

Reference No: 2005/51923

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Australian Government

23 September 2005

Mr Robert Baldwin MP
Chair
Joint Statutory Committee on Public Accounts and Audit
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Mr Baldwin

I am writing in relation to Centrelink's appearance at the Committee hearing of 19 August 2005 into the review of the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) Audit Reports:

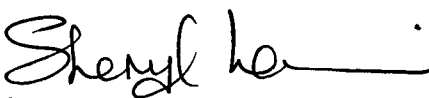
- 31-36 of 2004-2005 on Centrelink's Customer Feedback Systems; and
- 40 of 2004-05 on *The Edge Project*.

At the hearing Centrelink took a number of questions on notice and additional questions were subsequently provided by the Committee on 1 September 2005. The responses to these questions are at Attachment A.

I trust this information is helpful to the Committee. If you require more information please contact:

- Ms Sheila Ross, National Manager, Customer Experience Branch, (03) 9963 4401 regarding Centrelink's response to the audits of Centrelink's Customer Feedback Systems; and
- Mr John Wadson, Chief Information Officer, (02) 6212 0360 regarding the Edge Project.

Yours sincerely

for 
Jeff Whalan
Chief Executive Officer
Centrelink

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AT HEARING

Centrelink's Customer Feedback Systems

1.1 Please provide the Committee with an update on compliance against all of the ANAO recommendations.

A summary of action against each of the 44 ANAO recommendations is at Appendix 1.

1.2 Please provide data on national and local staff turnover rates.

Appendix 2 provides details of staff turnover in Centrelink Customer Service Centres, Call Centres and National Support Office for 2003-04 and 2004-05. These figures show staff turnover due to separations from Centrelink.

1.3 Please provide a flowchart of the process from induction through to whatever position Centrelink customer service staff end up in (eg. call centre or front desk) and the training that is given to those people along with the approximate time frame for each step. How is this monitored?

Appendix 3 describes the pathways by which Centrelink staff gain the knowledge and skills to become effective customer service operatives, beginning with the induction process through to becoming fully operational Customer Service Officers at a Customer Service Centre or Call Centre.

Centrelink has a strong focus on staff training and development and has a range of means by which to connect staff with training opportunities and monitor their progress in acquiring the range of skills appropriate to their responsibilities. These are described below.

Learning Needs Analysis Tool

In Centrelink, Learning Needs Analyses in relation to technical skills are conducted through an online, structured question and answer process. The Learning Needs Analysis process aids in the development of team and individual learning plans.

Individual Learning Plans

Centrelink staff complete Team and Individual Learning Plans as a component of the performance assessment process. In consultation with their Team Leader, staff identify learning needs and how those needs will be addressed. Progress against learning plans is monitored by Team Leaders. Team Leaders ensure training needs are met.

Learning Management System

The Learning Management System, a national database, enables learning and development activities to be recorded and monitored at all levels of the organisation. Team Leaders and Managers can monitor staff attendance at training via the Learning Management System.

Pay Point Progression

The Centrelink Development Agreement 2003-2005 requires customer service officers to achieve a relevant Certificate IV qualification to progress from pay point 2.5 to 2.6. Staff access learning and are then required to demonstrate workplace competence, before being issued the qualification. Their progress is monitored by Area Accredited Learning Coordinators.

1.4 Please provide information on how you monitor the turnover within and between offices. Do you look at the management styles that lead to unhappy office situations, and which then lead to further complaints?

Staff turnover is monitored at both national and local levels. Centrelink has a range of strategies to identify and deal with turnover problems including exit interviews and questionnaires for departing staff; and tracking where any staff complaints/issues come from. Centrelink reviews staff survey results to identify management issues at a local level. Training and developing managers and team leaders and dealing with performance issues occurs through the Performance Management process.

1.5 What action has Centrelink taken to capture data from its individual systems and consolidate it to provide an overall view of the:

- (a) opportunities for improvement**
- (b) better practices**
- (c) cost savings achievable through improved practices that minimise rework, etc?**

Centrelink has developed the Centrelink Corporate Reporting Framework. The overriding objective of the Framework is the identification of better practice across key business areas by providing a multidimensional view of service quality, cost and HR metrics at an organisational and at an Area level. The Framework takes into account specific data from the Customer Service Centre Satisfaction Survey.

The results relating to customer service are integrated with other information (relating to the correctness of program outlays, timeliness of decisions, and whether or not key performance standards have been met) to provide a combined service quality measure. Results are published at the National and Area level on a monthly basis.

The responsibility for monitoring performance and developing cross-Area improvement strategies sits at the national level, while the implementation of national and local service improvement initiatives for both service quality and cost efficiency is the responsibility of Areas.

1.6 What action has Centrelink taken to ensure that the customer feedback systems provide more robust information to Centrelink for use in enhancing its service delivery and identifying cost savings?

Centrelink has developed and is implementing a Customer Intelligence Strategy. The Strategy represents an integrated approach to the management and analysis of customer information. Specific actions aligned with the Strategy are:

- introduction of a monthly customer feedback report to the Executive's Service Delivery Performance Committee;
- development of a prototype for a Customer Knowledge Bank which is a ready reckoner of customer intelligence to assist high level decision making;

- development of a process for rapid collection of customer insights from the front line;
- review of Customer Relations feedback (complaints) reporting to improve alignment with business lines;
- revision of a Key Performance Indicator for customer satisfaction with Centrelink services for reporting in the Balanced Scorecard (reporting against business lines using data from Call Centre and Customer Service Centre surveys); and
- use of customer intelligence in the development of Centrelink's self-service (on-line) initiatives.

1.7 Has Centrelink now mandated a consistent measure of Quality Assurance in the resolution of complaints?

A mandatory national quality assurance regime for resolution of complaints will be in place by January 2006. The design of the regime is complete, it is to be agreed and then staff training and system support will be implemented across Centrelink's 15 Areas.

1.8 In terms of the different types of surveys, how many people are involved in each group, what have you found and how are issues from these surveys taken on board?

The different types of surveys that Centrelink conducts regularly as part of its customer satisfaction program are the Customer Service Centre Customer Survey, the Call Centre Customer Survey, and the National Customer Survey.

Customer Service Centre Customer Survey

In the 2004-05 financial year, 62,290 interviews were conducted as part of the Customer Service Centre survey program to gauge customer perceptions of service quality on their last visit to a Centrelink Customer Service Centre. Quarterly reports from this program provide Areas and Customer Service Centres with comparative performance data. These reports are used to measure performance and to identify better practice.

Satisfaction with 'the overall quality of people, services and information at the last visited Customer Service Centre' has been measured since November 1997. From November 1997 to November 2002 there was a steady increase in customer satisfaction (from 75.3 per cent in November 1997 to 85.5 per cent in November 2002).

In January 2003 Centrelink changed from yearly surveys to weekly collection of data throughout the year. This change to continuous polling from a point-in-time annual survey resulted in an increase in the proportion of students surveyed. As January is the time of year that students claim payments, January's result of 80.8 per cent was lower than the November 2002 result. Since then, at the national level, reported levels of satisfaction with the overall quality of Centrelink's people, services and information in Customer Service Centres have steadily increased with a reported 83.9 per cent customer satisfaction level in August 2005.

Call Centre Customer Survey

In the 2004-05 financial year, 16,524 interviews were conducted as part of Centrelink's Call Centre Monitor Survey to gauge customer perceptions of service quality on their last call to a Centrelink Call Centre.

As with the Customer Service Centre survey program, quarterly comparative reports are provided to Call Centres and used as the basis for identifying better practice and service improvement opportunities.

Satisfaction with 'the overall quality of people, services and information at the last contact with a Centrelink Call Centre' has been measured since November 1997. From the period November 1997 to November 2001 customer satisfaction with the service received from the Call Centre network increased from 66.5 per cent to 85.3 per cent.

In February 2001 Centrelink changed from yearly surveys to weekly collection of data throughout the year. Over this time results have increased with a reported 88.5 per cent customer satisfaction with the overall quality of service from the Call Centre network in August 2005.

Information from both the Customer Service Centre and Call Centre survey programs is used in the Centrelink Balanced Scorecard and the Centrelink Comparative Reporting Framework.

