



What's the difference? Jobseeker perspectives on employment assistance

Insights from Victoria's Work and Learning Centres

Eve Bodsworth
2015



**Brotherhood
of St Laurence**

Working for an Australia free of poverty

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Note about terminology

In this report 'mainstream employment services' refers to the Australian Government – funded services, Job Services Australia and its precursor Job Network.

Summary

Funded by the Victorian Government to operate for a three-year period until June 2015, the Work and Learning Centres (WLCs) aim to support the economic participation of Victorians facing disadvantage in the labour market, particularly public housing tenants and other clients of the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS). Drawing on findings from four focus groups with 39 clients from the Carlton, Moe and Shepparton WLCs, this study provides rich insights into the challenges faced by jobseekers navigating today's labour market and their experiences of receiving assistance from both mainstream employment services and the WLCs.

Despite fragmented employment histories and complex barriers, jobseekers are highly motivated

While the study participants were from diverse backgrounds and locations, they shared many common experiences in their search for employment. Many had fragmented job histories, with time out of the workforce punctuated by periods of insecure work and jobs with too few hours.

They reported challenges in finding paid work because of limited networks and broken connections with the labour market often due to caring responsibilities or resettlement. Some lived in areas with limited transport, which limited their job options, while others faced discrimination from employers based on their ethnic or cultural background.

Yet despite having spent long periods searching for paid work, with little or no feedback from employers, the people interviewed remained highly motivated. These jobseekers explained that gaining employment would enable them to support themselves and their families, participate in a meaningful activity and give back to their communities, and offered the hope of meeting future aspirations of buying a house or getting married.

Employment services and support – what matters to jobseekers

Many of the focus group participants, like WLC clients generally, were also clients of mainstream employment services offered through Job Services Australia (JSA) or had been in the past. These participants provided particular insights into the benefits and limitations of the mainstream employment services system and the WLCs.

While on paper the actual activities offered by the WLCs and mainstream employment services appeared similar—both, for example, offered job search and interview skills training and links to training providers—participants with experience of both systems revealed **subtle but significant** distinctions between the two approaches.

The aspects of service delivery and support most valued by jobseekers were found not to be particular activities, but the assumptions underpinning service delivery and how these affected the service providers in their interactions with jobseekers.

Valued features of the WLC approach

Participants placed strong value on aspects of the WLC approach, including:

- **recognition of their individual circumstances and a personalised approach to service delivery**

Not only did this approach afford respect and hope to jobseekers in their search for work, but the participants also considered that it enabled service providers to give better assistance,

especially to match work and learning opportunities with jobseekers' experience, background and interests.

- **a focus on jobseekers' strengths**

Participants valued the 'strengths-based' approach of the WLCs focusing on what they were capable of now and in the future.

The voluntary basis of participants' engagement with the WLCs was also underpinned by an approach that recognises jobseekers' motivation and previous experience. The voluntary nature of the service was acknowledged as important by the research participants.

- **a long-term perspective**

The long-term perspective taken by the WLCs, with their focus on developing career paths and upskilling in addition to assisting people to secure short-term employment, was highly valued by focus group participants.

- **networks with employers**

Because participants recognised the difficulty of searching for work with limited networks, they valued an approach which could assist them to build links with local employers.

By contrast, participants mentioned several less helpful features of the mainstream service delivery they had experienced, such as apparent lack of interest in the client's personal circumstances, inadequacies of the jobseeker streaming system, a narrow focus on immediate placement in any available job, and applications submitted to employers without the client's knowledge.

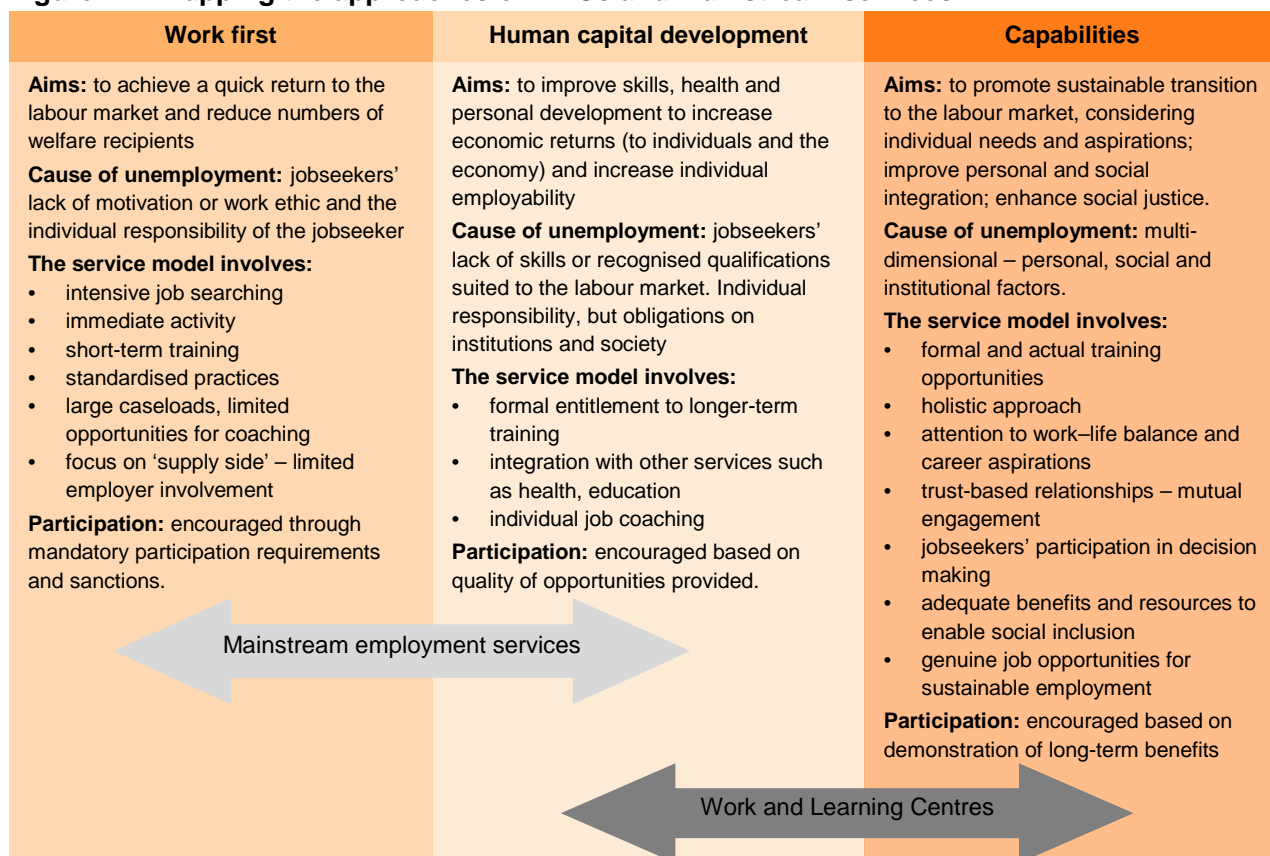
The features that participants valued in WLCs could be linked to the contrasting rationale and underlying assumptions of the WLCs and JSA providers, which then translated into differences in the models of direct service delivery and interactions with service delivery staff.

To make sense of these findings, this study has drawn on a typology of approaches to employment services, which distinguishes between 'work first', 'human capital development' and 'capabilities' approaches (see Figure A).¹

Based on the responses of focus group participants and knowledge of the two models, the JSA and WLC approaches were mapped against the typology. WLCs were found to demonstrate aspects of the human capital development and capability approaches, while JSAs showed features of the work first and human capital development approaches.

¹ It should be noted that while these stylised models are presented separately, actual programs and policies usually combine elements from different approaches with different degrees of emphasis.

Figure A Mapping the approaches of WLCs and mainstream services



Adapted from Bussi 2014 and Bonvin & Orton 2009

Towards a capability approach to employment services

The aspects of service delivery *most valued* by study participants align with the 'capabilities approach'. This finding suggests that jobseeker-focused employment services should move beyond concentrating solely on short-term outcomes and human capital development, towards valuing the strengths and aspirations of individuals and providing real opportunities for achieving economic security.

The WLCs' emphasis on creating real opportunities to gain employment-related skills and qualifications, their holistic approach, their recognition of jobseekers' individual circumstances, their respect for present and future choices, and the voluntary nature of engagement align with a capability approach to employment services.

The participants' experiences of the mainstream system indicated that it contained aspects of a 'work first' approach—emphasising short-term employment, job search requirements and the threat of benefits withdrawal—as *well as* elements of the 'human capital development' approach. While mainstream services often encouraged jobseekers to undertake further training, many participants felt that the training they had received had not been adequately linked to employment opportunities.

A voice for jobseekers

The study also highlights the need for jobseekers themselves to be heard when designing employment services. Participants commented on the value of forums such as the focus groups held for this research in offering a space to present their views. They expressed a desire for further opportunities to provide feedback about their needs and those of their communities, particularly in

relation to policies and services. Enabling jobseekers to have a greater 'voice' is also consistent with a broader capabilities approach to employment services.

Broader challenges

A capabilities informed approach to unemployment requires not only employment services to link jobseekers to employment but also broader policy responses to address the scarcity of paid work and transport in regional areas, and the nature of many entry-level jobs, which offer limited job security and often insufficient hours of work. These broader concerns highlight the importance of a comprehensive approach to tackling unemployment that incorporates decent levels of income support; inclusive school and training systems, and changes to macro-economic, skills and industry policies to create enabling conditions for jobseekers, including a supply of sustainable jobs.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that Sen's capabilities approach could inform further research and program development, examining what the users of employment and training services value and have reason to value, how current services enhance skills and opportunities, as well as how the capabilities approach might be further operationalised and integrated into employment service provision (see for example, Kimberley, Gruhn & Huggins 2012 in relation to aged care).

1 Introduction

There is increasing debate about how best to address unemployment in Australia, particularly long-term unemployment. Policy proposals frequently cast the unemployed as 'the problem'. In these debates the voices, experiences and perspectives of people looking for work often remain unheard – despite jobseekers' intimate knowledge of the challenges of navigating the contemporary labour market and employment services systems.

