

Submission to VLA's Economic and Infrastructure Committee – 'Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers'

For the purposes of this submission the following Definitions have been used:

'Disadvantaged' – 'of unfavourable circumstances especially with regard to financial or social opportunities'

'Jobseeker' – 'a person who is unemployed and looking for work'

'Core Disadvantage' – a core disadvantage is one that cannot be removed. It both forms and contextualises the individual's state of being

'Exponential Disadvantage' – 'an individual whose disadvantage is compounded at a factoring scale, by the presence of more than one Core Disadvantage identifier.'

'Exacerbating Impact' – an exacerbating impact is a present but solvable issue that increases the difficulty faced by a disadvantaged jobseeker in their quest to gain employment'.

Submission Context

In order to be able to develop effective solutions to the Disadvantaged Jobseeker challenges, it is important that discussions are centred on clear and unambiguous language. The Terms of Reference seeking submissions does not do this and it is the view of this submission that the lack of clarity is problematic for any future design or performance criteria for models that respond effectively to the current challenges. Without specific clarity it becomes possible for accountability to wane or effective performance measures to be ignored.

Taking that position, this submission aims to offer a system assessment rather than one based on isolation of any one factor or one group of factors.

Response to Issue One:

This submission contends that this framing statement is ill-defined and that the Economy and Infrastructure Committee would benefit greatly by embracing the offered stronger and more accountable measure. The current request is:

'...the social and economic benefits of seeking to place disadvantaged jobseekers into sustainable employment'

1. *'...benefits of seeking to...'*

- a. The act of *'seeking to'* in no way requires an ACTUAL outcome on behalf of the jobseeker. It could be argued that currently there exists a myriad of providers who accrue significant economic benefits as a result of *'...seeking to place...'* and that any links to widescale benefit for disadvantaged jobseekers is more tenuous.

The stronger and more accountable measurement is:

'The social and economic benefits of **placing disadvantaged jobseekers into sustainable employment'**

If the terms of reference were interested in social and economic benefits of a successful job placement with specific inclusion of the person placed into the job, then one does not have to look far.

- Sustained employment will typically see lower rates of crime & lower policing costs, the supporting data of which is easily unpacked through resource allocation comparisons across LGAs.
- Stemming from lower crime rates, typically higher employment rates mean lower associated court and legal costs.
- There will usually be a widescale drop in medical costs, both at the General Practitioner level and at the Hospitalisation level. Use of pharmacology can decrease in both legal (prescribed) and illegal uses. Unfortunately, neither GP practises nor hospitals are immune from the ongoing deleterious impact of alcohol consumption across society. As Prof David Nutt highlighted in his research for the UK Government, researching 20 commonly used drugs, the number one drug of harm in society is alcohol. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-11660210> It should be noted however that some of the core Disadvantaged Jobseekers do not consume alcohol and as such are non-contributors to the hospital, policing or GP workloads that result for alcohol related interventions.
- Higher employment rates within the Disadvantaged Jobseeker ecosystem overtime, leads to a reduction and or reallocation of social work costs. In some cases, there is an *initial increased* work level as support workers are required to engage more heavily in *the early stages* to be able to effectively assist a disadvantaged jobseeker transition into employment and critically RETAIN their employment.
- And higher employment rates also assist with increased Federal and State taxation bases and may help lower damage to Government properties and infrastructure in specific geographical areas.

The question then is whether the reduced hard costs (less policing, fewer legal system interventions, lower hospital demand, and less property damage costs) outweigh the cost of a more individual, customised support process. This submission would suggest that it does, by a significant factor.

2. The terms of reference do not define '*sustainable employment*'. If we apply the definition of sustain as 'to maintain overtime' then the request is either for strategies that value continuity of employment, or requests for strategies that seek employment within jobs likely to continue. Given the rate of change due to robotics, software and artificial intelligence, this is possibly a more difficult task.

Given that employment opportunities for Disadvantaged Jobseekers are often found in low skill or manual level jobs, and that automation, software and robotics are likely to reduce the numbers of those roles over time, then consideration must be given to the impact of those dwindling roles on any assessment of future strategic choices aimed at assisting Disadvantaged Job Seekers.

