

Submission To: The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment
Education and Workplace Relations

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This submission has been authorised by Ms Katrina Mellick, Executive Officer,
Quality Industry Training and Employment on Thursday 29th April 1999.

**Inquiry into issues specific to older workers seeking employment, or
establishing a business, following unemployment.**

Summary of Content

1. Organisational Profile A brief outline of the activities of Quality Industry and Employment and Mission Statement.
2. Community Profile A brief description of the current economic and social environment of the communities covered in this submission.
3. The Story for 45+ in Rural Communities:
Key Points:
 - Case study of job seekers over the age of 45 contracted as Flex 3 – Intensive Assistance clients.
 - 26.3% of Flex 3 clients are over 45 years of age of which 88.6% are male.
 - Significant number of target group experience significant physical impediments as a result of long periods of heavy physical labour.
 - Disability Support Allowance focus on retraining for partial disability inappropriate.
 - Reluctance of clients to relocate to areas offering increased employment options.

- Low levels of literacy – of the 55 clients who have not completed year 10, 25.5% are over 45 years of age.
- Impact of increase Occupational Health and Safety regulations has led to decreased employment opportunities.
- High cost of and limited access to training do not make retraining a viable option.
- Only 14.3% of Flex 3 clients over the age of 45 are women – women are predominantly targeted as welfare recipients, therefore reducing their access to labour market programs.
- Lack of redundancy packages for rural workers
- Need for start up funds for enterprise initiatives.

Recommendations:

1. That financial assistance be provided for experienced and unticketed plant operators to obtain the relevant tickets.
2. That financial resources be allocated to assist in the set up costs for small business initiatives.
3. The creation of access to a public transport system.
4. That economic Development funds be made available for the identification, development and implementation of community job creation schemes.
5. That Disability Support Allowance criteria in regard to retraining be more realistic in regard to the availability of employment options.
6. The development and resourcing of support networks for unemployed men over the age of 45 as a means of support and the sharing of ideas and experiences.
7. That women be provided equal access to labour market programs regardless of whether they are in receipt of a welfare benefit or a employment related allowance.

Organisational Profile

Quality Industry Training and Employment (QITE) is a community based, not for profit organisation located on the Atherton Tablelands in Far North Queensland. QITE has offices in three Tableland communities, Mareeba, Atherton and Ravenshoe, though we provide services to a much broader geographical area.

QITE are registered as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and as a Private Employment Agency. We are currently contracted as Job Network Member providing services to Flex 1,2 and 3 clients. In addition to these activities we provide a range of enterprise services which include workshop and secretarial services.

Quality Industry Training and Employment – Mission Statement

Quality Industry Training and Employment (QITE) is an organisation committed to assisting people to gain, retain or enhance their position in the workforce. This is achieved by developing and delivering training and services which are approved by industry and/or relevant authorities. The staff and directors of the organisation are committed to providing the best possible services to create the best possible outcomes through an efficient and effective quality system.

Community Profile:

The Atherton Tablelands is made up of four local government areas, Atherton, Mareeba, Eacham and Herberton. The four shires have a total population of 39,833 persons. The Tablelands experiences an unemployment rate of 10.4% (ABS 1996). Whilst this may not be significant against the National Average of 9.2% (ABS 1996) it is significant when examining the statistics of individual shires. Herberton Shire experiences an unemployment rate of 19.6% (ABS 1996) with some individual communities experiencing unemployment rates as high as 28.5%.

The communities on the Atherton Tablelands also experience higher than National average populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (7.6% against 1.9%) and those born overseas (15.1% against 4.6%).

Whilst the Atherton Tablelands has a growing industry base in the tourism industry, its primary source of wealth has been primary industries such as agriculture, mining and timber. As with many rural communities throughout Australia there has been a significant downturn in the economy of many of our communities. Contributors have included a now all but non-existent tin industry, due to the current low price of tin, and a significant downturn in the timber industry as a result of environmental pressures.

All of these factors contribute to a depressed economy, the average household median income is \$163 below the National average (ABS 1996). It is also significant to note that the average age of residents on the Tablelands is 1.2 years older than that of the National population.

The Story – Job seekers over 45 years of age in a rural community

The 45+ Male Job Seeker:

The following is a case study of job seekers over the age of 45 currently contracted as Flex 3 – Intensive Assistance clients utilising the services of our Ravenshoe branch.

Currently 26.9% of our flex 3 clients are over the age of 45 of which 85.7% are male. The following is a profile of these male clients, issues confronting women in this age group will follow later in this submission. Consistently the employment history of these men is that their work history has been located in semi-skilled/labouring/farm work, within the timber, tin mining and dairy and farming industries, necessitating long periods of heavy physical labour. They are local residents who were born here or have moved into the area some time ago and own their own homes here creating family ties and responsibilities which make relocation an unlikely scenario for most.