This research draws on the findings from four focus groups held with clients of Victoria's Work and Learning Centres.² The WLCs offer an alternative, place-based approach to assisting jobseekers facing disadvantage in the labour market by investing in local communities and harnessing local networks. The work and learning centre approach was developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence.³ In 2011, based on the success of the CWLY (see BSL 2012), the Victorian Coalition government committed to fund five Work and Learning Centres across Victoria in areas with high concentrations of public housing, at a total cost of \$4.6m over four years. The five WLCs are currently funded until June 2015. These Work and Learning Centres are delivered with support from the Brotherhood by local agencies in five locations—four regional and one inner-metropolitan (see Bodsworth 2014 for a description of the approach).

This report complements an earlier research report, *Investing in local people and harnessing local communities: a progress report on Victoria's Work and Learning Centres* (Bodsworth 2014) which examined the preliminary outcomes achieved by the WLCs. The present study sought to gain further insight into the labour market experiences of jobseekers attending the WLCs and the barriers they face to labour market participation. It also explored jobseekers' perspectives on what forms of assistance they valued and felt had helped them to gain employment or engage in study, particularly with reference to the WLCs. The 2014 study showed that many WLC clients also used the mainstream employment services system, Job Services Australia (JSA), and that the WLCs were essentially providing a 'second chance' for jobseekers facing additional challenges. This report provides jobseeker perspectives on the differences between the Work and Learning Centre approach and that of mainstream employment service providers.

The report also locates jobseekers' perspectives within the broader context of the changing labour market, the design of Australian employment services and conceptual understandings of active labour market programs drawn from the research literature.

Seeking work in the contemporary labour market

Structural and individual factors contribute to unemployment. Economic policy, the structure of the labour market, employer perceptions and recruitment practices, along with jobseekers' capabilities and skill levels, where they live and the services they can access, all contribute to the risk of unemployment. The consequences of unemployment—especially long-term unemployment—are significant, including economic hardship, loss of self-esteem, erosion of skills and the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

In February 2015 it was estimated that there were more than 781,600 unemployed Australians (ABS 2015a) and 181,700 people had been looking for work for more than one year (ABS 2015b). The number of people experiencing long-term unemployment has been increasing in recent years (ABS 2015b). In addition to increasing long-term unemployment, there has also been an increase

² <http://www.housing.vic.gov.au/work-and-learning-centres>

³ The Centre for Work and Learning, Yarra, was a demonstration project to test innovative place-based approaches to promote work and learning opportunities for disadvantaged jobseekers in an inner-city neighbourhood with a high density of public housing and high unemployment. The Centre was primarily funded by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations through the Innovation Fund over three years from July 2009. For more detail see BSL (2012).

in underemployment, with recent jobs growth predominantly in part-time employment. The ABS estimates that in February 2015 there were 1,072,800 underemployed workers and the underemployment rate was rising (ABS 2015b).

The nature of work itself is also changing. Firms no longer play the significant role they once did in training new recruits and the imperative to increase efficiency has combined with technological changes to reduce the number of entry-level positions, making it harder for young and low-skilled jobseekers to secure employment (AWPA 2012). Globalisation and the knowledge and service – based economy have also seen the emergence of a divide between ‘good jobs’ which are well paid, secure and rewarding, and tend to privilege workers with high levels of education, and insecure jobs which offer lower rewards, especially income, reduced job security and fewer hours, and are highly vulnerable to future transitions and restructuring (Baum, O'Connor & Stimson 2005).

The risks of experiencing unemployment, underemployment and insecure work are not evenly distributed. The distribution of these risks is shaped by geography, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender and age. Rather than a uniform national labour market, researchers have observed that the reality is a ‘complex geographical mosaic of overlapping local and sub-national labour markets’ (Sunley, Martin & Nativel 2006, p. 43). This mosaic forms part of ‘a new geography of winners and losers’ across Australia, with outer-urban suburbs and non-metropolitan areas experiencing higher levels of disadvantage and unemployment (Baum 2006).

Assistance for disadvantaged jobseekers

While most unemployed people find work relatively quickly, some jobseekers are consistently excluded from work, or cycle between insecure and temporary jobs and unemployment and reliance on income support. Disadvantaged jobseekers include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds including refugees and asylum seekers, early school leavers, single parents, people with disabilities, and older people. Their experiences are shaped by personal circumstances as well as issues such as the number, quality and location of available jobs, affordability of housing and accessibility of child care.

The main offer: mainstream employment services

A key focus of Australia’s approach to unemployment is the ‘activation’ of jobseekers. In Australia, activation refers to policies that make the receipt of ‘working age’ income support payments contingent on the fulfilment of conditions, such as job searching and other strict activity requirements, with close monitoring and sanctions for non-compliance through Centrelink and employment services providers (Davidson 2011).

From Job Network to Job Services Australia

The mainstream provision of employment services is currently through the JSA system, which was preceded by the Job Network system (1996 to 2009). While there is some debate about the extent of the differences between the two models, it is generally accepted that the JSA system represented a modest improvement on its predecessor, with less emphasis on strong sanctions, greater consideration of client choice and greater flexibility to tailor services to meet client needs (according to staff), and slightly higher employment outcomes (Considine, O'Sullivan & Nguyen 2014).

Assessment and stream allocation

JSA services are available to jobseekers receiving income support payments with participation requirements. Jobseekers not receiving income support may become ‘voluntary’ JSA clients,

although support for them is limited.⁴ On entering the JSA system, jobseekers complete a telephone or face-to-face questionnaire based on the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) to determine their readiness for work. They are either allocated to Streams 1 to 3 or referred to a further Employment Services Assessment (ESAt), as a result of which they may be allocated to Stream 4, disability services or another stream. Stream 1 clients are those considered most work-ready and Stream 4 clients are those with severe barriers to employment (Department of Employment 2014). Accordingly, funding allocated to services is partly based on the stream allocation of clients, recognising that jobseekers experiencing disadvantage require additional support if they are to find and maintain employment. Getting a jobseeker's classification right is critical as it determines the level and types of service they are entitled to from a provider, and the job search activities they are required to undertake.

Concerns exist regarding the weight attributed to certain forms of labour market disadvantage under the JSCI, particularly those faced by refugee and migrant jobseekers (Olliff 2010; Refugee Council of Australia 2012). Concerns also exist about the impersonal assessment process preventing disclosure of issues such as family violence and homelessness at initial meetings due to stigma and fear of discrimination (Australian Law Reform Commission 2012; Mavromaras et al. 2011).

⁴ See <<https://employment.gov.au/job-services-australia-eligibility-and-how-register>>

Employment services for jobseekers: the JSA model

Key features of the JSA approach to assisting individual jobseekers are shown in the table below.⁵

Table 1.1 JSA model of employment assistance

ACTIVITIES	DESCRIPTION
Registration with JSA provider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job seeker can choose a JSA provider or are randomly allocated a provider by Centrelink.
Employment Pathway Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The jobseeker and provider work cooperatively with Centrelink to negotiate an Employment Pathway Plan (EPP), setting out the jobseeker's activity and participation requirements. For Stream 1 clients, this is usually completed with Centrelink. Stream 2 to 4 clients usually complete their EPP with their JSA provider. The EPP sets out next steps, including vocational and non-vocational assistance, taking into account the jobseeker's previous experience, skills and current circumstances. It also sets out compulsory activities, and a service guarantee.
Stream 1 (first 3 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stream 1 clients have an initial meeting with a JSA provider to complete a résumé, but then have minimal contact with the JSA for the first three months. During this time they are expected to actively search for work and must report regularly to Centrelink, recording and reporting their job search activities. Job search requirements are generally between 8 and 20 applications per month.
Streams 2–3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At a minimum clients receive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> assistance preparing a résumé advice on the best way to search for work information about job opportunities in the local area advice about skills shortages in the local area advice about how to receive training
Stream 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As for Stream 2, but with an emphasis on addressing non-vocational issues by providing or referring to counselling or other professional support.
Interviews with JSA provider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Except for Stream 1 clients during the first three months, JSA clients generally meet with an advisor once a month during the first year and every two months after that.
Work experience phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After 12 months of unemployment, JSA clients are moved into the Work Experience Phase, which involves mandatory participation in work experience activities including Work for the Dole (the default activity), education or training, non-vocational programs (for example drug and alcohol counselling), voluntary work.
Mutual obligation and penalties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Penalties apply for failure to attend meetings with JSA providers or Centrelink, failure to attend or behave appropriately during an activity; failure to meet job search requirements; failure to enter into an EPP when asked to do so; failure to attend a job interview or commence employment. Most serious failures or persistent non-compliance can result in the suspension of income support payments for 8 weeks.

Sources: OECD 2012, 2013; <https://employment.gov.au/job-seeker-servicing-what-you-can-expect>; <https://employment.gov.au/job-services-australia-work-experience-activities>.

Outcomes and limitations of the main offer for disadvantaged jobseekers

While JSA works reasonably well for many unemployed people, especially those with recent work experience and the skills and capacities to take up work, researchers have observed that the

⁵ Note: In 2015 the system will become 'Employment Services'. At the time of writing, the details of the new model were in development, but likely to involve reconfigured streams and a changed focus of activity requirements. The new system is likely to place greater emphasis on Work for the Dole activities for all jobseekers, and wage subsidies. For more information, see <<http://employment.gov.au/employment-services-2015>>

structure of the JSA system makes it difficult for providers to meet the needs of jobseekers facing more significant barriers to employment (Davidson 2011). Around 56 per cent of the most job-ready jobseekers (Stream 1) find employment within 3 months of participating in employment services; the figure sits at around 24 per cent for the most disadvantaged jobseekers (Stream 4) (September 2014 outcomes data, Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2014, p. 4). Moreover, most jobs obtained by Job Services Australia clients are casual, temporary or seasonal (Department of Employment 2014, p. 5). The education and training outcomes for Stream 4 jobseekers are relatively modest—more likely to involve certificate level courses than diploma or higher levels (Department of Employment 2014, p. 5).

