REPEAT FAILURE

Why Australia's workforce programs aren't working

JANUARY 2024

Anglicare Australia
in every Community

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About this report

This report aims to understand whether existing Government approaches to employment, training and mutual obligation are achieving their goals. It also seeks to understand the true purpose of mutual obligation programs in Australia, and how approaches are shaped by biases in the areas of social security and employment policy.

Repeat Failure: Why Australia's workforce programs aren't working undertakes a meta-analysis of evaluations previously conducted of several key employment and mutual obligation programs. While this analysis will predominantly focus on Government evaluations, independent research has also been incorporated where it is available.

Part I outlines the context in which Australia's current employment services and social security programs operate, providing an overview of key milestones and major changes that the system has faced in recent history.

Part II presents a comparison of performance evaluation findings for several key employment and mutual obligation programs against the objectives they were implemented to attain.

Parts III and IV draw broader conclusions about the Australian approach and how it is working in practice. This includes an overview of consistent themes and learnings that can be derived from the analysis, and a reflection on the evaluations that were studied for this report.

Finally, Part V recommendations to reform employment services, ensuring the future of Australia's workforce programs provide people with the support they need while delivering the outcomes they were created to address.

Any study is confined by its methodology. The method used in this report is a meta-analysis. This method cannot answer every question, and in some cases this research has generated important questions that this project cannot directly answer. We are contributing this study to a growing body of research in the hope of working with others to more fully answer these questions.

We hope we can use these findings to change the conversation about income security and improve people's lives.

Repeated failure in workforce programs

Few doubt the importance of having a secure income. It protects us from living in poverty and allows us to enjoy the benefits of stability. Without a secure income it is hard to live beyond the next pay cheque, plan for the future, or take control of our lives. Many people hope to draw a secure income from a secure job, and recent political debates have placed full employment at the centre of debates about economic security.

The narrative has been one of success. Many commentators have been pointing to our low unemployment rate and strong pandemic recovery. Yet this is at odds with the experience of hundreds of thousands of Australians who continue to grapple with the challenges of finding and retaining jobs, some after years of relentless searching. There is a deep disconnect between the experiences of the people Anglicare Australia Network members work with and the mainstream commentary about employment, with people left behind on low payments that come with draconian conditions and little real help to find security.

Australia's social security system is placing ever more obligations and conditions on those it serves, while simultaneously reducing the support it offers to them to find work. At the same time, record amounts are being spent supporting private and profit-driven providers to administer the system.

All of this is being done under the guise of helping people find work. In light of that rationale and the billions spent on the system each year, it is timely to ask whether Australia's approach to workforce participation is serving its purported goal – to help people find work.

The study finds that Australia's approach, which is focused on short-term pre-employment interventions, does almost nothing to address the structural barriers to gaining work. In some cases there is no expectation that they will serve this goal, and it has been accepted that programs will simply exist to keep people busy in order to justify their receipt of payments. Our recommendations call for overhauling these interventions, which have been failing to deliver outcomes for years. We also call for a renewed focus on job creation, which has been neglected by governments for too long.

As the current Government refines its agenda for jobs and skills, our hope is that we can work with them to create a truly holistic approach to employment which focuses on tackling structural barriers, and giving people who want it the support they need.

Aims and research methods

Through this paper, Anglicare Australia seeks to evaluate the performance of the employment system in achieving the outcomes it was intended to. This follows Anglicare Australia's 2021 study *Asking Those Who Know*, which explored people's experiences within this system.

This report aims to answer to the following questions:

- Are existing Government approaches to employment, training and mutual obligation achieving their stated goals?
- How is the success of existing approaches being measured?
- What is the true purpose of mutual obligation programs in Australia?

More fundamentally, this paper seeks to understand the biases that underpin the Australian approach to employment by asking, "what are the things we don't need evidence to believe?"

The findings aim to contribute to existing literature on the effectiveness of employment services and social security programs by assessing the performance of Australian workforce programs against the objectives they were created to achieve. These insights are critical to reshaping the system so that it works for the people it purports to help.

The paper outlines the context in which Australia's current employment services and social security programs operate, providing an overview of key milestones and major changes that the system has faced in recent history. This is followed by comparison of performance evaluation findings for several key employment and mutual obligation programs against the objectives they were implemented to attain.

From this comparison we will draw broader conclusions about the Australian approach and how it is working in practice. This includes an overview of consistent themes and learnings that can be derived from the analysis, and a reflection on the evaluations that were studied for this report.

We conclude by making recommendations to reform employment services, ensuring the future of Australia's workforce programs provide people with the support they need while delivering the outcomes they were created to address.

Methodology

This paper undertakes a meta-analysis of evaluations previously conducted of several key employment and mutual obligation programs. While this analysis will predominantly focus on Government evaluations, independent research has also been incorporated where it is available.

The programs analysed within this paper are:

- Compulsory income management, including the BasicsCard and Cashless Debit Card
- Employment services, including Workforce Australia and its predecessor, Jobactive
- Pre-employment training, including the Career Transition Assistance (CTA) program and Employability Skills Training (EST) program
- Work for the Dole.

These programs have been chosen because they exemplify recent trends in employment and social service programs, and because publicly available evaluations have been conducted for each.

To assess whether the chosen programs achieving their objectives, their performance will be evaluated against the publicly stated rationale for its introduction. This enables the analysis to go beyond a face-value reading, which are often expanded to include tangential outcomes or hypothetical benefits.

This methodology has been chosen to help understand what drives the preference for some approaches over others, why similar approaches continue to be redeployed, and whether they are delivering results.

PART I

Social security and employment services

Recent decades have seen major changes to the systems that support people out of work, especially for those who receive social security payments. These changes have many elements, but the most striking is that people receiving social security payments now need to do much more to justify their income support payments than ever before. Each of the programs featured in this paper stem from this changing approach.

These changes have been driven by policy shifts in Australia and by a changing consensus around the purpose of social security. At its core, this new thinking holds that payments should direct people to work and use incentives and punishments to maximise employment.[1]

As part of these shifts, the number and scope of requirements to receive unemployment benefits in Australia has ballooned. At the same time, support for individuals is constantly being wound back. This section explores how Australia came to have a social security system which places so many obligations and conditions on those it serves, while simultaneously reducing the support it offers to them.

The Australian approach

For the past four decades, Australian social security has been shaped by an approach known as Active Labour Market Policy. The essence of this approach is that services should not just support unemployed people financially. They should also influence their behaviour and encourage job search efforts. This has become an unquestioned paradigm for social policy, evolving into ever more punitive approaches. A key focus is on getting unemployed people 'moving,' even if this is initially an administrative achievement. According to the OECD, "the general principle [is] moving the long-term unemployed from one 'activation' system to another – avoiding inertia, and when one thing has not worked, trying something else." [2]

Reforms have been influenced by the idea that social security can shape the labour force, with the system becoming a tool to redirect 'surplus' workers to new forms of employment. A major social security review led by Bettina Cass in the late 1980s was arguably the first step towards this use of the social security system. The Hawke Government was facing dramatic changes to employment, including trends towards higher-skilled work, growing female participation, more part-time work, and stubborn structural unemployment. Cass argued that the social security system should be used to help unemployed people to respond to these changes.[3]

According to the Cass Review, the income support system had three roles. These were to support job search, promote a more flexible workforce, and redistribute income to those with barriers to work. Cass called for better links between labour market programs and income support to promote training and reskilling. The Review proposed that the 'work test,' which required people to be available for work, be replaced by a broader 'activity test'. According to Cass, "the concept of an activity test extends the boundaries of the work test to include participation in activities, particularly training programs, which will increase skill levels and potential employment chances." [4]

This activity test could be satisfied through training, part-time work, or searching for full-time work. Other reforms included changing the taper rates of payments depending on work hours. This was designed to promote part-time work, which was believed to lead to full-time work. The Review also suggested that levels of payments for long-term unemployed should be increased.[5]

Most significantly, the Review introduced the concept of 'reciprocal obligation.' This meant that governments would do more to help people to find jobs. As part of this compact, unemployed people would be expected to do more to help themselves, and it was considered fair to require more of people as part of the activity test.[6] [7]

Key developments in Australian social policy

Australian social security policy has been evolving to become more targeted and more conditional. Since the 1980s, unemployment payments have come with an obligation to look for work. This is also known as the 'work test.' To receive payments, people had to be unemployed, available for work, and willing to accept reasonable job offers. [8] Applicants also had to register with the then Commonwealth Employment Service (CES).

To enforce these obligations, the CES was required to report when someone's registration with them had lapsed. This prompted the Department of Social Security to suspend their benefits. Introduced in 1986, this is one of the earliest examples of 'breaches' being used against individuals. To maintain their registration, people were forced to list two jobs they had applied for in each fortnight. During the same period, the rules around acceptable job offers were also tightened. Applicants were allowed to look for jobs in their preferred field, but could be forced to take another job if they failed to find one in their area of choice.

