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Caught between Obligation and Exclusion: The Plight of Mature Age Jobseekers in Australia's Employment Services System

Cheryl Sykes[1], Marylène Gagné[1, 2]

[1] *Future of Work Institute, Faculty of Business and Law, Curtin University*
[2] *CEPAR*

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Executive Summary

This report presents a detailed qualitative study of mature age individuals navigating Australia's mandatory employment services while on income support. Aimed at exploring the challenges and experiences of these jobseekers, the study utilised open comments from online surveys across five time intervals with a sample of 173 respondents. Participants comments are discussed through three themes:

- The impact of 'mutual obligations' requirements and 'work first' policy settings.
- The quality and value of the service received from employment service providers.
- Interactions with the labour market and employers.

Additional quantitative insights were gained on two other factors of interest: occupational and worker identities and their relationship with future job prospects.

Key Findings

- **Age Discrimination:** Participants expressed deep frustration at significant (but disguised) age discrimination, as well as employers' failure to respond to applicants.
- **Policy-Reality Discord:** Existing policy settings worsen the conflict mature age jobseekers experience between obligatory job-seeking and systemic age discrimination.
- **Distressing Lived Experience:** The system perceived as 'one-size-fits-all', summarised as 'they don't care' and 'they don't help', and expressions of deep frustration, humiliation, despair, hopelessness and fear for the future.
- **Strong Occupational and Worker Identities:** Compared to younger cohorts, mature age jobseekers exhibit stronger occupational and worker identities, each having a positive relationships with future job prospects. This may offer both resilience during job search but also a potential conflict with retraining or career transition options.

Recommendations

Policy Reform:

- **Combat Age Discrimination:** Prioritise policies addressing age discrimination as a specific employment barrier for mature age jobseekers.
- **Modify Mutual Obligations:** Provide greater flexibility and age-specific accommodations to better serve mature age jobseekers.
- **Co-Design and Industry Collaboration:** Partner with sectors facing skill shortages to develop tailored training and work experience programs which offer sustainable, attractive jobs for mature age jobseekers.
- **Promote Age-Inclusive Workplaces:** Lead by example in age-inclusive governmental recruitment policies and actively promote inclusion. Consider ways to encourage employment services providers to implement diversity and inclusion practices.
- **Adopt Human-centred Metrics:** Broaden system evaluation criteria to include well-being and mental health indicators of participants in this system.

Provider Improvements:

- **Improve Employer Engagement Strategies:** Move beyond provision of labour for entry level/menial tasks to partnerships focused on age-friendly employment opportunities.
- **Address Staff Turnover:** Reduce high staff turnover, which negatively impacts the quality and continuity of service for jobseekers, including those of mature age.
- **Specialised Workforce Training:** Prioritise professional development that focuses on the unique challenges faced by jobseekers, particularly those of mature age.

This report offers evidence based insights crucial for policy reform and service delivery in Australia's employment services. We hope it serves as a catalyst for future research and encourages stakeholders from policy domains, academia, and industry to engage in rigorous, collaborative intervention studies aimed at finding innovative solutions that address mature age unemployment.

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Background to the Research

As many economies confront the economic and social challenges of an ageing population, countries such as Australia have adopted strategies to increase workforce participation and reduce the cost of support payments to unemployed people into the future. One recent strategy has been to increase the eligibility age to receive an age pension, providing a disincentive against the choice to retire from the workforce. Another well-established strategy is a suite of policy measures known as Active Labour Market Programs/Policies (ALMPs) designed to tackle a key assumption in labour market economics; that is, absent conditions which serve to compel unemployed people to participate in the workforce, the incentive to work, or search for work, will be eroded (Immervoll & Knotz, 2018). In other words, without coercion, people receiving income support whilst unemployed will not be 'motivated' to search for work; they must, therefore, be 'activated'. This activation is achieved primarily via a framework of mandatory job search and participation requirements and subsequent sanctions for non-compliance with the requirements. Using Australia's comparatively low unemployment rate as a measure, Australia's system is deemed to be one of the more successful in the world (OECD, 2012, 2013). However, while these policies are intended to address the challenges of unemployment, their effectiveness for specific cohorts, such as mature-age job seekers, raises additional questions. This report will specifically focus on the experiences and outcomes for this age group within the context of ALMPs, and the Australian employment services system.