Other identified limitations of the JSA system include difficulties effectively engaging with jobseekers (Flentje, Cull & Giuliani 2011; Rose et al. 2011); a transactional focus and restraints to innovation (see Jobs Australia 2013; Considine, Lewis & O'Sullivan 2011) and limited engagement with employers (DEEWR 2013a). The proposed new system of Employment Services for 2015 includes tighter compliance for jobseekers, changes to the contracting of service providers; expanded scope for Work for the Dole and more emphasis on engaging with employers by offering wage subsidies. There will also be no provision for specialist providers, which have typically assisted the more disadvantaged jobseekers.

The Work and Learning Centres: an alternative approach

Funded by the Victorian Government to operate for a three-year period until 30 June 2015, the WLCs offer an alternative employment assistance approach to the mainstream system. The centres aim to support the economic participation of Victorians experiencing labour market disadvantage, particularly public housing tenants and other clients of the Victorian Department of Human Services.

WLCs are delivered by local agencies in five communities around Victoria. The localised approach enables them to address the specific needs of these communities and to leverage local connections, particularly with employers.

The WLCs were developed in recognition that many Victorian public housing tenants, DHS clients and those living in areas characterised by low employment and socioeconomic disadvantage want to work but face significant personal and structural barriers, both vocational and non-vocational. The WLCs are also a response to the recognition that the approach of the mainstream employment services system may be inappropriate for these clients (Davidson 2011).

WLC services for jobseekers: the model

For individual WLC clients, many of whom are also clients of the JSA system, the WLC approach offers a 'second chance' at achieving employment. While many of the core activities resemble those offered by JSA providers, there are significant differences in terms of:

- flexibility and the extent to which services are tailored to meet individual client needs
- the intensity of the relationship between advisor and client
- the scope of pathway planning
- the quality of training and work experience on offer.

Table 1.2 WLC model of employment assistance

ACTIVITIES	DESCRIPTION
Personalised, tailored support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients are provided with personalised support through an assigned Work and Learning Advisor (WLA), with whom they develop a trust-based relationship.
Pathway planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients work with their WLA to develop a tailored pathway plan, which takes into account their past experience, skills and qualifications, aspirations and any issues that may cause problems for gaining and retaining employment.
Careers coaching and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work and Learning Advisors provide careers coaching and support for clients, as well as referrals to services to address non-vocational barriers to employment, such as health and mental health services, drug and alcohol support, and child care.
Non-vocational and vocational training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients have access to one-on-one coaching and group learning opportunities designed to enhance employability skills and confidence, job search and interview skills. Clients are referred to training and courses in line with their pathway plan.
Real work experience and links to employers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work placement opportunities with local employers enable the building of trust and networks for future employment.

Source: Bodsworth 2014

Underpinning the WLC model are other elements which also differ from the mainstream approach. These include:

- **a place-based approach:** The WLCs are delivered by local agencies in local communities for local people. This enables them to address the specific needs of communities facing disadvantage and leverage local connections. Each centre is guided by a Local Advisory Group including local employers and service providers. While JSAs are also located across the country, many are delivered by large national providers. There are concerns that the new Employment Services system will further reduce the number of providers, particularly smaller ones.
- **a core model, with flexibility:** Each WLC adopts the core service delivery model, but is afforded the flexibility necessary to act as an independent broker and adapt the model to local conditions and community needs. In contrast, the tight management of provider contracts under the JSA system has also been found to create homogeneity among providers and a 'one size fits all' approach to service delivery (Considine, O'Sullivan & Nguyen 2014)
- **voluntary engagement:** Clients engage in an active search for work on a voluntary basis, although the service offer sets out clear expectations of jobseekers and WLCs.
- **building human capital:** WLCs focus on building the vocational and non-vocational skills of clients, with an understanding that developing skills will equip jobseekers to find employment in the short and long term, and to secure more sustainable employment and potentially future advancement. Under the JSA system, job searching is encouraged as the primary activity, with further training considered only in some circumstances.⁶
- **leveraging organisational social capital:** As local community organisations with existing community trust and relationships, the WLC delivery agencies build and leverage their local networks.
- **building individual social capital:** The local networks of WLC delivery agencies provide opportunities for WLC clients to build their individual social capital through direct links to employers and other community organisations (Bodsworth 2014).

⁶ See: <http://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/3/2/9/100>

A framework for understanding the different approaches to employment services

Literature regarding employment assistance or active labour market programs throughout the world often distinguishes between those that take a 'work first' approach and those focusing on 'human capital development' (Lindsay, McQuaid & Dutton 2007). Some researchers have also explored the notion of a 'capabilities approach' to providing employment services (see, for example, Bonvin 2008; Bonvin & Farvaque 2006; Dean et al. 2005). These concepts or frameworks are useful for assessing approaches to policies and the delivery of programs, and are picked up later in this report as a way of understanding jobseekers' views about the services they have experienced, and the types of services they would like to have access to in the future.

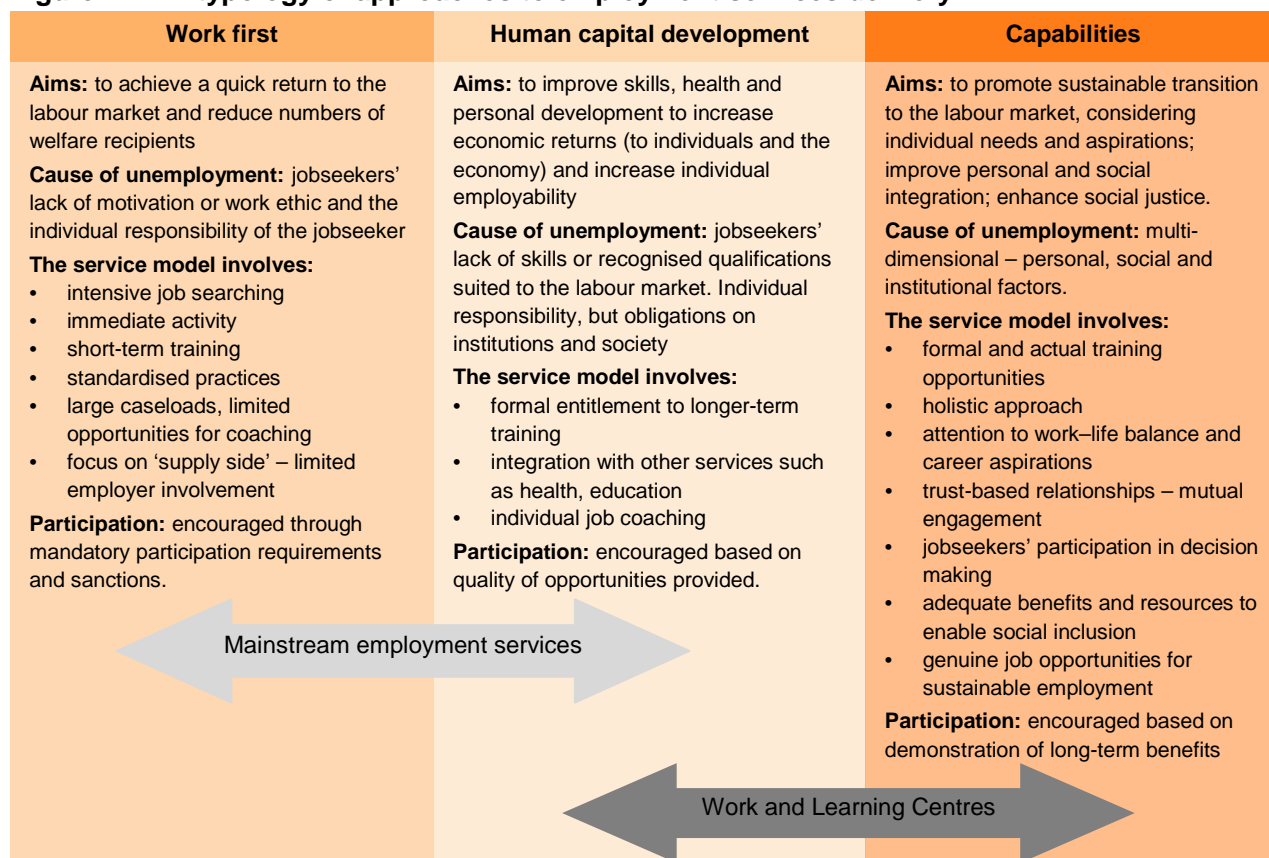
A **work first approach** emphasises the motivation and responsibility of individual jobseekers and involves active measures such as job searching, mandatory programs, short-term work preparation and the threat of benefit withdrawal to 'propel welfare recipients into the labour market as rapidly as possible' (Peck & Theodore 2000, p. 120). This approach is less concerned with the quality of job outcomes or with education and training than with achieving employment—underpinned by the belief that any job is a positive step, no matter how precarious the employment (Sol & Hoogtanders 2005).

A **human capital development approach** also asserts the responsibility of the unemployed to take action to move towards work, but in addition provides a range of 'holistic' measures to improve skills and address individuals' barriers to work (Lødelmel & Trickey 2000). The human capital development approach is concerned with improving the employability of jobseekers through education, skills, health and personal development (Lindsay, McQuaid & Dutton 2007).

A **capabilities approach** draws on Amartya Sen's capabilities framework, which has been identified as a useful tool to evaluate policies or programs (Bowman 2010; Robeyns 2003). This approach goes beyond narrow economic understandings of poverty based on income and is concerned with the opportunities people have to live a 'good life', taking into account health, safety, happiness, education, participation in work, the community and other activities of value to individuals. 'Capabilities' are not held by individuals, but are the genuine opportunities or 'substantive freedoms' that allow a person to 'lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (Sen 1999, p. 87). Translating this approach to the delivery of employment services highlights the extent to which a program or policy provides jobseekers with:

- material resources required to achieve their goals
 - such as access to appropriate services, sufficient income support, secure housing and reliable transport
- genuine opportunities, and the competencies to 'convert' these material resources and actually take up the opportunities available, for example
 - on an individual level, support to develop language, literacy and other vocational skills and knowledge; and
 - on a structural level, genuine job vacancies in sustainable employment, with support for retention, ongoing opportunities for advancement and legal frameworks to prevent discrimination
- freedom to choose pathways that have meaning for them and to have a voice in the development of their individual plans and broader policies and programs (Bonvin & Orton 2009).