From 1989, all long-term unemployed people aged between 21 and 54 were subject to intensive interviews. The following year this was extended to all long-term unemployed people. The 'work test' was also broadened to become an 'activity test' which could include part-time, temporary and casual work.[9]

In 1991, the Unemployment Benefit was replaced by two other benefits. These were the Job Search Allowance for those who had been unemployed for less than one year, and the Newstart Allowance for those who had been unemployed for more than one year. Newstart beneficiaries were forced into intensive interviews and formal agreements which included a "contractual obligation to undertake an agreed course of action." [10] They could also participate in full-time training or voluntary work for up to eight weeks per year without losing payments. The agreement was later extended to all applicants.

Starting from 1996, people were required to list more detailed employer contact information on their fortnightly continuation forms, and the use of Employer Contact Certificates increased. Diaries were introduced, requiring job seekers to keep a record of their activities and list up to ten jobs applied for per fortnight.

In 1997, the Work for the Dole scheme was introduced. At the same time, the Howard Government introduced the notion of 'mutual obligation.' This effectively replaced 'reciprocal obligation.' Reciprocal obligation referred to the requirement for people to seek work if they were receiving government support to find it. Mutual obligation took this a step further. It was now the income support payment itself, not the add-on support to look for work, that created the obligation to 'give something back' to the community. A new agency, Centrelink, was created to oversee these obligations and deliver payments. The CES was later abolished and the first round of outsourcing employment services under the Job Network began.[11]

Penalties for failing to meet requirements have also been through substantial changes. In 1991 penalties for failing to reply to correspondence or attend interviews were increased. 1994 saw the introduction of a distinction between 'activity test' breaches and 'administrative' breaches. From 1995 penalties were applied at rates governed by the length of time a person had been on benefits, increasing the penalty for those who had been longest without work.

Under the Howard Government, breach penalties were again revised and their duration was increased. By 2004, administrative penalties resulted in cuts to benefits of sixteen percent for thirteen weeks, and three categories of activity test penalty were introduced. These included a cut of eighteen percent for 26 weeks for the first breach in a two-year period, a 24 percent cut for six months for the second breach, and no payment at all for eight weeks for the third breach.

Although the architecture of these systems was created in the 1990s and 2000s, the past two decades have seen a major expansion of obligations and conditions. In this period Australia has been at the vanguard of welfare conditionality in the developed world, adapting many conditional programs from overseas and pioneering some at home.

In 2008, the Rudd Government began trialling an income management card, the BasicsCard, in the Northern Territory. This has evolved into the Cashless Debit Card, an expanded program quarantining income for people on certain government payments by not allowing the owner to purchase alcohol, gamble or withdraw cash. The cards are attached to a separate account where 80 percent of the payment is deposited. The card only allows users to buy products at approved sellers. Bill payments are set up by Centrelink to automatically be paid by the card. In spite of inconclusive evidence when evaluated,[12] another extension and expansion of the cashless debit card was enacted in 2020.

Among the most significant changes to social security were those introduced by the Gillard Government to the Disability Support Pension. The changes were enacted from 2015, with stricter rules and new assessment processes. The changes have made it harder to qualify for payments.[13] Instead, growing numbers of people are accessing lower payments with greater obligations.[14] Further changes in eligibility for the Disability Support Pension were again introduced in 2017. The changes mean that it is no longer be possible to qualify for a Disability Support Pension on the basis of alcohol or drug related issues.

Critically, a new Targeted Compliance Framework for job seekers was introduced in 2017. The Framework again strengthens penalties and introduces 'demerit points,' mandatory participation, and other obligations for those on Parenting Payments. The regime of breaches and demerit points, which can be policed by private employment service providers, is unique globally. They allow for people who are breached three times to have their payments suspended. This Framework was accompanied by a mandatory random drug testing scheme, which was trialled temporarily in three locations.

Finally, in 2020, the Morrison Government enacted a consolidation of working age payments into a new JobSeeker Payment. The creation of JobSeeker abolished the Newstart Allowance and several other payments.

Today, the stated aim of Australia's income support system is to provide for a minimum acceptable standard of living for those who rely on it. As of September 2023, there are 5.7 million Australians who receive income from Centrelink.[15] Almost half, about 2.6 million people, receive the Age Pension. Over 800,000 receive unemployment payments such as the JobSeeker Payment or Youth Allowance for non-students. Over one million receive disability-related payments, such as the Disability Support Pension or Carer Payment. The remaining payments are largely for parents and students.

Increasingly, the social security and income support system works in tandem with employment services. This area has been constantly growing and evolving since the Howard Government first introduced the Job Network, later rebranded as Job Services Australia and then Jobactive. The current iteration of this system is a network of privatised employment services agencies contracted to support job seekers into work. The system places job seekers into three streams based on how much support they need, and they are given a plan to support their job search. In overseeing this system, governments have outsourced their obligation to provide income and employment support to their citizens.

Private providers can require job seekers to attend activities, courses and other obligations. They are also empowered to breach those who fail to comply. From 2022, Jobactive was replaced with Workforce Australia. The new model retains much of the system's architecture and mutual obligations, with a new digital portal and more automated services for some job seekers. The three streams for job seeker support will be consolidated into two.[16] The current Workforce Australia model is explained in greater detail in the following chapter.

In conjunction with the growth in employment services, basic obligations to receive payments have expanded. Currently, in order to receive JobSeeker payment, recipients must:[17]

- register with an employment service provider
- actively look for suitable paid work
- accept suitable work offers
- attend all job interviews

- attend Centrelink offices and meetings with their provider when requested to do so
- agree to attend approved training courses or programs
- not leave a job, training course or program without sufficient reason
- correctly advise Centrelink of any income earned
- enter into and comply with a plan to search for jobs
- lodge fortnightly continuation forms
- apply for ten jobs per fortnight
- participate in a mutual obligation activity after a certain amount of time on benefits
- have certificates signed by employers approached about jobs, if required
- complete a Job Seeker Diary with details of job search efforts
- not leave their current residence to move to an area with a higher rate of unemployment.

Effectiveness of mutual obligation

Despite a decrease in the official unemployment rate over the last decade, evidence suggests that the mutual obligation regime does little to help people. Much of the literature in this area is also based on government data, with various reviews and inquiries also showing that the system is failing to place long-term unemployed people into work.[18] Some key examples of these will be explored in greater detail in a later section.. Academic research produced during the Coronavirus pandemic has also shown that people are actually likely to be unemployed longer if they are subject to mutual obligation activities or Work for the Dole, and if they participate in employment services.[19]

Anglicare Australia has been a major contributor to the research in this area, with our findings showing that those in the greatest need of support from employment services are those facing the greatest competition for work.[20] Anglicare Australia's Jobs Availability Snapshot has found that people in the highest needs category for support stay in the system for an average of five years.[21] This is well beyond the definition of long-term unemployment, which is twelve months.[22] Those unemployed for five or more years are much less likely ever to find work again.[23] The number of people in this category has been trending upwards as a proportion of the employment services caseload.[24] The rate of long-term unemployment has almost doubled over the past ten years, while the proportion of unemployed people who are long-term unemployed continues to climb. The growth in long-term unemployment has been universal, affecting all demographics.[25]

Anglicare Australia's research also shows that entry-level jobs, which are best suited to those with barriers to work, have been slowly disappearing and becoming harder to compete for. In 2023, there were 48 job seekers for every entry-level job.[26] At the same time, employers are now able to report job seekers if they submit unsuitable or inappropriate applications. The lack of suitable jobs, coupled with the requirement that people apply for a minimum number of jobs each month, means that people can be breached simply for trying to comply with their obligations.

There is mounting evidence that mutual obligations do not work. Government and parliamentary reviews have repeatedly shown that programs such as youth internship programs,[27] Work for the Dole,[28] and the Community Development Program[29] are failing to place people in work. Research also suggests that employment services have been failing in their aims, with a recent inquiry reporting that "participants are gaining employment in spite of the system, not because of it." [30]

In all, the current Australian approach to social security is distinguished by an emphasis on obligations and compulsion; severe penalties for non-compliance with requirements; and compared with European countries, a very low level of financial investment in income payments.[31]

PART II

Findings from key mutual obligation programs

Comparing the aims of each studied program with their performance shows that many employment initiatives are not delivering employment outcomes. This chapter explores the findings for each studied program, with a section on each.

The performance of each program will be assessed based on the publicly stated rationale for its enactment, using rationales from the time of introduction and evaluation results. Themes from the evaluations will also be considered and independent research will be drawn on where it is available.

