

Ability Works Australia Submission

to

Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services

28 Feb 2023

Ability Works Australia has responded to specific questions within the guidelines where it has expertise. Ability Works Australia is a not for profit social enterprise, with a vision to provide long term employment for people from vulnerable backgrounds.

Integration and support for local responses

How can smaller, local organisations that have social capital and employer networks and a desire to help be engaged in the national employment services system?

Smaller organisations such as social enterprises can be supported by government to develop prototypes of successful place-based models to employ people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The unemployment of people from disadvantaged backgrounds has the characteristics of a wicked problem which are:

1. Multiple causes
2. Many interdependencies
3. Different stakeholders have a different understanding of what the problem is and therefore different stakeholders have conflicting goals
4. No clear solution
5. Attempts to address them often leads to unforeseen consequences due to their multi-causality and interdependency
6. They adapt - because of the interdependencies, changes to one part of the problem can have unforeseen consequences for other parts of the problem
7. And they are context specific – for example, poverty is different in different communities - there will be different combinations of intertwined causal factors in different communities

Source: [Wicked Labs](#)

Accordingly, research was commissioned by [Ability Works Australia](#) (AWA) on culturally diverse communities in the City of Greater Dandenong (CGD) and conducted by RMIT University in the last quarter of 2022. It identified macro, meso and micro barriers to employment, that require strategic collaboration between government, business, and communities (*Refer Appendix A. The RMIT codesign study can be made available to the enquiry if required*).

Government could support a place-based initiative in the CGD by setting up a representative body of key stakeholders to focus on designing solutions to each of the macro and meso level barriers to employment, identified in this research. Several job focussed social enterprises could be included in this initiative in the CGD, so a real impact on unemployment reduction is made.

The CGD council is making significant efforts to change local business practices ([Gamechange](#) program). They are encouraging businesses to be more flexible during the recruitment process and during employment. Their approach could be enhanced by government using social enterprises to develop a successful evidence-based model. As social enterprise's goals are employment first, with profit second; a faster result is more likely

to be achieved compared to business. There is also some evidence from the Centre for Social Impact, at Swinburne University, that social enterprises are more successful at getting disadvantaged communities into work.

In March 2022, the unemployment rate in Greater Dandenong was 8.3 per cent - representing 7,000 residents - the second highest rate in Victoria, and substantially higher than the Victorian rate of 4.5 per cent. However, the unemployment rates of specific overseas born communities are up to 26%.

Outcomes and recommendations of the qualitative study in the CGD on 60 participants using focus groups were as follows:

Macro barriers preventing employment were lack of accessible childcare, inaccessible transport, long commutes, unaffordable cars, no driver's license, caring responsibilities of women and young people, visa limitations for work and study for refugees, disability or poor health and workplace discrimination. These issues are beyond the realm of what a social enterprise like AWA can tackle on its own.

Where government can potentially play a role!

- Organisational childcare, at or near the workplace. An opportunity for private/public cooperation.
- Transport solutions – policy support to encourage van / carpooling.

Meso and Micro barriers included a requirement for education for migrants on Australian workplaces. For e.g. differences between gross, and net pay, what is superannuation etc.

Where government can potentially play a role!

- **Educational workshops** run by community/business/govt to explain taxation to develop confidence in the Australian workplace. E.g., Tax and superannuation are an unfamiliar concept to the Afghan community. They are not something to which they have had previous exposure. These need to occur in first few weeks of employment with regular refreshers, delivered with employee and community representatives present.
- **English language and literacy support** – employers work with communities and government to create fast tracked opportunities at the workplace to develop and practice English, specifically related to workers occupations.
- **Cultural Liaison Officer**– facilitate communication between the community and the employer to address culturally sensitive issues. Communities were keen this position did not report into the employer but to an independent third party.

Additionally, using an equivalent of the [Victorian Governments Social Procurement Framework](#), government departments and corporates need to be incentivised to provide social enterprise with long term ongoing contracts, to enable provision of long-term ongoing employment to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The reality is disadvantaged cohorts cost more to employ. A 3 month pilot project conducted by [Ability Works Australia](#) with the African Australian community (via [Afri-Aus Care](#)) suggested costs are 30-40% higher. [White Box Enterprises](#) with other cohorts from disadvantaged communities suggest the costs are 20-30% higher.

Focus by government needs to be on the social value being created as opposed to the immediate cost.

What steps might the Commonwealth take to better understand and respond to workforce demand at the local level?