Figure 1.1 A typology of approaches to employment services delivery



Source: Adapted from Bussi 2014 and Bonvin and Orton 2009.

Job seekers' perspectives on searching for work and employment services: from the literature

While there is considerable research examining the effectiveness of different types of employment programs, policies and approaches, there is limited research providing the perspectives of disadvantaged jobseekers on looking for paid work or employment services. This section provides a scan of literature which captures the experiences and views of disadvantaged jobseekers.

The scan finds three key themes in this literature: disadvantaged jobseekers' non-linear employment histories; a desire to access services that take into account their circumstances and aspirations, often associated with experiences of mainstream services that did not do so; and a desire for their experiences and views to inform future policies and programs.

Non-linear pathways

The small body of literature which explicitly provides the perspectives of disadvantaged jobseekers highlights the complexity of their transitions in and out of work and navigating income support and employment services systems. Dean's (2003) UK study involved 50 in-depth interviews with jobseekers who had multiple problems and needs. Their work histories often involved intermittent or temporary jobs (typically part-time, temporary or seasonal) or unsociable hours. Most interviewees also described applying for a great many jobs with little response.

Similarly, in a major recent Australian qualitative study which interviewed 150 people relying on income support, Murphy and colleagues found:

Much of the focus of policy discussion is based on the notion of transitions from welfare to work that assume a linear progression. Yet rarely are people's relationships with work and welfare so simple. People move in and out of work at different points throughout their lives for a whole range of reasons that may include health problems, caring commitments and family responsibilities, a mismatch between skills, qualifications and labour needs, as well as age-related discrimination. Some may move into decent and sustainable work and cease to be in need of income support. Some may move in and out of low-paid and insecure work while moving on and off welfare, while others may juggle the responsibilities of work and welfare simultaneously (Murphy et al. 2011, pp. 89–90).

Motivation to work

Despite their non-linear work histories, most participants in Murphy's study had previously had jobs. Contrary to popular assumptions that jobseekers are responsible for their own unemployment owing to being 'work-shy', Murphy and colleagues found that all participants valued paid work and placed considerable importance on its capacity to enable a better standard of living, access to social networks, learning new things and alleviating boredom. For many interviewees in that study, being a worker was a key part of their identity 'and a foil to the stigma and indignity of unemployment' (Murphy et al. 2011, p. 96). Interviewees shared 'modest yet optimistic' aspirations for the future — often they simply wanted a stable job through which they could access stable housing, buy a car and provide resources for their children (Murphy et al. 2011, p. 105).

Brotherhood of St Laurence research with unemployed income support recipients and single parents found that the participants had similar goals, including a desire for secure, ongoing work and for jobs that offered 'a future' (Bodsworth 2010). The single parents in that study also sought employment that would enable them to fulfil their care responsibilities. Both studies revealed the risks of the labour market, particularly for low income and low-skilled workers (Bodsworth 2010; Murphy et al. 2011).

Experiences of employment and other support services

Murphy and colleagues highlight the challenging role of employment services, observing that they:

have a daunting task in trying to assist people to cross the forbidding space between what skills people have, and what the world of work demands, and between their individual needs and circumstances, and a labour market with its requirements for only one sort of 'flexibility', but with little flexibility to accommodate others (Murphy et al. 2011: p.136).

They asked interviewees about their experiences of employment services. Some participants spoke of programs and case management styles which had helped them, describing 'effective' case management as support which focused on their individual needs and took account of their often highly complex circumstances. Participants identified 'effective case managers' as motivating, interested in their clients' views and offering 'options and alternatives for becoming 'job ready' (Murphy et al. 2011, p. 125). These experiences sat in contrast to experiences of frustration, ineffectiveness and, at times, humiliation under the 'work first philosophy' of mainstream Job Network providers. Marston's and McDonald's (2008) research with long-term unemployed clients of the Job Network concluded that the system was ill equipped to provide the sorts of interventions necessary to assist such clients to improve their self-efficacy or their chances of gaining sustainable employment. Income support recipients in another study indicated they wanted an income support system and employment services which could work *with them* towards their long-term goals and aspirations rather than just push them into dead-end work (Bodsworth 2010).

South Australian jobseekers interviewed by Moskos (2007) also identified helpful and unhelpful actions by service providers. They believed that labour market programs should include affordable training and or skill development, linked to local labour demands and opportunities for work experience or formal employment. They also argued that labour market programs should take into

account jobseekers' employment aspirations. Participants in that study also suggested that labour market programs should incorporate self-development to assist individuals to overcome personal issues that might exacerbate other barriers to employment (Moskos 2007).

Exclusion from the policy process

Dean (2003) found that the UK policy regime itself, with underlying assumptions regarding individual jobseekers' responsibility for their own joblessness, had a direct and potentially corrosive impact on the individuals targeted by the policy. Murphy and colleagues found that their Australian participants wanted both policymakers and the wider community to better understand what their lives were like, and to accord them respect for and recognition of what they did as carers, as community members and as workers (Murphy et al. 2011). This finding corresponds with other research drawing on interviews with low-income service users. Nevile argues that while most income support recipients readily accept that this support comes with a responsibility to engage in activities to increase their chances of paid employment,

those with experience of poverty value dignity and respect above all else and place a high priority on choice and agency and on receiving information which will enhance their capacity to exercise choice and agency (Nevile 2008, p. 15).

Nevile's research also suggests that individuals experiencing poverty also want to participate in decision-making processes relating to welfare programs and policy, because their knowledge and expertise should be respected (Nevile 2008).

The literature reviewed consistently demonstrates that jobseekers' aspirations are much the same as those of the community in general. Jobseekers recognise the importance of paid work, have aspirations (though they may be modest) for the future, want assistance from services that take into account their individual circumstances and would like to be consulted about policies and programs that affect them. These themes are further explored in the remainder of this report. The following section outlines details of the methods used in this study.

2 The study

This study built on earlier research about the WLCs and was intended to gain further insight into the perspectives of WLC clients regarding:

- labour market participation and experiences of looking for work
- motivations for attending a WLC (particularly as many are also required to attend a JSA provider)
- whether and how the WLC model differs from mainstream employment services
- the experience of receiving assistance from a WLC, including the aspects that have the greatest impact and those that could be improved.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were chosen to gain insight into jobseekers' experiences. In particular, focus groups were conducted in recognition that this method offers a data-rich, flexible approach which provides a stimulating environment for participants, with an opportunity to accumulate insights and share experiences (Fontana & Frey 1994). Focus group discussion is facilitated by a moderator to gain information about participants' beliefs, attitudes, or motivations on a topic (Linhorst 2002). The focus group format can give voice to and empower vulnerable populations (Linhorst 2002); in the context of social services, it can give clients a sense that they are meaningfully providing feedback and contributing to service improvement (Linhorst 2006; Madriz 2000). The focus group method also allowed more individuals to participate within a short time frame. Limitations of the approach can include the tendency for certain types of socially acceptable opinion to emerge, and for some participants to dominate the research process (Smithson 2000). These limitations were taken into account when moderating the focus groups and analysing the data.

Four focus groups were conducted in April and June 2014 at the Carlton, Moe and Shepparton centres. Focus groups were not conducted at the other two WLCs: Ballarat, because it was the last centre to open and Geelong, because it did not have capacity to host a focus group at the time the research was conducted.

Focus groups were guided by one moderator using a range of activities to guide discussion on topics linked to the research questions above. The discussions were recorded using a digital sound recorder with the consent of participants and lasted from one to one and a half hours. Participants were provided with refreshments during the sessions and offered \$50 to thank them for their time.

Sample

Recruitment for the focus groups targeted participants who:

- had been engaged with a WLC for 6 months or more or had exited the service; and/or
- were living in public housing; and/or
- were also engaged with a JSA provider, or had been engaged with a JSA provider when they first attended a WLC.

Focus group participants were recruited by program staff at each site. Three of the focus group interviews were held in the evening to enable participation by clients who had gained employment.

A total of 38 people participated in four separate focus groups. One additional participant was interviewed separately because, although she had been a WLC client, she was currently employed as a Work and Learning Advisor. Given that some of the focus group questions related to the

What's the difference? Jobseeker perspectives on employment assistance

support provided by WLCs, it was considered that other clients would be able to speak more freely in the absence of WLC staff.

Focus group site	Number of participants
Moe WLC	6
Carlton WLC	7
Shepparton WLC – group 1	12
Shepparton WLC – group 2	13
Interview (Shepparton)	1
Total	39

The profile of the focus group participants was fairly similar to the overall cohort of WLC clients. The main difference related to employment status: a higher percentage of focus group participants had moved into employment since commencing with the WLC. The focus group participants also tended to be older than the overall WLC client group.

	WLC clients ⁷	Focus group participants
Age		
Under 25	44%	13%
26–45	39%	65%
46–65	17%	17%
Sex		
Female	50%	44%
Male	50%	56%
Born overseas	37%	42%
Client of a JSA	65%	61%
Employed	49% ^a	79% ^b

^a While 49% had secured an employment placement as at January 2014, only 55% of these clients were still working 16 weeks later (Bodsworth 2014)

^b 79% of participants were working at the time of the focus group.

Note: Data for WLC clients relate to the period January 2012 – January 2014. The focus groups were conducted in the period April–July 2014.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval for this research was granted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence Research Ethics Committee, which is guided by the NHMRC human research ethics guidelines. Participants were provided with a plain language statement and were verbally informed about the project and advised that they would not be identified in any publication of findings. Participants were asked to maintain confidentiality in relation to the information provided by others during the focus group, both verbally at the beginning of the session and also as part of the consent form. Questions were designed to avoid discussion of very personal matters, and all participants were advised that need not respond to any questions they felt uncomfortable about. As King and Horrocks (2010, p. 77) note:

While there is no panacea to remove all possibility of confidentiality being breached, if confidentiality has been discussed openly participants are able to make choices ... [and] participants are alerted to their reliance upon the confidentiality of other members of the

⁷ Source: Bodsworth 2014

focus group. While this may mean some information might be withheld, this is preferable to there being negative consequences arising from participation.