I. Employment services

Background and objectives

Private employment services have been constantly growing since the abolition of the CES. In 1997-98 the Howard Government began Australia's shift toward the compliance-driven 'work-first' model of employment services, replacing the public employment service provider with an entirely privatised system known as the Job Network. As explored in the previous chapter, the 'reciprocal obligation' model was replaced by the more onerous 'mutual obligation' system of requirements.

The subsequent iterations of privatised employment services have continued an approach focused on mutual obligation, including Job Network to 2009, Job Services Australia to 2015, Jobactive to 2022, and Workforce Australia from 2022 onwards. This has resulted in the rapid increase of activity-test requirements, a dramatic increase in penalties imposed on unemployed workers, and a steady decline in government expenditure on direct labour market programs and job creation.

The current system, Workforce Australia, was developed by the previous Morrison Government and inherited by the current Albanese Government. Under this model people out of work and in receipt of Government income payments are matched with an employment services provider, who develop a job plan for the person with minimum activity, training, and job application requirements. The system's architecture is based on job seeking activities, mutual obligations, and breaches for non-compliance which providers are paid to administer.

The key difference between Workforce Australia and its predecessor, Jobactive, has been the creation of a digital portal and automated employment services for those out of work for less than twelve months. This is designed to eliminate the need for an employment services provider for the most

work-ready people. However figures also show that most people receiving income payments are out of work for 42 months,[32] meaning that the vast majority of the Workforce Australia caseload is already being managed by a provider less than eighteen months after the new model was enacted.

In addition to the payments that providers receive to manage a participant, the system offers many opportunities for for-profit providers to generate revenue streams with providers administering breaches and obligations. Many of the largest employment service providers also deliver training and offer workforce placements, meaning that a provider can be paid to take on a client by the federal government, then be paid to place them into training within their own organisation, and then be paid again by placing the person into work somewhere else in that organisation's network.

Workforce Australia is a $7.3 billion model,[33] making it the largest and most expensive program explored in this report. It also underpins the architecture of the entire system and overlaps with the programs explored later in this chapter. For example, employment service providers administer the Work for the Dole scheme and refer participants to it through job plans, and many are also providers pre-employment training.

The goals of the employment services model can be traced back to the Howard Government's reforms in establishing the architecture of the system. The stated objective of privatising employment services was to create a cost-effective service system that was incentivised to achieve sustainable employment for people who are long-term unemployed.[34] The then Minister for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs Amanda Vanstone outlined six principles for the new system:

- The assistance to job seekers should be based on their individual needs and their capacity to benefit from it in terms of achieving an employment outcome.
- Providers should have access to flexible forms of assistance that fit the needs of job seekers.
- The incentive framework should reward providers of labour market assistance primarily for placing job seekers in real jobs, with additional incentives for those most in need.
- A competitive market for employment placement services should separate purchaser from providers and ensure that providers operate on the basis of competitive neutrality.
- Conditions for payment of income support for unemployed people should be linked closely with active employment assistance measures.
- People and employers should be able to receive high quality and streamlined service from the agencies and providers with which they interact.[35]

These principles continue to underpin the employment service system, with new iterations of the system building on them in the years that followed. In 2020, then Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business Michaelia Cash announced that the new Workforce Australia model, set to succeed Jobactive, would pursue a different approach to meeting these principles:

> The new model will allow most jobseekers to manage their job search requirements online, without the need for face-to-face meetings with job service providers, and allow more resources to be directed to providing personal, tailored help to more disadvantaged Australians who need access to vital skills and training to break into the workforce. [36]

Bringing together the new direction with the existing six principles, Workforce Australia currently describes itself as "existing to deliver personalised support. Workforce Australia will help Australians find and keep a job, change jobs or create their own job." [37]

Evaluation results and program performance

A major government-commissioned review of Jobactive was released in 2022. The review explored various aspects of the system, including employer awareness and satisfaction with the program, the matching of participants with providers, and whether job plans are adapted to the needs of individuals.[38]

However, the evaluation did not assess whether and how Jobactive helped people find work. Instead, it simply looked at exits from income support and assumed that these exits could be attributed to participation in Jobactive. The evaluation fails to note that the average amount of time a person spent on JobSeeker, known as Newstart at the time of the evaluation, had risen by approximately a year over the life of the Jobactive program.

The evaluation does acknowledge that the model does not address the barriers to employment, reporting that:

> Participants consistently reported similar personal and structural barriers to employment. Personal barriers include, for example, mental and physical health issues. Structural barriers include factors such as a lack of available jobs or public transport. Participants do not always disclose barriers to their provider, but many who did, felt that their provider did not assist them in addressing their barriers.

> Providers consider it is more difficult to address participant barriers to employment under the Jobactive model… This is because addressing the multiple complex barriers some participants experience requires more holistic servicing and a tailored approach. Some providers do not feel they have the time to achieve outcomes with this group. In addition, access and availability of services is variable – for example, about two-thirds of providers reported that it was difficult or very difficult to access housing services for their participants. [39]

This is a significant finding, as one of the key principles underpinning the privatised model was to address the barriers to employment. It is important to note that nothing in the architecture of the new Workforce Australia model addresses this key weakness from the Jobactive system.

The new Workforce Australia model is ostensibly based on the work of the Employment Services Expert Panel,[40] another key review, which collected evidence from service providers, users, peak bodies and labour market experts. Yet the model only adopts some of the Panel's recommendations, ignoring calls to favour specialist and locally-based providers over for-profits, end excessive compliance and penalties for people, and end avenues for exploitation of the system.

Despite some minor improvements, the architecture of the old Jobactive system remains. Billions of dollars' worth of new contracts to support this scheme were signed by the Coalition just months before it lost government, and the current Government has confirmed that it will proceed with the contracts.

II. Pre-employment skills training

Background and objectives

In addition to the employment services framework, Australia's system has a strong focus on pre-employment training for individuals. Two key examples are the Career Transition Assistance (CTA) program and the Employability Skills Training (EST) program.

The CTA program was announced by the Turnbull Government in 2017 in response to higher rates of unemployment among people over the age of 45. Around 40 percent of people in the employment services caseload are over the age of 45, and research shows that workers who lose their jobs later in life are much less likely to find work again.[41] CTA works by offering a skills assessment for each participant,

using that information to target their job search, and assisting people to tailor their job applications. It was trialled in five sites before being expanded nation-wide. EST is a similar pre-employment training program for people aged fifteen years and over, announced in 2016. It offers similar support for job searching and skills assessment. Both programs are largely delivered by employment service providers, with private providers serving as the largest contractors for both schemes.[42]

Neither program offers the level of training that would enable a participant to change careers or earn an advanced qualification. However, the EST is promoted as helping people "build industry-specific knowledge" in fields they are interested in. Both programs offer more general support to build "workplace skills, such as problem-solving, communication and decision making, and the ability to work in a team."[43]

CTA is a voluntary program, although participants can be referred to it as part of job plan through their employment service provider. EST is compulsory for jobseekers in the Workforce Australia employment program if they have been unemployed for four months. At the time of its introduction, then Minister for Employment Michaelia Cash said the CTA program "will help prepare mature aged Australians for new jobs," adding that "by making this targeted investment we are identifying and removing barriers that may be preventing mature age Australians from returning to the workforce."[44]

Announcing the EST program in 2016, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said that it will "help prepare young job seekers for the workplace. The training will help young people better understand what employers expect of them and give them the skills, attitudes and behaviours required to be successful in a job."[45]

Evaluation results and program performance

Although both CTA and EST were introduced on the premise of improving work preparedness and readiness, neither program was evaluated on that basis. The Government-commissioned evaluation of CTA was conducted by Wallis Social Research and ACIL Allen Consulting.[46] Notably, it did not evaluate whether participants are more job ready, whether employers considered it helpful in preparing candidates for new roles, whether it removed barriers for mature-age workers, or whether it assisted them gaining work.

Instead the evaluation measured resilience and confidence, although the evaluation did not explore whether CTA contributed to these traits in participants. The evaluation also had a strong focus on

digital literacy, and drew positive conclusions for the program based on a finding of digital literacy in making mature-age workers more confident to use digital platforms to apply for jobs. The evaluation noted that 88 percent of people surveyed were still looking for work after participating in program, although it did not focus on this result or analyse its implications for the program.[47]

The Department of Education, Skills, and Employment's evaluation of the EST program was particularly sparse, focusing not on employment outcomes or work readiness but instead on the number of providers who had to cancel courses due to low levels of referrals, and the number of unused courses that were delivered by providers.[48] The program was reviewed alongside the PaTH Internship Program, which has since been abolished. Where the review did engage with the experiences of participants, it surveyed:

- awareness of the program, which was around 30 percent
- participation in the program, measured through commencement after referral. Around 79 percent of those referred commenced the program
- social connections formed within the program using qualitative quotes from participants.[49]

The review identified low referral numbers as the primary issue with the program, and noted that the Government was responding by working with employment service providers to increase the number of referrals.[50]

Neither the CTA or EST evaluations engaged with the performance of the program against its stated goals or considered the role the program may or may not have played in a person's search for work. The independent and academic research that exists in this area suggests that pre-employment skills training has a limited impact.[51] This is because they fail to provide more advanced qualifications, which is what is usually needed for workers to change careers, or address the structural causes of unemployment.[52]

III. Work for the Dole

Background and goals

Work for the Dole was first proposed by the Liberal Party in 1987 and was enacted on a trial basis under the Howard Government 1997. It was expanded and made permanent in 1998. In its current incarnation, the program offers work-like placements run by host organisations. The Work for the Dole program is administered by employment service providers, many of which are private and for-

profit. However, the host organisations themselves are either Government agencies, not-for-profit organisations, or charities.

