YA (student) is paid to eligible young people who are studying or training full-time (16–25 years). YA (other) is paid to young people (18–21 years) who are unemployed and looking for work; are undertaking a combination of approved activities, such as part-time work and part-time study; or who are unable to work due to illness. Job seekers under the age of 21 are eligible for YA, while those 21 years and over are eligible for Newstart Allowance.

The objectives of YA are to:

- ensure eligible young people receive adequate levels of income while studying, looking for, or preparing for, paid employment
- encourage young people to choose further education or training over job search if they do not have sufficient skills to obtain long-term employment
- encourage young people to undertake a range of activities that will promote entry into employment
- gain and maintain broad community support for the program. (FaCS 2001, p.18)

YA was developed in response to a changed youth labour market. Between 1986 and 2001 there was a reduction in the number of young people in full-time employment and an increase in casual and part-time employment, mostly taken by full-time students (FaCS 2001, p.13). In addition to these changes, increased demand for high-skilled jobs meant younger people required better qualifications to be competitive in the labour market. Completion of year 12 significantly affects

employment and earning outcomes and is now generally regarded as a minimum level of education. As an incentive to choose education and training over unemployment, a requirement was introduced in January 1999 for those under 18 who had left school after 1 July 1997 without Year 12 or equivalent to undertake full-time study to be eligible for YA.

YA activity requirements were intended to respond to trends in the youth labour market (FaCS 2001). Since job search was not necessarily the most appropriate activity for all unemployed young people, recipients of YA were to be encouraged to choose further education or training over job search—if they did not have sufficient skills to obtain long-term employment—and to undertake a range of activities to promote entry into employment (FaCS 2001). The single YA payment was developed to ease movements between study and work and to enable the combination of both.

Activity agreements were introduced in 1998 to outline the requirements for YA recipients to remain eligible for income support. Three-quarters of a full-time study load was considered sufficient for students. Job search and/or a combination of study and part-time work were expected of job seekers.

YA (Other) is a means-tested payment to unemployed young people to increase their capacity for full-time, long-term employment. It makes sense that required activities would focus on skills development and further studies in response to their barriers to employment.

Activity testing and Centrelink

As of July 2000, all activity-tested job seekers were required to enter into a Preparing For Work Agreement (PFWA).

Centrelink has responsibility for the assessment of work capacity of job seekers, the identification of both vocational and non-vocational barriers and referral to appropriate programs with a view to maximising a person's social and economic participation. It is not in Centrelink's capacity, however, to cover the costs associated with such programs. Centrelink's role in the assessment of the customer's job readiness and barriers to employment is critical to activity tests and agreements. Centrelink staff gather information with an automated, computer-based tool that creates a profile of the person claiming payment. This 'Preparing for Work' framework was developed to assess potential barriers to employment, to refer job seekers to Job Network providers and other service providers to address barriers and to ensure regular follow-up with job seekers. Job Network is the national network of private, community and government organisations, which specialise in connecting unemployed people to job vacancies. Their focus of assistance is on addressing vocational barriers.

These assessment and referral activities are documented in a PFWA that is generated at the job seeker's initial interview at Centrelink:

The PFWA will mean that from the first day that they claim payment, job seekers will understand what they will need to do to meet the activity test and the help Centrelink will provide them with to get back to work. The activities that form the PFWA are a combination of things that all activity tested customers are required to do and other activities that are responsive to the needs of the individual. (FaCS 2002b)

Centrelink provides guidelines for the negotiation with job seekers of PFWAs that are tailored to their needs and include specific outcomes (FaCS 2002b). According to these guidelines, PFWAs will include clearly spelled out activities (see Appendix 1 for a list of approved activities). Each activity is to be:

- quantifiable and specific, stating who will do what and when
- measurable, so it is clear when the activity has been completed or not, and
- given a review date.

The agreement must also take into account:

- the person's education, experience, skills, age and physical condition
- the state of the labour market where the person lives
- the training opportunities available
- any other matters the Secretary of the Department considers relevant in the circumstances. (FaCS 2002b)

PFWAs, like the earlier YA Activity Agreements, allowed more flexible activity testing for young job seekers:

Under YA, young people satisfy the Activity Test if they are in approved full-time education or training; engaged in job search; or in various approved combinations of part-time study, part-time work, life skills training, Work for the Dole or other approved activities (FaCS 2001, p.21).

Centrelink guidelines also recognised the more flexible activity testing introduced to YA to encourage young people's participation in further education and training and to allow young people to take on combinations of activities and transfer between activities in order to become self-supporting:

As individual needs vary, Centrelink employees have the discretion to approve appropriate combinations of activities. Combinations of activities should reflect the person's individual circumstances by meeting short, medium and long-term needs of the recipient. (FaCS 2003a)

Indeed the guidelines state that in certain circumstances, the combination of activities need not even include a job search component. This applies to young people:

... undertaking a combination of approved activities including, but not limited to

- part-time work,
- part-time study
- voluntary work
- state funded programmes
- rehabilitation or
- caring responsibilities

provided these activities amount to 15 hours' participation per week (FaCS 2003a).

Youth servicing strategy

Centrelink is aiming to improve its delivery of services to young people through the development of outcomes and minimum servicing requirements. Centrelink's Youth Servicing Model, introduced in 2002, focuses on three key elements:

- easy access to Centrelink information and services to enable young people to choose from a range of options and to make decisions based on their needs
- tailoring of service delivery to the needs of young people
- partnerships with all levels of government and the community to achieve better outcomes for young people. (Centrelink Youth and Student Community Segment 2002)

In implementing this strategy, Centrelink Areas determine how best to respond to the special needs of their area population. Some Centrelink Areas have now established designated Youth Servicing Officers whose primary role is to work with youth agencies to assist disadvantaged customers. To inform the implementation of the Youth Servicing Strategy, Centrelink's Youth & Students Community Segment have conducted several trials and research projects that explore ways to help young people remain engaged and participate in education, training and work (Youth and Community Segment 2002). Trial activities relating to job seekers include:

- Youth Participation Advisors (YPAs) who explored the service delivery and intervention strategies required for young job seekers (at risk of failing to comply with requirements) and students and the support provided by CSOs, specialist officers and YPAs.
- Centrelink Community Officers and Centrelink Youth Community Officers that target young people who are homeless to ensure they have activities in their PFWAs that reflect their personal circumstances amongst other items. Workers have been seconded from the community sector to make linkages with Centrelink
- the use of SMS text messages to contact young customers
- Centrelink National Partnership Group for Young Job Seekers and At Risk Young People which comprises key national and state service providers/stakeholders who have a keen interest in young job seekers and people at risk.

To this end Centrelink Youth and Student Community Segment investigated the use of the guidelines—for negotiating PFWAs for under-18s who have been identified as ‘at risk’ of not complying with the Activity Test requirement—distributed for use in Centrelink CSCs in November 2000 (Centrelink Y&SCS unpublished). The guidelines were developed, in response to concerns about the number of young people who were being breached who have personal issues that act as barriers to employment and successful job search activities. The investigation uncovered numerous benefits to both the YA customer and Centrelink when PFWAs were formulated according to these guidelines and effectively reflected the young person’s circumstances. These benefits included better customer service, improved relations with YA customers, a potential reduction in breaches and appeals, and improved relations with community agencies and between staff in the CSC. The well-formulated PFWA was considered to be a document that changes in accordance with the young person’s circumstances.

Australians Working Together

The fieldwork for this study took place at a time of considerable change in Centrelink Customer Service Centres (CSCs) soon after the implementation of Australians Working Together (AWT) in July 2002. AWT is the Commonwealth Government’s response to the findings of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform, which recommended that a new Participation/Income Support System be tailored to meet the individual, long-term needs of the person in receipt of income support (McClure 2000). In addition Centrelink launched its Youth Servicing Strategy targeted at better servicing for young people.

In preparation for the implementation of AWT, Centrelink had undergone an internal restructure and instituted a process of job redesign. Four hundred Personal Advisers were recruited and trained to help people with barriers to employment to return to education, access training or get involved in the community. This extra ‘participation’ support is only available, however, for YA job seekers at the new claim stage who are Indigenous or recently released from prison, or for certain activity test exempt job seekers only.

While most YA job seekers were not directly affected by AWT, in some sites the accompanying internal restructure resulted in the loss of designated youth officers and generalist CSOs now provide services to young people.

In this Centrelink context, the features of Youth Allowance that differ from Newstart Allowance—particularly the more flexible activity requirements—could be overlooked.

Recent research

School to work transition

In 2001 the Prime Minister’s Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce—established to develop creative approaches to help young people and their families negotiate the transition from school to an independent livelihood—released its report *Footprints to the future* (Eldridge 2001). The

Taskforce found Centrelink guidelines could allow more effective tailoring of PFWAs to meet the individual circumstances of marginalised young people. The Taskforce recommended that Centrelink and the relevant client departments develop and implement strategies to ensure PFWAs 'take into account the individual situations of young people, are culturally appropriate and focused on local community circumstances' (Eldridge 2001, p.76) to ensure potential barriers are considered.

The Taskforce also found some young people consider YA to be onerous and unhelpful because of its activity requirements and the level of payment that was considered insufficient to cover the costs of study or job search. The Taskforce found income support was not well integrated with other forms of support for young people and linkages between Centrelink and Job Network agencies needed to be improved, made more youth friendly and based on a measurable level of expertise in youth-based practise (Eldridge 2001, pp. 73–74).

The Taskforce called for a national commitment to all young people and proposed they would have the opportunity to complete 12 years of schooling or its vocational equivalent, acquire employability and life skills to enable them to be independent, confident and active members of the community, to engage with a professional career and transition support system and participate in local cultural, recreational sporting and community service activities (Eldridge 2001, p13). Other opportunities were also proposed.

The Ministerial Council for Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs accepted the premise of the Footprints Report in a Ministerial Declaration in July 2002 (Applied Economics 2002). It established a Transition from School Taskforce with a brief to develop an Integrated Action Plan including a national approach to youth transitions, based on a commitment to provide all young people with the opportunity to access learning and work.

Dusseldorp Skills Forum commissioned Applied Economics to calculate the cost of implementing these policy commitments and found that a National Youth Commitment along the lines proposed by the Prime Minister's Taskforce would deliver significant social benefit and increase economic participation and productivity. In particular, Applied Economics found that providing Year 12 equivalent education to 50 per cent of early school leavers would reduce unemployment and associated government expenditures on income support and deliver an economic return of at least 2.3:1 (Applied Economics 2002).

The Business Council of Australia (BCA) was also concerned to understand the economic implications of young people leaving school early, without the skills and capabilities to participate in the workforce and contribute to economic growth (Lahey 2003) and commissioned a range of research (one jointly with Dusseldorp Skills Forum) in late 2002:

The BCA is concerned to see all young Australians have the opportunity to complete twelve years of learning at school or through vocational education and training, including apprenticeships and traineeships or through adult community education. (Lahey 2003, p.13)

While BCA acknowledged the commitment of governments to improve the access to education and training for all Australians, they noted that progress over the last decade had been slow. To avoid serious long-term consequences BCA urged investment in sustainable solutions to ensure the education and training outcomes for Australia's youth are increased (Lahey 2003).

Other research consistently identified further study as a pathway to improved employment and earnings outcomes (Applied Economics 2002; Birrell et al. 2000; Dwyer et al. 1998; Koliass et al. 1999).

Youth Allowance evaluation

Again in 2001, the final report of an evaluation of the first three years (1998–2000) of Youth Allowance was released (FaCS 2001). YA was found to have played a role in reducing the number of early school leavers and increased the participation in post-school education and training. YA also appeared to have supported job seekers to undertake study that improved their chances of obtaining employment and these job seekers were more likely to have made effective transitions to employment than those who did not study.

However, only 38 per cent of the YA sample who were unemployed and not studying in 1999 had moved off income support and into employment by 2001. Another 10 per cent were studying. A little over half of the sample (52 per cent) remained in receipt of income support and were not working (FaCS 2001, pp.54–55).

The more flexible activity testing arrangements, intended as an incentive to take up education or training, appeared to result mainly in more young people participating in various Commonwealth-funded programs rather than vocational or educational courses. These programs include Intensive Assistance, Work for the Dole, Community Development Employment Projects, the Community Support Program (now the Personal Support Programme) and Literacy and Numeracy programs (FaCS 2001, p.73).

The evaluation also found that the effectiveness of YA in supporting a successful transition to employment was influenced by social and personal reasons in addition to educational factors. Given that people on YA were more frequently from a disadvantaged background (FaCS 2001) it could be assumed that more attention may need to be given to their social and personal issues in addition to education.

The main activity required of the majority of non full-time students was job search. More research was suggested to find out why a relatively small number of young people were doing combinations of activities and to explore ways to increase the use of the range of activities permitted.