Paradoxically, the rise in automation is seeing a bigger shortage of skilled workers able to assist organisations. The paradox lies in the fact that a number of Disadvantaged Jobseekers have arrived in the country possessing advanced degrees and experience in robotics, software design, automation, pharmacology and more, yet few of their qualifications are recognised or treated at 'Australian Level'. As such, despite the brainpower available, these people are offered few opportunities to deploy their skills for the wider benefit of the Australian economy. It might be that sooner, rather than later, conversations over validity of experience or overseas qualifications assess whether there is an unfair or unwarranted barrier to recognition of existing capabilities.

3. There is no clarity as to for whom '*social and economic benefit*' ought to accrue. Using the language of '*...seeking to place...*' the economic benefits can already be assigned to the Job Active style entities. Whether there is an economic benefit to a disadvantaged jobseeker who has been part of a system that is '**seeking** to place' but not ACTUALLY place' is open to debate.

Beneficial socio-economic results are also relatively easy to identify. LGA mapping of socio-economic areas combined with Policing statistics of certain crime rates and resource allocations matched to those crime rates tell a ready tale of social and economic advantage and disadvantage. Some crimes are more prevalent in some areas, but crime exists in all areas. If it can be reasonably held that increased employment = lower overall crime rates (and anecdotally the suggestion shows a strong correlation) and that such lowering of crime rates also increases social benefits, then a more troubling issue arises – why has there been an apparent unwillingness to invest in purposeful strategies that work to enhance employment participation of disadvantaged persons?

One could argue 'costs' for interventions. But as can be shown, the reduction in costs associated with dealing with social issues arising from unemployment, could easily account for any increased cost in a customised and or bespoke intervention for the disadvantaged.

Response to Issue Two:

'...the jobseekers who might be considered 'disadvantaged' in the labour market and the types of barriers to employment they may face'

This table attempts to map an array of elements that exist in the 'Disadvantaged Jobseeker' space. 'Identifiers' are the labels used for a specific category of disadvantage; 'Barriers to Entry' flags the likely challenges for that Job Seeker which have then been framed through one of 3 Lenses – 'Biological' challenges, 'Psychological' challenges, and 'Sociological' challenges. This Table does not imply that all 'disadvantaged' are represented, or that all challenges are represented, nor that cross over challenges do not exist. Rather it aims to provide an essential snapshot or core features of the Disadvantaged Jobseeker ecosystem, such that a ready handle of the challenges that are present might be more easily considered;

Table 1 – Disadvantaged Jobseekers Barriers to Entry

Barrier to Entry		Identifier					
Lens	Core Barrier Type:	Asylum Seeker	CALD	Women	DisAbility	Youth	Aged
Biological	Physical Disability	Minimal support services			Accessibility challenges, transport challenges and onsite tools suitable for use	Lack of specific housing options sees them placed into aged care facilities	Movement & workload challenges esp. in manual occupations
Biological	Physical Health	Lack of access to health services to enable wellness		Lack of workplace flexibility in some cases	Some disabilities present ongoing physical impairments requiring medical attention	Insufficient body strength for some manual and often low-skill tasks	Insufficient body strength for some manual and often low-skill tasks
Biological	Non Binary	Still examples of preference for Binary applicants					
Psychological	Mental Health	Challenges with self identity	Impact of moving into workplaces after long periods of displacement	Increasing rates of anxiety		Increasing use of prescribed pharmacology to assist coping mechanisms;	Exacerbates those with temporary housing or inconsistent job access crating