National Customer Survey

Under the National Customer Survey program, 1,600 customers are interviewed annually. This survey is used to identify national level, cross-channel issues in relation to the quality of Centrelink's service delivery. These reports are provided to relevant National Office teams so they can identify possible service improvement opportunities.

Satisfaction with 'the overall quality of people, services and information from Centrelink' has been measured since November 1997. At the national level, overall reported levels of satisfaction have increased from 72 per cent in November 1997 to 81 per cent in November 2004.

Centrelink makes use of customer feedback to inform work programs at both the local and national levels. At the local level, business planning takes account of location-specific feedback (eg. from Value Creation Workshops and the results of regular customer satisfaction surveying). Managers are responsible for putting in place improvement strategies and interventions to address any particular performance issues, including responding to customer feedback.

1.9 What action has Centrelink taken to address the range of issues raised in ANAO's report in relation to the ODM process?

The ANAO made five recommendations in relation to the role of the Original Decision Maker in Centrelink's internal review process. These were that Centrelink:

1. monitor and report on customer awareness of, and satisfaction with, the Original Decision Maker reconsideration process;
2. develop a separate form for customers to request an Original Decision Maker review which records the customer's agreement not to proceed directly to an Authorised Review Officer review;

3. explicitly inform customers who request a review that they are not obliged to agree to an Original Decision Maker review but have a legislative right to go directly to an Authorised Review Officer;
4. require staff to record all Original Decision Maker reconsiderations on the APL system, and include in relevant Centrelink internal reports information gathered through monitoring and reporting of ODM reconsiderations; and
5. develop and implement quality control processes for Original Decision Maker reconsiderations.

Recommendations 1, 2, 3 and 5 are being actioned as part of a broad examination of Centrelink's internal review processes. Centrelink has commenced trials of three alternative models for internal review. The trials are being held in and around Newcastle, Adelaide and north-west Tasmania. Two of the models involve retention of the Original Decision Maker in the internal review process; the third does not.

The Steering Committee for the review includes representatives from the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, the Ombudsman and the Welfare Rights Network. Recommendations about the future shape of internal review in Centrelink will be referred to the Steering Committee by the end of this calendar year.

Recommendation 4 has been implemented.

**1.10 If ODMs [reconsiderations] are abolished and therefore ARO reviews increase:
(a) What will be the additional costs incurred by this change. (eg. extra AROs)?
(b) How will this be funded?**

The costs and required funding are unable to be quantified until such time as the trials are completed and evaluated, which will be early in 2006.

1.11 Given the failure in providing cost information for VCWs, what system is now in place to monitor costs and performance of the VCW program?

Work is under way to upgrade the financial system to collect and record full VCW costs by 31 October 2005. Once the database system is in place, the National Value Creation Team will be able to report on VCW costs monthly.

In relation to monitoring performance the National Value Creation Team will use a similar methodology to that used in the independent evaluation to survey managers and staff at regular intervals about the impact of the VCW program.

The other area of performance monitoring called for by the Audit relates to the implementation of actions arising from workshops. For workshops conducted on behalf of local service centres, progress against implementation of agreed actions is being monitored centrally at three and six month post-workshop intervals. This is a manual process pending completion of the new database system.

1.12 Does Centrelink identify or have mechanisms to identify deficiencies in contract delivery by other agencies or stakeholders delivering related services?

Centrelink's purchasing departments are responsible for the management of contracts with external service providers whose customers include Centrelink customers, eg. Job Network members. Customer feedback and complaints data is available to purchasing departments.

1.13 Is there a map of the interflows between Centrelink customers and stakeholders re customer service feedback? If so please provide a copy.

Centrelink is working towards the full integration of customer feedback data across several information systems. The attached map (Appendix 4) illustrates that many of the building blocks are in place and a degree of integration does exist. However, work underway to review the composition and use of Centrelink's feedback systems is aimed at ensuring that the broadest possible range of customer feedback is gathered and brought together to provide broad understanding of the needs, preferences and expectations of Centrelink's diverse customer base.

1.14 The issues identified by Centrelink as those with the poorest performance, in priority order, were:

- (a) long waiting times and delays
- (b) poor staff attitude
- (c) policy and payment concerns
- (d) making mistakes and not following through
- (e) lack of access to necessary and consistent information
- (f) 'not receiving the help I need'.

Centrelink provided a response to the first point during the hearing. Please provide a similar succinct response to each of the other points.

A summary of Centrelink initiatives to address the six customer irritants referred to at the Committee hearing and identified through Centrelink's Value Creation Program is at [Appendix 5](#).

1.15 Can you please inform the Committee as to what is happening with internal audit processes?

Centrelink actively responds to all ANAO audit recommendations and has in place a sound business process to support this work.

ANAO audit recommendations that affect Centrelink are registered on a database managed by the Centrelink Audit and Risk Division. Each recommendation is assigned to the relevant Business Owner (Senior Executive Service officer) who is responsible for the development and implementation of the action required to resolve the audit recommendation. Business Owners are required to demonstrate that sufficient action has been undertaken before a recommendation is resolved. This information is submitted to the General Manager, Audit and Risk for clearance.

Audit and Risk monitors progress towards the resolution of findings on a regular basis as agreed with the Audit and Risk Committee of the Centrelink Board (the Committee). Representatives from the ANAO attend all Committee meetings as observers and they also provide a report to the Committee on any ANAO audit activity in Centrelink.

1.16 The cost of enforcing compliance, the cost of rework, the cost of the system etc, was raised with us. Please provide some sort of cost analysis as to what Centrelink will get out of the ANAO's recommendations. Is there going to be a cost impost or a cost benefit for Centrelink? If there are savings, what are they? I do not want a whole balance sheet, but could you do an analysis for us?

The ANAO recommendations are being implemented as part of Centrelink's routine approach to continuous improvement. An evaluation of the cost benefit realised from the collection and use of customer feedback is being considered for inclusion in Centrelink's Internal Audit and Evaluation Program.

The Edge Project

2.1 The value of this contract when it was signed back in 2000 was of the order of \$30 million. At this stage, what were the levels of delegation and who had the authority? What lines of delegation are in place now, who has the authority and under what circumstances where a contract is being signed does it have to go to the minister for approval? What review processes does a contract have to go through before it gets to the final approval stage?

The Edge contract was originally signed by the Deputy Chief Executive Officer who held the necessary financial and contract signing delegations assigned by the Chairman of the Centrelink Board. The question about what lines of delegation are in place now was answered on page 56 of Hansard.

In the present day, the procurement process for a complex procurement is subject to multiple control points in accordance with Centrelink Chief Executive Instructions, procurement policy and financial delegations. The process can include obtaining external legal and independent probity reviews. Ministerial approval is not sought or required for the Centrelink delegate to sign a contract.

2.2 What approval processes does a contract have to go through prior to it being signed?

Answered in response to question 2.1.

2.3 Who took responsibility for the failure of the Edge project?

The Edge Business Case Review was commissioned jointly by the Department of Family and Community Services and Centrelink in August 2003 to assess and report on whether there was a viable business case for the further development and deployment of the Edge system. The review was concluded in November 2003. The review did not support further development and rollout of Edge in its current form. The then Chief Executive Officer of Centrelink and the then Secretary of the Department of Family and Community Services accepted the recommendations of the review and so took responsibility for the cessation of the Edge project.

2.4 How many of the people who signed the initial contract or had delegated authority to make progress payments got performance bonuses as a result of this project?

In light of privacy considerations, Centrelink cannot divulge this information.

2.5 Can you provide the actual job title of the position held by Martin Kos at the time of the Edge project and a diagram of where that position fit within the organisation? How had Centrelink invested in this person to develop the skills he needed for this project? Did this person's CV show any skills which justified him being given carriage of this project?

July 2000 National Manager - Youth, Employment and Expert System

March 2001 National Manager - Edge (Decision Support) Project

October 2002 National Manager - Edge and Change and Integration

In terms of how the title fitted into the organisation, the following provides clarification.

Chief Executive Officer > Chief Information Officer > National Manager

In light of privacy considerations, Centrelink cannot divulge information about Mr Kos' CV.