The YA evaluation noted some concerns about PFWAs. In particular, young people living in areas with limited activity options were not being helped by these more flexible arrangements and that some young people might not have the confidence or communication skills to negotiate an Activity Agreement that suited them. While most respondents reported no aspects of YA that would discourage them from study or training, those who did see a problem referred to the YA level of payment.

Employment assistance

Horn investigated the impact of changes to employment assistance services—specifically the introduction of the Job Network—on job seekers in Melbourne who were experiencing homelessness or were in housing crisis (Horn 1998). Relevant to our study are his conclusions about the failure of the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) to identify all barriers to employment. (A job seeker's JSCI score determines the level of employment assistance they are offered).

Horn's research revealed job seekers in housing crisis were often reluctant to disclose personal issues in a bureaucratic environment without having developed a trusting relationship (Horn 1998). When interviewed at housing services by housing workers, by contrast, two-thirds of the sample revealed additional needs affecting their ability to obtain work, for which assistance was not offered by their Job Network provider. Horn recommended:

- changes to the JSCI to ensure that the characteristics of job seekers experiencing homelessness or in housing crisis were recognised and assistance was provided to overcome this barrier to employment

- changes to the administration of the JSCI to ensure a full disclosure and assessment of all the circumstances of disadvantaged job seekers required for accurate assessments of employment barriers.

A follow-up study by Hanover Welfare Services also found that Centrelink's procedures for conducting the JSCI were failing to record homelessness, as well as other relevant personal factors, for homeless Newstart recipients (Parkinson & Horn 2002). Analysis of participant JSCI records showed significant under-reporting of relevant factors, resulting in lower assessment scores and non-referral for JSCI supplementary assessment. The authors concluded that the current interview procedures were failing to engage this group of disadvantaged job seekers in a way that facilitates full disclosure of all relevant circumstances to make an informed assessment of their 'job readiness' and capacity to participate in employment assistance programs (Parkinson & Horn 2002, p.iv).

While these studies did not focus specifically on YA job seekers, their findings were confirmed by two studies involving young people.

Assistance to marginalised young people

In 2002 Uniting Care Burnside reported on its exploration of young homeless people's experience of the Youth Allowance system (Urquhart et al. 2002).

Given the importance, identified by Hanover Welfare Services, of 'engaging' the job seeker to assess barriers to employment, the perception of poor relationships with Centrelink by the participants of Urquhart's study was of concern:

They went to Centrelink to get money rather than spend it, they spent a lot of time in queues, faces were often less than friendly and welcoming, a trip to Centrelink was forced rather than freely chosen, it was an unwelcome chore rather than a pleasantly anticipated outing. Young people in particular were more likely to encounter problems than receive assistance. (Urquhart et al. 2002, p.21)

Participants reported a lack of understanding of young people in general, one key result of the study was the perceived lack of acknowledgment of the difficulties faced daily by homeless young people in meeting Centrelink requirements:

The young participants reported that often they could not wash their clothes and couldn't afford new clothes, so personal presentation for job interviews was a problem. (Urquhart et al. 2002, p.9)

Youth workers interviewed felt that Centrelink staff lacked the skills to work with youth and did not know how to talk to them (Urquhart et al. 2002, p.22).

Problems identified with Centrelink policies and procedures included the length of time it took to remedy Centrelink mistakes and errors; frustration with long waiting times; trouble with forms; and a lack of fluency in English among some Centrelink staff.

Finally, in a small scale study by the National Welfare Rights Network into financial hardship among young homeless people, Mullins (2002) highlighted a number of administrative and legislative flaws that appeared to hinder young people's access to income support and increase the incidence of penalties amongst this population. In particular she noted the expense associated with each new obligation or requirement that required extra activity and travel, as well as inadequate systems to ensure young people understand their rights and obligations at the time of claim. Again problems were identified with the administration of the JSCI that resulted in failures to disclose personal information and inappropriate assessments of job readiness.

Many studies expressed concern about the significant rates of non-compliance with activity test requirements (PM Taskforce 2001, FaCS 2001, Mullins 2002, Urquhart et al. 2002, Parkinson & Horn 2002). There was general consensus, however, that improvements to the administration of JSCI and the PFWA would improve compliance.

Research design

This study used qualitative research methods to undertake an exploration of the administration of YA activity agreements by Centrelink. The perceptions of a sample of 21 job seekers (18–20 years), nine Centrelink officers and seven youth support workers were explored to determine how well the agreements had been tailored to the individual needs of YA job seekers. This initial exploration was guided by the following questions:

- What activities were included on the PFWAs of our sample?
- Did these activities reflect the needs of the YA job seeker?
- Did young people understand the purpose of YA PFWAs and what they were agreeing to?
- Were the activities perceived to assist YA job seekers towards employment?
- What improvements could be made to Centrelink's administration of PFWA?

Methods

Job seekers (18–20 years)

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were undertaken with young people aged between 18 and 20 years recruited through youth support agencies, Job Network providers and Centrelink Customer Service Centres (CSC) from four sites across the three Centrelink areas in Victoria.

Young people were initially recruited through youth support agencies identified by each CSC. This method failed to produce an adequate number of interviewees and Job Network (JN) providers were approached to increase participant numbers. Those JN providers did not have ongoing contact with YA job seekers registered for job matching and were unable to recruit for the study. Eventually, interviewees were recruited directly through CSCs, with considerably more success. As a result of this drawn out process of recruitment within a time limited project, the number of young people interviewed (21) was less than the intended 48 interviews (comprising 12 from each of the four sites).

The intention of recruiting interviewees through youth agencies was to guarantee their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses and to demonstrate some distance between the study and Centrelink. An unintended result of this approach was to bias the sample with young people with multiple barriers to employment

The small number of interviews and the biased sample means the results cannot be generalised to the total YA population. However, many of the issues raised by the young job seekers and confirmed by youth workers and Centrelink officers, indicate problems with the administration of PFWAs that require further attention.

Each interviewee was paid \$40 to cover their expenses. Open-ended questions in an interview guide (Appendix 2) were used to explore perceptions of YA PFWAs and their experiences of Centrelink to provide some context to the administration process. The interviewer adopted a conversational style to assist the flow of information. The interviews were taped and transcribed. Subjects from the regional town were interviewed by phone.

Demographic data was collected from each interviewee and used to describe the sample.

With the consent of the young person, copies of their PFWA were obtained from Centrelink and used to inform responses about the activities required. Informed consent was ensured with printed information handed out by the recruiting agency.

Workers in youth agencies

Youth agency staff that recruited YA job seekers for the study were also interviewed to explore the role they play mediating the needs of YA customers with Centrelink. Their agencies were mostly youth housing services and Job Placement Education and Training (JPET) providers.

Seven agency staff were interviewed using open-ended questions in an interview (Appendix 3).

Centrelink officers

Four Victorian CSCs participated in the study. They were chosen to represent an inner city suburb, a middle suburb, an outer suburb and a regional town in locations where the BSL could draw on existing relationships. Centrelink officers identified youth agencies through which to recruit YA job seekers and provided copies of PFWAs upon receipt of a consent form.

Nine Centrelink officers, recruited by their Centre manager, were interviewed (see interview guide, Appendix 4). They included staff who administered YA PFWAs and other officers who intervened in breaches or assisted those at risk of failing to comply with agreements, including social workers.

Perceptions of the administration of YA and how well the purpose of YA PFWAs was achieved were explored with open-ended questions. Additional demographic data was collected to describe the sample. The officer from the regional town was interviewed by phone.

Feedback forum

Initial results of the fieldwork were presented to a forum of YA job seekers, Centrelink officers and youth agency staff who had been involved in the data collection. The discussion of the results and possible solutions was recorded and used to inform the recommendations.

Results

Job seekers

Description of sample

Twenty-one unemployed young people aged 18–20 years in receipt of YA were interviewed (see Table 1).

Table 1 Youth Allowance job seekers' details

Characteristic	Frequency
Location	
Inner metropolitan	6
Middle suburbs	5
Outer metropolitan	4
Rural	6
Age	
18 years	8
19 years	6
20 years	7
Gender	
Male	9
Female	12
Cultural background	
Born in Australia	21
English-speaking backgrounds	21
Indigenous Australians	3
Living arrangements	
With parents	3
Elsewhere	18
Alone	6
With partner	2
With friends	6
With relatives	4
Education	
Did not complete year 10	7
Completed Year 10	8
Completed Year 12	6
Employment	
Had employment history	18
Currently employed	4
No work experience	3
Parents' current employment	
Both parents with jobs	5
One parent with job	7
Neither parent with job	7
Parent(s) retired	1
Not known	1
Total	21

The young people's length of unemployment ranged from one month to six years, with a median period of six months.

The majority of young people (12) were aged 17 and over when they left school, six were 15, one was 14 and one 12. Two were pursuing further study at secondary school level.

Eleven were receiving the independent Youth Allowance rate because it was deemed unreasonable for them to live at home. Expenses for rent or board varied widely, from \$20 to \$165 per week.

Centrelink history

Most of the young people had begun receiving YA from the age of 16, whilst in high school. More than half had been on and off payments over a period of time, some mixing YA with work opportunities and study. Only a minority had been continuously in receipt of payments. Periods of time in receipt of YA varied from four months to six years.

Breach history

Seventeen of the 21 interviewees had been breached during their time on YA.

Most of the infringements were administrative breaches for failing to attend interviews or to report changed circumstances (living circumstances, gaining or leaving employment, ceasing study).

Findings from the recruitment process

The recruitment process uncovered some details about our sample of YA job seekers and their connection with the participation support system.

The main connection job seekers aged 18–20 years had with the participation support system was through Centrelink, not the Job Network. Contact with the youth support services was usually crisis driven. In contrast, YA job seekers under the age of 18 appeared to dominate JPET and youth housing services, with the exception of the inner city area.

Young people who continued to access youth support agencies once they turned 18 either faced multiple barriers to employment (drug dependency, health problems, behavioural problems) or needed short-term assistance. Many of these had been in receipt of YA for a number of years.

YA job seekers 18–20 years did not appear to have ongoing contact with Job Network providers who had only small numbers of YA job seekers registered for job matching.

YA job seekers over 18 years in metropolitan areas were highly mobile. Contact details for this group recorded by youth support agencies were found to be soon out of date: mobile phone accounts were frequently cancelled, addresses changed regularly. In contrast, the young rural job seekers had ongoing ties with employment and support agencies.

The employment circumstances of some YA job seekers were constantly changing. Agencies, initially hopeful of recruiting interviewees lost potential interviewees to short-term work opportunities a number of times.

Examination of PFWAs

We examined the PFWA of each interviewee and measured the frequency of all activities that can be included in YA PFWAs.

Table 2 Activities actually included on PFWAs examined

Activities approved for inclusion in PFWAs	Frequency	Percentage of PFWAs examined
Job search		
Register with Job Network provider	21	100
Job Search Diary	17	81
Employment contacts*	21	100
Vocational training course (short)	5	24
Job search training	2	10
Paid work experience		
Measures designed to eliminate or reduce disadvantage in the labour market		
JPET	3	14
Literacy and Numeracy	0	0
Approved program of work for unemployment benefit		
Community Development Employment Program	1	5
Work for the Dole	1	5
Development of self-employment	0	0
Development of and/or participation in group enterprises or cooperative enterprises	0	0
Intensive Assistance	1	5
Community Support Program (now Personal Support Programme)	0	0
Participation in a rehabilitation program	0	0
A course of education	0	0
Unpaid voluntary work in the community	0	0
Combination of part-time work and/or unpaid community work and/or education and training	0	0
Activities not specified as approved (see Appendix 1) but in PFWAs examined		
Part-time work	4	19

*The numbers of Employer Contacts per fortnight varied: Six job seekers had to make 10 contacts, one had to make eight, two had to make six and 11 had to make four.

Findings

In this sample there was a heavy emphasis on job search activities and a minimal focus on pre-vocational or vocational activities amongst the sample PFWAs. This is significant, considering one-third of the sample had not completed Year 10 and two-thirds had not completed Year 12 and the median period of unemployment was six months. Furthermore, one-third of the sample had neither parent employed at the time of the study indicating a low socio-economic background and the need for extra assistance to improve their employment outcomes.

Why did these activity agreements not include more flexible combinations of activities, including education and training and more creative responses to poor employment prospects? This question was explored in the interviews with participants.