People are typically referred to Work for the Dole after they've been on the JobSeeker payment for six to twelve months. The program was unique at the time of its introduction for not being designed to build any particular skills or competencies and for not including a pathway to paid work, compared with the more traditional work placements or work experience programs that had previously existed. Instead, Work for the Dole hosts are encouraged to develop 'soft skills' in participants:

> Where possible, Work for the Dole activities should allow participants the opportunity to develop [competencies such as] teamwork, initiative and innovation, planning and organising, oral communication, digital engagement, reading, writing, problem solving, learning and numeracy. [53]

Each placement lasts for eight weeks. Participants do not get paid for the work they perform as part of the program, however they do receive a supplement of $20.80 per fortnight to cover travel and other participation costs. As of 2022, retail represented the highest proportion of Work for the Dole activities, followed by building and construction, warehousing and manufacturing.

Unlike other programs studied in this report, Work for the Dole was not presented as an employment program when it was introduced. The Government openly described it as a scheme designed to ensure that people receiving payments are contributing to the community in exchange for those payments. At time of its introduction, Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training Devid Kemp said that scheme was intended to provide value to communities and participants:

> This legislation will provide local communities and organisations around Australia with the opportunity to reach out to the unemployed people in those communities and put in place worthwhile community projects which will leave something of value to the community and which will also give something of value to the unemployed people who participate in them…
>
> I have made it clear that the government does not represent Work for the Dole as a solution to youth unemployment. Real jobs, as we know, can only be provided by a business environment that secures our economic future – by small businesses that are encouraged to take people on and employ them. Some speakers have based their comments on the mistaken belief that the initiative is about creating jobs and providing training, and it is not. However, it is – and it is accurately described as – part of the government's overall armoury against youth unemployment. [54]

Upon its election in 2007, the Rudd Government opted to keep Work for the Dole. In opposition, the Labor Party had raised objections to the program centred on its failure to serve as a work training program or lead to paid employment. Over the years, its mission statement has evolved to reflect these priorities. Work for the Dole has now been reframed as a work experience program designed to lead to employment, with a different goal and description to those originally offered:

> It is a work experience program that offers participants the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities, contribute to their local community and build skills to help find secure work. Work for the Dole activities provide work-like experiences and are run by host organisations. [55]

While the language surrounding the program changed, the fundamental architecture of the program has remained fundamentally the same since its enactment.

Evaluation results and program performance

Official evaluations of Work for the Dole rarely assess the contribution the scheme makes to employment outcomes. In some ways, this is unsurprising given that the program did not have a formal employment objective for much of its existence. Official evaluations have instead focused on measures such as completion of the program after referral, enjoyment of the placement, and satisfaction with the supervision received.[56]

The most recent of these evaluations, released in 2022 as part of the review of Jobactive, found broadly positive responses to these measures. However, the report also noted that participants consistently raised concerns around the number of required hours, up to 25 hours a week, combined with undertaking job search activities.[57] This was especially the case for those who had other obligations or caring responsibilities. The evaluation also found that the $20.80 payment for participation in the program did not cover the costs of participating, particularly for transport.[58]

Where evaluations and independent research have investigated its impact on employment, they have found that Work for the Dole has resulted in, at best, modest employment outcomes. For example, an assessment of the program commissioned by the Government in 2014 found that it had resulted in less than a two-percentage point increase in job seekers' prospects of gaining employment, from a baseline of fourteen percent.[59] This finding is consistent with international evidence for the effectiveness of work for benefit programs, which typically find limited or no effects on labour market outcomes for participants.

Labour market economist Professor Jeff Borland identifies two main reasons for the modest outcomes of programs such as Work for the Dole. The first of these is that the programs "do not increase the long-term availability of jobs" and "it is only when extra jobs become available that people who are unemployed can move into sustainable employment." The second is that the programs do not provide enough opportunity for skill development to make a difference to employment prospects.[60]

Whilst it is to be expected that the Work for the Dole program doesnot necessarily provide participants with relevant employment experience as a result of the program. As it was always intended that the Work for the Dole program should not cross over into the area of job replacement, with projects selected on the basis that they will not compete with the private sector. This has meant that few of the skills and experiences that are provided by Work for the Dole projects are relevant to, or in demand from, the labour market.

Based on the evaluation findings and years of independent research, it is clear that Work for the Dole has failed to contribute meaningfully to employment outcomes. For much of its life, it was not even designed to. The fundamental problems with the Work for the Dole model will not be addressed by altering the program's mission and description and while it remains in place, it will continue to be costly in terms of the time and morale it takes from its participants and the funding it absorbs from the Government.

IV. Compulsory income management

Background and objectives

Various forms of income management operate in locations around Australia including the Northern Territory, Cape York, the Kimberley, Perth, Playford, Shepparton, Bankstown, Logan, Rockhampton and a number of remote Indigenous communities. A key plank of compulsory income management has been the BasicsCard, which was introduced by the Rudd Government to support its income management initiatives in the wake of the Northern Territory Emergency Response.

The BasicsCard is a PIN protected magnetic stripe card that allows income support recipients to spend their payments at approved businesses. The card works on the EFTPOS system. Cardholders cannot use the card to withdraw cash from automatic teller machines or EFTPOS terminals or to buy alcohol, tobacco, pornography or gambling products. Only some retailers and service providers are approved to accept the BasicsCard. To get approval, a business must agree to accept a list of obligations that include not allowing people to use the card to buy excluded goods, gift cards or cash.

A common complaint from cardholders has been that many retailers and service providers do not accept the BasicsCard. For example, Aldi, Bunnings, Officeworks and some government agencies. This was a key impetus for the introduction of the Cashless Debit Card, which was introduced by the Abbott Government in 2015 in response to a recommendation by the Forrest Review of Indigenous jobs and training. Forrest argued that the BasicsCard had been an effective tool but that it was "very expensive to deliver and unaffordable on a large scale."[61]

All merchants who accept BasicsCard must sign an agreement not to process transactions for excluded goods such as alcohol or tobacco. This was one of the key barriers to merchants participating in the scheme. In contrast, most merchants who accept the Cashless Debit Card have no agreement with either the Department of Social Services or the card provider.

While both schemes relied on cards provided by Indue, a private payments company, they worked in different ways. The biggest differences being who could accept the card, and merchant responsibilities under the scheme. The BasicsCard can only be used at merchants that the Department of Human Services has approved. The Cashless Debit Card could be used at any merchant the Department had not blocked, provided it was able to accept Visa Debit. Both cards prevented income support recipients from withdrawing cash. Income support recipients receive part of their payment on their card with the remainder transferred to their bank account in the normal way.

In 2022, Labor promised to end the mandatory use of the Cashless Debit Card, pledging to move to a largely voluntary system that individuals or communities could opt into.[62] In 2023, it abolished the Cashless Debit Card. It has retained the BasicsCard, and introduced the SmartCard as an 'enhanced income management' measure. Users of the BasicsCard can now opt to use the SmartCard.[63]

Unlike the BasicsCard, the SmartCard is not branded and more closely resembles an ordinary debit card in its appearance. It also offers some enhanced functionality, such as the ability to shop for groceries and essential items online, make contactless purchases, and access improved technical support when problems emerge. However, the SmartCard continues to represent compulsory income management, with income quarantined at the same rates as for the BasicsCard and cash withdrawals blocked. The legislative framework for the card allows it to be imposed on individuals and communities,[64] raising questions about whether the current Government still intends to move to voluntary income management.

The initial rationale for the introduction of the BasicsCard and related income management programs was to "break the cycle of welfare dependency," with Jenny Macklin, the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, arguing in 2010 that the measure would assist people to take control and responsibility for their lives:

> The federal government's reforms aim to restore independence and dignity to people's lives and to instil in their children the expectation that life has more to offer them than the next welfare cheque. Welfare should not be a destination or a way of life… we must encourage and foster personal responsibility. [65]

When introducing the trial of the Cashless Debit Card in 2015, Assistant Minister for Social Services for Alan Tudge echoed these sentiments and added a focus on the role that income management could play in reducing harms:

> The main objective of the trial is to test whether restricting discretionary cash can reduce the overall social harm which is caused by welfare-fuelled alcohol, gambling and drug abuse, particularly against women and children. [66]

Evaluation results and program performance

In spite of the rationales provided for the BasicsCard and other forms of income management, official evaluations have not focused on child welfare, social harms, women's safety, or 'welfare dependency.' Instead, the review of income management undertaken by Deloitte Access Economics focused on unrelated measures. Much of the review was based on a survey of 547 participants from the trial sites, including 124 participants who signed on to the scheme voluntarily.