2.6 Can you provide a list of the legal supervision/involvement in the contract prior to signing and from that point forward?

The Australian Government Solicitor was engaged to draw up the contract between Softlaw and Centrelink.

APPENDIX 1

PROGRESS AGAINST AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS – CUSTOMER FEEDBACK SYSTEMS

1. Centrelink's Customer Charter and Community Consultation Program (Audit Report No.32 2004-05)			
Rec No.	Recommendation	Status	Milestone Date
1	<p>The ANAO recommends that, in accordance with the guidance set out in the Australian Government's <i>Client Service Charter Principles</i>, Centrelink include in its Customer Charter measurable service standards to:</p> <p>(a) better inform customers of the level of service to expect; and</p> <p>(b) provide an improved basis for measuring, monitoring and reporting, both internally and externally, the agency's performance against its Charter.</p>	<p>1 (a) Centrelink is undertaking a major review of the Centrelink Customer Charter in 2005.</p> <p>1 (b) The new Charter will include measurable standards that customers have identified as important to them and will provide a basis for measuring, monitoring and reporting Centrelink's performance against the Charter.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	28 February 2006
2	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink:</p> <p>(a) implement adequate systems to monitor community consultation nationally, and to identify, at the national level, common issues/trends that are emerging at the local level to allow identification of service improvement and cost savings; and</p> <p>(b) put in place quantitative indicators, such as targets and cost effectiveness measures, in addition to descriptive indicators, when assessing and reporting its consultations with community stakeholders.</p>	<p>2 (a) Centrelink has investigated the most cost effective options for a community consultation monitoring system. As a result Centrelink will implement a "Top 5 Issues" approach to recording and monitoring feedback from the community. This approach relies on Centrelink Areas identifying the top 5 issues in their Area that have been raised by the community and reporting these.</p> <p>2 (b) Work is under way to identify the value of community sector relationships.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>COMPLETED</p> <p>Recommendations made to Centrelink Executive.</p> <p>30 September 2005</p> <p>Recommendations to be made to Centrelink Executive.</p>
2. Centrelink's Customer Satisfaction Surveys (Audit Report No.33 2004-05)			
Rec No.	Recommendation	Status	Milestone Date
1	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink include:</p> <p>(a) the objectives of the satisfaction surveys in all reports from the surveys;</p> <p>(b) in the objectives, for all its satisfaction surveys, the accuracy requirements for each survey; and</p>	<p>1(a) (b) (c) Objectives of surveys and accuracy level information for National and Customer Service Centre Surveys are now included in reports, as is advice that survey data is used for performance management information; for Call Centres this will occur by the end of September 2005.</p>	30 September 2005

	(c) in the Customer Service Centre survey's objectives, advice that the survey data are used for performance management of individual Customer Service Centres.	IN PROGRESS	
	Customer Satisfaction Surveys (cont'd)		
2	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink include in reports from the satisfaction surveys the type of sample used and the effect of a quota approach on calculating error estimates.	2. Type of sample used and effect of quota approach information for national and Customer Service Centre Surveys now included in reports; for Call Centres this will occur by the end of September 2005. Research has been conducted to investigate the quota approach; the report was received at the end of July 2005, and will be analysed by the end of September 2005.	30 September 2005
3	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink: (a) undertake further research on the characteristics of those customers who are excluded from the survey sample, in order to ascertain whether any significant bias is introduced from the exclusions; and (b) in reporting information from the surveys, inform users of the data as to the nature of the exclusions from the survey, the rationale for them, and the related implications for the interpretation of survey results.	3 (a) Exclusions information for National and Customer Service Centre Surveys now included in reports; for Call Centres this will occur by the end of September 2005. 3 (b) Final decision on sampling strategies and appropriate weighting of results will be made by the end of December 2005. IN PROGRESS	30 September 2005 31 December 2005
4	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink: (a) undertake research into the reasons that a significant number of customers selected for the Customer Service Centre survey, on the basis of DOCs raised indicating they had visited a Customer Service Centre, subsequently advise the market research company they have not visited a Customer Service Centre at the time reported in the DOC; (b) undertake further research into the inclusion in the Customer Service Centre survey of those customers who only lodged a form or updated personal details during their visit to the Customer Service Centre, to ascertain whether any significant bias is introduced from their inclusion; and (c) in reporting information from the surveys, inform users of the data as to the related implications of these inclusions for the interpretation of survey results.	4 (a) Appropriate inclusions in the samples for surveys are currently being investigated. 4 (b) A final decision on sampling strategies and appropriate weighting of results will be made by the end of December 2005. 4 (c) An explanation of the context of results is now included in all reports from July 2005. IN PROGRESS	31 December 2005 31 December 2005 COMPLETED

Customer Satisfaction Surveys (cont'd)			
5	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink:</p> <p>(a) regularly analyse the non-response rates for each of the major satisfaction surveys to identify the nature of the non-response and any associated bias; (b) include this information in any reports of the survey data; and (c) consider weighting the data appropriately to minimise non-response bias.</p>	<p>5 (a) (b) Non-response information for National and Customer Service Centre Surveys now included in reports; for Call Centres this will occur by the end of September 2005.</p> <p>5 (c) Research commissioned to investigate non-response rates to surveys; the report was received at the end of July 2005, and will be analysed by the end of September 2005.</p> <p>Any action to address non-response rates will be taken by the end of December 2005.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>30 September 2005</p> <p>31 December 2005</p>
6	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink:</p> <p>(a) undertake research to identify whether concerns regarding anonymity and confidentiality impact adversely on customers' willingness to participate in Centrelink surveys, and whether these concerns lead to significant bias in the survey results; (b) include clear indications at the beginning of the survey regarding the uses and purpose of the survey; and (c) include clearer statements in the introductory and closing sections of the surveys regarding the confidentiality of customer information, particularly that identifying information is kept confidential from Centrelink.</p>	<p>6 (a) Research commissioned to investigate whether anonymity and confidentiality concerns created bias in survey results; report received at the end of July 2005 and will be analysed by the end of September 2005.</p> <p>6 (b) (c) Introduction to surveys was changed in March 2005 in line with ANAO recommendations to stress anonymity and confidentiality. Following investigation of customer understanding of the introduction further changes will be undertaken.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>30 September 2005</p> <p>31 December 2005</p>
7	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink review the quality of its satisfaction survey questionnaires and, where appropriate, make changes to increase the usefulness and accuracy of the information gathered.</p>	<p>7. Research commissioned to investigate quality of questionnaires; report was received at the end of July 2005 and will be analysed by the end of September 2005.</p> <p>A decision on the findings is expected by end of December 2005</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>30 September 2005</p> <p>31 December 2005</p>
8	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink undertake quality assurance checking of data and analysis provided to it by its satisfaction survey consultants.</p>	<p>8. Annual and monthly data quality checking of National and Customer Service Centre Survey results respectively has commenced. Monthly quality checking of Call Centre Surveys will be included by the end of September 2005.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>30 September 2005</p>

	Customer Satisfaction Surveys (cont'd)		
9	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink, in its reports which use survey data, ensure the reporting is transparent regarding the source of the data and its limitations, to enable readers to properly interpret the data and have confidence in the results.	9. As well as additions to survey reports to improve the transparency of methodology, Centrelink' Annual Report 2004-05 will include this information. IN PROGRESS	31 October 2005
10	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink ensure that performance measures under the purchaser / provider arrangements with the various portfolio departments now responsible for income support payments are appropriate for the purpose, and that targets are set at a sufficient level to assess performance achievement.	10. In negotiating new agreements with purchasing agencies, consideration is being given to including appropriate satisfaction measures in those agreements. IN PROGRESS	Various dates apply to completion of purchaser department agreements.
11	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink review its use of an average for its top line KPI Overall Customer Satisfaction with the last contact with Centrelink. Other KPI measures under Goal C: Customer also be reviewed to ensure they measure what they purport to measure.	11. Negotiations are continuing on the appropriate measures for inclusion in Centrelink's new Balanced Scorecard. IN PROGRESS	31 October 2005
12	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink: (a) introduce an internal quality control process to ensure that performance measures in Area and Customer Service Centre Business Improvement Plans are appropriate and adequate, and that the use of the top line satisfaction number is supplemented by other selected measures; and (b) provide additional training to staff at the Area and Customer Service Centre levels on performance indicators, to ensure they have a good understanding of their use and limitations.	12 (a) Relevant Centrelink Branches are working together to develop a Quality Assurance process to ensure that appropriate customer service improvement activity and measures are included in local Area, Customer Service Centre and Call Centre business plans. 12 (b) A Business Planning Guide for managers and staff was released in August 2005 and provides advice on understanding and using performance indicators. IN PROGRESS	31 December 2005 COMPLETED
13	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink include confidence interval information in its Area and Customer Service Centre satisfaction reports.	13. Confidence interval information for national and Customer Service Centre Surveys is now included in reports; for Call Centres this will occur by the end of September 2005.	30 September 2005