Care was taken to design the focus group activities and questions to enable full participation of those with English as a second language (many clients at the Carlton Work and Learning Centre) and those with limited literacy and numeracy.

Limitations

The focus group sample is not fully representative of the WLC client cohort. Most participants had been successful in gaining employment through a WLC, so further research would be required to gain the perspectives of clients who had been unsuccessful in finding employment—and also of younger clients. Also, since only three sites took part in the focus group interviews, further work would be required to gain the perspectives of clients at Geelong and Ballarat if a comparison between sites was required. Although each is delivered by a local agency within a different labour market, the impact of place was not a focus of this study.

3 Challenges to securing employment

Focus group participants were asked to draw or 'map' their employment pathways since leaving school and to consider the factors that had seen them change jobs or return to work over time. Common issues raised by participants across all four focus groups were:

- experiences of 'non-linear' employment pathways and insecure work
- the desire to find secure and decent employment
- challenges to finding and keeping employment, particularly for:
 - migrants and refugees
 - those with caring responsibilities
 - young jobseekers
 - those with limited access to transport.

Non-linear employment pathways

Like the jobseekers in the studies described in the literature scan, the Work and Learning Centre clients described non-linear work histories since leaving school. One young woman in her late twenties described her labour market experiences as follows:

There was school, then I worked and then I moved down here, and then I studied—that's at TAFE—and then I worked, and then I didn't work, and then I studied and I worked, and then I moved, and there was some volunteer work and paid work, and now it's study and work ... At first it was retail customer service, and then I went into business admin, and now I'm in hospitality. *Moe focus group participant*

This participant's experience of moving between low-skilled roles, in and out of work and between work and study was echoed by many others, despite their diverse backgrounds. These experiences highlighted the extent to which normative assumptions regarding the school to work transition and ongoing employment pathways do not match the lived experiences of jobseekers facing labour market disadvantage.

Insecure work and underemployment

Experiences of insecure work were a common thread running through most participants paid work histories. Earlier research surveying WLC clients identified that the main reasons for clients leaving previous jobs were that their jobs were temporary or seasonal or no more work was available (Bodsworth 2014). Many focus group participants described moving in and out of employment due to short-term contracts or lack of ongoing work and the challenge of securing sufficient hours in casual jobs. One young man, who had been university educated in his home country before fleeing as a refugee, described his employment experiences in Australia as follows:

I studied a Certificate III in Aged Care. One month after training I found a job, but the job was not permanent, it was casual. I was working with an agency for five years in casual work. And then the government cut funding to [another] place so they reduced my hours ... they didn't remove me, but they reduced my hours of work. It was very, very low, three hours a week, so I can't continue like that. So I started studying at university but I couldn't continue that and I dropped it and continued working. But again my work hours were reduced ... so again I started looking for a job, online ... but every time I apply—nothing. So I started learning driving, for a heavy truck [licence] ... I found a job driving a bus and I worked there for about two months. But it was a long way away. It took 40 minutes to travel there and the hours of work were small ... I would start at 7 am and work until 9 am and then start again at 2 pm for two hours. It was very difficult so I couldn't continue like that. *Carlton focus group participant*

These experiences were echoed by others who, despite gaining employment, had then found that it was unsustainable or did not provide sufficient hours or income to cover the cost of living. As pointed out in Chapter 1, much of the recent jobs growth in Australia has been in part-time employment, and there is increasing underemployment. These experiences are therefore more and more common, particularly for jobseekers seeking low-skilled or entry-level employment. They pose a real challenge for employment services attempting to assist jobseekers.

Highlighting the localised nature of labour markets, several participants from the Shepparton WLC identified challenges relating to seasonal employment in agriculture, which provided the main manual, entry-level jobs in the area. One described having worked from January to April in a seasonal job, but then spending the next seven months making job applications with no success.

Seeking decent work

All of the focus group participants who were searching for work were highly motivated and expressed their desire to find work in terms of a 'need'. Nevertheless, they all had modest long-term career ambitions, and expressed a desire not only for immediate employment—'I needed to find a job, I needed a 'quick job'—but also for work which would provide them with job security and sufficient hours.

Training not enough to deliver secure employment

Some participants expressed frustration that despite completing multiple training courses, they had failed to find ongoing paid work. One participant at the Carlton focus group exclaimed: 'What I want, I *need* a job. I'm fed up with learning ... I need a long-term job'. This person had undertaken multiple certificate courses that had not led to paid work but had also cycled in and out of work in short-term, insecure construction jobs. Such comments exposed tensions including those between jobseekers' desire to find immediate work to meet their basic needs; the challenge of finding secure, low-skilled work; and the disjuncture between the promise of training through a human capital agenda within the mainstream employment services system and the failure to adequately link training to jobs for many jobseekers.

Wanting to 'give back' to the community

Employment also had broader meaning for participants. One participant, who had worked in several short-term seasonal jobs, described his frustrations at being unable to find ongoing employment and emphasised his desire to support his family and contribute to Australian society:

I know a lot of people are struggling with their literacy, they can't speak English, or they can't write—so they can't get a job. But ... we're not just here to stay on Centrelink money. I came here as a refugee, I need to contribute something to Australian society. So I can't just stay home to wait for the money to come into my account. I am grateful for that, but I have a family to support so I need a job now and I need to pay tax so I can help other people.

Shepparton focus group participant

Modest aspirations

Those participants who had found paid work pointed to their future goals. These included wanting to buy a car or a house, provide for children, travel and marriage. Those who had casual or short-term jobs continued to search for more secure employment and held off on making plans for the future. One participant described his desire to find low-skilled work in the immediate term, but emphasised the importance of working in an environment where he would be treated with respect, having previously experienced race-based threats from co-workers followed by inaction by managers.

Challenges to finding and keeping work

In addition to challenges created by the nature of employment itself, all participants had experienced other issues which compounded the challenges of entering and staying in the workforce. These included dislocation due to re-location (including migration), and the difficulty of returning to work for women with children, especially for those with limited skills or work experience. Young jobseekers spoke of needing guidance about possible career pathways. Many participants from regional centres described transport as presenting barriers to both gaining and keeping employment. While described below as discrete 'issues', for many participants the nature of work, being a migrant, accessing child care and transport difficulties combined to compound the challenge of entering the workforce or retaining their jobs.

Migrants and refugees

Around one-third of Work and Learning Centre clients were born overseas, with just over half of these born in African countries. While the Carlton WLC had the largest proportion of overseas-born clients, this group is also represented in the other centres (Bodsworth 2014). Around two-fifths of the focus group participants were from refugee and migrant backgrounds. These participants described challenges of having their skills recognised and translating skills across cultures, as well as relating to limited English language skills, employer assumptions and lack of networks.

Lack of recognition of skills

One woman from a refugee background in her late forties, who had been a teacher in her country of birth in Africa, described her experience in looking for work in Australia:

Before I came to Australia, I was teaching. I worked at a teacher training college for three years before I came to Australia. But over here, teaching is not the same. When I arrived in Tasmania, I actually spoke to my case worker and she took me to talk to someone about teaching. I think I would have had to start with Certificate II. But when I worked in child care, I saw that teaching over here is very different and I thought I don't think I can do teaching. So I changed everything to look at working in health. *Carlton focus group participant*

This participant's comments highlight the dual challenges of receiving recognition of prior qualifications and experience, and adapting to cultural differences that shape work in different countries. These participants, and others, spoke of a need for guidance regarding Australian workplace culture, qualifications and retraining, and how to navigate a new career path.

Segmented labour market

Some participants in this study from refugee and migrant backgrounds had accepted that they would be unable to gain skilled roles, despite their qualifications, due to previous failed attempts to find work. They also described challenges of finding entry-level or low-skilled jobs that could provide security and of learning a new language while needing immediate employment. Other Australian research has identified high levels of unemployment among skilled refugees in Australia; and those who do find employment often suffer a major loss of occupational status (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2007). The authors point to a segmented labour market in which racially and culturally visible migrants and refugees, in particular, tend to be concentrated in unattractive jobs.

One older participant who had come as a refugee from Sudan described the difficulty of attempting to learn English, having done all his schooling, including a university engineering degree, in Arabic. Unable to gain work as an engineer he had travelled interstate to find work and then moved in and out of entry-level labouring roles in the construction industry:

When I came here, I didn't have very much, not enough English. I came here in 2005 and for two years I learned English. In 2007 I committed myself to do some courses—machinery tickets for construction jobs. My first employment was with a labour hire company and I

worked for 18 months in a tunnel underground ... When the contract stopped, I moved to North Queensland to get a mining job ... I worked there for six months and then the company collapsed ... I found a job as a traffic controller in Western Australia. I was 'on call' one day or two days a week. But ... that was not enough. And I was alone and lonely... My sister was in Melbourne so I decided to come here. *Carlton focus group participant*

For this participant, the search for work had come at a high cost. Not only was he unemployed at the time of the focus group, but while working interstate he had experienced separation from his wife and five children, and then the breakdown of his family.

Employer discrimination

Participants from migrant and refugee backgrounds highlighted challenges often faced by ethnically diverse job applicants: all described applying for many, many jobs without success and with little idea of why their applications were being rejected by employers. While the participants themselves could not account for the reasons, research have identified that jobseekers from a CALD background are likely to be excluded by employers as a result of stereotypes about their abilities and motivations (Laufer & Winship 2004; Pager, Western & Bonikowski 2009), or perhaps 'unconscious' cultural biases (Beattie & Johnson 2012). Other research using CVs with different names but the same qualifications to apply for jobs in Australia found that job applicants with names from ethnic minority groups were less successful (Booth, Leigh & Varganova 2012).

