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**RE: MID-LIFE UNEMPLOYED**

I am 48 years old and have had a successful career as a geologist in the mining and mineral exploration industry that has spanned 24 years. I was retrenched as a result of a major corporate re-structure / downsizing late last year, and have been unable to find further work in my field. I have specialist post-graduate qualifications in geology (updated in 1990), but realise that I need to broaden my employment horizons, after considering the following: The extended downturn in the minerals industry - showing no signs of recovery. Impact of changes in world monetary systems on investment in gold exploration. The declining trend in mineral exploration in Australia in the wake of Mabo. Changes in the employment profiles of Australian minerals companies. Unprecedented unemployment levels for geologists (worldwide). Low levels of availability of contract work resulting from all of the above. Particular problems for older applicants in shrinking job and contract markets.

I have identified new fields (natural resource management / sustainable development) where there is a growing demand for expertise, my existing qualifications and past experience are largely relevant, and I have a strong interest. I have been unable, so far, to convince potential employers that I can make a transition 'to employment in this area without obtaining recognized, directly relevant qualifications.

In the past, my former colleagues and I have updated or made career transitions by completing short (1 or 2 year) post-graduate programmes, with financial support of employers. These same employers are now retrenching longer-term employees and replacing them from time to time with short-term contractors with task-specific qualifications. In order to return to the work force in their areas of expertise (or related ones), older, unemployed people now have to independently update and / or modify their qualifications.

For me, the most effective approach is to complete a Master of Natural Resources degree by external study through the University of New England. This will build on my existing science qualifications, (which meet course pre-requisite requirements), minimizes duplication of previous training, and can be completed in two years (full time). It combines course work that covers important areas that were not included in my previous training, with practical research work, which will appeal to potential employers.

Unfortunately, I have found that courses of this type fall between the domain of Youth Allowance / Austudy funding, which is restricted by legislation to full time under-graduate coursework programmes, and University Research funding, which is restricted to full time post-graduate research. The University and Centrelink have both advised me that post-graduate programmes with a coursework component can not currently be approved for either of the above types of funding. I believe that courses of this type are particularly relevant to

some mid-life unemployed people, a group that has been recognized by the Federal Government as particularly needing support. I believe that as a result of this funding gap, many will be discouraged from pursuing programmes that could have the following benefits:

- Eventual return of people with valuable skills and experience to the workforce.
- Adjustment of those skills to changing employment patterns and market demands.
- Providing a positive option for older people who currently cannot find new work for extended periods, with implications for self-esteem, motivation and employment prospects.
- Avoidance of depression that commonly arises from retrenchment and difficulty finding work. Reduced erosion of assets ahead of retirement and potential long-term welfare dependency.

I would prefer not to walk away from 6 years of scientific training and 24 years of field operations experience to drive taxis or serve coffee for the remaining 17 years prior to retirement. There is time for another career in a new growth area, but I (and others) need some help to make the transition quickly. I have currently enrolled for part time study, and am looking for whatever part time work I can find, but if this continues, it will extend the transition to 4-5 years.

I would like to know if there are any current moves to address this issue via amendments to the guidelines for administration of Austudy by Centrelink, provision of other funding through Universities for re-training of mid-life unemployed, or other initiatives. If not, is there any possibility that this issue can be raised for consideration? I look forward to your response.

Yours Faithfully,

Richard M. BARRATT  
(formerly of Hampton and Bentleigh)