3. Centrelink's Complaints Handling System (Audit Report No.34 2004-05)			
Rec No.	Recommendation	Status	Milestone Date
1	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink take prompt action to address the finding of its October 2003 internal audit report on Customer Complaint Management, which identified that there is a significant inconsistency across the customer service network in the frequency of prompt resolution of complaints at the point at which they are received.	<p>1. Action has been taken to address the October 2003 internal audit finding.</p> <p>More detailed investigation has been undertaken of Area Customer Relations Unit data over the July 2004 - June 2005 period to identify trends and differences across Areas' recording of complaint resolutions.</p> <p>Where any Areas are showing marked variation this is being investigated, and remedial action taken to address any instances of inconsistent recording.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	31 December 2005
2	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink:</p> <p>(a) re-commence surveying customers regarding their awareness of its complaints handling system; and</p> <p>(b) as part of its overall communications strategy, identify ways to enhance customer awareness of its complaints handling system.</p>	<p>2(a) Seven new questions were included in November 2004 National Customer Survey to assess customers' knowledge of, and experiences with, Centrelink's complaints handling system.</p> <p>2(b) Communications Division has begun consultation with stakeholders on a draft customer communications strategy to address awareness issues in relation to complaints, review and appeals for all customer groups including non-English speaking and Indigenous customers, and others vulnerable due to low literacy levels.</p> <p>First communication products to be produced by 31 December 2005.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>COMPLETED</p> <p>31 December 2005</p>
3	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink redesign its Internet website to:</p> <p>(a) ensure that a search on the term 'complaint' provides pertinent information to customers and stakeholders on its complaints handling system;</p> <p>(b) provide customers and stakeholders with more explicit information as to the various avenues by which to lodge a complaint;</p> <p>(c) ensure that information on Centrelink's complaints handling system is easily identifiable by customers and stakeholders; and</p> <p>(d) allow customers, and stakeholders to lodge a complaint without being required to navigate through numerous webpages.</p>	<p>3 (a) (b) (c) (d) Action has been taken to enable quick access to feedback mechanisms, including new content on complaints handling.</p> <p>Customers can now directly access complaints handling avenues via a 'hot button' on Centrelink internet homepage. Similarly, a search on the term 'complaint' gives customers access to complaints handling avenues.</p> <p>Other developmental work on the website is continuing to support these initial changes.</p> <p>COMPLETED</p>	COMPLETED

	Complaints Handling (cont'd)		
4	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink regularly survey its customers and staff regarding their satisfaction with the complaints handling process.</p>	<p>4. New questions were added to the National Customer Survey in November 2004. See response to Recommendation 2(a)</p> <p>Centrelink is to undertake the joint Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals (SOCAP) /TMI Australia P/L complaints culture survey to identify staff views of the Centrelink complaints system. Subject to results of this survey, consultation will be held with People and Planning Division to determine approach to include relevant questions in future Staff Polls to assess staff satisfaction with the complaints handling system.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>COMPLETED</p> <p>31 December 2005</p>
5	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink, in accordance with the Commonwealth Ombudsman's Good Practice Guide for Effective Complaint Handling:</p> <p>(a) include, in each avenue available for the lodgement of a complaint, an explicit statement that assures customers and stakeholders of the confidentiality of the information they provide; and (b) establish an internal follow-up procedure to address the risk of discrimination against customers or stakeholders who lodge a complaint.</p>	<p>5(a) Work is well advanced on a Centrelink Statement of Commitment to Service Recovery that will be available externally through various channels. The policy statement will address issues highlighted in ANAO recommendations covering complaints, review and appeals, and Charter commitments, including a statement of assurance on confidentiality of customer information and non-discrimination. Other communication products to be developed will also carry this assurance statement.</p> <p>5 (b) Work is under way to establish an internal follow-up procedure. This will form part of a quality assurance process to include random sampling of customers providing feedback through Customer Relations Units to assess their satisfaction with the complaints handling system. The internal review mechanism will be in place to address cases of alleged retribution or discrimination arising from the submission of a complaint or other feedback to Centrelink.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>31 December 2005.</p> <p>31 January 2006</p>
6	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink implement a system to:</p> <p>(a) improve and monitor national consistency in the way in which complaints are recorded, analysed and resolved by CRUs; and (b) facilitate the timely promulgation and adoption of better practice across all CRUs.</p>	<p>6(a) The Customer Relations Unit Protocols are being reviewed to improve consistency of recording, analysis and resolution of complaints.</p> <p>6(b) Each Customer Relations Unit is involved in the review of the Customer Relations Unit Protocols to involve them in the identification and sharing of better practice. The revised Protocols will be tested with CRU staff and other stakeholders for feedback before final promulgation as mandatory standards.</p> <p>Regular customer feedback data integrity checks also enable identification of better practices and their referral back to Area Customer Relations Units to improve performance.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>31 January 2006</p>

Complaints Handling (cont'd)			
7	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink:</p> <p>(a) improve controls for ensuring that all oral complaints are recorded in an appropriate and timely manner within the CFAD; and</p> <p>(b) revise the CFS to include a greater range of relevant information to facilitate improved recording and analysis of oral complaints lodged at a Customer Service Centre.</p>	<p>7(a) Revised Customer Relations Protocols will include procedures for capturing and recording oral complaints. Implementation of an internal communication strategy will assist staff to recognize the importance of oral feedback as part of the service recovery function.</p> <p>7(b) The Customer Feedback Sheet (CFS) used by Centrelink staff to record oral complaints is being reviewed as part of communication strategy.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>31 December 2005</p> <p>30 September 2005</p> <p>31 December 2005</p>
8	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink:</p> <p>(a) improve controls for ensuring that all completed comment cards are forwarded to the relevant CRU;</p> <p>(b) redesign the comment card to enhance customer awareness of its availability as an avenue to lodge a complaint;</p> <p>(c) identify ways of more generally improving customer awareness regarding the availability of comment cards as a feedback channel; and</p> <p>(d) identify ways of improving the current communication strategies implemented by Centrelink to increase DCALB customer awareness regarding the availability of comment cards and DCALB fact sheets.</p>	<p>8(a) Revised Customer Relations Protocols will include procedures for a focus on improved consistency of recording, analysis and resolution of complaints.</p> <p>8(b) The Protocols will include improved controls for the appropriate completion and forwarding of Customer Comment Cards to Customer Relations Units.</p> <p>8(c) and</p> <p>8(d) Communication strategy for all customer groups, including DCALB and Indigenous will seek to improve customer awareness of Customer Comment Cards as a feedback channel.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>31 January 2006</p> <p>30 September 2005</p>
9	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink develop the necessary functionality within the CFAD to allow for the recording, monitoring and analysis of complaints lodged by all stakeholders within the business and community sectors.</p>	<p>9. A process of consultation has begun with internal and external stakeholders to identify options for capturing and reporting all stakeholder feedback as part of an integrated feedback system.</p> <p>It may take up to two years before the required level of functionality is available.</p> <p>Work is under way to provide interim enhancements to the Customer Feedback Approach Database (CFAD) to allow capture of feedback from all stakeholders.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>31 January 2006</p>
10	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink develop the necessary functionality within the CFAD to allow for the recording, monitoring and analysis of multiple complaints about the same issue, a particular staff member and/or Customer Service Centre.</p>	<p>10. As per Rec. 9, this issue will be addressed as part of the effort to develop an integrated systems capacity to capture all channels of customer feedback.</p> <p>The work under way includes an interim solution to enable the recording, monitoring and analysis of multiple complaints about the same issue, a particular staff member, and/or Customer Service Centre.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>31 January 2006</p>