The review studied whether participants use the BasicsCard regularly, whether the card was easy to use, and whether the card prevents spending on certain items.[67] These measures relate to the card's basic functions and its compulsory nature, so unsurprisingly, the results show that people who have a card use it regularly to buy goods, that it successfully quarantines the designated amount of income.[68] Against these measures inherent to its design, the card was deemed a success. However, the same review found that just one in four participants who had been involuntarily placed onto the card (26 percent) said it helped them with their money situation.[69] Almost two in three (59 percent) reported that the BasicsCard made their situation worse.[70] More than half (53 percent) said there were goods that they would like to buy but are not able to.[71] The results showed that the card made no impact on how participants rated their health. No data was presented on child welfare, as the sample size was too small for these results to be published.[72]

There has been little in the way of credible official evaluation. Outside of the Deloitte Access Economics report, however there has been a great deal of independent research and independent evaluation of income management. The most comprehensive study to date was undertaken over a four-year period by the University of New South Wales Social Policy Research Centre. It could not find "any substantive evidence of the program having significant changes relative to its key policy objectives, including changing people's behaviours." [73]

It found no evidence of changes in spending patterns, improved financial wellbeing, or improved community wellbeing, including for children, the primary stated goal of the measure. This was in spite of the fact that the most vulnerable third of the Indigenous population has been subject to the measures. The evaluation also showed that income management did not increase people's ability to manage their money better, and that it may harm people's ability to develop the skills to manage their own finances.[74]

Further research into the cashless debit card trial in Ceduna, South Australia echoes some of these results. While some participants supported aspects of the card, many experienced it as an unfair intervention into lives that were already characterised by hardship. Participants who had experiences overcoming alcoholism did so with support from individuals, personal determination, and access to rehabilitation services. These experiences led people to question the assumption that the cashless debit card would be of any benefit to remedying alcoholism.[75]

A review of the multiple evaluations of income management, undertaken by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research in 2016, found no evidence of benefit. It showed that the most effective schemes were voluntary and target people with high-needs as part of a holistic set of services.[76]

Years of reviews of the program, coupled with independent and observation, show that the BasicsCard and compulsory income management more broadly have done nothing to improve the lives of its users, instead serving to limit their access to their own income and inhibiting their ability to manage their own lives.

PART III

Themes from the programs

In reviewing the evidence surrounding key employment program performance, there are many reasons why they are structurally unable to attain their objectives. This chapter explores those lessons and the common themes emerging from each program.

This report finds that programs focus overwhelmingly on pre-employment skills and behaviours, even though this approach does not have a track record of success or a grounding in evidence. They are underpinned by mutual obligations which have been discredited by a growing body of Australian and international research, and are delivered through an employment service system that is entirely unfit for purpose. Finally, programs fail to address the structural causes of unemployment at the most basic level. Addressing each of these issues and creating a system that truly helps people will require a fundamental change in approach.

Programs do not address the structural causes of unemployment

Each of the programs reviewed is based on one of two assumptions. Either, they assume that job opportunities are widely available and that people out of work should be subjected to obligations in order to accept them. Failing that, they assume that anybody in need of a job can get one with the help of a short-term pre-employment intervention. However, analysis of the structural factors that underpin unemployment shows that neither of these assumptions are true. The same cohort of people have been long-term unemployed for years, many of them without advanced skills or qualifications, and are only likely to re-enter the employment market through entry-level roles. These entry-level vacancies are disappearing from the market. Australia's work-first employment approaches have failed to grapple with this dichotomy.

On average, people in need of support stay in the employment services system for five years.[77] This is well beyond the definition of long-term unemployment, which is twelve months.[78] Those unemployed for five or more years are much less likely ever to find work again.[79] The number of people with barriers to work or who are long-term unemployed has been trending upwards as a proportion of the employment services caseload.[80] The rate of long-term unemployment has almost doubled over the past ten years, while the proportion of unemployed people who are long-term unemployed continues to climb. The largest cohorts affected by long-term unemployment are people with disabilities and older Australians, who are seeking entry-level work – that is, jobs which do not require advanced skills or qualifications.[81] In every part of the country, these jobseekers outnumber entry-level vacancies by as many as eight to one.[82]

To make matters worse, data shows that these entry-level jobs have been slowly disappearing and becoming harder to compete for. Entry level roles made up one in ten of all vacancies in July 2022, compared to one in four when records began in January 2006.[83]

Training programs on behavioural attributes, job searching activities, and mutual obligation requirements simply will not change the number of positions being offered and the skill level required to compete for them. This is demonstrated by the fact that job advertisements have increased over recent years while unemployment, underemployment, and the employment services caseload all declined. At the same time, the number of people out of work with barriers to employment remains stubbornly unchanged.[84] The unemployment rate isn't low because everyone who wants a job has one. Instead, those who are long-term unemployed are giving up on finding increasingly scarce entry-level roles and dropping out of the workforce entirely, meaning they are no longer counted in rates of unemployment.

This points to the difficulty many people face in securing work. Australia's employment system forces people to look for jobs they are unable to compete for. For those at the lowest rung of the job market, the shrinking number of entry-level jobs that are available to them are increasingly precarious and insecure. The labour market is simply not generating the entry-level vacancies that people need, and by failing to acknowledge this fact, Australia's employment programs are systematically failing those with barriers to work.

Interventions are not supported by evidence

Australia's employment system is replete with supply-side programs, pre-employment interventions and obligations. In addition to those reviewed, the Australian Government operates the Community Foundation Skills program, Disability Employment Services, Future Ready, Launch into Work, Time to Work, Transition to Work, and Youth Advisory Sessions.[85] Together with the programs in this study, the total spend on training and pre-employment initiatives amounts to more than $12 billion in the current Federal Budget.[86]

The dearth of evidence for this approach should make it more difficult to secure funding for pre-employment interventions and short-term courses. Instead there are many ways job agencies can claim payments from the taxpayer for referring people into courses, including those run by the same company or a related entity. These include outcome payments for when a client completes an eligible

course, while in some cases job agencies can claim the cost of the course through a reimbursement pool of funds.[87] This kind of short-term training does little to secure work or ensure there are jobs available for who compete for them. The Brotherhood of St Laurence has found that people struggling to get into the workforce are not being well-served by training unlinked to viable job opportunities, with 44 percent of people seeking work they studied having completed three or more short courses in the last five years.[88]

There is almost no quality assurance on these offerings. According to a recent investigation, one job agency claimed more than $100,000 by referring jobseekers to its own online short courses, which included topics such as 'body language' and 'making decisions.'[89] Anglicare Australia's own research and interviews with people out of work has found that many of these courses are considered unhelpful and pointless by those forced to participate in them.[90]

The failure of these programs is not unique to Australia. No country has been able to reduce its unemployment rate through pre-employment interventions and mutual obligations, and research shows that these approaches only make an impact on employment rates when they are paired with demand-side interventions such as job creation. Australia has focused its spending and policy priorities on programs that structurally incapable of addressing unemployment.

Programs prioritise inputs over outcomes

The most consequential program in this study is Workforce Australia, Australia's privatised network of employment service providers. It is the largest and most expensive part of Australia's employment assistance framework, and it underpins each of the other programs reviewed. In researching Workforce Australia, it is clear that the fundamental features and architecture of the old Jobactive model remain in spite of reviews and a major rebrand. Billions of dollars' worth of new contracts to support this scheme were signed by the Coalition just months before it lost government in 2022, and the system has been inherited and carried forward the Labor government.

The Workforce Australia model is ostensibly based on the work of the Employment Services Expert Panel, which collected evidence from service providers, users, peak bodies and labour market experts. Yet the model only partly adopts the Panel's recommendations, ignoring calls to favour specialist and locally-based providers over for-profits, end excessive compliance and penalties for people, and end avenues for exploitation of the system. Importantly, the system continues to focus on inputs rather than results.

When employment service providers refer people to programs like CTA, EST, or Work for the Dole, they are paid additional fees. For example, every unemployed person placed in a Work for the Dole program earns the job provider a $500 placement fee. Participants referred for EST are either partly or fully publicly funded by the taxpayer at $1,250 each, with a $250 placement fee to the job network provider. CTA fees are between $1,800 and $2,250, fully funded by the government. As noted in a previous section, a provider can be paid to take on a client by the federal government, then be paid to place them into training within their own organisation, and then be paid again by placing the person into work somewhere else in that organisation's network.