Income Support in Australia

In Australia, in exchange for receipt of income support during periods of unemployment (currently known as the 'Jobseeker' payment), individuals must meet what are known as 'mutual obligation requirements', the acceptance of conditions which are at the heart of ALMPs. Continued receipt of income support is contingent upon an individual agreeing to meet certain job-related activity standards, for example, they must provide evidence of meeting a prescribed number of job search activities and apply for (and accept) any job regardless of its suitability to the individual (contract,

casual or part time work), with failure to meet these requirements resulting in sanctions and suspension of income support.

Whilst the Commonwealth government oversees the welfare policy and administration of these income support payments to unemployed persons through its agency Centrelink, continued receipt of income support is also conditional on the individual engaging with an employment services provider (ESP), being one of a range of for-profit and mission-based organisations who operate under contract to the government. As a part of fulfilling their mutual obligation requirements, unemployed people must attend regular meetings with an ESP and undertake recommended activities, such as attending job search skill workshops. The frontline workers of these organisations with whom unemployed people must meet, known as employment consultants (ECs), must monitor the attendance and job search activities of the individual and apply sanctions and income support penalties for non-compliance.

What Employment Services Do

In the research literature, ALMPs typically include programs known as interventions, variously described in terms of the nature of the intervention (for example, job search interventions or vocational interventions or more generally, reemployment interventions) and the cohort of interest (for example, long-term unemployed, youth or mature age unemployed). As Sheehan (2021) argues, remaining unemployed is most often viewed as a function of the jobseekers' 'individual deficiency', such as poor motivation, lack of skills, or personal barriers rather than external factors, such as labour market conditions and economic cycles. Consequently, such as the one that is the subject of this study[1] are focused on correcting the deficits of the individual (see also Sol et al., 2011).

Meta-analysis has found that these types of programs typically focus on two key areas: first, job search related activities, such as resumé writing, teaching job search and interview skills, and improving self-presentation; second, encouraging proactivity, described in terms of boosting self-

[1] At the time of the study, the system was known as 'jobactive' but changed to Workforce Australia on July 1, 2022.

efficacy; promoting goal setting; stress management; and enlisting social support (Liu et al., 2014, p. 1014). In short, the focus is on the individual and improving their 'employability' and, it is presumed, consequentially, increasing their chances of securing a job. In Australia, the contracted ESPs deliver a program which is consistent with this overview, including the allocation/coordination of funds for work clothes, travel costs, licenses and other expenses to help secure a job (Australian Government, 2021a).

The 'Work First' Approach

In addition to delivering support services to jobseekers, a key (and arguably dominant) component of an ECs role is to enforce jobseeker compliance with the mutual obligation requirements, specifically, the mandatory activities that are prescribed by the government. In practical terms, this means ECs could be engaged in an employment guidance/counselling session with a jobseeker in one appointment, and in the next, or even at the same time, be reporting them for non-compliance, triggering sanctions and potential financial penalties.

For context, it is also important to note that under its contract with the government, the remuneration of ESPs is contingent upon their success in attaining an 'outcome': they are awarded a fee by the government if a jobseeker obtains and maintains paid employment for a defined duration or if the jobseeker undertakes an approved activity such as a training program. This framework is inextricably linked to the unemployed person's mutual obligations, in particular, the requirement that a person must apply for, and accept, any available job regardless of its suitability to the individual and their circumstances. Thus ESPS (and often, their ECs) are financially incentivised to ensure that an unemployed person is not only actively engaged in job search, but that any job they are capable of doing is accepted, regardless of the nature or monetary value of that employment.