Limited social and cultural capital

Some participants from refugee and migrant backgrounds also identified the networks that could help them get work. One young man from the Congo, now living in regional Victoria, commented:

Since I came here I have seen one problem with, one issue with myself and other people in my community about employment. What I have seen is if you don't have a connection, it is hard to find a job. Why I am saying this—is not because I am African, but I have seen it as an issue for Indians, Afghanis and Australians as well, especially with young people. So if we as young people, and our elders, don't have connections, it is hard to get a job. *Shepparton focus group participant*

This comment echoes findings from research identifying the employment barriers created by limited social networks for particular groups, especially refugees and migrants (Torezani, Colic-Peisker & Fozdar 2008), and as this participant observed, young jobseekers generally. While employment services often focus on developing jobseekers' skills, mainstream services may struggle to assist refugee jobseekers to develop networks or 'linking social capital' that would open up employment opportunities (Torezani, Colic-Peisker & Fozdar 2008). In this regard, the focus of WLCs on building jobseekers' social capital is important.

People with caring responsibilities

Most of the women participating in the focus groups had sought assistance from the WLCs after struggling to find employment, having spent time out of the labour force caring for their children, often on their own. The competing demands of paid employment and childrearing can create intense pressures, particularly for women (Bowman, Bodsworth & Zinn 2013). Women are also more likely than men to find themselves in part-time or casual employment due to family care responsibilities.

When asked what had been the greatest challenge in finding employment, one mother referred to the time spent out of the labour market in a caring role:

... probably being a mother for so long—I think that was the hardest. And then going straight into doing a course, doing a diploma from being a mother—that was a really big challenge. And then finally getting your diploma and applying for jobs and you just get so many knockbacks and you just feel like [giving up] ... yeah, you really do. You think, 'Well I've

wasted all my years and I haven't gone anywhere'. That was my big, main struggle.
Shepparton focus group participant

Asked why she thought it was so difficult to find employment, the participant identified competing with students coming out of university and being told that she was either over or under-qualified, as well as lacking recent work experience.

Another participant, a single mother of four in her early fifties described her own employment pathway: having left school with no further qualifications, she had worked her way up to being a team trainer in sales before having four children. After 20 years out of the labour market, she had found work at a fast food outlet, but was let go when she requested time off during the school holidays. Several participants described spending periods outside the workforce caring for older or unwell relatives which had disrupted their employment pathways. Others identified the challenge of finding work that was compatible with their care responsibilities.

Young jobseekers

Around 44% of the WLC clients are aged under 26 years⁸ (Bodsworth 2014). The focus group comments from young people were consistent with other research which has found that young jobseekers face particular barriers to labour market participation, especially in securing their first job. Such barriers include the decreasing availability of low-skill, entry-level positions (Skills Australia 2010); employer expectations and assumptions about young jobseekers (CIPD 2013); lack of job readiness, work experience and understanding of workplace culture and expectations; lack of social networks likely to open up employment opportunities; and lack of knowledge needed to plan career paths and navigate the education and training systems (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2014).

Lack of career guidance

Several young school leavers participating in the focus groups indicated that knowing what kind of work to do and accessing suitable careers guidance were major challenges. When asked about the biggest challenge she faced in finding employment, one young woman who had finished Year 12 in the previous year said:

Just trying to work out what I want to do, that's the hardest thing for me. And I'm still stumped about what I want to do. I just finished school last year. They had classes on it at school, but I s'pose, while you're at school you're really just focusing on finishing school and you're not really worried about what's going to happen next until you're at that stage—so yeah, that's probably the hardest bit. *Shepparton focus group participant*

This young woman's JSA provider had assisted her to find employment, but she had received neither career guidance nor advice about further training and was concerned about how to reach her goal of eventually working in the community sector.

Young jobseekers highlighted how where they lived affected their search for work. Those living in urban fringe and regional areas face a limited number and range of employment opportunities within their local communities, high travel costs to access workplaces further afield.

Transport challenges

The 'Investing in Local People' report (Bodsworth 2014) revealed that lack of access to transport (particularly public transport) was a significant barrier to finding employment for WLC clients. The Shepparton and Moe focus group participants also reported limited public transport that could connect them with jobs at the right times.

⁸ Data for January 2012 to January 2014.

Regional focus group participants described difficulties such as travelling between Mooroopna and Shepparton, a trip which would take only 5 to 10 minutes by car:

The first bus out the front here that runs into Shepparton doesn't come until 8.30 am. So for me, working in Shep, when I first moved over here, I had to get a lift or walk, I walked for five months.

It's nearly impossible. My first job was over here in Mooroopna and there was nothing available. If I finished after five o'clock, I couldn't get home.

One participant had lost his job in hospitality when he lost his drivers licence and could not reach the job by public transport. The bus he relied on only ran until 7 pm, making it difficult to find other employment in hospitality. At the time of the focus group he was planning to move house closer to a train station in order to broaden his opportunities.

The following section illustrates clients' perspectives about the kinds of employment services and support they wanted, valued and had benefited from in the search for employment, in the context of the barriers they faced.

4 Employment services: WLC clients' perspectives on 'what matters'

One of the key aims of the focus groups was to identify clients' views about the support and assistance they had received to find work, both from their WLC and from other employment services providers. Many participants contrasted their experiences of the different systems.

Focus group participants generally identified problems with the JSA system which had precluded them from accessing the type of assistance they required, rather than criticising individual JSA workers or providers; and several said they had received support from a 'good' JSA worker. Their observations also confirmed the findings of earlier WLC research that the JSA system often struggled to provide the kinds of assistance required by disadvantaged jobseekers. This was reflected in the high number of referrals from JSAs to the WLCs, with WLCs seen as offering a 'second chance' for jobseekers (Bodsworth 2014).

Whether they had been assisted to find work or engage in study, or were still looking, the WLC clients participating in the focus groups were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences at the respective centres. While some of the activities offered by the WLCs—such as job search training and interview skills—were similar to services offered by JSA providers, participants identified, the personalised approach of the WLCs, the effort put in by Work and Learning Advisors in working with clients to find jobs, and the long-term perspective taken as the elements that made the biggest difference to them.

The participants also identified some issues that they felt were not addressed by either mainstream services or the WLCs.

What matters

The aspects of employment services most valued by the focus group participants were:

- individual recognition and a personalised approach
- a focus on jobseekers' strengths
- a short and long-term approach to career planning and employment
- links with employers
- resources such as funding for work clothes, and access to computers
- being consulted about policy and program development

These are discussed in more detail below.

Individual recognition and a personalised approach

Reflecting on their experiences of the mainstream employment system, focus group participants described feeling as though the system treated them as 'a number' rather than an individual with particular experiences, aspirations and needs. Participants also commonly described seeing a succession of different workers when attending compulsory interviews with their JSA providers. Many described infrequent meetings that involved minimal engagement, leaving participants with the sense that these meetings were driven by compliance requirements rather than their particular employment needs:

It's just sign the paper and leave. That's it. Maybe once every two weeks, every month. Moe focus group participant

If you don't go, they cut off your payment.

But I'm not going for the payment, I'm going for a job. I want my own income and to help myself ... They just ask you to fill in a form, they just ask you 'Have you looked for a job?' but they don't help you.

Carlton focus group participants

One participant described a change in structure at her JSA provider, where one-on-one meetings had been replaced by fortnightly group meetings. Another participant described being required to attend an interview with his JSA provider despite having arranged to undertake work experience that he hoped would lead to employment.

Building jobseekers' skills

Concerns about the lack of a personalised approach from mainstream employment services providers were also apparent in participants' descriptions of the types of assistance they received. Rather than being assisted to develop her own job searching skills, one young woman described her provider's practice of submitting her résumé to potential employers without her knowledge, and receiving rejection letters or phone calls inviting her to interviews from unknown employers.

Maintaining motivation by building hope

The extent to which individual recognition was highly valued by participants was also underscored in their comments about the WLCs' approach. Unconstrained by compliance functions and highly structured contracts, WLC staff were able to take a more responsive approach to working with clients. One Shepparton focus group member encapsulated the sentiments of most participants when she commented:

I found that they're more compassionate. More friendly and non-judgemental. Real caring – it's a whole different feel. You kind of feel like you've got hope.

Better job matching

However, the personalised approach was valued not only because of the 'feel' or the manner in which WLCs engaged within individuals, but also because participants felt it enabled the centres to provide them with better assistance, particularly matching them with work and learning opportunities based on their experience, background and interests. Two regional focus group participants commented:

The JSA are not interested in what your family set up is, how many kids you've got, they don't ask you what your barriers to work are or what the best fit would be. I don't think anyone would be able to tell me that they get asked those sorts of questions at a JSA. But here [at the WLC], they find out who you are, what your circumstances are, what your capabilities are—what you can and can't do—and they work with that. *Shepparton focus group participant*

[The WLC staff] want to know what you are interested in, for working. And they ask what your experience is. They are interested in what work you want. *Shepparton focus group participant*

A holistic approach

The person-centred approach taken by the WLCs means they are able not only to match jobseekers to jobs, but also to identify the range of enabling conditions that might facilitate a client's pathway to work. In this respect, there is a link between recognition of individual circumstances and a holistic approach to the delivery of employment services. For example, the Shepparton WLC clients, many of whom faced housing or health and substance issues, described the benefits of the

co-location of the WLC with public housing (Rural Housing) and other services. The building provided computer facilities and a kitchen where free meals were provided for the community, as well as opportunities for work experience and a means of 'softly' engaging potential clients who might not have directly approached the WLC for assistance.

Gary's story illustrates the holistic approach.

Box 4.1 Gary's experience

Gary, a participant in his forties at a regional WLC, described his history of cycling in and out of paid work, substance issues and more recently illness.

I finished school... and started an apprenticeship and then life, circumstances, issues got in the way. I continued to work a lot of the time, but with the issues, I had lots of periods on and off work. I was in that cycle for 20 years, working on and off. Then I came to [regional city]. I was always doing [the same kind of work]. And I think I've been here for two and a half years. I got a job here in town in the first two weeks after I arrived, but I also had to start treatment for [a serious illness].

Due to his illness, Gary⁹ had moved into supported accommodation and ultimately lost his job. Since receiving support from the WLC, he had been offered casual cleaning work which gave him the flexibility he required to manage his treatment and also to complete a Certificate IV in Community Services. At the time of the focus group interview, he was still employed and had enrolled in a Diploma of Community Services.