Perceptions: relating to Centrelink

It is reasonable to assume that an understanding of the referral gateway role of the agency will influence the expectations young job seekers have of the agency. Centrelink is responsible for the assessment of work capacity, the identification of both vocational and non-vocational barriers and referral to appropriate programs, with a view to maximising a person's social and economic participation. It is not however, Centrelink's role to cover the costs of programs that may improve the job seeker's employment prospects. Job Network providers may have this capacity, but the division of responsibility is often unclear to young people. This knowledge—or lack of it—of Centrelink's referral role may influence whether there is disclosure of personal information and therefore, the accuracy of the assessment of the job seeker's job readiness as well as the ability to ensure PFWAs are tailored to individual needs. To explore perceptions of this understanding, the interview covered first and ongoing impressions of Centrelink, the information provided by Centrelink and how well CSOs were able to develop rapport with young people.

Initial contact

People apply for YA by lodging a claim at a Centrelink CSC. They can register their intention to claim either at a CSC or over the phone. This registration is known as 'initial contact' and takes 15 to 20 minutes for a person with uncomplicated financial circumstances (Mullins & Keebaugh 2000). The person is given an appointment for an interview to lodge their claim and negotiate a PFWA at a Centrelink CSC.

Most of the young people we interviewed made initial contact with Centrelink through the Customer Service Centre. Only a minority (11%) chose the phone to make this contact.

An adult (parent or youth worker) provided support to the majority (57%) of our sample during this initial contact. In some cases the adult made the initial call to Centrelink.

Interviewees expressed great appreciation for any familiar adult support during interviews, either a parent, relative or agency worker.:

It was a bit nerve wracking because I'd never been ... I didn't know what was going on and I was really nervous but my dad was there so it was pretty good. Glad I had some support (20-year-old, middle suburb)

Of the young people who acted alone, half found Centrelink staff helpful, the other half found them unhelpful. The need for adult assistance at this stage was clear.

I kept calling my parents saying 'Come with me, I need your help, I don't know if I'm going to ask the right questions', but they just said I've got to learn from it and to do it myself, but I really needed someone else there. (18-year-old, middle suburb)

At the first contact, details about the person's circumstances are recorded in the Customer Declaration and used to determine whether the person will qualify for Youth Allowance. The

customer is given an appointment to lodge their claim and negotiate a PFWA. According to Centrelink procedure, the claimant will be sent a package of information that includes a notice explaining what will be required to negotiate a PFWA at that first interview.

Pre-grant seminars

Pre-grant information seminars are now provided in most CSCs prior to the first interview. These seminars with video presentations and opportunities for questions were considered by most young people to be a better way than printed handouts to provide important information. In particular, seminars were appreciated by young people with literacy problems:

I don't read but I listen. I like to walk into [something] like the seminar that we had and have someone stand there and actually read it out instead of me sitting there and looking at the piece of paper and trying to read it myself. So I take it in better if someone else reads it than if I read it. It stuck in my head pretty much so at least I know everything. (18-year-old, outer metro)

The seminars did have their limitations for some:

[They should] just make the seminars much more clearer and more interesting to teenagers because if it's more interesting to teenagers then they're probably more interested in getting a job. ... It's exactly the same as an extreme sport. If they make it look interesting more teenagers will do it. (20-year-old, middle suburb)

Few interviewees from rural areas had had the opportunity to attend seminars even though this group displayed the most significant literacy and comprehension problems.

First interview

The YA job seekers we interviewed were not all well informed about what would take place during this first interview:

I actually went in there with no clue as to what I had to do, what was involved in this appointment. I knew I had to bring details and that but I didn't actually know that I'd be filling out a Preparing For Work Agreement or anything like that. I didn't have no idea really that I'd be doing any of that. But yeah, I'd had to do it. (20-year-old, inner metro)

Centrelink collects a lot of information at the first interview:

- The Customer Declaration is completed and information is recorded on the computer.
- An electronic form is completed by the CSO, prompted by questions on the computer. This produces an assessment of the person's barriers to employment (Job Seeker Classification Score) to determine what level of assistance they will be offered. This assessment relies on the disclosure of personal information that may indicate barriers to employment.
- The PFWA is generated.

Many young people expressed a need for significant assistance in comprehending information and completing paperwork at this stage:

Maybe we could have an interview or something so we could sit down, and explain it and they could help fill out the form, instead of just like handing it to you and 'Here you go, find everything yourself'. (18-year-old, outer metro)

It would have been better if they'd probably come up and filled out a form in front of you, where everything, all the details and stuff like that, or showed you on a slide or whatever. I don't know, people would probably have a better idea of how to fill out a form, how to fill out diaries and that. (18-year-old, inner metro)

Access to information

Only a minority of interviewees appeared to be comfortable relying on written information to explain the YA system and even in these cases, they used parents or other adults to confirm the meaning of forms, pamphlets and correspondence:

After the interview, I didn't really know how to fill out the forms, like they went through the form and that, but I don't know, it was still pretty complicated. Like the job seeker member [Job Network provider]—I didn't know what that was, and I don't think I'm still even involved with a job seeker member yet. Just, I don't know, big stuff-up. (18-year-old, inner metro)

Many felt unable to cope with the sheer volume of paperwork:

Oh, God, I've been given millions of papers. (19-year-old, rural)

or struggled to understand complicated language or 'department speak':

The way they say things, like they say big words and I don't understand the big words. (19-year-old, rural)

or received only cursory explanations:

They just read the topics and explain a short, minute paragraph of it and then they go onto the next one... Like I said, I don't normally read what they hand in front of me. I just skip through it... they'll explain small bits (18-year-old, outer metro)

Quality of service

The young people interviewed appreciated instances of good service, but found Centrelink service was inconsistent:

Some people were really nice, really helpful. Other people, they did not want to help you, they were unfriendly, they were rude, they treated me like junkie scum, all the rest of it. So I got like one extreme from the other. (20-year-old, inner metro)

The lady I saw was really rude. I felt like she was talking down to me, she just didn't seem to have the time for it. I'd ask questions and she'd sort of just cut them off. At one point she just said 'Look I need to finish this, can you just hold on?' and when I came up to asking other questions—because she asked about tax, something about tax, and that went straight over my head. I was asking questions about it, like if I could speak to my parents— she was just like, 'Well we really have to know now and we need you to tell us now. But if it's going to be like that then you'll have to come in at a different time'. So I said yes to anything! (18-year-old, middle suburb)

There was a sense of frustration amongst a few about staff who were perceived to be inexperienced:

It's mostly the people who work in there. Yeah, 'cos they all say, you know, different things and they don't, a lot of them, they're just fresh starters and they don't know what's going on and you end up having to tell them what to do. (18-year-old, rural)

At least two YA job seekers specifically stated that they were resigned to the fact that it depended on 'who they got on the day' whether they were treated in a respectful and comprehensive manner or had a hostile or dismissive encounter:

It depends who you deal with. There's some Centrelink workers who can relate to the young people. Some are especially good and some are especially bad. (20-year-old, inner metro)

A lack of respect or civility was always keenly felt and descriptions of feeling mistrusted and even persecuted during interviews were not uncommon:

[They said] ‘What are you doing here? You’re not trying to look for work. You’re hopeless, trying to rip off Centrelink.’ They could be nice. You go up to the front desk and you get looks and stuff. I don’t know if it’s the way you dress or what they think of ya, but you get these looks ... (18-year-old, outer metro)

Establishing rapport

Inconsistent service and limited understanding of the role of Centrelink are not conducive to the development of rapport or the disclosure of relevant personal information. Some YA job seekers were confused and possibly marginalised further, by the way Centrelink officers communicated with them:

They could have been nice to me ... Being in that situation and actually going, ‘OK I need help’ and then just being shunted, doesn’t make you feel very good about yourself. You put your pride in your back pocket, ‘OK, I can’t get a job by myself, go and see Centrelink’ and then they just tell you, ‘No, sorry’. They could have done it in a more professional way. They could have done a lot of things instead of just going, ‘Nah, see ya.’ (19-year-old, inner metro)

The importance of establishing some trust or understanding with a CSO in order to communicate effectively was identified:

I reckon they should send you to a social worker that you feel comfortable with, not just shove you around, ‘Here’s the office, sit there and wait for the person to come ... Other people don’t know me and it’s hard for me to explain to them, it’s hard for me to sit there and talk to them because I don’t say nothing really, I just sit there. (20-year-old, middle suburb)

Young people who attended interviews on their own felt Centrelink officers could have been more helpful:

They could have made it not so stressful. There were times when I just wanted to rip them over the counter. Have more respect for the people that are trying to get help from you. They just look at you like ... every time I go in there I just get stares from them. (19-year-old, middle suburb)

Handling complex circumstances

The more vulnerable the applicant felt, the more extreme their perception of and response to negative or dismissive treatment:

I think because I was so young and I was kicked out of home ... They were getting to the point of trying to tell everybody I was a trouble-maker, which I wasn’t ... They have an attitude problem to people who are not up to their stakes ... They don’t listen, they just don’t listen to you. They’ll stop you halfway through you explaining something, ask you another question. It’s like, ‘I didn’t get to the point I wanted you to know’. (19-year-old, middle suburb)

The most disgruntled interviewees were those who made applications for independent rates of pay (UTLAH), especially without a support person present. These customers have additional administrative requirements—to account for their often complex circumstances (in both oral and written form) and to contact parents and third parties for verification of their stories—as well as lacking any family assistance with the process:

They gave me a form for my parents, even though they live 12 hours away and I’ve already proved my independence. They’re like, ‘No you’re still dependent’ ... I needed money to live on, I didn’t have a cent, and she just said, ‘No, we’re not here just to give people money who think they need it. Your parents should be supporting you.’ (20-year-old, inner metro)

None felt they were offered adequate support from Centrelink at this stage:

It took me about two months to actually get on Centrelink [payments]. Initially they could have followed through the steps of how I could prove my independence (with me)... They could have gone, 'Well, you obviously can't get this organised for us so to prove your independence do it this way...' [and] just been more helpful rather than just saying, 'No we can't help you, sorry'. (20-year-old, inner metro)

They felt they were treated with unfair suspicion:

They kept on asking me that question ... 'Why do you need to be on Centrelink?' 'Because I'm homeless'—that's the only reason I could give them at the time—I'm homeless, I need money'. I didn't think they believed me at first, the way they kept ...[saying]. 'We want to ring your parents' and stuff like that, 'Make sure you can't move in ... Why would I be going to Youth Housing if I had somewhere to go?' (19 year-old, middle suburb)

Using alternative assistance

As a result of inconsistent customer service and inappropriate information provision, some interviewees tended to avoid contact with Centrelink:

It's kind of like you're just getting processed and that's about it. So that's no encouragement on my behalf to go back there into a sterile environment with sterile people. That's really deterring for me. (19-year-old, inner metro)

When faced with confusing written material it was common for them to go to outside sources for interpretation and translation:

They [agency worker] will ring them up for me...and they'll get told something completely different from what they told me or something exactly the same but it's totally wrong. (20-year-old, middle suburb)

They would go to youth support workers:

Gary [support worker] helps me a lot. Gary is the main person. If I don't know anything I go ask Gary and Gary always gets information for me. (19-year-old, middle suburb)

Young customers also turned to friends to 'clear up' basic misconceptions and clarify important details about YA:

The forms are the hardest things to fill out. I just signed it and went through it with a mate and he was all right, and the diary, I didn't actually fill out a proper diary yet. I will now though—and I've got another mate who's done a diary before so he's going to show me how to do it. (18-year-old, inner metro)

Perceptions: designing PFWAs

Many of the details of PFWAs continued to elude some of our sample who claimed—after a seminar and one-to-one interviews—to have heard the same basic points over and over again, but when asked were unable to:

- relate to key terms such as 'Preparing For Work Agreement' or 'Mutual Obligation'
- articulate the stated goals of the agreement
- distinguish between initial PFWA interviews and review interviews
- explain details of the breach system.