This has become known as the 'work first' approach of the current system in which getting a job, any job, is prioritised over training and education. This approach has been contrasted with a human capital development approach, where programs are tailored to longer-term skill acquisition and personal development, the social and health care needs of the individual are addressed and typically the services are delivered by a professionally qualified adviser. For example, in the work first

approach of the current system, training offered is typically short-term and job-focused (Lindsay et al., 2007), such as obtaining a fork lift license or gaining responsible service of alcohol accreditation in order to work in hospitality.

Yet, whilst perhaps well-intentioned, it is unclear whether the system's 'work first' approach and stringent job search requirements are providing assistance to mature age job seekers who, by virtue of time in the workforce, are likely to have developed skills and experience in a particular sector, industry, or job role which they would seek to leverage.

Gaining New Employment at a Mature Age

For many involuntarily unemployed people, the path to finding work is an arduous journey filled with rejection, experiences of frustration, uncertainty, and financial and psychological stress. Whilst the current programs are arguably intended to address these challenges, recent research has found these mandatory interventions may have serious implications for unemployed people, particularly in terms of their lack of effectiveness. For example, in a qualitative study by O'Halloran et al. (2019), unemployed people commonly reported failures in three functions of employment services. That is, unemployed people saw the primary focus of appointments with ECs was on administration of the mutual obligations requirements (the compliance function) and not assistance to find work. Jobseekers also expected they would be referred to available jobs (the labour exchange function), yet this had rarely occurred; in fact, for those who had found a job, the majority said this had been through their own efforts or personal networks and felt angry that ESPs were able to claim a payment from the government when they hadn't contributed to the outcome. With regard to training (the employability improvement function), a common theme in the discussion was that the training and courses offered to jobseekers were either irrelevant/unsuitable to the needs of the jobseeker, not matched to the labour market, and often, not easily accessed by the jobseeker and in some cases, not made available at all.

In addition, taking a self-determination theory perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2017), a study of unemployed people on income support in Australia (n = 422), found that jobseekers' mental health

was negatively impacted as a consequence of their psychological needs for relatedness and competence being thwarted during their interactions with ESPs (Sykes, 2023). That is, when participants felt they were just a 'box to be ticked' and no-one cared about them as an individual (relatedness frustration), or when they were not given any useful help to find a job and felt they were being left to their own devices (competence frustration), their mental health was adversely affected, well-being was diminished and ill-being increased. Although age is a commonly included variable in the employment literature, from a theoretical perspective, age was not expected to influence psychological needs and was therefore not included in the particular model being examined in that study.

However, age is known to influence a number of job search and reemployment outcomes with real and significant impacts for those older people searching for work. In a meta-analysis, Wanberg et al., (2015) sought to elucidate three key aspects of extant studies: the strength of the relationship between age and speed of reemployment, the role of age in influencing other reemployment outcomes, such as employment quality and satisfaction, and the mediating effects of job search variables, such as job search intentions, job search clarity, job search intensity on these relationships. In the 94 studies examined, it was found that, as age increases, individuals will receive fewer job offers and take longer to find work than their younger counterparts and are less likely overall to obtain reemployment after job loss. If they do find a job, older people were also likely to receive lower reemployment wages (although this noted as preliminary findings due to the limited number of studies that had been conducted at that time) and are less likely to be satisfied with their new job.

The Impact of Employment Services on Unemployed People

In the future, people will be compelled to remain in the workforce for much longer than they ever have before and, as a result, the likelihood of facing these job search and reemployment challenges will increase, which will be of significant concern for many. Additionally, those who will need income support whilst unemployed - and who must therefore participate in the employment services system - face even more challenging worrisome prospects. With some unemployed people

already saying they feel ‘too old to work and too young to retire’ (McGann et al., 2015), research needs to continue to give voice to the reality of unemployed people as they age and search for work, particularly for those who must engage with this system.