							negative feedback loop
Psychological	Held Skillsets	Restricted opportunities to develop bridging skills from previous country of origin	Lower ability to read and or take instructions in English			Lack of experience and operational skill sets for jobs available – minimal task based training opportunities	Unable/unwilling to develop additional skills/ lack of access to skills training made only available to youth
Psychological	Employer Wants	No onsite capabilities for support; Still examples of preference for Binary applicants	English proficiency (but see also the Deakin U report)	Still examples of preference for males esp. in 'traditionally male' role	Minimal change to workplace design, minimal disruptions to onboarding person with a disability	Positive attitude, low cost of acquisition, rapid skill take-up	
Psychological	Jobseeker Wants		On the job learning opportunities not matching real life demands	Equal pay, opportunity to prove worth and capability; work hour flexibility	Opportunity to prove value and worth		
Social	Language Skills	Lack of proficiency in English; often skills that are outdated or have been lost during asylum period	Insufficient dual+ language in both writing and verbal skills reduces opportunities			Poor written communications at CV / application stage	
Social	Minimal Experience	Overseas exp not recognised	Language impedes ability for gaining experience	Women returning to work find past skill sets not recognised		Lack of entry level opportunities	Perceptions of inability to adapt to new roles
Social	Outdated Skills	Long journeys often see once proficient and valuable skill sets lost	Skills from O/S not recognised or deemed of lower quality	Women returning to work after long periods in charge of child rearing often lack up-to-date skills (or perceive they lack them)			Skills have not been maintained
Social	Sexism			Still examples of preference for males			

				esp. in 'traditionally male' roles			
Social	Background	See Deakin U research *	See Deakin U research *	In some cultural settings women must gain spousal 'Permission to work' or main male family member	Unspoken bias against hiring of people with a disability		
Social	Transport	Distance barriers rule out opportunities				Challenged getting to workplaces, especially for roles that are 'variable location' (trades support)	
Social	Housing	Housing often within friends or others		Many face housing dislocation through relationship breakdown, avoiding violence or due to sexually transmitted debt aligned to them during a relationship.	Independent persons may face few suitable housing options thus restricting the localities suitable for work	Disadvantaged youth often present with housing challenges. This can make contact with employers or support services sporadic	Plus 55yo (especially women) with housing challenges are on the rise and face similar issues for work consistency
Lens	Barrier Type	Asylum Seeker	CALD	Women	DisAbility	Youth	Aged

What Table One suggests is that there is unlikely to ever be a 'one size fits all' model for assistance or intervention. Equally this table highlights the impact on those facing what is best framed as 'Exponential Disadvantage'. The presence of each 'lens' has a Factor inducing impact rather than a mere 'doubling' or exacerbating impact. By way of an example, an Asylum seeker with a transport challenge has a significantly better chance of finding work than an Asylum seeker with a Disability even if transport is readily available to them.

Missing in the terms of reference such as they are, is the much-needed conversation on employment **retention**. Table Two aims to map some of the factors that answer the question 'Why do Disadvantaged Jobseekers, fall out of work once placed?'

* Lack of English language skills may not be the problem -

https://www.sbs.com.au/news/even-with-good-english-skills-muslim-migrants-say-they-can-t-land-jobs-in-australia?cx_cid=edm:newsam:2019

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Expanding the View of the Disadvantaged Jobseeker Ecosystem

One area missed within the Disadvantaged Jobseeker ecosystem is the impact caused by a job loss. It can be difficult enough for a qualified job seeker with experience to locate a new role, let alone being a person who has had constant challenges with gaining an entry into employment. The ‘place and forget’ approach can cause ongoing harm to any improvement in employment suitability as periods between employment tend to be longer and the psychological health impacts far more negative.

The Barrier to Employment retention suggest some of the opportunities to help a Disadvantaged Jobseeker maintain longer periods of employment (Sustainable Employment) and thus move further away from the position of ‘disadvantage’.

Table 2 – **Disadvantaged Jobseekers Barriers to Job Retention**

This Table suggest Barriers to Retention of employment. It does not suggest this table is a complete assessment of known or likely contributing factors.