Complaints Handling (cont'd)			
11	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink: (a) report on the full range of performance information on its complaints handling system identified as good practice by the Ombudsman's Good Practice Guide; (b) commence monitoring and reporting on telephone call wait times and telephone call drop out rates across the CRU network; (c) accurately report the true nature of all customer contacts recorded by the CRU network; and (d) implement a system to develop national consistency in the reporting and use of data obtained by its complaints handling system.	11(a) Internal and external complaints performance reporting is under review. Centrelink will be evaluating external organisations' complaints handling systems, including their analysis and reporting arrangements, and methods to identify and act on systemic issues. 11(b) CRU telephone traffic reporting (from standalone systems) is being mandated from 30 September 2005 as part of the review of CRU Protocols. Solutions for integrated reporting are also being investigated. 11(c) Recommendation was partly addressed through input to 2003-2004 Annual Report on customer complaints handling, and is being further addressed in 2004-05 Annual Report. 11(d) Revised Customer Relations Unit Protocols will include enhanced data integrity checking to ensure national consistency in the reporting and use of data IN PROGRESS	31 January 2006 30 September 2005 31 October 2005 31 January 2006
12	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink implement an effective quality assurance mechanism for the administration and monitoring of its complaints handling system.	12. Centrelink is implementing a two-level quality assurance regime: (1) data integrity and procedural checking at the Area and National level; (2) post-complaint follow-up surveying of customers. IN PROGRESS	31 January 2006

4. Centrelink's Review and Appeals System (Audit Report No.35 2004-05)

Rec No.	Recommendation	Status	Milestone Date
1	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink monitor and report on customer awareness of, and satisfaction with, the ODM reconsideration process.	1, 2, 3, 5. A broad review of Centrelink's internal review processes is well under way. Any changes flowing directly from the ANAO recommendations will be determined in light of the Review outcomes. A Steering Committee for the Review includes the Commonwealth Ombudsman, SSAT and the Welfare Rights Network. Trials to test 3 alternative models for internal review to be held. IN PROGRESS	31 December 2005 September/October 2005

Review and Appeals (cont'd)			
2	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink develop a separate form for customers to request an ODM review, which records the customer's agreement not to proceed directly to an ARO review.	As per Rec 1 IN PROGRESS	31 December 2005 September/October 2005
3	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink explicitly inform customers, who request a review, that they are not obliged to agree to an ODM review but have a legislative right to go directly to an ARO.	As per Rec 1 IN PROGRESS	31 December 2005 September/October 2005
4	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink: (a) require staff to record all ODM reconsiderations on the APL system; and (b) include in relevant Centrelink internal reports information gathered through monitoring and reporting of ODM reconsiderations.	4 (a) In October 2004 all Centrelink staff were instructed to use the ODM/ARO referral script for ODM reconsiderations which automatically records them in the APL (appeals) management information system. 4 (b) Monthly management information reports on ODM reconsiderations are now prepared and distributed to the Area network with comments. COMPLETED	COMPLETED
5	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink develop and implement quality control processes for ODM reconsiderations.	As per Rec 1 IN PROGRESS	31 December 2005 September/October 2005

Review and Appeals (cont'd)			
6	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink monitor and report on customer awareness of their appeal rights and satisfaction with the appeals process, including any disincentive effects.	<p>6. Centrelink will incorporate relevant questions into the November 2005 National Customer Survey to attempt to elicit customer awareness of, and satisfaction with, the review and appeals process, including disincentive effects.</p> <p>From December 2005, Centrelink will publish information booklets for customers informing them of the review and appeals processes.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>30 November 2005</p> <p>31 December 2005</p>
7	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink develop, in consultation with DEWR, FaCS and DEST, performance indicators for the quality and cost of the appeals system.	<p>7. Centrelink is working with DEST, DEWR and FaCS on issues relating to the quality and cost of the appeals system.</p> <p>Qualitative indicators are being negotiated with these departments as part of the Legal Services Protocol in the respective Business Partnership Agreements.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	Various dates apply to completion of purchaser department agreements.
8	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink mandate and implement quality assurance processes for ARO decisions across the Centrelink network.	<p>8. National quality assurance processes for AROs were implemented in July 2005.</p> <p>COMPLETED</p>	COMPLETED
9	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink develop and implement a process for the accreditation of AROs, and monitor delivery of the training package and AROs' participation.	<p>9. An accredited Diploma of Government for AROs is now available through the Organisational Learning and Development Branch, and a numbers of AROs have already enrolled.</p> <p>Supporting technical training modules are in preparation for publication in the Learning Library.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	31 December 2005
10	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink develop and implement national systems for the identification of better practice in ARO reviews and its timely distribution across the Centrelink network.	<p>10. The new Legal Services Branch has taken responsibility for identifying and promoting best practice for AROs.</p> <p>The implementation of national Quality Assurance for AROs provides a means for identifying and sharing better practice.</p> <p>COMPLETED</p>	COMPLETED

5. Centrelink's Value Creation Program (Audit Report No.36 2004-05)			
Rec No.	Recommendation	Status	Milestone Date
1	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink undertake a study to determine the impact of the presence of Centrelink staff during the conduct of a VCW on the willingness of customers to provide open feedback.	<p>1. Dr Andy Butlin was engaged to undertake an independent study on the VCW process to specifically examine the ANAO findings. His report was presented to Centrelink in August 2005, and addressed all the ANAO recommendations.</p> <p>The Report found that staff presence at VCWs should not undermine the willingness of customers to provide open feedback.</p> <p>COMPLETED</p>	COMPLETED
2	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink put in place systems for monitoring the selection of customers for a VCW and the selection process used, in order to better understand how representative the selected customers are of Centrelink's customer base.	<p>2. The Butlin Report found and Centrelink agrees there is insufficient quantitative data on customer selection. Future reporting will include information of the customer selection method used.</p> <p>Automated customer listings and a recruitment database are being trialled. Monitoring of selections to ensure appropriate representation of customers will be implemented by the end of October 2005.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	31 October 2005
3	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink put in place systems for monitoring the participation of staff in VCWs, to ensure coverage of staff and to facilitate the assessment of the extent of cultural change within the organisation.	<p>3. The Butlin report found and Centrelink agrees that a specific selection process be implemented to ensure appropriate coverage.</p> <p>A strategy to address staff selection will be implemented by the end of October 2005.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	31 October 2005
4	The ANAO recommends that Centrelink put in place systems for monitoring the implementation of outcomes from a VCW.	<p>4. The Butlin Report found and Centrelink agrees that a range of strategies are required to ensure the outcomes are established, agreed and monitored.</p> <p>The VCW Team is examining how best to monitor the overall implementation of workshop outcomes, and an approach will be decided by end of October 2005.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	31 October 2005

	Value Creation Program (cont'd)		
5	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink put in place systems for monitoring:</p> <p>(a) the location of VCWs to facilitate the achievement of national coverage; and (b) better practice in the conduct of VCWs and any alternative processes used by Centrelink Area offices.</p>	<p>5 (a) The Butlin Report found and Centrelink agrees there are a range of opportunities to improve systems monitoring. Centrelink will revise all report templates to include demographic information and statements on the limitations of the data contained in the report</p> <p>5 (b) Opportunities to refocus VCWs and integrate them with other cultural change options will be examined as part of our effort to achieve better practice in the conduct of VCWs.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	31 October 2005
6	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink:</p> <p>(a) put in place systems to effectively monitor the costs of the VCW program; and (b) inform customers that the payment they receive for attending a VCW is income for taxation purposes.</p>	<p>6 (a)(b) The Butlin Report found and Centrelink agrees that the current processes are cost effective and that (if it is the case) customers should be advised on the taxable nature of their payment.</p> <p>Appropriate means for monitoring the full VCW costs will be developed by the end of December 2005.</p> <p>Centrelink has sought a private ruling from the ATO on the taxability of VCW payments to customers; this ruling is expected by the end of September 2005.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	<p>31 December 2005</p> <p>30 September 2005</p>
7	<p>The ANAO recommends that Centrelink takes the necessary actions to put in place systems to ensure that, in future procurements, it complies fully with the requirements of the Commonwealth's procurement policies and applicable legislation.</p>	<p>New procurement policies, procedures, system changes and training programs have been introduced to ensure that procurements comply with the requirements of the revised Commonwealth Procurement Guidelines with effect from 1 January 2005.</p> <p>Centrelink has a management consultancy procurement under way and a range of change management and cultural change companies will be selected to complement the existing work. Any future procurement will also go to open tender.</p> <p>IN PROGRESS</p>	1 January 2005