To that end, this research aims to illuminate the experiences of unemployed people of mature age who receive income support during periods of unemployment. Drawing on first-hand accounts of participants collected via online comments, we delve into the multi-faceted barriers faced by mature age participants as they navigate the job search journey within the context of the mandatory employment services environment. Our aim is to explore how the policy framework and delivery of services intended to assistance them are perceived, and what their experiences of the labour market as a mature age job seeker are; insights we hope will contribute to the discourse about how we support a healthy, ageing population and older Australian workers.

Having identified the gaps in existing policies and the unique challenges faced by mature age job seekers, it becomes imperative to explore these issues empirically. The following section outlines the research methodology employed to investigate the experiences of mature age participants within Australia's mandatory employment services environment. This methodology is designed to provide actionable insights that can inform future policy and contribute to the existing body of literature.

The Research

The data for this study are taken from a broader study by Sykes (2022) into the impact of jobseekers engagement with the employment services system. Participants for the study were recruited via two means: first, a large employment services provider that has a database which was representative of the population invited (via email) their clients to participate; and second, a social media strategy whereby the researcher identified and joined 196 separate groups that were likely to have people who were unemployed as members. These job board groups included, for example, large groups such as Job Vacancies Australia, industry specific groups, such as 'Melbourne Hospitality Jobs', and both large and small regionally based groups, such as 'Jobs in the Illawarra' and 'Sunshine Coast Jobs'. In both methods, individuals were invited to watch a video explaining the research and/or participate in the first of five online surveys. The five online surveys were delivered at fourteen-day intervals, running from October 2020 and (due to rolling starts), finishing in January 2021.

At the end of each of the online surveys which were collecting quantitative data for the primary analysis, participants were invited to provide an open comment as follows: 'Before you go, is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your job search experiences?' The question was intentionally broad so that participants would feel free to interpret the term 'job search experience' in a way that was most salient at each survey time point and without regard to the research questions of the primary study. That is, for example, they might choose to describe wider labour market concerns, such as the availability of jobs (or lack thereof), to comment on their own successes and challenges in searching for work, or to provide support for, or criticism of, their interactions with the employment services system. By providing participants with the opportunity to respond in this way we offered a degree of functional reflexivity to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2013), acknowledging that the method of data collection may influence the data that is collected. In recognition of the difficult situation that unemployed people face, in keeping with the spirit of SDT, this question was also intended to provide a sense of psychological need support to the participants by giving them the opportunity to express their experience of job search more generally. Of relevance to the current report, it might also be

noted that neither the participant information statement which prefaced the online surveys, nor items in the online surveys referred to (or alluded to) age as variable of interest in this study. That is, participants were not unconsciously primed to consider age as a notable factor in their experience of searching for jobs.

There were 277 comments provided by participants in Survey 1, 135 comments in Survey 2, 81 comments in Survey 3, 74 comments in Survey 4, and 66 comments in Survey 5. As it was not the intention to analyse the comments over time, the comments for each participant were merged and are reported accordingly. Comments provided by participants who were 45 years and over were then identified for separate analysis (n = 173). It might also be noted that the comments varied in length and depth of description. Some were very brief, for example, 'waste of time' or 'hard and difficult' whereas many participants provided extensive descriptions of their experiences. For some context, we conducted a word count on the 276 comments provided in Survey 1 and found that the number of words per comment ranged between 1 and 386, with a median of 39 and interquartile range of 61. We note, of course, that fewer words does not necessarily imply a lesser meaning, or indeed, the reverse. Rather we offer this information simply to provide some context to the level of engagement the participants had with the study and their willingness to write about their experiences.

Demographics and Comparison with Total population of Unemployed People.