All of this promotes churn, and the design of the system prioritises inputs over outcomes. Those who successfully find work for themselves, get themselves work-ready in spite of the system, and do this while complying with their obligations, are highly profitable for providers. They are paid for holding appointments with clients and having them on their caseload. They are then also paid bonuses when the person finds work, regardless of the role they played in that process.

Anglicare Australia's own research with people in the system show that these activities are widely regarded as hindrances at best and harmful at worst. When asked about their attitudes to the activities in their job plans, very few respondents agreed that their activities were helping them find paid work (11 percent), that their activities and obligations were tailored to their needs (19 percent), or that they were getting the support they needed to find work (13 percent).[91] Responses to the latter were particularly damning, with a staggering 85 percent of respondents disagreeing with the statement that Centrelink is supporting them to find work. This includes 36 percent of respondents who strongly disagreed.[92] These results are drawn from a survey of 600 people on income support payments.

The findings also show that people's experiences of their obligations, and to the system itself, were overwhelmingly negative. 79 percent believed that their activities are pointless, while 56 percent thought they prevent them from participating in more meaningful activities. Just 12 percent found the system easy interact with. In spite of this, the overwhelming majority of people surveyed reported that they want to do activities that lead to work (75 percent).[93]

These results are a damning indictment on the failure to provide people with meaningful support. It also underlines that substantial funds are directed towards for-profit providers who have not demonstrated a track record of success and for activities have not been shown to help people or support their own efforts to find work.

Punitive approaches are not delivering results

In addition to program evaluations, independent research was reviewed from Australia and overseas. Overwhelmingly, research shows that punitive approaches are not working.

Proponents of mutual obligations, pre-employment interventions and work-first approaches often themselves concede that they cannot improve employment rates unless they are coupled with job creation and other structural solutions. Instead they argue that punitive approaches are needed to ensure that jobs are accepted *if* they are offered. For example, the Centre for Independent Studies has written that:

> …part of the solution must involve an expansion of low-skilled jobs so that people on welfare can find suitable employment. But this will not be enough. We also have to ensure that people on welfare take up opportunities to work when they are offered. This is what is sometimes called a 'work first' strategy. There must be jobs for them to do, but we must also ensure that people are nudged, nagged, or pushed into doing them rather than becoming habituated to welfare dependency. [94]

Even using this reading, programs have not been shown to be successful. The most comprehensive study to assess the effects of Australia's mutual obligations requirements on job search and employment outcomes was published in 2022. It compared the experiences of 6,000 otherwise-similar Australians who were subject to mutual obligations with those who were not. It found that those subjected to mutual obligations search just as intensively for jobs, but that they took longer to find employment and spent less time in employment twelve months on.[95] Twelve months on those who had been on mutual obligations who were in employment were in lower quality jobs in terms of hourly wage, hours worked and weekly wage, than those otherwise identical Australians who had not been.[96] The authors conclude that "mutual obligation as a labour market policy instrument fails the test of assisting unemployed Australians into jobs." [97]

An earlier study of Australians out of work in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic explored the impact of the removal of mutual obligations, training, and activities under job plans. Breaches and payment suspensions had been ceased over the same period. The study concluded that the changed approach actually helped people find work.[98] Freed of demands on their time, people surveyed as part of the study reported that they could devote real time to acquiring more advanced skills and reengaging with the workforce.[99]

Similar findings were observed as part of a review of unemployment payments and work incentives across 33 OECD countries. It found that more generous, less punitive employment systems correlate to lower unemployment.[100] By contrast studies and papers that make conclusions in support of work-first approaches, mutual obligations and pre-employment programs typically focus on philosophical arguments[101] or tangential benefits rather than employment outcomes (for example, self-reported enjoyment of programs).[102]

PART IV

Themes from the evaluations

It was not the intention of this review to examine the quality of program evaluations themselves. However understanding their weaknesses and their biases helps to shed light on why the same failures have been repeated in the Australian approach to employment and social security. This section explores the themes from the referenced evaluations and how they have contributed to these failures.

These include that review parameters do not match the program objectives, and that they do not consider alternative ways to address the problems they purport to solve. Evaluations routinely focus on inputs instead of results, and on surface-level measures such as awareness and participation. Finally, even though none of the evaluations could conclusively describe their programs as successful, none recommended a change in approach. This could be the result of an unconscious bias among evaluators, or it could suggest that evaluators do not believe that decision-makers would enact a change in approach.

Evaluations do not align with objectives

A key issue with many of the evaluations reviewed is that their parameters did not assess the programs against the outcomes they were intended to achieve.. While most of the programs studied have a purpose related to employment, it is rare that the evaluations looked at the contributions the programs made to employment outcomes, focusing instead on more superficial indicators such as participation outputs.

For example, reviews of CTA and EST had a minimal focus on employment outcomes for people who completed the programs. Instead they focused on measures such as digital literacy, awareness of the programs, and completion rates among those who were referred. Income management evaluations for the BasicsCard and the Cashless Debit Card similarly failed to measure the success of their objectives of improving child welfare or rates of 'dependency,' instead looking at ease of use of the technology. This means that the studied evaluations cannot credibly measure the success of the programs.

Reports focus on anecdotal results

Each of the evaluation reports reviewed included lengthy digressions on issues that were not related to the performance of the program. Instead, they offered opportunities to focus on positive anecdotes or extraneous details. For example, the income management evaluation survey asked respondents about whether the programs improved their awareness of their own spending. The

Work for the Dole evaluation included anecdotes about how an unspecified number of participants had a better experience than they had initially expected. The CTA evaluation reported back on participants' enjoyment of programs, new social connections they made, and general improvements in confidence. None of these are related to the objectives of the programs.

Nebulous language about confidence and skills was particularly common, with evaluations reporting back on benefits that superficially appear to be related to employment outcomes without explaining their relationship to outcomes and results. For example, the Jobactive evaluation discussed how Jobactive and Work for the Dole helped participants build social skills:

> For some participants the experience included learning important basic social skills... Providers and hosts also mentioned the benefit of increased opportunities for social interaction. [103]

It is debatable whether building social skills should fall within the remit of employment services, but regardless, anecdotes like these do not provide any insight on how widespread such benefits are or whether they can be extrapolated across the client caseload. This kind of imprecise language was particularly prevalent when evaluations reported back on qualitative results, with reports generally failing to describe how widespread the benefit they describe truly is. For example, the EST evaluation reported that 'some' participants benefitted from learning how to shake hands, although this observation appears to be based on a single anecdote:

> Some EST participants reported that they enjoyed learning specific skills, such as how to shake hands, which helped them gain a sense of confidence and a better understanding of what employers are looking for in an employee. "If anything, we learned how to do a proper handshake. The whole class went around the table and like went to the teacher and the teacher like said it was a good firm one or what did you need to do to make it good one and things like that." [104]

Evaluations rarely measure results

It was typical for evaluations reviewed to focus not on the results of programs, but instead on inputs. For example, the review of Jobactive focused extensively on components such as the preparation of jobs plans, streaming of participants, and attendance rates. The brief portion of the report that did purport to explore labour market outcomes simply looked at the number of people in the Jobactive caseload who stopped receiving income support payments. Anybody who stopped receiving payments was assumed to have found work, and the evaluation did not investigate whether Jobactive contributed to this outcome in any way. It simply assumed that any participants

who left the caseload did so because their Jobactive provider helped them find employment. This is particularly poor research design, with the evaluation taking the program's contribution for granted rather than attempting to measure it. It is worth noting that independent investigations of Jobactive have found that people usually found work in spite of the system, and that providers typically leave the most employable candidates to their own devices.[105]

The EST evaluation did not base its conclusion on actual rates of employment after participating in the program. Instead, it relied on a survey of Jobactive providers who are paid to refer people to the courses or run courses themselves. Unsurprisingly, these providers take a positive view of the program and most agree that it helps people build skills. These survey results are not corroborated with any tangible data on employment outcomes.

Similar issues can be observed in the Work for the Dole evaluation. A large portion of the evaluation report is focused on aspects such as engaging host organisations, cost issues, supervision of participants, and completion rates. The report did briefly include a section on employment outcomes, but in reality, the section was about people's self-reported experiences of skills they gained. The numbers of participants who reported learning useful skills was low, and no data was presented on employment rates among participants or the role the program played in achieving them.