Understanding the purpose

When asked about the purpose of PFWAs, less than half of the sample (9) had some basic comprehension:

The Agreement is ... basically telling you questions like 'Are you prepared to go 90 minutes out of your way to go to work?' or 'How do you catch transport there?', stuff like that. It's just there to tell you ... 'Do you understand this and that and are you prepared to work?'. That's all it is really. (20-year-old, middle suburb)

Three had a poor understanding and five had no comprehension of its purpose at all:

I remember going to interviews and signing some stuff. (17-year-old, outer metro)

Only four demonstrated any knowledge of options that could be included in their PFWA:

Yeah, you could do volunteer work, you could do study or you could do work for the dole. (20 year-old, middle suburb)

I think he named a couple of things and [asked] which one I would use out of them. He said something about doing training course.... He said that I could do other than or while I'm looking for work, or instead of looking for work, one of those things. (17-year-old, rural)

And one of them had only gained this understanding from their Job Network provider, not Centrelink:

Yeah, they give you options, they ask you what you're wanting to do, and they sort of point you in the right direction towards that. They try and help you get apprenticeships or whatever—not Centrelink, but [name of Job Network provider] and places like that. (19-year-old, rural)

This YA job seeker also understood that she could negotiate the design of her agreement:

(It was possible to) Just see if they could change it to something else or work something else out that can suit both parties. I've been taught never to just sign, tick anything off and just sign it, but you should always read through it and everything so that you understand. (19-year-old, rural)

Few YA job seekers were able to describe meaningful discussion with CSOs at their PFWA interviews:

He just explained it quickly, got me to sign it, 'Do you understand, nah, nah, nah', signed it, it was very quick basically. Then he gave me a couple of pamphlets and that. (20-year-old, middle suburb)

There was little evidence that the administration process allowed time for these young customers to receive appropriate or timely support from Centrelink to articulate, let alone to plan for, their employment goals in their PFWAs:

It wasn't something that I thought about for more than two seconds. I mean it's obviously why I should have read the thing, to actually know that I could negotiate it, but nah, I didn't know that you could. (20 year-old, inner metro)

Knowing me I probably just would have gone errgghhh, signed it. I don't remember it. I can't guarantee if they just gave it to me, said 'Sign it', probably wouldn't have read it either. (18-year-old, inner metro)

Assessment of activities

What the activities did ensure was that the YA job seekers were engaged in job search. Most felt PFWAs were useful in getting them to *look for* work, but not necessarily in getting work.

When asked about the activities that were included in their PFWAs, most of the young people did not think that they were very helpful in finding work or in planning for longer term employment outcomes:

Some felt the job search reporting requirements included in their PFWAs were burdensome:

I really didn't need the Preparing For Work Agreement because I was out; I was looking for jobs at that time. I didn't need to be told, 'You need to have work now or you need to do something now', because I was looking for work and I was doing those courses and I just found it unnecessary that I had to take time off to go into Centrelink to say, 'Yes, I'm doing these courses, I'm looking for work.' (20-year-old, inner metro)

One YA job seeker already in casual work and part-time study felt additional job search activities put too much stress on their current load:

I don't have a car so ... [by] public transport, I couldn't travel to Werribee before work or after work because I had to be at work at a certain time, finish work at a certain time. So it was four or five hour shifts per day and it's like kind of 9 to 2pm and Centrelink closes at 4.30pm. I was bugged at 2pm so I didn't want to go to Centrelink, queue up to use their fax machine and stuff. (20-year-old, middle suburb)

Most YA job seekers said they were eager to find work at the initial contact with Centrelink:

I took it pretty seriously, 'cos it's very important for me to find work, well it's important for everyone to find work. (18-year-old, rural)

When I first started at Centrelink I was ringing up people [and the answer would be] 'Nah, job's been taken'. Probably in that fortnight I'd ring up more than 10 jobs, 20 or so jobs, and half of them would be taken. (19-year-old, middle suburb)

Some felt that they didn't receive adequate assistance with job search activities at that time:

I suppose they can't really do much more for you, because it is looking for work for yourself, but, maybe [Centrelink or the Job Network provider could] put a bit more hand in with your organisation of going into an interview, and just explain a little bit more about things before you go in there, just to give you a better idea of what stuff to talk about when you go in. (18-year-old, rural)

Others felt the activities did not reflect their capacity to get work in the local labour market:

I wasn't just sitting on my bum doing nothing, I was looking for work but it's like all the jobs out there weren't suited to me. It's like transport required, it's like half of them back then weren't public transport, you can use public transport or like the experience, everyone asks for experience. How the hell is a teenager or a youth supposed to get a job with experience if they don't have it? (20-year-old, middle suburb)

The role of Centrelink as a referral gateway to the participation support system appeared to be confusing to young job seekers and possibly raised their expectations of the agency to assist them to find work. As a result, the level of satisfaction with agreements varied greatly between interviewees:

I was given a choice. I could have done anything and because I was looking for a part-time florist job at the moment, it fell in really well, I got it that week and I started my Preparing For Work Agreement with my job. So that really well worked. (20-year-old, inner metro)

I've been on it (YA) for six years so how helpful is that? It's not like I don't want to get a job or nothing. It's mighty hard for me, not having an education fully or any training whatsoever. (18-year-old, outer metro)

This may have contributed to the degree of cynicism about the value of activities included in PFWAs. Some young people perceived the agreements to be part of a process of continually 'checking up' on young people, not addressing their employment needs:

(Activities are) the things that you can get breached by! No! Just sort of a set-up ... guidelines to go by to look for work and make sure that no-one's ripping off the government I guess (18-year-old, rural)

Registering with Job Network provider

All those we interviewed had to register with a Job Network provider for job matching. Estimations of assistance provided by the Job Network varied. Many expected greater support than they received in job matching:

They don't really tell you much. They don't contact you; it's just a thing you have to do, looking at jobs on the touch-screens and stuff. I've gone into a few different places and basically they just take you to the phone and take your resume and stuff and say, 'Look, we've sent your resume to this organisation', and then you don't hear anything about it. They don't tell you, 'No, you didn't get the job', basically. (19-year-old, inner metro)

Several interviewees said they had better results finding work through their own efforts than through the Job Network:

The only reason I got a job in North Brighton, I found it by myself. I didn't go through a job agency. And when I got my bakery job, I went through a job agency and the guy (the employer) ripped me off. He wasn't paying me very much money and it made me feel like I don't want to use those job agencies again. I don't want to go to them. They don't help... If I go for a job it's out of a newspaper. (18-year-old, outer metro)

Employer contacts

Our entire sample had to demonstrate between four and 10 employer contacts per fortnight. This requirement produced mixed feelings:

It's a pain! Yeah it pushes you to look for work which is really good, but it's just a pain. (18 years, middle suburb)

It could be a source of stress, especially when the required number of contacts was considered to be beyond the capacity of the local labour market:

I can do it but there's no point in applying for jobs that you probably won't get anyway, like putting in resumes to places where you probably won't get a job. Ten's a lot (of employment contacts). It forces you to fill out the form. It makes you go out and look for work, but if you're a job seeker, you're forced to look for work because you don't get paid enough. (18 years, inner metro)

Most job seekers had to record the details of these employer contacts, usually 10 contacts per fortnight for six fortnights, in Job Search diaries. Some felt the diary was unhelpful:

Well I don't think a job seeker diary is helping to find a job because all you're really doing is filling in a piece of paper to make them happy. You have to go out and look for a job anyway. Now I have to look for 10 jobs. I have 10 jobs (contacts) now but before I only had to have 4. I don't know [why], I don't get it. (19-year-old, middle suburb)

Job search training

Job search training provided some helpful structure and routine, but it had not resulted in full-time employment:

I sort of think the idea behind doing that part of it is that you get people doing something regularly, like you know, somewhere to go five days a week kind of thing, 'cos that's a pretty big problem [for] the unemployed, not having a regular place to go every day kind of thing. (19-year-old, inner metro)

Activities to overcome disadvantage

JPET also helped participants to addressing barriers to employment:

They've taken me out with the car to put resumes out and they helped me here finding work and they're getting me to choose a TAFE course. (19-year-old, rural)

Few work opportunities had eventuated from these programs but the regular activity, contact and support with resumes and contacting employers was clearly appreciated.

Mutual Obligation activities

Mutual Obligation (MO) activities were a particular source of confusion and frustration in our sample:

I wasn't told that I had to find part-time work. It's like, part-time work, that's a bit far fetched because basically there's a lot of people want to hire casuals now so part-time work is a bit far fetched ... They didn't explain to me. I would have opened my mouth if there was something explained to me about that. (20-year-old, middle suburb)

Another felt there was not enough information about the activity and that it was unrealistic:

That [register with JPET] was back in year 2000. There's not even a JPET in [name of town]. It's the first I've heard about it. [JNP worker] would have said something to me about it if there was anything like that, but I'm pretty sure there's not even a JPET. (18-year-old, rural)

While one was clear about her employment goal, she was only offered Work for the Dole in unrelated areas:

For me, I want to be a youth worker. [In Work for the Dole] there's gardening. What's gardening got to do with it? Office administration, yes I already know my basics and everything like that but they were all getting me to redo that again and I don't reckon there was a need for it. If I already know it why do I need to do it again? (20-year-old, middle suburb)

Intensive Assistance was seen by some as helpful in assisting with job search and accessing courses, especially helping to pay for them:

Just recently I've chosen Intensive Assistance ... to help me. I was actually looking forward to going along because I heard that they've actually got money put aside to help you look for a job or help you get into studies or whatever it may be. (20-year-old, inner metro)

Activities not included on PFWAs

A few YA job seekers we interviewed did identify activities they felt would improve their job readiness, for example driving lessons, specific industry pre-apprenticeships or vocational courses, but these were not in their agreements. However, where such activities are identified as helpful it is not within Centrelink capacity to cover associated costs. Centrelink can only refer to community agencies that may or may not have brokerage funds.

Barriers to long-term and in some cases short-term employment included lack of access to appropriate education and training (identified by five job seekers):

I think they should offer a bit more in the range of learning, because the TAFE vouchers have stopped. ... 'Cos most of the people on the dole at the moment ... do need a lot of training, yeah they don't really give out too much. It's pretty hard when you're living off those wages and you've got to try and pay for this and that, you can't really because you've got bills and all that. (18-year-old, rural)

One instance of the failure of a Centrelink officer to provide a referral in the pursuit of apprenticeship training was perceived to have resulted in a lost employment opportunity:

When I was going to get an apprenticeship at the guitar shop doing repairs, my boss said to me, 'You know, I'll be happy to take you on to do this if you can go and find out the information (re apprenticeship)'. And I went to Centrelink (for assistance) and they just shrugged at me. (19-year-old, inner metro)

Some wanted more assistance to access relevant community work:

They just sort of say, 'The touch-screen's over there, that's got some information', they don't really tell you, 'You know you can go out and ask anyone to do volunteer work for them'. (19-year-old, inner metro)

In addition, we found many young people were pursuing work experience and educational/vocational opportunities independently of Centrelink with no understanding that these activities could be listed in their agreements:

I didn't realise I could volunteer to work anywhere that I wanted, because I did for a while, work at that shop, voluntarily, just to get some experience. [I] Didn't realise that'd count, so I didn't tell Centrelink about it, which is volunteer work. And, yeah, so I sort of understand that a bit better now, I think. (19-year-old, inner metro)

Moreover, a significant number of interviewees saw merit in pursuing personal development or creative activities that would ultimately enhance their employability, but felt these fell outside the standard scope of agreements or were just not worth mentioning.

I didn't know that [I had the right to negotiate] and if I did know that I would have tried to negotiate with them because I'm with JPET doing stuff at the moment and with Connections, which is another organisation, a creative organisation, and with Buoyancy, doing stuff there. I could have tried to take that somehow into Mutual Obligation instead of just having to ... just get the job. (20-year-old, inner metro)

Suggested improvements

After reflecting on their engagement with Centrelink, the young job seekers suggested the following improvements to the process to promote a reasonable understanding of the requirements of Centrelink and Youth Allowance and assist young job seekers to comply with them:

- face-to-face contact with friendly and approachable CSOs
- clear and consistent communication
- slower and more detailed verbal explanations of complex aspects of the system, such as PFWAs
- assistance with filling out forms.

Youth agency workers

Additional data from workers in youth agencies shed significant light on many of the concerns raised by young people, including the importance of understanding the needs of and communicating well with this age group, the merits and shortfalls of PFWAs and suggested improvements to their administration.

Description of sample

Seven workers from youth support agencies were interviewed about their experiences of advocating on behalf of YA job seekers to Centrelink. These comprised workers from two agencies in each of the inner-metropolitan, middle suburb and outer metropolitan areas and one from a rural area. Two of the agencies had a housing focus and five, employment (see Table 3).

The proportion of agency clients who were Youth Allowance recipients varied from very low at Job Network providers, 20 per cent at the indigenous employment agency to 90 per cent at JPET providers. Most young clients had been referred to the agencies by word-of-mouth and a minority by Centrelink officers.

Table 3 Youth workers' details

Characteristic	Frequency
Location	
Inner metropolitan	2
Middle suburbs	2
Outer metropolitan	2
Rural	1
Service focus	
JPET* (15 to 21-year-olds)	3
Youth housing (homeless and at risk young people)	2
Job Network (unemployed, all ages)	1
Indigenous employment (unemployed, all ages)	1

*JPET Job Placement Employment Training, a Commonwealth-funded program

Perceptions

Mediating the relationship between Centrelink and young people

Because of the complex personal situations of many young people, all these youth support agencies worked with young people on a wide range of issues. Agency workers claimed a holistic approach best responded to the complex nature of many young people's needs: housing workers regularly dealt with employment and health related issues, JPET staff often provided assistance with housing and the criminal justice system.