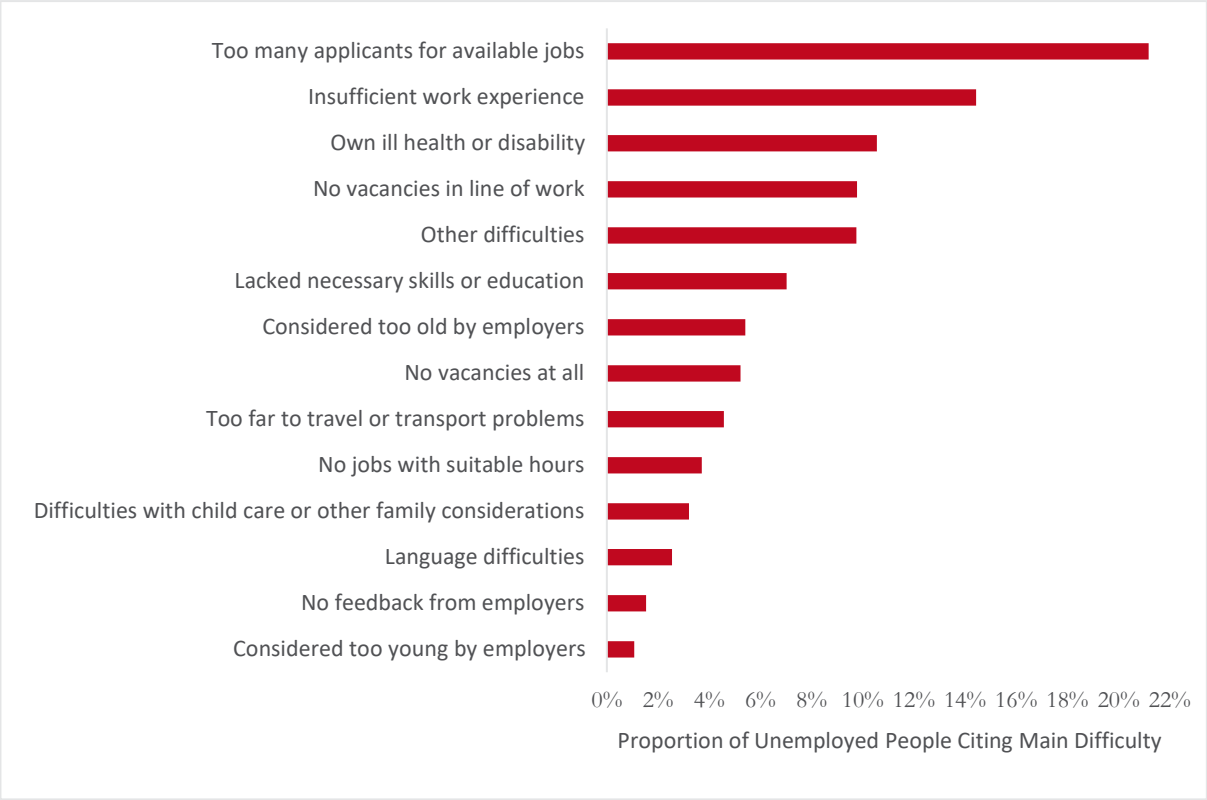
Unlike quantitative analysis, the findings from qualitative studies are not intended to be generalised and therefore the relevance of a sample being representative of a population of interest is not a key consideration. However, it might be noted that the demographic composition of the final sample of the quantitative dataset (n = 422) was broadly representative of the population of interest, in terms of age, gender, education level, ethnicity, and period of unemployment. Full details are presented in Appendix 1. In addition, we examined the degree to which the participants who provided qualitative data were representative of this larger survey sample. As shown in Appendix 2, participants in the qualitative dataset were largely representative of the original sample on the same variables.

Data Coding

Whilst there are many ways to approach the synthesis of qualitative data, given the intention of the analysis was to explore the qualitative data in a particular context, that is, job seeking within the employment services in Australia, a deductive approach was considered appropriate for this study (Saldaña, 2013). As a guiding lens through which to view the data, we turned first to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) categorisation of reasons unemployed people reported not having secured employment during the previous 12 months. The dataset is called the Job Search Experience of Unemployed Persons (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021) and reflects the 'main difficulty in finding work' over that time, reported by unemployed people. Whilst it is not the intention to compare the numbers, or proportions, of difficulties reported in the ABS with this study's sample, it may be helpful to visualise the categories of the ABS dataset for a sense of what difficulties they reported facing, recalling that this is a measure of 'main' difficulty which does not necessarily take into account the multiplicity of factors facing jobseekers. In Figure 1, the number of unemployed people reporting the main difficulty by category is reported as a percentage of the number of people who reported finding it difficult to find work (as opposed to not finding it difficult) for the period from February 2020 to February 2021 (n = 710,600), 55% of whom were male and 45% of whom were female. These groups represented 88.3% of the total number of people unemployed.