Actual harms are balanced against hypothetical benefits

A theme of the evaluations was that actual harms were easily dismissed, or balanced against benefits that were hypothetical. For example, the Deloitte review of income management found no impact on financial management or alcohol consumption, and it did not present survey results on child welfare. In many instances it was left to the reader to draw their own conclusion from the results, but in other instances, it was overtly acknowledged:

> Survey results indicated that PBIM [place-based income management] did not appear to have a substantial or sustained impact on the level of alcohol, tobacco or gambling consumption.[106]

The evaluation also reported that income management harmed participants' financial situation and made it more difficult to buy goods that they needed, although these results were described briefly and did not feature prominently in the report's conclusions. Instead, these harms were contrasted with survey and interview findings on potential benefits in areas such as housing stability and child welfare. Hypothetical or potential benefits were not identified based on data, overseas examples, or independent research, but simply on anecdotes and pre-existing beliefs. For example:

> In terms of child wellbeing, DHS and child protection staff in 2014 noted that PBIM had the potential to positively impact on children's welfare... Staff believed that PBIM had the potential to positively impact on children's wellbeing.[107]

The Forrest Review similarly took the potential benefits of a Healthy Welfare Card, later named the Cashless Debit Card, for granted and made recommendations accordingly:

> Together, the Healthy Welfare Card and changes to the FTB [Family Tax Benefit] have the potential to radically change the current non-attendance rates of children across Australia. The Healthy Welfare Card will remove the distractions of alcohol, gambling and drugs that contribute to poor school attendance. [108]

Similarly, this theme was observed as part of the Work for the Dole evaluation. It presents negative participant feedback and some inconclusive or poor program results, but then speculates about potential positive impacts. For example, it notes that while the program may not improve employment outcomes, it could prompt people to report work that they were previously not disclosing:

> Because paid employment reduces the activity requirement of the job seeker, the referral to WfD [Work for the Dole] may provide an incentive to report pre-existing paid employment. Not all of the increase in part-time employment was a reporting effect; although it should be noted that reporting earnings to providers and confirming the existence of previously unreported part-time employment can still be considered a positive outcome. [109]

Evaluations do not consider alternative ways to address problems

None of the evaluations reviewed compared their programs to alternative approaches. This is closely related to the first theme, evaluation parameters rarely aligned with the stated aims of the programs. If evaluations were more closely aligned with a program's aims, a logical place to begin would be to review existing research about the approaches that are known to work. This would offer a point of comparison for the program's evaluation results, and prompt evaluators to consider whether the program's underlying design is compatible with the existing evidence base.

This is a key point because in spite of the methodological issues raised in this chapter, none of the evaluations could be described as conclusively positive. The Work for the Dole evaluation and the Deloitte income management evaluation present largely negative results in spite of the fact they

are methodologically questionable and balanced towards positive anecdotes. The Work for the Dole evaluation resiles from making definitive conclusions about whether the program improves employability because it cannot establish an agreed definition, instead recommending small changes to improve the national roll-out. The income management evaluation similarly recommends changes such as improved staff training, better information sharing, and financial counselling and training for participants. The latter is presented as key to improving financial outcomes for income management participants, tacitly acknowledging that income management is failing to achieve those outcomes on its own but failing to recommend an end to the program.

Evaluations of EST and CTA are more positive in tone, but even these fail to demonstrate a link between the programs and employment outcomes. Low rates of employment after completion of training are presented briefly but are not a focus of the reports. Recommendations for CTA instead focus on expanding online training options, better engagement with employers, increasing referrals, and improved data collection. The EST evaluation makes no recommendations.

Finally, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations' own evaluation of Jobactive, the largest and most expensive program reviewed, did not attempt to demonstrate whether and how providers contribute to employment outcomes. However it does note that participants did not think job plans were a helpful tool in gaining employment, that providers rarely tailor job plans, and that people's experiences with the system were often negative. The Department's evaluation did not make recommendations. The Employment Services Expert Advisory Panel also reviewed Jobactive, finding that the system was not personalised, user-friendly, or localised enough. However their final report, I Want to Work, still failed to engage with the fundamental question of whether the employment services model was contributing to employment outcomes at all. Instead it made recommendations for a revised system based on the same architecture. This means that Jobactive was reviewed and updated to create the multi-billion dollar Workforce Australia system with no assessment of whether the model works.

Put simply, none of the evaluations could establish an evidence base for their programs or attempt to find one in independent research. In spite of this, none recommended a change in approach or even took steps to explore alternatives. This could be the result of an unconscious bias among evaluators, or it could suggest that evaluators do not believe that a change in approach was possible in the political environment

PART V

Policy implications and recommendations

After years of repeated failures, this chapter explores the solutions needed to change course. The research points to structural answers to unemployment such as job creation, particularly at the entry-level. This should be underpinned by a voluntary approach to employment services provided by the public sector, and an end to compulsory income management.

Improving outcomes will also mean moving away from the current focus on short-term pre-employment interventions. Funding and programs should be reoriented towards longer-term career retraining, from providers with expertise such as TAFEs and institutes of technology. Where pre-employment interventions remain, they should focus on removing immediate barriers, such as helping people who can't drive gain a licence, rather than the more nebulous training options currently on offer.

Finally, programs must be subjected to meaningful evaluations. Having an evidence-base from real evaluations is critical to understanding the real reasons that governments are choosing some approaches over others – and holding them accountable for those choices.

Invest in entry-level job creation

This study has shown that current approaches to employment are failing. These failures are driven by the fact that the causes of unemployment are structural, and run much deeper than the factors that can be addressed through short-term pre-employment interventions.

In reviewing Government data, we have found that there are few jobs available for people with barriers to employment, who typically need entry-level work. Mutual obligation requirements will not help people overcome these odds and are demoralising in the face of them. Put simply, people out of work do not need activities and busywork. They need entry-level vacancies that they are qualified to apply for.

The focus on obligations and short-term pre-employment programs highlights a general government aversion to being seen to be intervening in the market, which is a major impediment to helping people into work. This manifests in the reluctance to spend funds on direct job creation. This approach is confusing when considering that the training packages announced in recent federal budgets amount to hundreds of millions of dollars, yet unless these are linked directly to actual jobs, will not see many people gain employment as a result. If a similar amount of funds was spent on direct job creation it would have a far greater positive impact.

Anglicare Australia has often showcased the potential for job creation in the aged and disability care sectors, including for people with barriers to work.[110] As one example, The Brotherhood of St Laurence, a member of the Anglicare Australia Network, is an expert in developing job creation programs for young people and those with barriers to employment. They have shown that job creation is possible and has enormous benefits for people who have found it the hardest to get work. Their work also shows the advantages of both systems-wide and place-based approaches.[111] [112] Pathways like these can be co-designed and trialled with people seeking such work, aged and disability care providers, training organisations and governments.[113] It can be trialled in some of the areas hardest hit with persistently higher unemployment.

Of course, care work is not the only sector in Australia where there is future demand for workers, or where opportunities could be created. Other organisations have identified additional areas for jobs creation and growth in Australia, such as manufacturing. In smaller communities too, there is the potential to support local businesses, councils, and people to work together to create the right jobs. Programs that support Indigenous Rangers, Indigenous Protected Areas, and caring for country offer an outstanding example. This place-based job creation is critical, particularly for regional Australia.

The Federal Government has shied away from direct job creation, treating it as the work of the private sector. Incentives for employers, such as the JobMaker tax credit introduced by the previous government, are a prime example. Yet incentives like these do not have a track-record of creating lasting jobs. It is clear that government investment in job creation has become critical. Job creation programs offer pathways for people with barriers to employment. Job creation simply cannot be left to an already failing market.

Across Australia, some sectors are desperate for workers. The care industry is the fastest growing industry in Australia. The demand for skill Level 4 aged and disability care workers is projected to grow as a result of the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIS). The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety reported an estimated need for more than 130,000 additional, full-time equivalent workers by 2050.[114] This would be a 70 percent increase on current levels.

These are meaningful jobs, in a growth industry, with a solid career trajectory. As a female-dominated industry, job creation in the care sector can also help close the gender wage gap and improve the rates of women's economic participation. This presents a real opportunity to connect people with barriers to employment with entry-level jobs, which in turn lead to long-term careers in sectors with a high demand for workers.

This approach makes good economic sense. Experts report that investing in childcare and other forms of social care would create twice as many jobs as the same investment in construction.[115] It also an opportunity to respond to two problems at once – a dearth of entry-level roles for people who want them, and a workforce shortage in some of Australia's most critical sectors. Job creation at the entry-level could be critical to addressing both.

Make employment services voluntary

Anglicare Australia's analysis has shown that the employment services system is not delivering for Australians out of work. For those facing the greatest barriers to work, the system has proven to be a failure. These include people who may not have qualifications or experience to draw on, those trying to re-enter the workforce after a long break, or those living in regional or remote areas. The Government's own data shows they are likely to remain out of work over the long-term, and that they face the greatest competition for work.[116] This is backed by academic research which shows that people are actually likely to be unemployed longer if they are subject to mutual obligation activities and if they participate in employment services.[117]

Government and parliamentary reviews have also shown that programs connected to employment services, such as pre-employment programs[118] and Work for the Dole,[119] have failed to place people in work. Anglicare Australia applauds the new Government's scrutiny of these programs. Yet research also suggests that employment services have been failing in their aims for years.[120]

The failure of the system ought not to be a revelation to anybody who has been following its evolution. No amount of obligations, activities, or behaviour-based trainings can create an entry-level vacancy where one does not exist. The entire employment service system fails to engage with these structural causes of unemployment.