STAFF TURNOVER IN CENTRELINK CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRES / CALL CENTRES

Separations - Area Network	2003-04	2004-05
	Separation rate	Separation rate
Area Network	13.1%	11.4%

Separations - Call Centre Network	2003-04	2004-05
	Separation rate	Separation rate
Call Centre Network	14.9%	11.2%

Source: June 2004 Separations and Engagements cube (2003/04 data) and July 2005 Separations and Engagements cube (2004-05 data)
 Total separations includes employee-initiated separations, organisation-initiated separations, contract expiry and termination by transfer

Total Separations 2003-04 and 2004-05 Centrelink and National Support Office

	2003/04	2004/05
	Separation Rate	Separation Rate
Centrelink	13.0%	11.6%
NSO	9.9%	12.7%

LEARNING PATHWAYS FOR CENTRELINK'S CUSTOMER SERVICE STAFF

Customer Service Officer: Learning From Recruitment

Customer Service Officers in Customer Service Centres and Call Centres undertake a learning pathway that supports their job role and helps them contribute to the achievement of Centrelink's Purpose, Strategic Framework and service delivery objectives. Learning programs, assessed to ensure underpinning knowledge and skills required for competent performance are transferred to the workplace, incorporate the generic and technical skills required by staff.

Following recruitment, Customer Service Officers in Customer Service Centres and Call Centres undertake the three to five week Centrelink National Induction Program that provides an introduction to all aspects of Centrelink, including its work environment, customers, IT systems, programs and services.

Individual training programs depend on the person's previous experience. There is no set period in which a Customer Service Officer is expected to complete the necessary training to become fully operational. However, induction and technical training typically extends over a period of about nine weeks.

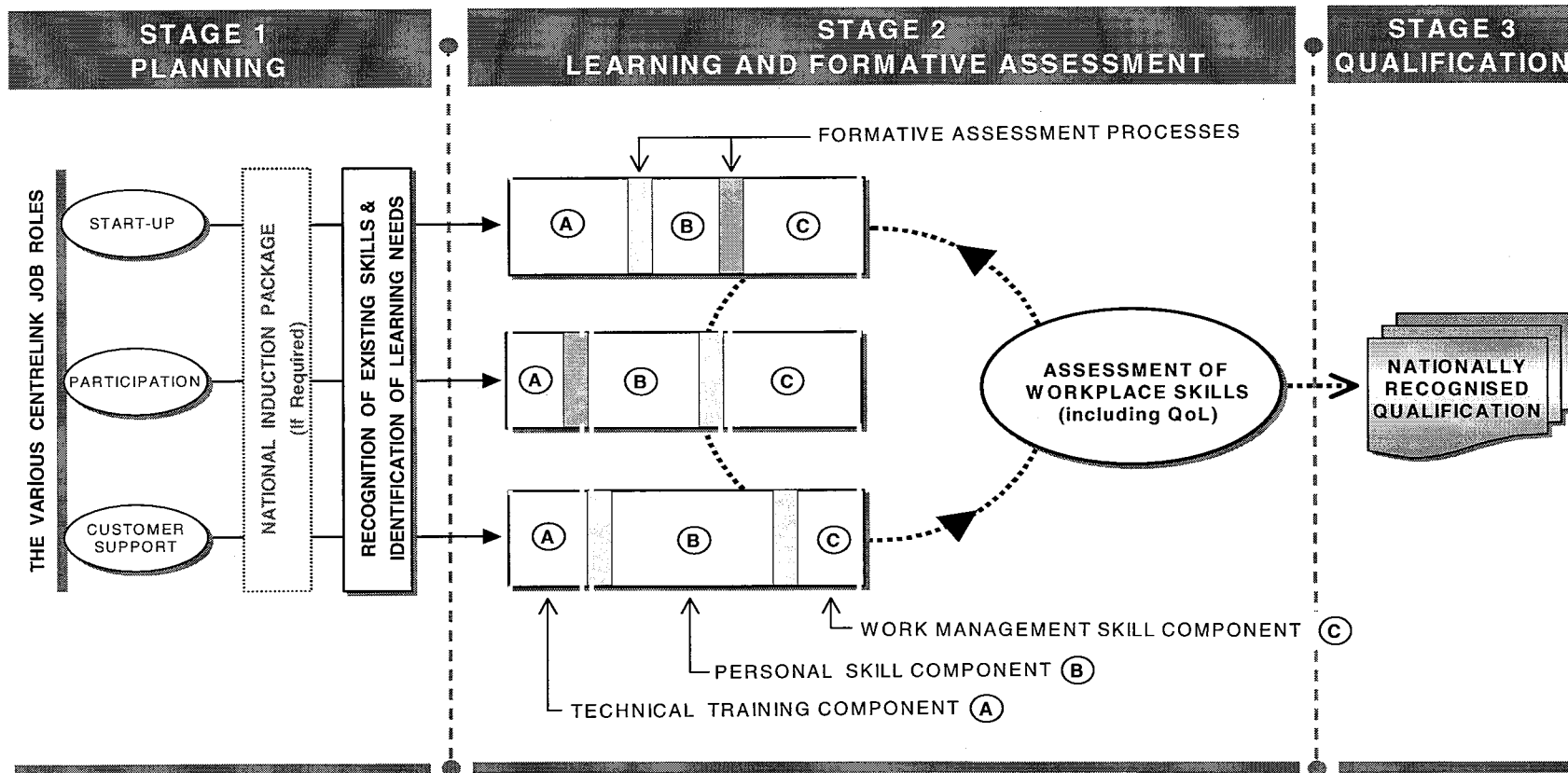
Technical training to support job roles is undertaken prior to the officer commencing their role in a Customer Service Centre or Call Centre. The officer continues their learning using an 'action based learning' model that includes working with their team leader, senior practitioner and peers to further develop their skills and knowledge. In addition, officers participate in interactive Centrelink Education Network programs, attend facilitated training sessions or access learning products customised to use Centrelink tools and processes.

Under the current Centrelink Development Agreement, achievement of a relevant Certificate IV qualification is required to progress from Centrelink pay points 2.5 to 2.6. In Call Centres, the relevant qualification is a Certificate IV in Customer Contact. In the Customer Service Centre network, a range of qualifications is available, including:

- Certificate IV in Business;
- Certificate IV in Government (Generalist, Statutory Compliance or Investigation);
- Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training; and
- Certificate IV in Community Services.