Promote the conduct of place based research that enables codesigning with communities that have high unemployment to identify barriers to employment, followed by finding solutions to minimise the barriers. Job focussed social enterprises should be resourced and supported to find the solutions, as described in the response above.

What role can and should the Commonwealth play in building connections between national, state/territory and local initiatives.?

The Commonwealth government could tackle macro barriers to employment eg. Visas, English language supports, marketing campaigns to reduce discrimination in the workplace and community, worker skill development & training.

The State government could tackle barriers related to childcare and transport.

The role of Local Government could involve support such as the provision of Cultural Liaison Officers and education on Australian workplaces.

Where does the system need more collaboration with other human services? How could this be built into the employment services system?

Build the system around an evidence-based approach that has been shown to work. These may need to be developed first. There is some evidence that suggests a person centred approach may be the solution. For example, In the disability sector there is an approach titled "[Customised Employment](#)" which is an evidence based successful approach that gets young people with a disability into mainstream employment.

To ensure collaboration, a person from the equivalent of a Workforce Australia or Jobs Victoria could play a linchpin role liaising with other services and ensuring the jobseeker is being catered for with a person centred approach.

What could Australia learn from other jurisdictions and what changes would we make to move closer to best practice systems ?

Despite its many challenges the NDIS is overall a system that has been life changing for many people with a disability. People from disadvantaged communities need their equivalent of the NDIS. Their barriers to employment and potential solutions are equally complex and challenging and need funding on a long-term basis with most likely a person centred approach.

Appendix A

CoDesign Research

This submission is highlighting to the Inquiry, research conducted using a place-based approach (in the City of Greater Dandenong (CGD), Melbourne) by social enterprise [Ability Works Australia](#) (AWA), tailored to the local economy of Dandenong. In late 2022, AWA commissioned RMIT University School of Global, Urban and Social Studies (GUSS) to research local communities in the CGD and identify the barriers to employment they were facing. The purpose of the study was to help AWA identify how its potential employment facility should be set up, so barriers to employment for local communities could be minimised.

Background to codesign research

AWA has a goal to increase its social impact and grow employment opportunities for communities experiencing significant barriers to employment. We seek to provide an additional 50-100 jobs in the next 4 years. AWA has several business units in Kew, including a Wire and Metal Fabrication facility. Its current facility is not Fit for Purpose, hence seeking to create an additional facility in Dandenong

To further its employment creation goals, in the first quarter of 2022, AWA collaborated with [Afri-Aus Care](#) an organisation that supports the mental health and wellbeing of the African Australian community with high levels of unemployment in Melbourne's Southeast. Seeking to employ 30 people to fulfil a government contract, AWA was only able to get 6 members of the community in its Records Management business in Kew, despite being advised there were hundreds available. To employ the six people, a bus and driver were provided by Afri-AusCare to transport the workers to Kew, with AWA paying transport costs. This pilot was terminated after 3 months, due to AWA experiencing 30-40% additional costs to complete the work. AWA still keen to further its social impact decided it was important to commission a study to establish how communities in Dandenong could be successfully employed.

Using philanthropic funds from the Westpac Foundation and [Jobsbank](#), AWA employed the RMIT University School of Global, Urban and Social Studies (GUSS) who had a long standing relationship with Afri-Aus Care, to conduct research using 7 focus groups (8-10 participants in each) with a total of 67 people consulted. The communities included [Afri-Aus Care](#) (African Australians), [Friends of Refugees](#) (asylum seekers and refugees from the Tamil, Burmese, Vietnamese and other communities), and [Bakhtar Community Organisation](#) (Afghan Australians). The research outcomes will be used to develop an evidence base to take to funders (Govt. and philanthropy).

Research Approach

Stage 1: Developed advisory group (Ability Works, Afri-AusCare, Jobsbank) to identify the relevant stakeholder groups for interview. Participants recruited through snowball sampling through Ability Works and Afri-Aus Care.

Stage 2: the use of creative human-centred design tools were co-developed prior to the commencement of data collection to ensure cultural responsiveness, would elicit insights and inspiration for stage three,

Stage 3: Recruit, consult and engage in a reference group (Ability Work, Afri-Aus Care, Indian Care, Jobs Bank, and the City of Greater Dandenong) to decide on best approach,

and develop tools for conducting situation & needs analysis, views about employment, and identifying impact measure domains. This stage was the co-development with the reference group prior to the commencement of data collection to ensure cultural responsiveness, for stage four

Stage 4: Data Collection - Focus groups. Suggest, Refine/ Design service delivery concepts, Representatives from employment agencies (Jobs Vic) and Greater Dandenong City Council took part in a focus group; (about their services and how that could be utilised as a cluster of wraparound services.