The amount of time spent on Centrelink issues varied amongst the agencies. JPET workers felt they spent considerable time clarifying personal details and contesting breaches or other decisions on behalf of their clients. In particular staff at an inner metropolitan JPET felt a large proportion of their time was spent on Centrelink business:

If we were to charge Centrelink, for example, for the time that us three spent on the phone fixing up their stuff-ups, they'd be paying half our wages! They would—if not more!

The Job Network provider received regular requests for assistance with a wide range of Centrelink issues but referred most back to Centrelink. The housing workers often made initial contact with Centrelink on behalf of young people (in housing crisis) and aimed to speed up the claim process.

The Indigenous employment worker said virtually all her clients were Centrelink customers who needed assistance querying breaches or working through paperwork.

All agencies cited literacy and comprehension problems with Centrelink paperwork as a major problem for young clients. In particular a lot of time was spent on translating written material and clarifying correspondence:

The majority of them aren't living at home, so it's not like you may take this stuff home and another adult goes with them explaining what to do, they just try to understand it. The majority of them have probably left school early anyway and probably have quite low literacy and numeracy. (outer metro)

They get conflicting letters. You know in one case I had a lad ...[who] had three different letters all with three different sets of instructions that said if he didn't do them his benefits would be cut. (middle suburb)

The employment services advised that Centrelink referred young people to them that were not job ready.

Workers also reported assisting young people to access literacy and training programs and with job search requirements.

All the youth workers interviewed liaised with Centrelink on behalf of young people to:

- Review breaches, activity requirements and referrals:

Oh, the kids are notorious, they're not perfect in this, they tend to not read the letter properly (the first one), ...and they don't worry about it then, they don't bring it to us when they first get it, they bring it to us after [the breach has] happened. (outer metro)

- Clarify personal circumstances:

Often our role is to cut through the red tape to fast track things and to advocate on their behalf to show that there are other factors in a young person's life, that it's not just black and white, why they're in that situation. (middle suburb)

Whilst agencies saw a level of advocacy with many government agencies as a regular part of their work with young people, many viewed the amount of work required with Centrelink as particularly problematic:

If we look at a client coming in for the first time, I would say probably 60–70% of those young people in the first meeting when we say to them, 'How can we assist?', would say, 'Oh Centrelink's stuffing me around' or 'I've been breached', or 'My money's reduced and I don't know why'. (inner metro)

Assisting young people for whom it is unreasonable to live at home (UTLAH)

One of the most common problems identified by agency workers was the time spent advocating on behalf of YA job seekers—with legitimate homelessness issues—who had been refused the independent rate of YA. While Centrelink makes appointments for YA job seekers who are under 18 years to see the Centrelink Social Worker to assist with their application for independent rate (UTLAH), this is not the case for those 18 years and over.

With the social workers and all of that it's really good, and the kids never complain about the social workers—'cos the social workers of course do see life in all its rich tapestries—I think that ... when you've got a group of people who've had secure jobs most of their lifetimes, I don't think they can quite imagine how dire ... things are... for people who are homeless. It's just such a huge, a huge imaginative leap and I think it's sometimes just a bit too much for them. (middle suburb)

Most workers felt that these young people had to go to unreasonable lengths to establish and demonstrate independence of their families and many required the level of assistance available to those under 18 years.

Youth focus

The strongest theme to emerge from the agency data in this study was concern over the loss of youth-friendly service delivery strategies in their local area.

Bring back youth-specific people. ...When you look at it you've got average Job seekers, you've got young people, you've got people with disability, you've got families and you've got aged people. How can you be an expert in all those five areas? ... It just doesn't work which is why in society and in the community we have aged care facilities and we have youth facilities and we have disability services. I don't understand what's so precious about Centrelink that they think that they don't need that. (inner metro)

The loss of designated Youth Officers in the sites included in this study limited individual working relationships:

It has been harder since they've moved away from the specific Youth Team. It was easier when it was because ... you met those six people, you did your talk to them, we worked out some relationships and things were going. Now there's certainly a lot more people, you think, 'Oh, I've never heard of this person'. (outer metro)

This loss of youth expertise was also perceived to limit the interaction between Centrelink and other youth services:

Lots of Centrelink workers don't understand what JPET is. In the Youth Unit, because it was a youth-specific program they were very aware of what JPET did, where now ... it seems that people there are just data collectors as opposed to information sources. (inner metro)

Access to particular officers who had been helpful and were perceived to be skilled in YA was also difficult:

It's hard to find them [CSOs], (you) don't know what extension they are on, whereas the others [Youth Officers] had direct lines and [you] could always get hold of them. [It] highlights how much we had, now that those connections are missing (middle suburb)

Centrelink staff with the local knowledge or experience necessary to respond to the needs of YA job seekers also appeared to be missing:

I don't think Centrelink have got any idea of the actual resources on the ground. They've got all these great ideas for what they'd like to happen but I asked at the last AWT (consultation) whether anyone had done, you know, a raincheck [sic] of what was actually available in the way of training in our region and they hadn't. (JPET worker, middle suburb)

This loss of youth expertise contributed to inconsistencies in information provided to YA job seekers:

It's not uncommon either that when kids have gone in there to try and understand what's going on with the benefits, that they've got one story from the person over the counter and then they've come in and told me and it's been totally wrong. (inner metro)

Working with Centrelink

Workers perceived that their relationships with Centrelink were dominated by regulations and a degree of suspicion of the young customer's eligibility for payment, instead of a focus on overcoming their employment barriers.

I don't know if I'm getting old and cynical but my impression of Centrelink is they just stamp pieces of paper and tell [clients] whether or not they have been breached or whether or not they have to sign up to a Job Network agency. I don't see them doing much more than that. (outer metro)

While workers often felt they were operating as an information source for Centrelink, Job Network providers lack access to the information Centrelink had recorded about mutual customers:

I can go to my screen and access some really limited information that says yes this will be their second lot of IA, or they've been incapacitated for some time ... so probably that's the reason why they're not coming (into the office) this time around. But I have no access to the (JSCI) score or the barriers or the reasons why to indicate ... why the client hasn't come and I haven't sighted them. So until I actually sight that person and get their permission I've got no access to see what their classification is based on. (outer metro)

The high turnover in Centrelink staff was seen to contribute to a breakdown in working relationships that are necessary to assist YA customers:

The problem with the Centrelink relationship is the amount of time that it takes to maintain it, because of the turnover of staff. Seriously, if I was to familiarise myself with the people over there that I speak to on the phone I would be over there every week meeting new people. (inner metro)

Impact of the system on PFWAs

Agency workers believed that a lack of skill working with young people and expertise about youth participation in the labour market resulted in PFWAs that failed to achieve the stated purpose of the agreements:

I don't think in the majority of cases it [PFWA] does serve its purpose ... I think it's all about just going for interviews ... it's about job searching, it's not about them getting skills to get ready for [work]. (outer metro)

The administration process of PFWAs did not adequately respond to the complexity of many young people's lives:

If it was something that was useful, you know, where the Centrelink worker sat down and said right, you know, you're doing (something about) sexual abuse, you're doing (something about your) drug and alcohol use and you're doing JPET, I'll give you a 13 week exemption for looking for work. (inner metro)

This failure was considered to reflect a lack of knowledge about the barriers to employment that some young people face:

The expectations are quite high, particularly for homeless young people, that they will be able to attend interviews, or keep appointments, to think that there's not other things happening in their lives (middle suburb)

This lack of knowledge in turn resulted from a failure to engage the YA job seeker in the process:

I also ask kids why they think they haven't been able to find a job and usually they'll give you a very good assessment, like 'Blue collar workers need a driver's licence'—I think there's always that underestimation of the client's knowledge base, as if they're empty vessels. (middle suburb)

Confusion about Centrelink's role and a failure to adequately explain the requirements resulted in agreements that were not tailored to individual needs:

I had this client back where they had given him the choice of Mutual Obligation Activities and he'd said 'Oh, I'll do part-time work' and he didn't realise that that meant he had to go out and find himself a part-time job ... They hadn't made that clear to the client ... and he

actually thought that Centrelink were going to help him find a part-time job. (middle suburb)

Some workers claimed PFWAs consistently reflected an overestimation of the job readiness of many YA job seekers:

If they're already involved with these other community agencies, they've already got some major issues, and that's probably the reason they're not working anyway. And so they need a lot of time trying to stabilise them and support them before they're actually ready to go out and get a job (outer metro)

Suggested improvements

Agency workers identified specific improvements that could be made to the administration of YA, in particular the design of PFWAs.

Centrelink officers should be less concerned with the YA job seekers compliance with activities and more interested in their progress to independence:

They don't really ask just, 'How are they?' you know, 'Have they settled? Is their accommodation stable?' No, they've never really asked, [they do] more checking up, 'Are they still on JPET?' (outer metro)

Centrelink officers must have the skills to engage with young people:

What makes for effective case management you need people who ... convince them on the first appointment you can do something useful for them because if you don't do that, ... the kids will give you a pass/fail at the end of the first appointment, they just won't come back or they'll go through the motions ... what I guess worries me about the whole exercise is that it just isn't possible to compel the positive emotions. You need quite good skills and counselling to do that (middle suburb)

Shared responsibility for the needs of YA job seekers and effective case management between Centrelink and the wider youth support network would help to compensate for the loss of youth officers.

An improved flow of information from Centrelink to the youth agencies was important:

I would like to see a lot more information come to us from Centrelink, particularly when they change information [and] policies and we don't actually find out until 2-3 months later when we've got a client involved in a particular activity and that activity was made redundant or cancelled three months earlier and we weren't informed. It's very frustrating. (outer metro)

Staff suggested the reintroduction of strategies that established informed relationships between Centrelink and young customers:

We got one of the Youth Officers to come down to the Job Breakfast, and it was an informal way of talking to the kids and letting them know, 'Well if you come to your appointment and you apply, this is what you have to bring. Now these will be some of the questions I'd ask you', and almost setting up appointments through the Job Breakfast... It worked for about three months till that person got transferred. And no one else then took it up. (outer metro)

Centrelink officers

Description of sample

Data from nine Centrelink officers interviewed across four types of location (see Table 4) and the three Centrelink areas in Victoria helped clarify the perceptions of job seekers and youth workers.

Table 4 Centrelink officers' details

Characteristic	Frequency
Location	
Inner metropolitan	3
Middle suburbs	3
Outer metropolitan	1
Rural	2
Social security experience	
Centrelink	6
Department of Social Security (DSS)	1
Commonwealth Employment Service (CES)	2
Previous employment	
Work with young people	3
Centrelink/CES/DSS	4
Other	2

The Centrelink staff members' experience in social security varied from 16 months to 18 years, and their time at a Customer Service Centre or equivalent ranged from one month to 17 years. Most of the officers had been at the particular CSC for less than a year.

Perceptions of the purpose and value of PFWAs were explored with CSOs in semi-structured interviews. Barriers to the best practice of the administration of the YA Activity Agreements were considered as well as possible improvements.

Perceptions

Purpose of PFWAs

Perceptions of the purpose and value of PFWAs were varied. Some were positive:

The emphasis is to have the young person engaged in something, some sort of activity that's going to..., if not help them find work, at least open up some other possibilities for them and, generally speaking, keeping them engaged in something that's going to not only boost their self-esteem but keep them connected with their peers and community supports. (Social Worker, RURAL)

Some officers felt the process of administration outweighed any benefit of an agreement:

They're (YA job seekers) not catered for. It's like, this is what you have to do, they look at it as a process, boom, boom, there you go and they just sign and don't care what's written on the agreement. It doesn't have a meaning to them. (outer metro)

Three main factors were suggested to influence the administration of PFWAs to YA job seekers:

- the degree of youth focus and expertise at the Customer Service Centre
- the amount of time available to spend with the young person
- access to appropriate information to ensure the YA customer was informed about the purpose and potential of PFWAs.