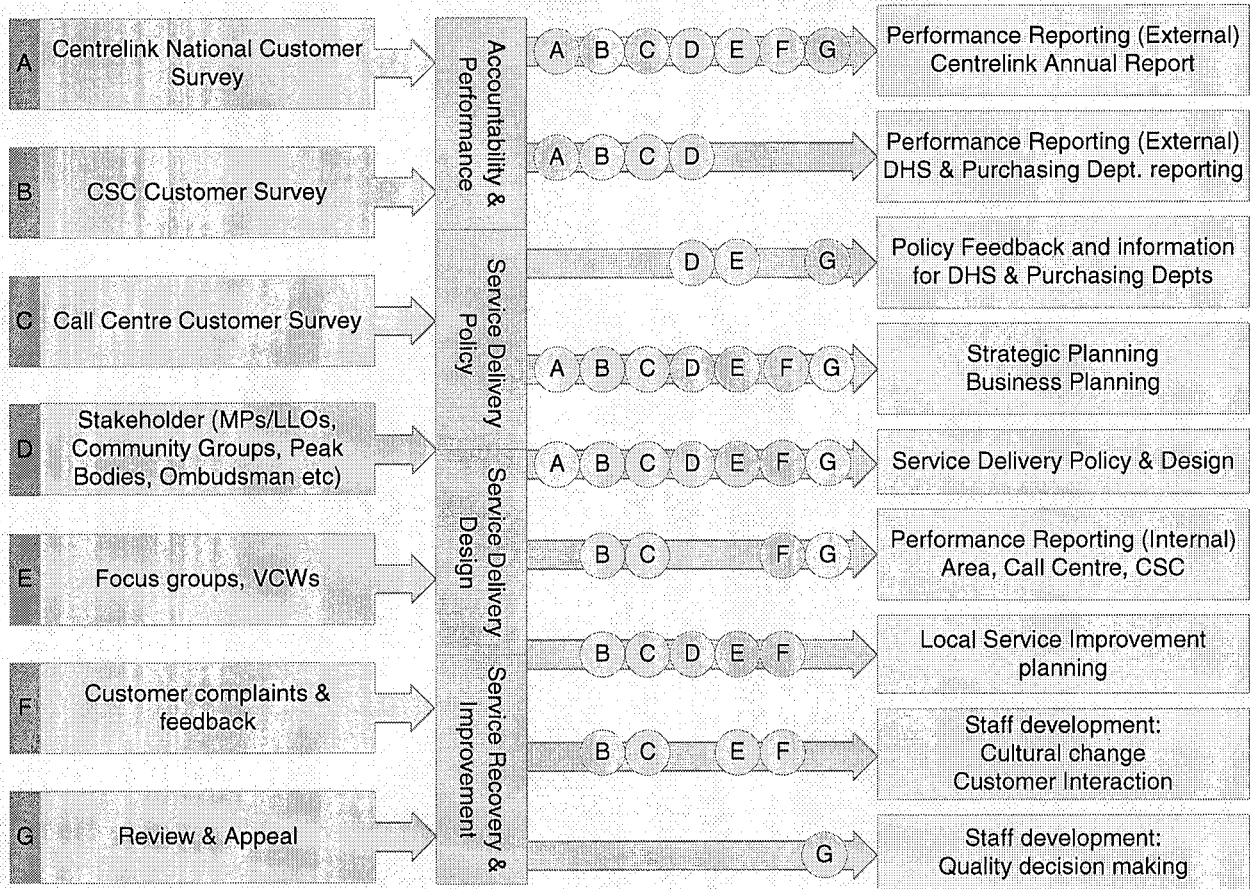
This pathway is shown diagrammatically on the following page.

An officer identified for, or recruited to, a Team Leader position may undertake the Customer Service Team Leader Development Program or the Diploma of Business (Frontline Management). The Customer Service Team Leader Development Program develops the operational and leadership skills of the new Team Leader, while the Diploma of Business (Frontline Management) develops a more strategic focus for experienced Team Leaders.



Centrelink Customer Feedback Map

Customer and Stakeholder Feedback: Primary Uses



CENTRELINK ACTIONS ADDRESSING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

CONTEXT

Findings from Customer Value Creation Workshops (those designed to elicit customer feedback on the perceptions of Centrelink's service delivery efforts at the local level) have been analysed to identify common trends and themes:

1. Long waiting times and delays
2. Poor staff attitude
3. Policy and payment concerns
4. Making mistakes and not following through
5. Lack of access to necessary and consistent information
6. Not receiving the help I need

This analysis has led to the identification of a range of actions to address these trends and themes:

1. "LONG WAITING TIMES AND DELAYS"

Customer concerns about the length of time spent waiting in a queue at Customer Service Centre or for a Call Centre operator have been addressed at a structural level, and by a number of targeted initiatives.

Accountability for Queue Management

The Customer Service Delivery Group is a national business group created in March 2005 with accountability for developing Centrelink's customer service strategy and delivering services through Centrelink's network of offices, Call Centres and self-service channels. The Group, led by one of two Deputy CEOs, has a mandate to ensure that aspects of the customer experience, such as waiting times and queue management practices, comply with citizen expectations.

In 2005 queue wait times are being monitored daily at all Centrelink offices and reported to the Executive (and the Centrelink Board.) Management effort has focused on reducing wait times and consequently the wait times have dropped.

Improved queue handling at Customer Service Centres

Introduction of service standards

Standards for waiting times have been introduced and site managers are accountable for ensuring compliance.

Best practice for reception and queue management

Centrelink has identified best practice in determining the appropriate mix of pre-booked and "walk-in" appointments at Customer Service Centres in order to align waiting times with customer expectations.

Front of House training for team leaders

Centrelink's externally accredited Diploma of Business learning program enables Customer Service Team Leaders to gain skills in "Front of House" management, including knowledge of quality customer service.

Tools to support customer interaction

Staff online administration tools used to streamline customer contacts have been implemented. Customer Account Start Up allows the re-use of a customer's known data by pre-populating that data into an application for the customer to accept or change where necessary, thereby saving time.

Business Process Redesign

Centrelink continuously improves its business processes in order to improve the quality of customer experience. For example, under changes recently announced by the Minister for Human Services, families having a new baby can claim family assistance and add the new child to their Medicare card and Medicare Safety Net record at the same time.

Expanding channel options

To meet community expectations and to reduce the need for customers to attend Centrelink sites in person, Centrelink has expanded its offering of services online, including an automated telephone service. Providing self-service options in Customer Service Centres and on the telephone gives customers greater choice in how they access Centrelink.

Online forms

Centrelink has delivered a suite of printable customer claim forms, supporting forms/modules and information products for use on the Centrelink website. Online forms give customers greater choice in accessing Centrelink's wide range of services. Customers can view, download and print products at their convenience rather than waiting for the product to be mailed from Centrelink or having to visit a Customer Service Centre.

Self Service

A range of information and administrative are available online (internet and IVR) that provide choice for a customer, particularly at peak times. In April 2005 Centrelink delivered a generic online claim facility for students. The online claim has enabled students to access a claim via the Centrelink website, complete the claim (or partially complete, save and then later complete within a given time frame), and then submit it to Centrelink electronically via the internet.

Moving services closer to citizens

As well as improving queue management practices at existing sites, and providing alternative access channels for customers, Centrelink continues to expand its face-to-face services to customers who find it difficult to access services via Customer Service Centres. On-campus services, out-servicing teams, Centrelink Agents and Remote Area Service Centres reduce waiting times and travel delays for customers who would otherwise find in-person access difficult.

2. “POOR STAFF ATTITUDE”

Customer concerns about the attitude of customer service staff are being addressed by a number of targeted learning initiatives, as well as broader projects around leadership and organisational culture.

Recruitment and learning

Centrelink National Induction Program

In August 2004, Centrelink updated its induction and learning package for new recruits include an “Introduction to Centrelink’s Customers” module which provides information on how to determine the most appropriate service to customers. The module seeks to raise awareness of the issues and needs of diverse groups of people in the Australian community.

Customer Interaction Skills Training

A major new program of customer service training was developed in 2004-05 to enhance attitudes and consolidate “soft skills” for customer service staff.

The program covers 19 learning themes and includes components on cultural awareness, establishing empathy, active listening, encouraging customer feedback, engaging customers, meeting customer expectations, and dealing with difficult situations.

3. “POLICY AND PAYMENT CONCERNS”

Centrelink customers have expressed concerns about what they perceive as a lack of communication between government departments. Centrelink has continued to pursue partnership opportunities with a range of government and community agencies to minimise double-handling and provide a more seamless service for customers.

Partnerships with other Human Services and Other Agencies

The creation of the Department of Human Services has facilitated greater integration and policy alignment with other Human Service agencies and resulted in a number of cross-agency initiatives.

Working with the Health Insurance Commission

Centrelink has started working with the Health Insurance Commission to deliver more Family Assistance Office services through Medicare Offices. Centrelink also supports Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme access for citizens by providing electronic confirmation of concessional entitlement for Medicare customers.