The support he described receiving from the WLC was intensive and personalised, providing the necessary conditions for him to be able to work and learn. Staff members had driven him to work when he first gained his job because he lacked a licence or public transport. They also supported him by driving him to attend his course in the initial weeks until he was able to arrange a lift with friends he made at TAFE. Gary also told of how he had been encouraged to enrol in further study despite his initial reluctance due to being 'totally computer illiterate'. Importantly, he had been offered computer training and access to the computer room to complete assignments by the WLC.

Each element of the very practical support provided by the WLC had made a difference between Gary failing or succeeding. Although on the surface he appeared to have 'complex barriers' which might exclude him from employment or study, the WLC had sought to provide the conditions necessary to enable him to meaningfully participate. This was not simply a matter of offering a vacancy or an opportunity, but required a tailored response to the barriers which might have prevented him from working or studying or caused him to drop out along the way.

Other participants also identified the 'holistic' nature of the support offered as important in increasing their self-confidence:

Here [at the WLC] they work holistically. There are different programs, you can volunteer, they organise different training programs, computer course, RSA [responsible service of alcohol certificates] and stuff like that to bring your confidence up.

Engagement through 'soft entry'

One participant in her thirties, who had received a negative response to her mental health problems at her JSA provider, described how she initially came into contact with the WLC through volunteering at the community kitchen. She explained that this first step was 'incredibly important', as she had become isolated and self-conscious about the damage to her teeth caused by previous drug use. Working with others in the kitchen had boosted her self-confidence, which then enabled her to seek employment opportunities. She told the researcher, 'Two months ago, I wouldn't have

⁹ Pseudonyms have been used to maintain client anonymity.

been able to talk to you', and went on to describe her 'love' of the new job at a local fish shop that the WLC had helped her to secure.

Appropriate assessment

Focus group participants also spoke about the ways in which the narrow assessment and 'streaming' of clients in the JSA system worked against flexible or sustainable support. A recent migrant with English as a second language explained that he had been allocated to Stream 1—the most 'job ready' category—despite facing significant challenges. This classification limited the support he could access:

When I went to Centrelink I was given a service provider. When I asked what they would do, they said, 'You are in Stream 1—we are helping people who are in Stream 3 and 4 who are waiting to get a job'. After that they can look at my matter. Only one consultancy and now I'm finished. At that time, my daughter is very ill. My wife is the only income and they have decreased her shifts. Our [home] repayments are difficult. I asked if they could put me in Stream 3 or 2 to help me get a job. The lady [the service provider] said I needed to speak to Centrelink. But Centrelink said that I need to ask my service provider. My JSA said you can use the booklets and materials—that's all the help we can give—but you have only one consultation.

In addition to facing challenges as a new migrant from a non-English speaking background, this participant also needed flexible work to fit around his wife's shifts, as his daughter had special needs and could not attend child care. The lack of recognition of his circumstances meant that he was unable to access the more intensive support he needed to find employment.

In another example, a participant described being told by his JSA provider he could use the computers to create a résumé and apply for jobs—but he had never used a computer or the internet before. No computer assistance or training was offered.

A focus on strengths

In addition to a person-centred, holistic approach, focus group participants placed value on being dealt with in a way that focused on their strengths and potential, rather than their supposed shortcomings or limitations. In this respect, the participants identified the positive, strengths-based approach taken by the WLCs in working with clients. A strengths-based approach is a philosophical approach to working with individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities. It focuses on the potentials, strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge and capacities of people, families or communities, rather than their limits or 'deficits' (Grant & Cadell 2009).

One woman in her late thirties explained that she had experienced a long battle with drug addiction during her twenties. Having received help for her substance issues, she found herself dealing with many unresolved issues from her childhood and was subsequently diagnosed with a mental illness. Prior to attending the WLC, she had been attending a JSA provider, where she had disclosed her mental illness and background. She described the challenges she had faced looking for work:

if you tell people that you're suffering from mental illness, people think that you can't work, that you can't handle the pressure, so I didn't get put forward for any jobs from my JSA provider for two years until I lost the plot. And then I came over here [to the WLC], and they give you the support you need, even if it's just to build your confidence. Because I had all the skills, it was just that I'd been sick and in treatment for nine months so I had to get my brain back working and get my confidence back. And after coming here for a month, I got work. It made a huge difference. *Shepparton focus group participant*

Not only did this participant receive holistic support, but the WLCs focused on what she was capable of achieving in the future, in contrast with the 'low expectations' she had previously experienced.

Despite the importance participants placed on the recognition of their individual circumstances, it was also vital that the challenges they faced should not define their potential. One participant who had sought assistance to 'upskill' after migrating to Australia and taking time out of the workforce to look after her children described the WLC as a 'huge help':

Because they see no barriers—whether you're disabled, or don't speak English, the doors are wide open. And I felt this was the first helpful place that I could come and just sit back and relax and [have] a cuppa and people actually care. *Shepparton focus group participant*

While the WLCs respond to individuals' needs and the barriers they might face, these clients understood this as focusing on strengths and opportunities rather than deficits.

Mutual expectations and accountability

The strengths-based approach taken by the WLCs also influenced the understanding of the mutual obligations between service provider and client, based on positive assumptions about each individual jobseeker's potential rather than assumptions about lack of motivation or engagement. These positive assumptions about the strengths and potential of jobseekers were also evident in the extent of the support offered and delivered by WLCs. This meant that high expectations were established and met by both jobseekers and service providers:

If they know you're motivated, and you're wanting work and you're fulfilling your part of the bargain, they'll go to the ends to help you, to assist you in working. *Shepparton focus group participant*

And what the WLC does, is they look at your strengths and they see what you're passionate about and they guide you exactly to where you want to go. And that's the difference. *Shepparton focus group participant*

The difference between the WLC and other employer services—the WLC commits themselves to give you learning and they commit themselves to look for work for you, everywhere. *Carlton focus group participant*

These comments also articulated an alternative vision of 'mutual obligation'. They echoed Nevile's (2008) research finding that income support recipients were more than prepared to accept obligations, but sought recognition and high quality support in return.

Voluntary engagement

A subtle but crucial distinction identified by participants between the services provided by JSAs and the WLCs related to the different terms on which service users were engaged by the two services—the former based on compulsion and sanctions in the income support system, the latter offering a voluntary service with intensive support.

The voluntary nature of engagement with the WLCs was acknowledged as important by services users and appeared to be linked their perceptions of the WLCs' positive, strengths-based approach.

I think that's the best part about the program [is] that it's on that voluntary basis that people seek them out and want to come and get help. I think with normal JSAs with Centrelink, when people are being forced to attend 'x' number of appointments or have your benefits cut, there's that added pressure as well as looking for work. But when you come in here, it's voluntary ... the whole process here, it works a lot better than the normal JSA. *Shepparton focus group participant*

A short *and* long-term approach to work and learning

Focus group participants highly valued the WLCs' focus on developing career paths and upskilling in addition to assisting people to obtain employment in the short term:

With [my Work and Learning Advisor] we work on a pathway—it's about where do you want to be at a certain stage down the track. *Moe focus group participant*

Here, they were more focused on 'Where do you want to go?', 'What do you want to do', 'How are you going to upskill?' *Shepparton focus group participant*

These experiences were often contrasted with the approach of JSAs, which participants described as focused only on immediate employment in 'any' available job. One young focus group participant who had finished Year 12 the previous year described being grateful for the job that her JSA had helped her to secure, but was seeking help from the WLC to navigate training options so that she could move into employment in line with her interest in community services in the future:

[The focus of the JSAs is] not about putting you into a position that you want to do, it's just putting you into any position. Not that I'm not grateful ... and not that I'm not willing to do it, but I don't want that to be my life. I want to do something that I want to do. *Shepparton focus group participant*

Post-placement support and advancement

The longer-term approach also included post-placement support for participants who had gained employment. One young jobseeker who had been placed into his first ongoing role commented on the long-term view of the WLCs and their post-placement support:

When I did start working [my Work and Learning Advisor] would come in every two weeks or so, just for 15 minutes to see how I was going. She also helped me draw up a pathway, of what my goals would be for the next few weeks, then months then years. So they're still there, once you've got a job. Just because you've been put somewhere, doesn't mean they forget about you. That makes a difference, like we were talking about – at [JSA] you're just another number. *Moe focus group participant*

A participant described the way the Work and Learning Centre had provided long-term support to achieve her goal of becoming a nurse, while recognising her immediate need for employment as a single mother supporting two children.

I was meant to be working as a PSA [patient services assistant] but really I was just doing cleaning. So I resigned and decided to apply around my area. I live in [inner suburb]. With the help of a Work and Learning Advisor, I applied for six jobs and was offered four. So I took one job at [a hospital]. Then in 2012, I took a PCA [personal care attendant] course, because I wanted to try something different and because my plan in my head is to do nursing in the future. But I need to take it slow because I've got kids and ... so much responsibility. I need money. I always maintain that first—I need a job. When I finished my PCA, I applied for a job with an aged care facility in inner Melbourne. And at the moment I've also applied to another care facility, so I think I might start with them too. I have enough hours, but I'm trying to roll my job into a PCA job so I can move toward nursing. *Carlton focus group participant*¹⁰

Ongoing support in recognition of insecure employment

This ongoing support was important not only to support longer-term career progression but also because securing work was not necessarily a 'one-off' event for many clients who often had a series of short-term jobs. Some participants expressed concerns that the JSAs were only able to

¹⁰ Although the WLCs have been operating for a relatively short time, this client had previously been a client of the Centre for Work and Learning, Yarra—the pilot program that was a precursor to the WLCs.

help you 'get started' in a job, but did not provide ongoing support: 'It's like once you've got a job, they don't want to know you, they just cut ties'. This was particularly important for those who cycled in and out of employment, as they felt they had to 'start again' with their JSA provider each time their employment ended.