There are two secondary but very significant influences on the delivery of services to Centrelink customers. Firstly, the high staff turnover, especially in particularly in busy offices:

This office is a fairly young office... most of the people here haven't been here very long, we've only got a few people that have got ... humungous talent...and in terms of creative thinking outside the square, all that type of stuff...the ability of making decisions, sometimes they feel unable to make those decisions because they don't feel confident. (inner metro)

Secondly, the 'automated' (computer based) administration process was considered to encourage the production of 'standard' PFWAs, rather than the identification of vocational and even pre-vocational barriers to employment that are essential to the design of the PFWA:

The problem with it is that it does tend to be a very automated. It's a matter of using your discretion and having the experience to use your discretion to the best of your ability ... The standard package is 10 jobs per fortnight, job seeker diary, employer contact certificates; any deviation from that requires some other sort of assessment. Does it have to do with their literacy skills? You can't get someone to fill in a Diary if they can't read it or if they can't write. Now an 18-year-old is not necessarily going to tell you that they can't read and write. (CSO, inner metro)

Youth focus

Most interviewees recognised special needs of the 18 to 20 year age group and that YA job seekers require additional attention particularly in the design of their activity agreement:

Sometimes at that age, I see a lot of kids that don't really know what they want to do. (outer metro)

When we're talking about young people who are perhaps making an application for the first time and aren't familiar with all the red tape ... I think [what's needed is] just talking to the person as an individual, doing away with the jargon and the legislative sort of talk and just offering your help and support in getting them through the process. (rural)

Centrelink CSOs generally put significant effort into their contact with this customer group, but different levels of capacity, motivation, expertise and skills appeared to act as barriers to the delivery of youth friendly services by Centrelink:

I think some people have more skills in doing that [building rapport with youth] than others. I mean, I've got a degree in Social Science majoring in Human Services and I've done a lot of youth work as well. So, I love working with the young kids and the younger customers and stuff. Some people don't enjoy that quite so much I guess [it] depends who you've got as a customer as well. (inner metro)

Government jobs people are single-minded. They go 'That's the job description' and will not go out (of it). 'This is what I deal with, this criteria [sic] ... Every CSO is different. Some people just want to get it over as quick as they can. Some people actually want to try and get that customer to do something. (outer metro)

But it was the loss of youth-specific expertise or skills amongst CSOs that was brought up most often:

I think certain skills have been lost with the change from having a separate unit that just deals with youth. There's something that's been lost with the change from people who just dealt with under 25-year-old customers and when you see one under 20-year-old customer maybe once a week and the rest of your customers are 30-plus, you deal with those people very differently to how you would deal with an 18 to 20-year-old. (inner metro)

Without a designated youth position, the provision of services to young customers by Centrelink relies on the individual officer's personal experience or training:

If (the interviewing officer has) never lived away from home, (they) need a different set of skills to be able to identify different things without being told ...if you haven't had those sorts of life experiences or training in doing that, then the only signals you're going to pick up, or the only information you're going to pick up from a customer is things that they're actually telling you. (inner metro)

There was no guarantee that this service delivery will meet the needs of YA job seekers:

Some customers you just hit it off with straight away, and some customers are just really open in what's going on in their lives, others have an issue with authority and clam up and don't want to tell you anything and you have to forcibly drag their name out of them, stuff like that. (inner metro)

Time available in first interview

Centrelink officers stressed the need for time to develop rapport with YA customers :

When we (social workers) have appointments we can spend a little bit of time, a lot more time perhaps than the Customer Service Officers can...Sometimes you need to be on their sort of wavelength, because quite often they wouldn't want to disclose that sort of information (to a stranger). (middle suburb)

Many officers felt the time available for the requirements of initial interview with a YA job seeker was particularly limiting:

You're with them for an hour and you'd just be going, 'and this is this, and this is this and sign here, here, here'. It was an overload of information. (outer metro)

This made it difficult to negotiate a PFWA that was tailored to the individual:

Centrelink workers basically haven't got time to go through it all word for word and, I mean, I remember making every effort I could to sort of really just make sure they were aware of how important the Agreement was, what it meant, and you know, we'd try (Personal Adviser)

The need to check eligibility and to follow a prescribed process discouraged real engagement with young customers, who may actually require more effort:

I think Customer Service Officers are just focussing more on the process and really just thinking, well look they have to have an Agreement and they have to do this, and if they're not willing ... I'm not going to push them. (rural)

One officer pointed out that while interview times had been extended—with the aim of achieving more meaningful dialogue and accurate assessments of customers—individual officers still determined how long they would take.

My interviews go exactly the time they're meant to and everyone else's will run for half. My interview goes for 30 minutes and we've been given that extra time because they wanted to do what they were calling really good JSCI scores, really accurate, really in-depth. So you'd actually talk to the customers... [but] every CSO is different. Some people just want to get it over as quick as they can. (outer metro)

Informing YA job seekers

Many Centrelink officers recognised that some young customers had problems comprehending Centrelink documents, letters and printed material:

[The difficulty is] probably the technical nature of the documents that we give. If they haven't been explained well enough in the interview, or if they've been left just up to the customer reading them themselves, then they might not have a full understanding of what's required. (inner metro)

Poor communication contributed to unrealistic expectations of Centrelink and the preparing for work process:

A lot of them, you know, they'll say 'Yeah, I want a part-time job', but they think we're going to find it or it's 'That's what I want but I can't find one'. It doesn't work like that. (CSO, middle suburb)

Only a few believed that young customers had adequate understandings of the rights and obligations involved in receiving YA. Some, however, simply expected that young people would speak up if they didn't like something that was included in the PFWA:

What it comes down to is the fact that we do it up, it's printed in front of the customer, they agree to comply, that's the time when they should be saying, 'No, I don't like this.' I mean in the grand scheme of things any customer that's got an issue with the Preparing For Work Agreement, it comes down to, the bottom line says, do you understand your obligations, you know, all this sort of stuff and they've signed an agreement saying yes, I'm going to do this, so, if they don't think that they're going to be able to do it, that's their opportunity, well that's their final opportunity to say, hey, I've got a problem with that. (CSO)

Workers assumed that young job seekers would use informal sources to supplement Centrelink's provision of information to YA customers:

I think one of the benefits for people of that target group is that they talk to each other so customers will often be aware of services that they may be eligible for even if it's not pointed out to them. (inner metro)

Impact on PFWAs: application of the standard package

Staff acknowledged that Centrelink written material, the use of jargon and the amount of information covered in the PFWA interview were confusing:

[If you try] to impose a Preparing For Work Agreement with this over daunting, over bureaucratic [system] and if you've got a CSO that just gives the Preparing For Work Agreement and doesn't go through, you know, in some sort of language that they really do understand... you've lost that person. (inner metro)

Lack of time also resulted in the application of 'the standard package':

We've got this amount of time to do a whole range of activities with the customer, but I guess the customer would often feel like they're being rushed or really prodded because we need to get as much information out as we can in a very short period of time ... It's easier to go with the standard (PFWA) package than it is to try and decide on anything else, don't always have enough time to investigate other challenges or barriers that may be affecting the customer. (inner metro)

The automated (computer based) generation of the agreement was also identified to contribute to a failure to reflect individual needs in agreements:

The problem with it is that it (the process of administration) does tend to be very automated. It's a matter of using your discretion and having the experience to use your discretion to the best of your ability . . . The standard package is 10 job (contacts) per fortnight, Job seeker diary, employer contact certificates. Any deviation from that requires some other form of assessment (CSO, inner metro)

Given these constraints, some officers were at a loss to know how to achieve more meaningful PFWAs. They also felt young people might agree to the activities listed, without thinking about the consequences:

With the Preparing For Work Agreement, the down side is that sometimes a lot of customers just say 'Yes, yes, yes, yes', and not end up doing it. Because we say 'This is what's expected of you in order for your payments to continue, do you understand it all?'

... They will just sign it and worry about handing in the diary at a later date because they don't feel they should have to look for 10 jobs a fortnight. (CSO, middle suburb)

The agreements lacked real and achievable goals for many inexperienced and disadvantaged young people, while CSOs tended to be supportive of the current style of administration. All officers emphasised the importance of outside agency and client input to achieve constructive action plans for young people.

Suggested improvements

Many officers suggested changes to improve the preparation of PFWAs. They included:

Paying particular attention to each young customer's circumstances

I think for the whole thing when dealing with customers of this age people need to be aware of what their social circumstances are like, we need to take more time to look at challenges and barriers and you know, they might just be 18 and they've just left school but they might also have six brothers and sisters at home, and you know mum and dad are out working all the time and they have to look after the kids, and things like that. You know, looking at people's individual circumstances, I don't think we do that enough. (CSO, inner metro)

Paying more attention to possible barriers to employment:

I think there has been some negligence in terms of forgetting that group, the people that have got the multiple barriers. I think we are beginning to address better ways or better formats or...Preparing For Work Agreements have to be made different to address those issues. (inner metro)

Encouraging YA job seekers to explore their employment goals:

They should be pushed to do career counselling because at 18–20 they're still very new, often they've not long been out of school and they don't really have much of a goal of where they're going. If someone doesn't have a goal they have nothing to head for. (outer metro)

Adjusting Centrelink's approach—including the language used in interviews and correspondence—to meet the needs of its with young customers:

With the Preparing For Work (Agreement interview), because they're young kids, I don't talk departmental talk, I talk their talk and ...I talk what they would understand. (middle suburb)

I think it's too much. I find Centrelink letters have got a lot of small writing instead of just simple, clear understanding. (middle suburb)

Splitting the New Claim process would make the first interview less confusing. The first interview could focus on eligibility and payment details, with another interview to focus on the preparation of the PFWA. This process had been adopted at one CSC and was considered to be a positive reform:

I think this current change that we've just introduced might actually be the way to go, because the initial contact will focus mainly on the income support side of things, and actually getting the payments started, and then there will be an opportunity to speak to someone about the looking for work side of things, and they should be able ... have a more focussed sort of approach to the person's general situation and their ability to do things. (rural)

Building better linkages with the youth support network through regular visits by Centrelink officers to agencies and by workers from community agencies to Centrelink:

Now we are attempting to make more linkages and in fact the manager and I went to The Next Door in High Street, for drug users, and basically to look at the type of provision that they do have ... So there's a good attempt of getting people providing the service outside

Centrelink but also understanding the mix. Argyle Street is our next venture, to look at what can it be a marriage. (inner metro)

We are trying to build a better rapport. Just last week we had representatives from the Job Network attend our office for a presentation... things like maybe have us going in and visiting the Job Network members or them coming into visit us. Put faces to names and things like that. (middle suburb)

In particular, developing a partnership approach (between youth agencies and Centrelink) to the management of mutual clients:

So it is about building those linkages and the dialogue where you can be transparent between organisations and Centrelink, it's both ways, actually, to get a mutual outcome (for the young person). (social worker)

Discussion

Key findings

This study investigated the administration of PFWAs by Centrelink staff and the extent to which they had been tailored to meet the individual needs of young job seekers. The key findings can be broken into two parts: young job seekers' experiences and opinions about Centrelink and the impact of these on the development and content of Preparing For Work Agreements.

Centrelink

Centrelink provided job seekers aged 18–20 years with their main connection to the participation support system and the role of Centrelink as a referral gateway was not well understood by the young people.

This misunderstanding about Centrelink's referral capacity may have influenced the perception of Centrelink's helpfulness in finding work. It is not within Centrelink's capacity to cover associated costs; it can only refer to community agencies that may or may not have brokerage funds. Where activities to reduce barriers to work, for example driving lessons, specific industry pre-apprenticeships or vocational courses had been identified by the job seeker, their inability to access these was often attributed to Centrelink.

Most young people appreciated access to loans, income support payments and referrals to courses and job search assistance provided by Centrelink. Only a few had nothing good to say about Centrelink.

The attitudes of Centrelink officers towards young people were perceived to vary, from accepting and helpful on the one hand, to judgmental and unhelpful on the other.

Poor communication skills and negative attitudes on the part of some Centrelink staff contributed to difficulties in establishing rapport. Young people were consequently reluctant to disclose relevant information, leading to inaccurate assessments of their job readiness.

Many YA customers preferred to have an adult present with them during the claim process, partly to provide help in completing forms and partly because they felt more comfortable with the whole process if they were not alone.

Negative experiences and long waiting times meant that some young people were reluctant to deal with Centrelink directly. Instead, they would go elsewhere, particularly to workers in youth agencies, for assistance and to sort out mistakes with the administration of YA. These workers said they spent a lot of time on Centrelink business, which may have reduced their capacity to focus on other issues.

The loss of designated youth staff at the Centrelink sites included in this study was perceived by youth workers and some Centrelink officers to have had negative impacts on the delivery of Youth Allowance. Firstly, young people no longer are guaranteed to see an officer who understands the specific issues related to young people and youth services. Secondly, youth workers are no longer able to easily contact Centrelink officers with expertise in YA to sort out problems for their YA clients.

While it was not the main focus of this study, we were struck by the substantial time and effort required under legislation (Social Security Act) for those young people for whom it is unreasonable to live at home to establish eligibility to the independent rate of YA. The workload in collecting statements and putting together a case was often borne by youth workers and by vulnerable young

people without family support. Some of these young people remained on the dependent rate, when they appeared eligible for, and needed, the higher amount.

Preparing For Work Agreements

Young people generally did not understand the purpose of PFWAs and did not know they could negotiate the activities included within them. The process of completing the PFWA during the first interview (where the YA application is also completed) meant that Centrelink staff had little time to identify both vocational and non-vocational barriers, especially of those young people who do not readily disclose relevant personal information. It seems unlikely that PFWAs prepared during this process were based on an accurate assessment of the capacity or job readiness of all claimants.