Stage 5: Reference group Co-design Workshop - All reference group participants attended the second co-design workshop which focused on sharing and validating the research findings on identified needs and co designed wraparound services, consolidated ideas for wraparound services

Nationalities in focus groups

Somali, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Dinka, Afghan, Hazara, Burma

Focus Group structure

1. Large group discussion – What does work mean to you ?
2. Balloon activity – What helps – brings you up? What doesn't – brings you down?
3. What kind of employment at Ability Works would you be interested in ? What do wrap around supports look like?
4. Summarise decisions made by group. Ask participants to add extra information.

Research Findings

1. Strong motivation and need to work across all groups
2. Importance of work to the communities
 - a. Survival (food, shelter, medicine, financial security)
 - b. Means of contributing to family, community and society
 - c. Women – role model for children, independence and freedom
 - d. Young people and women– socialize, sense of belonging, sense of achievement (the opportunity to meet and interact with people through work, having a routine and physical and mental health and well-being benefits of working)
3. Will to work but numerous barriers preventing securing and maintaining employment
4. Major barriers are:
 1. Childcare
 2. Inadequate Transport (need car pooling, minibus pick ups by employer)
 3. Workplace socialization and discrimination

Type of work desired with reasons for choice (using what's on offer at AWA)

Women

- Packing and Assembly – as needs basic English, no qualifications or experience and opportunity to socialize
- Some chose office work as does not require heavy lifting (health conditions)
- Flexible shifts needed to facilitate school pick up and drop off

Young people and men

- No preference – will do any job (survival focus)

Barriers to Work

Macro or meso

- **Childcare** lack of accessible childcare (women with young children)
- **Transport** -inaccessible transport, and long commutes, unaffordable cars, no driver's licence
- **Discrimination**
- **Caring responsibilities** was identified as barrier by women and young people. Some young people take on care duties in the absence of a parent
- **Tax system unfamiliarity** - [Bakhtar Community Organisation](#)
- **Visa** limitations for work and study – [Friends of Refugees](#)
- **Disability** or poor health – men from Friends of Refugees

Micro

- **Lack of confidence** – not knowing what to do or where to start
- **Family expectations** – (young people) familial duties (caring for younger siblings, parents, grandparents) and career path (doctor, lawyer)
- **Drugs and alcohol** (Bakhtar Community Org) and young – but not critical issue

Meso & Micro

- Qualifications & Skills
- Family and friends
- Good health and access to good health care
- Adapting to needs – disability key issue (Friends of Refugees)
- Cultural awareness and respect
- Discrimination – young people from Afri-Aus Care said this made them try harder

Recommendations on minimizing barriers to work

Macro barriers

Childcare and flexibility – 42% of residents in CGD live in a childcare desert (Hurley et al 2022)

Employers could provide flexibility in working hours around school drop off and pick up.

Possible solution – Organisational childcare, at or near workplace, supported by state and federal govt. Opportunity for private/public cooperation.

Transport – minimum wage combined with high transport costs, means they are better off not working

Possible solution – Car pooling or work van organised by workplace or shared employer mini bus /with pick up points

Transport solutions – state or federal govt via policy support to encourage van/car pooling

Visas - Bridging visa (employers don't wish to employ someone who may depart in 3 mths) and community detention

Meso / Micro Barriers

Workplace socialization and education – Employers offer more accessible information about workers conditions and rights, remuneration and taxation to develop trust.

Difference between gross, net pay, what is superannuation. Educational workshops run by community/business/govt to explain taxation to develop confidence in Australian workplace. E.g. Tax and superannuation is an unfamiliar concept for the Afghan community, as it is not something to which they have had previous exposure.

Being paid on time.

Needs to occur in first few weeks of employment with regular refreshers, delivered with employee and community representatives present.

English language and literacy Supports – employers work with communities and government to create opportunities at the workplace to develop and practice English, specifically related to workers occupations.

Micro barriers

Cultural safety trust and respect – acknowledge diversity, promote equity and address discrimination

Establish Cultural Liaison Officer role – facilitate communication to address culturally sensitive issues

Ensure workers are involved in decision making – co design change strategies designed with employees

Promote growth & development – employers provide physically (safe) and culturally safe (transparent and positive) workplaces. Provide feedback on performance and facilitate training and communication.