The type of physical labour that these men have undertaken has had a significant impact on the physical well being, many with back injuries and a range of other physical impediments that make them unfit for the types of work that they have been doing for the last thirty or more years. These injuries and impediments are often not deemed sufficient to permit the allocation of a Disability Support Allowance as they are just as frequently deemed able to undertake a retraining program for positions that require less strenuous physical activities.

Three issues arise from this surmise:

- That employment is available in a range of other occupations;
- That these clients have the literacy skills to undertake such programs; and
- That the financial resources and access exist to provide individualised training programs.

As previously mentioned employment options are in decline with the downturn in the timber and mining industries and the creation of quotas for dairy farmers. What work remains available for our clients has been further affected by an increased casualisation of the existing labour market. This is not only evident in the primary industries but also with other traditional employers of semi skilled labour – local government and the Main Roads Department. Jobs are few and choice is almost non existent for our clients. The concept of career development for these clients is inappropriate due to the limited availability of suitable full time vacancies.

In addition to these factors many of our clients feel apprehensive about undertaking suggested formal training. Not only does this mean that they would need to relocate or travel without access to public transport in excess of 100kms per day to attend, they also lack confidence. Of the 55 clients who have not completed year 10, 25.5% are over 45 years of age. Further, it is difficult to motivate clients into training when there is no easily identifiable and realistic outcome.

A significant number of this target group are skilled plant operators from an era when tickets weren't required to operate machinery. Whilst this was not an issue in the past, it is a huge barrier now with increased Occupational Health and Safety regulations. This is one area of employment where the allocation of additional resources could meet with almost immediate employment outcomes for clients. Age is not perceived to be a barrier in the

employment of plant operators as experience is a highly valued commodity. To be competitive our clients need to have their experience recognised and they need to be multi ticketed. The barrier here is the cost of obtaining tickets, currently around \$200 for the assessment of each ticket and hire of equipment. If training is required an fees can be as high as \$1000 for each ticket.

The need to develop a response regarding the ticketing of skilled plant operators has never been more urgent. Within the next year Herberton Shire alone will see three major construction and mining projects commence. These projects include the:

- construction of the Chevron LNG pipeline from Papua New Guinea;
- Stanwell Corporation's construction of a hydro electric turbine at the Kareeya Power Station at Koombooloomba Dam; and
- Tin Australia's intention of opening up upto six new tin mines.

All of these projects will be requiring ticketed and experiences plant operators – providing an excellent opportunity to place many of our job seekers over the age of 45, pending their ability to secure their tickets.

The 45+ Female Job Seeker:

The story told by women clients differs greatly from the one above. For many women the biggest barrier to employment is the time spent out of the paid work force due to family commitments. The nature of work has changed a great deal for many of these women and whilst appropriate training would almost certainly increase their ability to secure employment, they experience the same barriers to accessing training as men. Very little relevant training is available at a local level and unemployed people do not have the resources to travel large distances to access what training is available.

It is also noteworthy that only 14.3% of 26.9% of Flex 3 clients over the age of 45 are women. It is the writer's perception that this is not a real indication of the number of women desiring to enter the labour market but more an indication that women are still predominantly being targeted as welfare recipients (parenting allowances, sole supporting parents benefits, partner allowances) and therefore being excluded from labour market programs that would assist women in this age group re entering the labour market.

Small Business

As previously mentioned most of our clients work history has been in semi skilled positions in primary industries, they have been unemployed for significant periods of time and have in general not been in receipt of redundancy packages. What they do have is years of experience and knowledge that would stand them in good stead to develop enterprise ideas. Whilst the New Enterprise Initiative Scheme (NEIS) provides a non means tested income for a twelve month period it does not have any provision for capital.

Many of our clients in the 45+ age group have the potential to develop viable ideas – however they have no access to start up capital. One example that comes to mind is a 50 year old client who was offered a maintenance contract by a real estate agent covering a number of Tableland communities – he needed \$1000 for a second hand ute to enable him to commute between communities – he didn't have the \$1000 – neither did we. As a result this opportunity was unable to develop further. This example is certainly reflective of the story told by many others in this situation.

Another barrier that clients face when attempting to access NEIS is that the contractor is located in Cairns and extremely limited outreach opportunities are offered on the Tableland.

Conclusion:

Whilst this submission has focused on the situation for clients in the community of Ravenshoe, the findings are also reflective and supported by staff in our offices in Mareeba and Atherton.

Centralised decision making has often led to further disadvantage for people residing in rural and remote communities. It is our hope that we have been able to provide a perspective that will assist you in developing solutions that are relevant for people dwelling in rural and remote communities across Australia. We hope that we have been able to offer a perspective that is informative and useful in developing your understanding regarding the need to move away from centralised generic solutions and allow you to respond accordingly to the very different economic and social environment currently existing in our rural communities.

We thank you for your consideration.

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