While all young people had been referred to Job Network providers for job matching, few had ongoing contact with them, few were confident that their vocational barriers were being addressed or that they were being connected to appropriate job vacancies.

The PFWAs we examined mainly contained job search activities, with relatively infrequent inclusion of other 'capacity-building' activities such as training or volunteer work. In fact, some young people were interested in or were following up volunteer work or training independently of Centrelink and did not realise these activities could be included in their PFWAs. Instead, the PFWA was understood by both YA customers and youth workers to be a list of required job search activities that provided the basis of a possible breach, if the job seeker failed to comply.

The computer-based processing of YA applications appeared to contribute to the generation of a standard model of PFWA that primarily includes job search activities. There is a lack of triggers in this automated system to identify potential non-vocational and vocational barriers to employment.

As a result, PFWAs appeared to motivate young people to look for work but did not contribute to increased capacity to get work or develop work-related skills. The sample of young people included a third who had not completed Year 10 and only a third had completed Year 12. They faced a range of barriers, yet the PFWA appeared to do little to address these.

There was some confusion about the inclusion of part-time work in PFWAs. While the inclusion of part-time work as a Mutual Obligation activity is negotiated with the young person (either to look for, or for those already with such work, to undertake), actually finding a part-time job can not be a legitimate requirement since it is not within the individual's control.

Centrelink does not appear to have any quality control mechanism to ensure that PFWAs do not include the requirement to find part-time work and to ensure they include activities that reflect the vocational and non-vocational barriers that prevent the entry of marginalised young people to long-term employment.

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that:

- Centrelink needs to do more to ensure young job seekers understand its assessment and referral role and its relationship with the Job Network.
- Some Centrelink officers require better interpersonal skills to develop rapport with YA job seekers that is essential for accurate assessments of job readiness.
- Some Centrelink officers require better knowledge of the youth labour market and youth services necessary for the design of effective YA PFWAs.
- The computer-based 'Preparing for work' format can result in inaccurate assessments of barriers to employment and the generation of 'standard model' PFWAs that are not tailored to individual needs.

- The time available to process YA applications and to negotiate PFWAs is not sufficient to design a PFWA that reflects the YA job seeker's employment barriers and goals.
- Young job seekers often lack the information, skills and/or confidence to negotiate activities better suited to their needs.
- As a result of these processes, PFWAs focus on job seeking activities and do little to assist disadvantaged young people address non-vocational barriers.

Implications for Centrelink

The implications of our findings for Centrelink are set out below according to the three categories of the Youth Servicing Strategy.

I Access to Centrelink information and services

In order to ensure that disadvantaged YA job seekers have the same access to the opportunities available to other young people (as argued by the Prime Minister's Taskforce, Eldridge 2001), the information provided by Centrelink must be clear and understandable. YA job seekers often do not understand Centrelink jargon or bureaucratic terms and often rely on parents or youth workers to explain letters. YA job seekers also rely on their peers to help them through the administration of YA with explanations of and assistance with forms and job seeker diaries, but this assistance may not always be based on an accurate understanding of requirements. Written information that is simpler and more easily comprehended would result in better communication with young people.

Disadvantaged young people often struggle with literacy and find formal paperwork overwhelming. They rely much more on verbal, face to face communication, and the chance to ask for clarification with someone they know and trust. This does not sit comfortably with the system of standardised 'computer driven' interviews, limited time for explanations, and sometimes unapproachable staff. Some Centrelink officers interviewed felt the interview time was too short to complete all the paperwork as well as develop rapport, discuss employment goals and activity options. Centrelink needs to investigate ways in which more time can be spent on face to face interviews with young people.

Recommendations

R1.1 Redesign letters, forms and written materials

Engage young people and youth agencies in the redesign of letters, forms, and written material for young people. Centrelink could approach media and design schools as well. An ongoing design and communication competition could improve the accessibility of Centrelink printed information and its general circulation. Other information aids could include:

- a 'map' of process and requirements: 'What happens when you first go to Centrelink?'
- youth-specific pre-grant seminars
- a concertina file for paperwork as learning aid to manage personal records and other important documentation (funding to be sought).

R1.2 Investigate ways to enable greater face to face contact time

Separate interviews to complete PFWAs (as suggested below, R2.5) may enable greater face-to-face contact time to devote maximum resources to those with the highest needs. Risk-based assessments may ensure adequate resources are devoted to the most disadvantaged and triggers to identify those with non-vocational and vocational barriers could be developed to stream vulnerable job seekers to longer interviews and reduce times for those not at risk.

R1.3 Promote the designated Youth and Student line to the Centrelink call centre

A Centrelink 'Youth Line' dedicated telephone line allows young people to feel more comfortable in contacting Centrelink by phone, and to have greater confidence in the information or advice they receive. Few knew of this and it could be better promoted to young people:

- through youth agencies and secondary schools
- with information on the best times to call as well as better times to visit CSCs.

2 Tailoring service delivery to the needs of young people

As a result of the internal 'job redesign' process within Centrelink, services to people of working age (job seekers) have been integrated, so that designated youth staff have disappeared from some Centrelink Areas. Most CSOs and all youth workers interviewed commented on this loss of youth focus. They questioned how activities would be tailored to the individual needs of YA job seekers if the officer designing the PFWA did not necessarily have an understanding of youth issues. Some Centrelink officers have the skills and motivation to work well with YA job seekers and a stronger strategy is needed to ensure the recruitment of appropriate Centrelink staff who have demonstrated an interest and aptitude for working with young people. Centrelink is currently developing a range of assessment tools that will help identify and stream customers 'at risk', which should assist to alleviate some of the issues raised.

The generation of the PFWA at the first interview appears to contribute to poor design of PFWAs. Both Centrelink officers and job seekers interviewed in this study agreed that some YA job seekers would sign anything at this interview in order to receive payment. The automated process that guides the first interview could also contribute to the generation of the 'standard model' PFWA.

PFWAs could be better designed at a time other than the initial interview with officers who have an interest in YA or with youth labour market knowledge. It was suggested that members of the Participation team could be responsible for the design of PFWAs that reflected a better focus on employment goals.

Young people who are eligible for the independent rate because it is unreasonable for them to live at home often have a range of personal issues—abuse, neglect, family breakdown or family violence—that require attention beyond the immediate pursuit of affordable housing and employment. However, as outlined above, they may be reluctant to disclose these details or may not see them as relevant to Centrelink. Research undertaken by Centrelink (2002 unpublished) found the application of current guidelines, including an automatic referral to a social worker resulted in better information about young people. Numerous benefits were identified for the YA customer and for Centrelink. These benefits included the provision of good customer service, improved relations with customers, a potential reduction in breaches and appeals, improved relations with community agencies as well as improved relations between staff in the CSC.

Centrelink staff sometimes include the requirement in PFWAs that someone finds a part-time job. If this person is not currently or about to work, this requirement seems unreasonable and unlawful, but it appears that, in some circumstances, this is actually happening.

Recommendations

R2.1 Ensure the lack of designated youth officers is not having a detrimental effect on the delivery of YA to job seekers (18–20 years)

Areas are urged to consult with Centrelink personnel, local youth agencies, young people and their families to ensure marginalised YA job seekers (18–20 years) in particular, enjoy equal access to PFWAs that are effectively tailored to meet their individual needs.

R2.2 Ensure CSOs with an interest in working with young people have the expertise to do so

Centrelink needs to provide ongoing training and skill development to reinforce knowledge in:

- the aims and objectives of Youth Allowance
- the greater flexibility of activity testing for YA compared to Newstart
- the developmental aspects of youth transition from dependence to independence, and from school to work
- characteristics of the youth labour market
- the issues and pressures facing young people
- purposes and functions of local youth services
- aspects of youth culture which may act as barriers to Centrelink services.

R2.3 Develop an Initial Contact strategy for YA job seekers

Ensure that from the first point of contact young people are informed about the administration of Youth Allowance (see R1.1 above: What happens when you first go to Centrelink?) and that their first experience is as helpful and inclusive as possible by:

- having officers with youth expertise on call for YA customers presenting at reception without an appointment
- explaining the stages and time required for the YA application process
- explaining the YA employment objectives and the flexibility of the YA activity test
- making the first appointment for a young person and their parent or guardian
- offering extra support, including referral to a youth service, when parents are unavailable.

R2.4 Introduce a pre-grant seminar tailored for YA applicants

Ensure that YA applicants understand the scope and requirements for YA by tailoring the pre-grant seminar to cover:

- the gateway referral function of Centrelink and the role of Job Network in addressing vocational barriers
- the importance of disclosing personal issues to identify non-vocational and vocational barriers prior to the preparation of a PFWA
- more flexible activity testing of YA
- the activities which can be included in a YA PFWA.

R2.5 Separate the design of PFWAs from the YA application

Developing the PFWA at a separate interview, perhaps with a member of the Participation team' would provide more time to develop rapport and collect relevant personal information. It would also allow the YA applicant to think about their goals or discuss the PFWA with family or friends before having to complete it. This would lead to a more accurate JSCI score and a PFWA better tailored to the needs of the job seeker. This PFWA interview might aim to:

- review personal information and explore the link with employment barriers
- explore the young person's employment or education goals
- update the JSCI score
- consider service options such as the Personal Support Programme, Intensive Assistance, or Job Placement, Education and Training program.
- discuss possible activities to be included in a PFWA which are directly relevant to the person's circumstances
- negotiate and design the PFWA.

R2.6 Introduce indicators for at risk YA applicants (18–20 years UTLAH)

Develop and implement risk indicators to identify young people between 18 and 20 years of age who require assistance to apply for the independent rate of YA (UTLAH). Referral to a social worker should be offered to those at risk.

R2.7 Establish a quality assurance process for PFWAs

Centrelink should institute a quality assurance process to ensure that PFWAs are individually tailored and include activities which enable disadvantaged job seekers to overcome employment barriers and develop skills.

3 Partnerships with all levels of government and the community to achieve better outcomes for young people.

YA job seekers appreciate friendly and approachable Centrelink staff, but the prospect of being treated badly (sometimes based on past experience) causes some to avoid any unnecessary (and sometimes necessary) contact with the agency. This group is also likely to limit their disclosure of relevant personal issues, in the same way as homeless young people interviewed by Parkinson and Horn (2001).

This goes some way to explaining why youth workers spend so much time with Centrelink, clarifying the personal details of YA job seekers and appealing breaches. These workers develop good relationships and rapport with service users, and are often more accessible and trusted by young people. One strategy to improve service provision could be the development of protocols to enable the collection and sharing of confidential information about clients by Centrelink and youth support agencies (with the client's consent and within privacy guidelines). Centrelink officers suggested this more than once.

Recommendations

R3.1 Develop out-servicing arrangements with youth agencies

Centrelink should outpace CSOs to local youth agencies on a regular (weekly) basis to improve the access of disadvantaged young people to Centrelink services.

R3.2 Improve links between Customer Service Centres and local youth services

To maintain a focus on local youth issues, local barriers to youth employment and local youth labour markets, Customer Service Centres should:

- work with the existing youth services network in the community to develop local strategies to ensure PFWAs are tailored to meet the needs of YA customers
- develop partnerships with schools, business and agencies to promote Centrelink information and provide opportunities for Centrelink personnel to meet with members of the community to address the needs of unemployed youth.

R3.3 Develop protocols for sharing information with local youth (and other) services

Protocols need to be developed between Centrelink CSCs and local youth agencies to oversee the sharing of information about YA customers (with the person's consent and meeting privacy guidelines). This will improve the quality of information held about young job seekers and enable PFWAs to be better matched to their needs.

Appendix I: Youth Allowance Activity Agreements – terms

Approved activities

544B.(1) A Youth Allowance Activity Agreement with a person is to require the person to undertake one or more of the following activities approved by the Secretary:

- (a) a job search
- (b) a vocational training course
- (c) training that would help in searching for work
- (d) paid work experience
- (e) measures designed to eliminate or reduce any disadvantage the person has in the labour market
- (f) subject to subsection (7) – an approved program of work for unemployment payment
- (g) subject to section 544D – development of self employment
- (h) subject to section 544E – development of and/or participation in group enterprises or cooperative enterprises
- (i) participation in a labour market program conducted by the Department
- (ia) an activity approved by the Secretary under the CSP
- (j) participation in a rehabilitation program
- (k) a course of education
- (l) an activity proposed by the person (such as unpaid voluntary work proposed by the person).

544B.(2) The terms of an agreement (including the description of the activities that the person is to be required to undertake) are to be approved by the Secretary.

544B.(3) In considering whether to approve the terms of an agreement with a person, the Secretary is to have regard to the person's capacity to comply with the proposed agreement and the person's needs.