The people at the centre of this system understand its futility. A survey from Anglicare Australia showed that in spite of a high level of compliance with obligations and jobseeking activities, the vast majority of respondents did not consider these activities to be useful in helping them find work.[121] Given the scale of investment in the system, the lack of benefit it is producing, and the harm it is causing its participants, it is time to move away from this system altogether and replace it with a support framework that is voluntary.

Create a public employment service option

Anglicare Australia believes that there should be a framework that supports people who want to re-skill, re-train, and find secure work. Those who do want help would find it difficult to get quality support in the privatised sector that has grown up around Workforce Australia and its predecessors. While there are examples of local, community-based providers doing good work, the overwhelming evidence is that the system is largely harming people rather than helping them.

Career transitions are difficult for most workers, but those facing structural barriers to work can expect to find it even more challenging. It is critical that they are supported by people with real expertise and an understanding of the changing demands of the labour market. They should not be influenced by short-term outcomes and incentive payments, but free to work with people to undertake more in-depth re-skilling and re-training if it is required. Evidence and experience has shown that the best way to achieve this is through public sector provision of employment services.

This paper has shown that the privatised employment service system has never been as effective as the Commonwealth Employment Service it replaced. After almost three decades and four rebrands, the system has been given ample opportunity to show that it works. Instead it has repeatedly been shown to be entirely unfit for purpose.

A public, voluntary employment service option that is staffed by experts would eliminate the conflict of interest inherent to the current system. As the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) has noted, it would also make government more accountable for achieving outcomes and avoiding harm, and enable it to better shape and respond to labour markets.[122]

Anglicare Australia calls for the creation of a public provider of employment services. While there are several models for how this could be achieved, Anglicare Australia supports the CPSU's preferred arrangement for "a new single unified national provider, essentially rebuilding a complete modern CES-style national labour exchange that offers universal access for employers and job seekers to state-of-the-art digital services and high-quality face-to-face services. In this model, the Commonwealth would also take responsibility for training, skill development and transition to work functions, while retaining space for non-profit community providers to deliver complimentary or specialist services."[123]

Prioritise long-term re-skilling

It is clear that the short-term training programs offered through Workforce Australia have been an expensive failure. Focusing on more advanced skills and qualifications, linked to real job placements, is therefore critical. Yet government policies have not been supporting this. Instead there is a reluctance to challenge the belief that the market without intervention will provide the jobs needed for people. The evidence reviewed shows this is simply not the case.

A key concern is that programs aren't meaningfully re-skilling people but are simply focused on short-term training. Evidence shows people with significant barriers to work would be better served by gaining advanced qualifications to meet the more advanced demands of the workforce. From there, mentoring and support for both the employee and employer is needed until a level of job security is reached to ensure the placement will be ongoing. Money spent on training programs can be easily wasted if it's not linked to the demands currently required by the workforce, or connected to actual work placements.

The current system incentivises providers to count a person placed in a position as a success. This works directly against the depth of reskilling and the kind of ongoing support we know is necessary to ensure that people find and keep jobs. The system is currently unlinked to vocational education, where people can gain real qualifications to advance their employment prospects. Redirecting funding to gaining advanced skills and qualifications, and making it easier for people to retrain at a TAFE or institute of technology, would yield higher success rates than the current system.

There has never been a more important time to do away with pointless obligations and training offerings that people out of work are subjected to and replace them with something more helpful. The research has shown that people would be better served by meaningful training that equips them to work in areas of known demand, such as the care sector.

Connect training programs to tangible skills

This study has shown that the current system is out of balance, disproportionately favouring short training courses over developing advanced skills. Whilst, there will always be a role for some short-term training. The pre-employment training that is currently offered should be reoriented to focus on developing competencies that are increasingly essential to gaining work, rather than nebulous offerings focused on people's behaviours and attitudes. These have been shown to fail everybody involved except for the provider paid to deliver them.

Shorter-term competencies or interventions could include financial support to complete a police check, a working with children or vulnerable people check, training in the use of personal protective equipment, first aid, or support to obtain a driver's licence. These are far more useful than the training options currently on offer, and Anglicare Australia research shows that many people would gladly take them up.[124]

End compulsory income management

This study has made it evident that compulsory income management has failed to achieve its goals. It has not reduced rates of 'dependency' or contributed to employment outcomes. Nor has it improved child welfare or helped people overcome alcohol or other drug issues.

Anglicare Australia commends the Government for abolishing the Cashless Debit Card. Far from helping people, reviews and independent research have found that the Card harmed its participants with no associated benefit. However there does not appear to be any plans to abolish the BasicsCard, an even more restrictive program that has produced similarly harmful results.

The current Government committed to ending compulsory income management ahead of the 2022 Federal Election, with Minister for Indigenous Australians, Linda Burney stating that "our fundamental principle on the basics card and the cashless debit card, it should be on a voluntary basis… If people want to be on those sorts of income management, then that's their decision."[125] Anglicare Australia calls on the Government to act on this commitment and abolish all forms of mandatory income management.

Conduct regular, quality evaluations

This study did not set out to examine the quality of government program evaluations. However in the course of reviewing material for this report, it became clear that the veracity of these evaluations was of serious concern. Many Anglicare Australia Network members regularly conduct evaluations of services and programs, and the quality of the material reviewed for this study would not have met our standards of research design.

We found that review parameters do not match the project objectives, and that they do not attempt to measure a program's contribution to employment outcomes. They do not consider alternative ways to address the problems they purport to solve. Evaluations routinely focus on inputs instead of results, and on surface-level measures such as awareness and participation.

In some cases the actual harms caused by programs were dismissed or measured against hypothetical benefits. In other cases evaluations relied on unempirical anecdotes, sometimes from a single respondent, to dismiss criticisms and create the impression of success.

Ultimately none of the evaluations reviewed by Anglicare Australia could establish an evidence base for the program or attempted to find one in independent research. In spite of this, none recommended a change in approach or even took steps to explore alternatives. This is unacceptable, particularly given the rhetoric used by successive Governments about the critical importance of employment.

Anglicare Australia notes the Government's creation of the Australian Centre for Evaluation in 2023. While this is positive, it must go further than simply promoting and championing best practice. Government evaluations should be required to measure the performance of programs comparatively. Ensuring performance reporting is against the actual objectives and desired outcomes, reviews independent research, studies alternative approaches, and is specific about the findings (for example, ending the practice of reporting that 'some participants' experienced an outcome without reporting on how many or whether the result can be extrapolated).

This is critical to better understanding why governments are choosing some approaches over others and holding them accountable for their decisions. With Australia's employment interventions systematically failing to deliver improved employment outcomes, it seems clear that some approaches have been favoured for ideological reasons. It is the right of governments to pursue an ideological agenda, but it is also the right of citizens to know when this is occurring – especially if the favoured approach is contradicted by evidence.

A way forward

This paper has aimed to shed light on whether Australia's programs are truly serving the needs of people out of work, and whether they are meeting their own stated objectives. It finds that instead of supporting the people that it's supposed to help, it is subjecting them to pointless programs that do not help them find work.

The findings show that key Australian programs focus excessively on short-term pre-employment interventions that do not address the structural barriers to employment, particularly the growing demand for advanced qualifications. They point to a system that has been designed to prioritise input over outcomes, and frequently mistakes the latter for the former.

In some instances the system makes it harder for people to look for work, and in others, it gets in the way of the activities that they find most beneficial. The system is underpinned by employment service providers, who are paid to run and police this system with little evidence that they are delivering results.

All of this is being done under the guise of helping people find work. Yet as our study shows, Australia's focus on short-term pre-employment interventions and mutual obligations has almost no impact on employment rates. In some cases there is no expectation that they will serve this goal, and it has been accepted that programs will simply exist to keep people busy in order to justify their receipt of payments.

Reimagining this system is a challenge, but it is also an opportunity to rethink our approaches and treat unemployment as a structural phenomenon, rather than an individual one. Our recommendations call for overhauling these interventions, which have been failing to deliver outcomes for years. We also call for a renewed focus on job creation and advanced skills, which has been neglected by governments for too long.

As the Government considers the future of employment services, our hope is that they will be willing to challenge long-standing biases and assumptions to reimagine what the system can achieve.

Further information

This report was prepared with the support and assistance of Anglicare Australia member agencies, who understake regular evaluations of major programs and work areas.

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