Here this table considers that falling out of work is NOT a preferred outcome

Disadvantaged Jobseekers	Barrier to Employment Retention						
	Why do Disadvantaged Jobseekers fall out of work after a successful placement?						
Performance Issues				Tasking Issues			
Skills Based Actions		Operating Related Actions		Redundancy of Role		Care Issues	
Unable to acquire needed skills for performance of allocated duties	Unable to consistently perform skills at the level of quality expected or demanded by employer	Substance issues impacting quality of work or exposing risk of OH&S problems	Relational issues impacting quality of workplace for individual and co-workers	Role was short-term or has been replaced by equipment upgrade	Inconsistent reliability of work attendance	Work hour commitments impeding need for carer responsibilities	Attendance to Existing issues prevent attendance to work
Lack of training opportunities, or challenges with learning skills through training that is offered	Lack of attention to detail, or physical overwhelm given workload		Lack of self-confidence; self-sabotaging behaviours; unsupportive workplace support	No transition options inside workplace beyond short term role	Coping strategies lacking for movement into workplace (psychological overwhelm)	Inflexible workplace requirements; loss/withdrawal of a support carer that had enabled access to time for employment	Hospitalisation, pre-standing court requirements etc

Response to Issue Four:

'Outcomes of efforts to encourage greater participation of disadvantaged jobseekers'

We can 'encourage' all we like but if the barriers identified at Q2 have not been resolved, we're cheering people on to roles that functionally, do not exist or cannot be retained. It goes against the call for 'sustainable employment' if Disadvantaged Jobseekers are shoehorned into roles that are ill-fitting or without enough structural, procedural and personal support to enable them to secure that role for extended periods of time – what might become 'sustained employment'.

Response to Issue Five:

'Education and training needs to support disadvantaged jobseekers transitioning into work'

The support structures needed to ensure that placement opportunities can be converted into *retained opportunities* (see Table 2) are not difficult to identify and arguably there is some consistency as to the kind of support required at each stage of the process. However, this can be especially critical for one Disadvantaged Jobseeker group only just touched on by the challenges listed in Table One and could warrant their own category marker – the illiterate school leavers.

Illiterate school leavers are those that have survived the schooling system and have completed their 'time' but have left or graduated without legitimate or sufficient literacy skills. This group is for most part, hidden from support structures despite a core barrier being present. These Disadvantaged Jobseekers cannot fill out a job application sheet and may depart a potential employment interview at the point where they are asked to fill in basic information in a paper-based form. Lacking readership skills, anecdotally, many have said they have walked out of an interview before being 'found out'. That many have proven themselves inside the school system despite reading difficulties shows a significant degree of problem-solving capability. Unfortunately, the 'normal' requirement to provide contact information proves a step too far with regard to employment opportunities.

Response to Issue Six:

'Interstate and overseas Best Practice models that could be implemented in Victoria'

The challenge for a response here is whether the request is for 'siloes' responses (singular aspects of the Disadvantaged Jobseeker ecosystem), or for an assessment of whole system interventions or even system critical interventions.

In that light, the Bio/Psycho/Social barriers nominated in Table One suggest that the most apt interventions are likely to be system-critical such that they address parts of the system that impact many of the others. However, in developing or redesigning those elements for improvement of the overall system, we'd be looking for outcomes that at the individual granular level, enable behaviours that provide for the greatest level of variety – (Law of Requisite Variety).

Although the perceived cost of offering bespoke support at the individual level may seem high, given the mid to long term benefits to the whole system that accrue it is likely to be a far more effective and far cheaper option. Additionally, when considering the kinds of interventions likely to provide the biggest impact across a number of Disadvantaged Jobseeker groups it is possible to identify actions that maximise benefits not only to the individual but also to the whole Disadvantaged Jobseeker ecosystem.

There are a number of positive outcomes seen in Victorian offerings that we can look at, not just options from overseas (some of which are included here), although it would be fair to say that few if any offerings work for all of the people all of the-time. Some of the system approach concepts include:

Bio-Social Interventions:

House them first – resolve social and mental health problems by offering housing upfront – allow for locational stability and safety such that mental health issues are removed/resolved/manageable. This approach allows for increased safety and security in the social barrier so that more conducive psychological and biological barriers can be managed/negated or removed and as such lead to more positive workplace outcomes - <https://www.vox.com/2014/5/30/5764096/homeless-shelter-housing-help-solutions>.