One participant who had been assisted by her WLC to find employment at a cafe explained that while she was gaining experience, she was also looking for work because it was difficult to get enough hours to satisfy her Centrelink requirements:

But because I'm the last on, my hours are being cut back first, so I'm really struggling to get enough hours at the moment ... I've got to get 30 hours a fortnight to satisfy Centrelink. But the last couple of fortnights I've only had 10 to 11 hours—when I started I was getting 20 to 30 hours. And it's not looking good at the moment. I'll just keep looking, keep applying. *Moe focus group participant*

She was receiving ongoing support from the WLC in this search for employment.

This ongoing support sat in contrast with the participants' experiences with JSA providers. One participant with qualifications in aged care described a job that his JSA provider had helped him to achieve, but fell well short of meeting his needs:

My [JSA] provider did help me to find a job, but the hours were very short —only three hours a day and you would have to go from place to place just doing one hour and one hour and one hour. That was the only job that I was able to get, because the others had so many criteria and I couldn't get them. *Carlton focus group participant*

The reality of the insecure labour market remains an ongoing challenge for all services attempting to assist jobseekers, particularly with low-skilled or entry-level positions. One participant pointed to the uncertainty facing small businesses. Despite having found a job that she loved through her WLC (proudly declaring that she 'had never taken a sick day') she explained that the owner of the small business had recently been diagnosed with a terminal illness and was planning to sell. This meant that the future of her casual job was uncertain. However, the increased confidence, recent work experience and references she had gained were likely to be significant assets should she need to search again for work in the future; and she remained in contact with her Work and Learning Advisor should she need additional support.

Networks with employers

Participants spoke about the important role of the WLC as a broker engaging with employers, particularly for jobseekers lacking their own social networks. One young participant identified that he had had greater success searching for employment with the direct assistance of his Work and Learning Advisor:

... when I had a chance to meet up with people like [Work and Learning Advisor] here, and he can pick me up and take me in car and go to some bosses and say 'This person is looking for a job', that's when successful. But I had already put in a résumé there and they didn't call me back. But I am happy because even if they can't call you when you apply, but when someone connects you with those people, and when your boss sees how hard you are working, maybe he will be happy ... I think we need that connection – someone who can stand up and say something about the people who are looking for jobs because people are struggling. People don't have those connections. People are depressed. It's hard. *Shepparton focus group participant*

This comment recognises the WLCs' role at a community level, linking into and harnessing their networks to identify opportunities for their clients.

Resources

When asked what they thought could be improved about the WLCs, one of the few comments made by several focus group participants was a desire for additional resources. One participant acknowledged that his JSA provider was able to offer resources such as money to pay for training or safety clothes for work that the Work and Learning Centre could not offer. Other participants at one centre commented that access to a computer room would be helpful.

Consultation regarding community needs and policy and program development

Another issue raised by participants in one focus group was the lack of opportunities for jobseekers and other members of the community to come together and discuss the issues they faced and to provide direct feedback to policy makers.

I would like just to ask for them to develop more learning centres, where people can meet—like here [the focus group]—where people can talk about issues in their communities. For example, we have issues, but we don't have someone we can talk to who can take our voices and what we are talking about now to other people so they can know what affects us ... So if you can provide other places where people can come together, like this ... Because there are many young people in our communities who have dreams in their pockets. But it's hard to get those dreams out of their pockets, because they don't know who they can talk to, and no-one can hear their voices.

These concerns regarding having a voice reflect findings in the literature that showed income support recipients wanted both policy makers and the wider community to better understand what their lives were like, to accord them respect and recognition and to value their knowledge.

This issue of voice and how to enable the greater participation of jobseekers in policy and program development is discussed further in the following section.

5 What matters to jobseekers: towards a capability approach to employment services

The experiences of participants and the aspects of employment services delivery they most valued provide a useful insight into important differences and similarities between the approaches of the JSA services and WLCs.

The **personalised approach** of the WLCs was strongly valued by all clients and was also identified as a key feature that distinguished the WLC approach from that of the JSA services. The importance of the WLCs' caring and compassionate environment was echoed by participants across all four focus groups. The WLC approach, underpinned by a positive, strengths-based approach had important flow-on effects, including encouraging clients to remain engaged in the search for work and building confidence after repeated setbacks and rejections.

The **recognition of individual circumstances** was particularly important to participants and it enabled the WLC staff to tailor employment opportunities and support services to meet clients' needs. Participants presented a number of examples where the formal opportunities they gained would not have been accessible without the intensive support of the WLCs.

Participants also strongly valued the dual **short and long-term approach** to work and learning demonstrated by the WLCs, recognising both people's immediate needs for employment and their future aspirations through career support and skills acquisition. The flexible and personalised approach of WLCs also recognises that some jobseekers, particularly those facing the greatest barriers, will need time and space to establish and realise their capabilities.

When mapped against the typology outlined on page 7, which differentiates between work first, human capital development and capabilities approaches, the WLC approach corresponds with aspects of a human capital development approach as well as elements of a capabilities approach (see Figure 1.1). The WLCs' recognition of individual jobseekers' circumstances, prioritisation of their short and long-term aspirations, and provision of real opportunities by creating enabling conditions all match a capability approach. From the perspective of participants, these elements provided a crucial distinction between the services delivered by JSAs and those delivered by the WLCs. These findings also provide additional insight into why jobseekers who have been unsuccessfully assisted by JSAs are seeking a 'second chance' from WLCs, with no compulsion to do so.

These findings also highlight the importance of evaluating employment programs not simply according to narrow definitions of effectiveness, but also taking into account the real opportunities delivered to people (Raveaud 2002). As is demonstrated by this research, the difference between approaches typified by mainstream employment services and those seeking to enhance capabilities can be subtle, 'however, for the unemployed person ... it is without a doubt noticeable' (Raveaud 2002, p. 282).

The capabilities framework described in Chapter 1 also provides some direction for potential improvements in the WLC service delivery as well as for a policy reform agenda broader than the scope of the WLCs.

A voice for jobseekers

How to increase opportunities for consultation with jobseekers and to involve them in program design and policy remains a challenge for the WLCs, mainstream services and policy makers. Drawing on the capabilities framework, Dean and colleagues (2005) point to the need to move beyond both work first and human development approaches towards an approach that recognises

the rights of job seekers to have a voice in conversations about decisions that affect them. Embedding the voices of jobseekers into the ongoing design of employment services would enhance engagement and enable greater responsiveness. Involving policy makers in conversations with jobseekers could also challenge underlying assumptions regarding the nature of unemployment.

Sustainable employment – an ongoing challenge

The participants' experiences demonstrate the ongoing challenges faced by jobseekers in the labour market – particularly finding employment with sufficient hours and secure conditions in local labour markets characterised by high unemployment and high levels of temporary or seasonal work. While employment services assist individuals to search for work, to improve long-term employability, and to navigate the labour market, the experiences of jobseekers continue to be shaped by the nature of the local labour market, public policy and other external forces (McQuaid & Lindsay 2002). The participants' responses in this study highlight the notion that any approach which focuses *only* on services for individuals experiencing unemployment—and is not situated within a framework of broader policies or programs—risks positioning the unemployed as 'the problem', while failing to assist those most in need.

Here, the embedding of WLCs within local communities and labour markets through harnessing the resources and networks of local delivery agencies and brokering relationships with local employers offers another important distinction between the WLC approach and mainstream services (Bodsworth 2014). The capabilities approach offers insights into how such a framework might be broadened in the future for the WLCs. In addition to a network of services designed to assist unemployed people, a broad capabilities approach would involve the school and training systems becoming geared towards a focus on strengths and enabling people to live lives they value. Such an approach also points to the need for changes to macro-economic, skills and industry policies to create further enabling conditions for jobseekers, including a supply of sustainable jobs. From this perspective, a strong economy is seen as an essential enabling condition for a flourishing life, but not an end in itself. Moreover, under a broad capabilities approach to unemployment, policies would recognise that human beings are not simply workers and carers but value other aspects of life, including community and civic engagement (Raveaud 2002).

The place-based nature of the WLCs, targeting locations of economic and social disadvantage, offers a more targeted way of broadening the approach to unemployment at the same time making it specific to the needs of local communities and locations. Baum, O'Connor and Stimson (2005) argue against a 'one size fits all' approach to unemployment and disadvantage, and propose a mix of people-based interventions in education, taxation and financial assistance and place-based interventions through infrastructure, community facilities and regional financial assistance for firms. This would also include improving transport networks to better connect employees (and potential employees) with employers.

Above all, a capabilities approach draws attention to the importance of actively listening to jobseekers when designing interventions and policies. As Raveaud (2002) argues, to be effective such policies and programs should rely on what people need, and not what the policy-maker may think they need.

6 Conclusion

Listening to the WLC clients reveals the complex challenges facing jobseekers in the current economy, especially in finding secure employment. Their experiences also highlight their strong motivation to work and the importance of ongoing paid employment for reaching their aspirations. The participants' stories also demonstrate difficulties faced by employment service providers in assisting jobseekers to find sustainable employment opportunities, particularly those facing significant barriers.

In asking jobseekers 'what has made the biggest difference in the search for work', this study has not pointed to one particular 'intervention' or activity, but rather a more subtle but crucial distinction between approaches to service delivery and the assumptions which underpin them. Above all else, jobseekers wanted their experiences and long-term aspirations to be recognised and wanted to be provided with the individualised support and enabling conditions necessary for them to develop skills and career pathways. They also sought advice to develop long-term career plans, while at the same time addressing immediate needs for a job.

The jobseekers' perspectives also highlight some broader questions regarding the best way to offer support to people facing labour market disadvantage. Through their insights into the shortcomings of the mainstream system and the aspects of 'good' service delivery they most valued, the participants articulated aspects of a 'capabilities' approach to employment services. They also highlighted some ongoing challenges and areas for improvement not only within the WLCs but also in broader policy reform. These findings suggests that a capabilities approach might be a useful framework for research and program development, examining what the users of Brotherhood employment and training services value in life, what capabilities they aspire to, how current services enhance capabilities and how the capability approach might be further operationalised and integrated into service provision (see, for example, Kimberley, Gruhn & Huggins (2012) in relation to aged care).

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