544B.(4) In having regard to a person's capacity to comply with an agreement and the person's needs, the Secretary is to take into account:

- (a) the person's education, experience, skills, age and physical condition; and
- (b) the state of the labour market in the area where the person lives; and
- (c) the training opportunities available to the person; and
- (d) any matters that the Secretary considers relevant in the circumstances.

Source: FaCS web site 2003 <<http://www.facs.gov.au/ssleg/ssact/ssase561.htm>>.

Appendix 2: Interview schedule – Youth Allowees

Section I

I Participant details

Personal circumstances

1. How old are you?
2. Gender: male female
3. Indigenous status: Indigenous Non-Indigenous
4. What is your country of birth?
5. What language do you speak at home? English
Other
6. Family circumstances:
Do you live
 alone
 with parents/ in parents' home
 with partner
 with other relative
 with friend/s
 elsewhere...
7. Parents' employment:
 both
 mother
 father
 neither
8. Parents' education: Mother Father
 Year 10 or below
 Year 11
 Year 12
9. Do you pay any rent, board or other living expenses? Yes No
 If yes, how much per week?
10. At what age did you leave school?
11. What is your highest qualification?

Work history

12. What was your last job?
13. Are you currently working at all? Yes No
 If yes, describe work:
14. How long have you been unemployed/ looking for work?
15. Have you ever participated in any training programs to help you find work?
 Yes Details
 No

Centrelink history

16. Have you been breached? Yes No
 If yes, how many times?
17. Would you like to attend a feedback forum to talk about the project results?
 Yes No
18. Would you like a written copy of the results? Yes No

We would like to talk about your experiences with Centrelink, as someone who receives Youth Allowance and about your Preparing For Work Agreement. The interview will take about an hour. *(following items are a checklist to be marked*

Yes No Don't know

You have signed the consent form?

We have a copy of your current PFWA from Centrelink.

Did you receive a copy of your PFWA?

Did you bring a copy of your PFWA?

If yes, date

Is your Agreement current?

How long have you been receiving Youth Allowance?

So you applied around *(month/year)*..... *(Ask next question based on length of time in receipt of YA)*

Have you also attended: 3 month review

 6 month Mutual Obligation interview

 9 month review

 12 month review

2 Contact with Centrelink

2.1 First contact with Centrelink

Think about the first time you had contact with Centrelink.

Was your first contact: by phone going into an office
Which office?

Can you tell me what happened?

How did you find this first experience?

- First impressions of the person at the call centre/ office contact?
- If you went into the office how did you get there?
- Did you have to travel far?

2.2 Suggestions for improvement

Do you have any suggestions about ways this first contact with Centrelink could have been better for you? (What was good about this first contact?)

3 Youth Allowance

3.1 Application process

Now can you think about the information you had to give Centrelink to apply for Youth Allowance?

What information did you have to give?

How did you find that experience of

- answering the questions
- filling out paperwork
- collecting proof of identity?

Since that time, have you made any changes to that information you gave?

If yes, can you tell me about that?

Do you have any suggestions about how this application process could be improved? (Was there anything you think was good about the application process?)

3.2 Pre-grant seminar

Did you go to an information session/pre-grant seminar?

Can you describe what that was like?

- How many other people were there?

- What age were they?
- Did they show you a video? Were you able to see and hear it properly?
- Do you remember what the video was about and what the Centrelink officer talked about?
- How helpful was the information on the video?
How helpful was that seminar?
- Were you able to understand your rights and responsibilities?
- Were you able to ask questions?
- How comfortable did you feel?
Do you have any suggestions about how that information could be better presented? (Was there anything you thought was good about the seminar?)

3.3 New claims interview (or other interviews as appropriate)

Do you remember your first interview with a Centrelink officer to process your YA application?

Was it after the seminar (or? video)? Yes No

Will you tell me how you felt about the Centrelink officer?

- Were they friendly, approachable?
- Did you feel comfortable? Why/ why not?

What did you have to do in that first interview?

Do you have any suggestions about how this first interview could have been better for you? (Was there anything you thought was good about the interview?)

3.4 Assistance required/received

Did you have any assistance applying for Youth Allowance?

- If yes, what happened? Who gave it to you?
- If no, do you think you would have liked some assistance? Yes No
- How long did it take you to get your first payment?

3.5 Suggested improvements

Looking back on that application process and knowing what you know now, is there anything you would do differently, e.g.

- provided more information
- asked for more help
- brought a friend?

Is there any part of the application process you would have liked Centrelink to handle differently?

4 Preparing For Work Agreements

4.1 Degree of understanding

Now I'm going to ask you about your Preparing For Work Agreement. Do you know what I mean when I talk about a Preparing For Work Agreement?

Yes No

If yes, what do you understand to be the reason for having a PFWA?

Then, (*show Agreement and explain*) the Agreement is supposed to help you understand what you need to do to meet the activity test and the help Centrelink will provide you to get back to work. The activities that form the PFWA are a combination of things that you are required to do and other activities that are responsive to your individual needs.

Considering your PFWA, what help do you think Centrelink is providing to get you back to work?

Which activities do you think are responsive to your needs?

4.2 Experience of application

Can you tell me about your first PFWA?

- Do you remember what was explained to you?
- Were you given many choices about activities you were expected to do?
- Were you aware you could negotiate an Agreement?
- Can you tell me what you think ‘negotiating a PFWA’ means?
- Did you understand the rules about the Agreement?
- Did you talk about ‘compliance’ with the list of activities at this interview?
- Did you talk about what might happen if you didn’t comply with the list of activities?

4.3 Requirements

What did/does your Agreement require you to do?

Register with a Job Network Provider
Fill in a Job Diary
Provide Employer Contact Certificates
Attend seminars
Other

How helpful do you think these activities are in assisting you to find work? (*Go through each activity above*)

- If helpful, explain why
- If not helpful, how could the activities be improved?

4.4 Problems with compliance

Did you have any problems complying with the Agreement?

- If yes, can you tell me what happened?

4.5 Alternative activities

Are there activities that are/ were not included in the Agreement that you would have liked included?

- If yes, what were they?
- Why do you think they weren’t included?

Has there been any assistance provided that you didn’t need, e.g.

- intensive assistance
- education & training
- housing
- counselling, support?

4.6 Changes to PFWA

Have the conditions of your Agreement ever been changed?

Yes No Don’t know

Can you tell me how/when they were changed and the circumstances around the change?

- After 3/ 6/ 9 months

Was the new PFWA an improvement?

4.7 Suggested improvements

Based on what you know now about PFWAs:

- Is there anything you think could be improved about them?
- What is good about them?

5 Relationship with youth services

5.1 Assistance

Are there any other people who have helped you deal with Centrelink? Yes No

- If yes, who are they...?
- How did they help?
- Why do you use that agency/person?
- What is it about the agency/person you like?
- Did they help you solve your problem?

5.2 Suggested improvements

Is there anything that you think youth services could do differently to help people like yourself on Youth Allowance?

6 Assessment of YA and preparation for work

Generally, do you think your experiences with Youth Allowance have helped you become more ready to find work?

- If yes, what has been most helpful?
- If no, what other help do you think would have been useful?

What could Centrelink do differently when serving young people?

That's the last question. Do you have any questions?

Is there anything else you would like to say about Centrelink, Youth Allowance or Preparing For Work Agreements?

Thank you.

Appendix 3: Interview schedule – Youth workers

When answering these questions could you think about your clients that are 18–20 years old, unemployed and in receipt of Youth Allowance. Could you also concentrate on what you know about Centrelink’s process of assessing the needs and participation requirements of this group?

1 Information about the agency

I would like to start by getting some information about your agency.

1.1 Location

1.2 Will you describe the work your agency does...?

What area of support does your agency work in?

Housing

Employment

Health

Education/training

Other _____

1.3 What is the target group of young people for your agency?

1.4 What percentage of your clients are the focus of our study i.e. Youth Allowees (job seekers) 18–20?

1.5 What special needs do you think they have?

1.6 How does your agency make contact with young people or how do they find out about you?

Centrelink

School

Word of mouth

Other agency (describe)

Other _____

1.7 What are the main reasons young people make contact with your agency?

1.8 What proportion of the time you spend with Youth Allowees (job seekers, 18–20) would be related to Centrelink business?

2 Relationship with Centrelink

Now I would like to talk with you about how the role you have in assisting young people plays out in the relationship between your agency and the local Centrelink CSC.

2.1 How would you rate this relationship and what are the factors that affect this relationship:
with the CSC?

with a particular Centrelink CSO?

2.2 What suggestions could you make that would improve this relationship?

2.3 What are the main issues that cause you to intervene with Centrelink on behalf of our target group?

2.4 What actions do you take in those circumstances?

2.5 Does Centrelink approach your agency to assist our target group?

2.6 Why do you think young people use your agency to get help dealing with Centrelink?

2.7 In what ways do you think Centrelink helps our target group to find work?

2.8 In what ways do you think Centrelink could further help our target group to find work?

2.9 Do you think the way Centrelink works with agencies could be improved?

Yes No

3 Preparing For Work Agreements

Now I would like to talk about PFWAs.

- 3.1 What do you see as the main purpose(s) of PFWAs?
- 3.2 How well do you think this purpose is served?
- 3.3 What is your impression of the experience of young people in our target group in:
Negotiating activities...
Complying with requirements outlined in the agreement...
- 3.4 What assistance do you think PFWAs provide young people in preparing for work?
- 3.5 What do you see as the main problems with the administration of PFWAs?
- 3.6 How do you think these problems could be overcome?

4 Youth Allowance

Now we will finish up with your thoughts about Youth Allowance.

- 4.1 What experiences do you think young people have when they are in receipt of Youth Allowance?
- 4.2 Do you want to make any other comments about Centrelink, Youth Allowance and/or PFWAs?

Thank you

Appendix 4: Interview Schedule – Centrelink officers

Questions relate to 18 to 20-year-old job seekers on Youth Allowance.

Office location _____

1 Work history

I'd like to get some basic background information about your work history.

- 1.1 What is your current position?
- 1.2 How long have you been in this position?
- 1.3 Was the work you did before this relevant to Youth Allowance or PFWAs?
Yes No
- 1.4 If yes, how?
- 1.5 How long have you been at this office?

2 Youth allowance

We'd like to get a clear understanding of the steps that young people go through to apply for YA and how Centrelink assesses their needs and participation requirements.

- 2.1 Could you briefly take me through the application and/or initial assessment process (*depending on relevance to interviewee's role*) and explain your role in the process?
Application
Assessment of needs
Other
- 2.2 Explain your role
- 2.3 What do you think are the main aims of the assessment process that you have just described?
- 2.4 How well does this process meet these aims? Well Poor
- 2.5 What do you see to be the strengths and limitations of this process?
- 2.6 How would you improve the application/assessment process?
- 2.7 Are there any areas of these processes that you believe you do particularly well or that you feel you could do better?
Developing rapport with young people
Explaining complex requirements of system
Taking advantage of flexible system/ using discretion
Administration
Other

3 Preparing For Work Agreements

Now I want to talk to you about PFWAs.

- 3.1 What do you see as the main purpose(s) of the Preparing For Work Agreement?
Application/eligibility
Assess needs
Assess capacity
Provide information about rights and obligations
Develop plan of action
- 3.2 How well do you think this purpose is served?
- 3.3 What is your impression of the positive and negative experiences of young people in:

Negotiation of Agreement
Poor comprehension and communication skills
Understanding rights and obligations
Communicating personal circumstances that identify needs and barriers

Compliance with Agreement

Lack of resources

Housing/homelessness

Health issues:

Physical

Mental

Substance abuse

Reluctance to take directions

Lack of local employment opportunities

Lack of job skills, job readiness, and job search skills

Isolation/lack of transport

Lack of life skills

Lack of family support

Other

3.4 What actions can you take about these concerns?

3.5 Do you have any suggestions to improve the process of developing and applying PFWAs?

4 Relationship with support agencies

Now I want to talk about Centrelink's relationship with youth support agencies.

4.1 How would you rate this relationship and what are the factors that affect this relationship?

With agencies

With staff

4.2 What suggestions do you have to improve these relationships?

4.3 What are the main issues that you find agencies contact you about (on behalf of our target group)?

4.4 What actions do you take

4.5 Why do you think young people use agencies to intervene on their behalf?

4.6 In what ways do you think agencies help this target group prepare for and find work?

4.7 How do you think they could assist further?

4.8 Do you involve agencies in addressing particular YA/PFWA problems?

Yes No

Details

4.9 Do you think the way Centrelink works with agencies could be improved?

Yes No

Details

4.10 How successful do you think PFWAs are in achieving their aims?

Good Poor

Details

4.11 Anything else you'd like to say about PFWAs, support agencies or Centrelink in general?

Thank you

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