Living Wage – as a concept the overall idea is to provide Disadvantaged persons with sufficient income without them being required to face the ongoing stress of dealing with a system geared toward making them feel unwelcome or unworthy of support. The positive impacts on mental health have been widely documented but other factors, like having enough money to be able to afford to travel to a job interview are also addressed. Sweden's example can be found here <https://tradingeconomics.com/sweden/living-wage-individual> and this SBS story offers an additional overview of the concept <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/what-is-a-living-wage-and-is-it-the-answer-for-australia-s-working-poor>

Literacy Teaching That Works – the shift in teaching of literacy towards one that is evidence and research based has taken an arduously long time. Thankfully there are signs of shift in thinking with the literacy model being led by Sarah A some of Bentleigh West Primary School in Victoria and winner of the Outstanding teacher of the Year Award - https://www.ldaustralia.org/client/documents/LDA%20Bulletin%20Autumn%202017_WEB.pdf and <https://nationaleducationsummit.com.au/sarah-esome/> and Dr Rosie Nash in Tasmania <https://www.utas.edu.au/profiles/staff/health/rosie-nash> have been achieving exceptional results that ought act as the guideline for all training of Disadvantaged Jobseekers whose core disadvantage is literacy.

Psycho-Social Interventions:

Fitted For Work – this model looks at pre-employment skills and factors often at the Psychological barrier stage and then spilling over into the social barrier area. Have the candidates had job interviews before? Do they know how to put a CV together? Do they have a budget that allows them to buy clothes so that they can present and attend as 'ready for work'? Do they have enough self-belief or a chosen direction for their life? <https://fittedforwork.org/>

Social Interventions:

Future Skills Centre – Canada. The Centre for Australian Foresight (and others) have been calling for a Ministerial level position specific to addressing emerging and anticipated future issues. In Finland <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/swedens-ministry-for-the-future-how-governments-should-think-strategically-and-act-horizontally/> the office has been helping inform Government policy for over a decade, working to support individual Ministry portfolios with research and strategic thinking, and now Canada joins the process - <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/news/news-article/future-skills-centre-looks-at-scaling-up-best-practices-for-canadas-workforce/>. Others have called for a similar Departmental body in the United States - <https://www.politico.com/agenda/story/2016/12/department-of-future-trump-000258>. The implications of applied futures thinking is the ability to take a system wide approach able to work beyond vested interests and sunk costs associated with historical patterns of operation

Systemic Interventions:

The Sustainable Development Goals July 2019 report provides a sobering view of the changing face of the workplace. The quick take from the report is that:

- Economic Growth needs to be inclusive and job led – ‘...one should not assume a correlation between economic growth, productivity and decent work...’
- Technology is changing how we work – ‘The digital revolution is bringing productivity gains along with increasing inequality...’ and there is a recognition that new technology is going to displace workers. Additionally when assessing the ‘gig economy’ the report states that:

‘While the gig economy provides some workers with flexibility & helps to diversify income sources, it lacks job security and a predictable career path. The gig economy is largely unregulated, both at national and international levels, which risks the exploitation of workers in some sectors as they often have little bargaining power.

- Lifelong Learning is imperative – ‘...one set of skills will not be enough...transferable and soft skills are critical for success...businesses have the responsibility to upskill employees...’
- Skill mismatches in labour markets requires a multi-stakeholder approach – ‘...employers need to communicate to education providers the skills they need...business/education partnerships need investment...Governments will need to collaborate with businesses in the design of skill building...NGOs & Unions need to be a voice for civil society...’

Forum participants believe that decent work for all will be challenging to achieve if we do not address pressing social issues such as poverty, inequality, weak governance, youth unemployment, and human rights

Systemic barriers are currently inhibiting decent work, especially for the most marginalized. Access to education, providing opportunities for people of low socioeconomic status, reducing inequality of opportunities, and providing strong social protection systems are seen as essential to achieving Goal 8. Greater efforts are needed to provide youth, particularly those in emerging economies, with the education and skills training they need to thrive in the workplace

‘Future of Work: Decent Work and Skills’
Sustainable Development Goals Leadership Series
July 2019