Child Support Agency/Centrelink Call transfer initiative

This initiative allows a customer's enquiry about both child support and Family Tax Benefit to be dealt with by just one phone call.

Customer Confirmation e-Services

Centrelink recognises that locally based concessions are an important part of the income support system in Australia. Typically, concessions offered by various concession providers relate to reductions in rates, transport charges (public bus, rail and ferry services), car registration fees and the supply of electricity, gas and water. In the past many customers were required to obtain written confirmation of eligibility from Centrelink to obtain concessions, necessitating a separate trip to a Customer Service Centre. Customer Confirmation is one of the on-line electronic services offered through Centrelink Confirmation eServices and allows concession providers to confirm customer details for eligibility of concessions direct from Centrelink. Customers just need to provide their consent to the concession provider to obtain their information from Centrelink using Centrelink Confirmation eServices.

Enhancing e-tax services

Centrelink works with the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) to facilitate e-tax lodgements. A Centrelink customer can now consent to their payment summary data being downloaded directly into their e-tax form.

4. “MAKING MISTAKES AND NOT FOLLOWING THROUGH”

Centrelink addresses customer concerns about mistakes in two ways: by preventing the occurrence of mistakes, and by providing opportunities for redress so that the impact of mistakes can be minimised for customers.

Getting It Right

Centrelink supports staff to improve the accuracy and correctness of their decisions.

Senior Practitioners

The Senior Practitioner is an experienced and appropriately skilled officer who helps to ensure that customer service staff are able to:

- make and maintain complete service offers;
- achieve business and customer outcomes, including self-support and participation; and
- make correct and timely decisions.

There are currently over 290 Senior Practitioners working in Centrelink’s Customer Service Centres and Call Centres.

Tools Supporting Staff to Get it Right

Centrelink Rate Estimator

The Centrelink Rate Estimator which was introduced earlier this year is a tool used by Centrelink staff to estimate and test scenarios relating to customers’ entitlements to payments. The estimator replaces the need for manual calculations, minimising the chance of error.

Redevelopment of Online Document Recording

During 2004-05 enhancements were made to mainframe functionality making it easier for customer service staff to record and display changes in customer circumstances.

View personal details online

Customers who are registered and authenticated for Centrelink's online self-service options can view many of the details held on their Centrelink record, enabling potential errors to be detected and corrected early. In 2006, customers with an appropriate level of access will also be able to update personal details online.

Mechanisms for Redress

Centrelink offers two avenues that allow customers to seek redress when a mistake has been made: the administrative review and appeal process and a number of complaint handling mechanisms.

Review and Appeal process improvements

Centrelink has always been subject to the process of administrative review, with various levels of internal and external scrutiny of decisions including Original Decision Maker, Authorised Review Officer and the Social Security Appeals Tribunal.

Centrelink is reviewing the role of the Original Decision Maker with the intent to achieve a more timely and transparent response for customers seeking reconsideration of a decision.

Complaint handling mechanisms

Customers who are not satisfied with the way a contact has been handled can provide direct feedback to Centrelink in a number of ways:

- by calling Centrelink's Customer Relations Unit on a toll-free telephone number (1800 050 004);
- by providing written feedback on a Customer Comment Cards at a CSC;
- lodging feedback electronically via Secure Internet Message Service on Centrelink's website, which is forwarded to the CRU; and
- providing oral feedback to a Centrelink staff member.

5. "LACK OF ACCESS TO NECESSARY AND CONSISTENT INFORMATION"

To ensure greater customer access to information, Centrelink has expanded the channels through which information is available, further simplified its written communication and continued to make its communication services more culturally specific.

Expanding channels through which information is available

Self Service

Online services released in 2004-05 include:

- View Study Details;
- View Other Government Payments;
- Report Future Study Intentions;
- View Child Care Benefit;
- Claim Approved Child Care Benefit;

- Update Work/Study/Training information;
- Update Child Schooling details;
- Claim student payments online; and
- Update estimates of family income for family assistance.

The take-up figures of Centrelink's online self-service options coupled with the growing expectation for online services throughout the Australian community, is a sound basis for the continued expansion of Centrelink's online services.

Centrelink Access Points

Centrelink has self-help Access Points in organisations located in regional and remote areas. Access points offer customers the ability to collect written information about Centrelink (including forms and brochures), telephone a Centrelink Call Centre and access photocopying and fax services. Centrelink has also commenced trialling the placement of self-service internet kiosks at community and government agencies in its North Central Victoria and Pacific Central areas. The kiosks provide access to Centrelink's website and other related government services.

Simplification of written communication

Personalised Communications Project

The Personalised Communications Project involves the adoption of several strategies to firstly reduce the volume of mail that Centrelink sends to its customers and eventually, with the introduction of letters online, provide the means for customers to choose how and when Centrelink communicates with them.

Multi-Attachment Template and Account Statement

Introduced in July 2005, the Multi-Attachment Template is a mail product developed by Centrelink in consultation with customers. The product streamlines and reduces the volume of documentation and correspondence mailed regularly to customers.

Centrelink Multilingual Call

Centrelink Multilingual Call Centre was created to provide a telephone service for multicultural customers. Originally made up of only a handful of interpreting staff, the Centre now has nearly 180 bilingual Customer Service Officers who help customers conduct their business in their own language over the phone and who handle enquiries and providing interpreting services in over 40 languages.

The Call Centre currently receives and handles an average of 40 000 calls a month. During 2004-05, call traffic increased by approximately 16 per cent over the previous year.

Interpreter services

Centrelink manages a national panel of 2000 contract interpreters who assist Centrelink staff to communicate effectively with its multicultural customers.

Publications in non-English languages

Centrelink also offers additional services and products in languages other than English, including:

- a large range of printed and online translated brochures and fact sheets in 56 languages;
- fortnightly national broadcasts on SBS radio in up to 59 languages, and the distribution of this program to up to 114 community radio stations nationwide; and
- weekly editorials in over 40 national ethnic newspapers.

Translated factsheets

Translated information in the form of factsheets is often an important part of a communication strategy ensuring people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds also have access to information on new programs or services. These sheets are always available from Centrelink's website and are widely promoted via Centrelink's Multicultural Service Officers.

6. “NOT RECEIVING THE HELP I NEED”

Centrelink customers have expressed concerns that the help they receive does not always match their needs. Centrelink has established a number of initiatives tailored to the needs of particular customer groups.

Response to Homelessness

Centrelink is implementing a Homelessness Action Plan to help address the service access issues faced by those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Working with multicultural customers and communities

Over the past year, Centrelink has collaborated with many communities and government and non-government agencies nationally to improve service delivery and outcomes for customers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Highlights include:

- working with local community groups to minimise debts for young migrants and refugees from the Horn of Africa, and Vietnamese and Arabic-speaking communities;
- delivering cross-cultural awareness training sessions to Centrelink staff;
- producing profiles of customer populations to enable better business planning;
- involving customers in identifying ways to improve and develop participation pathways and communication options; and
- investigating barriers to participation for Muslim women.

‘Welcome to Centrelink’ CD-ROM for newly arrived refugee communities

Centrelink produced a multilingual, audiovisual CD-ROM as a way of helping to break down barriers for the increasing number of cultural groups speaking different languages in Australia.

Prison Release Servicing

Centrelink works with State and Territory departments and agencies who are responsible for correctional centres and juvenile justice centres, to streamline administration across government departments, standardise the Centrelink service for inmates, and support early intervention and pre-release services.

Centrelink has signed protocols with each of the State and Territory correctional authorities. The protocols set out minimum service standards for prisoners and released prisoners who are Centrelink customers. The protocols also ensure that Centrelink pre-release services are available to inmates, helping them to avoid debts, ensuring timely payment on release (including outside business hours), and offering supported transition to work, training and participation in the community.

Community Agents

The Community Agent Program provides funding to selected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote community organisations (known as sponsoring organisations) in remote areas. Community Agents are employed to assist community members with social security matters, particularly ensuring customers gain full access to the help they need.

In the majority of cases, the Agent is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander from the local community. Their presence within the community and their ability to answer simple questions, pass on information and forms and to act as a point of contact for local Customer Service Centre staff, helps ensure the community members are receiving their correct type and rate of payments.