Figure 1

Categories of Difficulty of Finding Employment Rated by All Unemployed People



The data were imported into NVivo v12 software (QSR International) and a first pass of coding was undertaken based on the categories of difficulties used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Bearing in mind the stated intention to give a voice to the participants of this study, and acknowledging the importance of researcher reflexivity and keeping an open mind to what might be found in qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), coding was not limited to those in the initial list outlined above and codes were added when additional areas of interest emerged.

It might be noted that although the qualitative data were collected over time, we did not attempt to align the comments with the time periods of the quantitative analysis, nor was the frequency of comments across the five surveys given any weighting. Accordingly, where participants referred to one particular factor in more than one survey, for example, being of mature age, the comments selected for inclusion as examples below are generally those which most succinctly represented the views of a collective of participants. We did note, however, that some comments

were more prevalent than others and therefore we have also reported this where relevant. Conversely, some comments reflect the perspective of a single individual, and are included where a lone voice provides some additional insights beyond the views of the broader group.

After coding in this manner, it became clear that there were limitations to the use of the ABS categories. First, whilst the ABS categories were mutually exclusive, the barriers to employment participants in our sample reported were often multiple and intersecting. That is, many comments reflect the existence of one or more external barriers, such as a competitive job market or industry shutdowns combined with personal barriers, like age, ill health, or caring responsibilities. At the policy level, a significant number of comments were related to the effects of mutual obligation requirements, as well as the performance of ESPs/ECs in delivering helpful employment services initiatives. Participants also commented on their engagement with employers providing important insights that the ABS categories failed to encompass.

Accordingly, in the following section, the findings and illustrative extracts of participant comments will be presented as three key themes. First, participants experiences of mutual obligations and the 'work first' approach to employment services and second, the perceptions of the practical assistance offered to older unemployed by employment services providers. Finally, the voices of mature age jobseekers will provide critical insights into the labour market as they engage with employers and their recruitment practices in a competitive labour market.

For context, when quoting a participant, we will also include some demographic information, that is, gender, age and education level completed. For brevity, the following notation will be used for gender: Male (M), female (F), non-binary (NB). Education levels reported will be combined into three groups and noted in brackets as follows: primary, year 10 and year 12 school (Sch. Level), Certificate and Diploma qualifications (Cert. Level); and Bachelor's and Postgraduate qualifications (Deg. Level).

It might be noted that, consistent with categorisations by the ABS and relevant Australian government departments, we describe unemployed people who are over the age of 45 years as 'mature age' and use the terms 'mature age worker/s' and 'mature age job seeker/s' interchangeably.

This is to acknowledge participants' past experiences in the workforce as well as their current situation with respect to their search for employment. It is also acknowledged that although this report highlights the job search experiences of this older group, the experiences of those in the younger cohort should be considered no less important or significant.

Findings

Perspectives on the Governmental Settings

Before discussing the broader findings, it is also relevant to situate the study in terms of the labour market of the day. At the time of the study, there had been a significant increase to the unemployment rate as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. For context, during this period, 1,488,462 people were receiving income support payments (Australian Government, 2021b) and the unemployment rate was 7% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). With much of the economy hampered by lockdowns and continual outbreaks of the virus, the labour market was very competitive, which was confirmed by a number of participants across both the younger and mature age cohorts, for example: 'All the jobs I apply for have at least 150 applicants. It's insane' (Participant 2, F, age 28, Deg. Level) and 'Most jobs I have applied for received interest from 60-100+ applicants. Very competitive. (Participant 145, F, age 33, Cert. Level). For another participant, the fierce competition was related to a particular sector: 'My field (IT support) has a limited number of vacancies a recent application where I was shortlisted I was one of 3 out of over 200 applicants' (Participant 134, M, age 61, Deg. Level). For others, media reports of job vacancies and opportunities did not align with their own experiences, for example:

> *The government's statement that there are 13 applicants for each job is a gross understatement in my profession, where I am often competing against 100+ other applicants (Participant 234, age 63, M, Sch).*

Whilst many participants had experienced previous spells of unemployment, for some, this was the first experience of the employment services system and the challenge of job search and reemployment at a mature age.

Job Search Requirements

As described earlier, in exchange for receiving income support, the participants in this study were all subject to mandatory mutual obligations to engage with an ESP, although, due to Covid-19, engagement was typically electronic and may have been sporadic as ESPs were overwhelmed with increased case loads. There was also the requirement to apply for a prescribed number of jobs, a level which was paused at the beginning of the pandemic and had resumed at the time of the study to varying degrees. When asked to report the number of jobs they were required to search for at the beginning of the study, the most commonly reported number was four job applications per month (n = 135, 44%) and eight job applications per month (n = 86, 28%), with some reporting a requirement between eleven and eighteen job applications (n = 36, 11.7%), and eight people reporting they had returned to the pre-Covid requirement of twenty job applications per month (2.6%).

These requirements have been founded on research from the labour market economic field (for example, Borland & Tseng, 2007), and, in the job search literature, a positive relationship has been established between job search behaviour and job search success, that is, active job search leads to interviews and the receipt of job offers (Kanfer et al., 2001), thus laying the foundation for the assumption that more is better. However, it is also acknowledged in both the job search and unemployment literature that there are significant negative psychological consequences of unsuccessful job search for unemployed jobseekers (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul et al., 2009; Wanberg, 2012; Wanberg et al., 2001). The repeated and sustained rejections of job applications inherent in the process have been described as a significant stressor for jobseekers (Wanberg, 2012), with the continued discouragement being found to lead to decreased well-being (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Wanberg, 1997).

For some participants, the requirement to search for a certain number of jobs was considered unachievable, unreasonable and not suited to their personal circumstances and capabilities:

I'm expected to apply for more jobs than my experience and skills can meet. Therefore, to meet quota I'm forced to apply for complete unsuitable jobs. I'm nearly 60 and my doctor says I need a desk job but I don't have the skills and am made to feel I'm too old to acquire them (Participant 180, M, age 60, Cert. Level).

Having to deal with unqualified and ignorant persons at both Centrelink and a Job Provider who have no comprehension of what my capabilities are they do not care. The government wants young people employed I get that but do not make the old ones suffer through looking for jobs that do not exist currently or applying for them when you know that the employer or agent is looking for young talent (Participant 277, M, age 63, Deg. Level).

Some participants commented on the unfairness of the requirements for those in rural and regional areas, a factor that is exacerbated for those who are older.

They should separate rural areas as they usually have less employment opportunities and honestly my providers' staff have no experience in employment. If you looked to see how many placements they have made in the last 3 years it would be under 15. There should be no requirement to apply for a certain amount of jobs in rural areas (Participant 96, age 57, F, Sch).

There appears to be only inadequate (part time or menial labouring) jobs available or higher education jobs such as medical or professional positions. Job creation is not being presented in rural areas. Government expectancy is to relocate to different area to secure a low paying position (Participant 5, M, age 57, Cert. Level).

Over the past 1 1/2 years I have sent numerous applications for roles I am very capable of performing. In preparing these applications I spent many hours writing application letters and feel that in most cases they are probably not even read. Generally there is no response, it is exhausting and currently I feel I have no words left to write (Participant 20, age 63, F, Deg).

Of concern was that 'suicide' was mentioned 10 times in the data[2], whilst many more people alluded to the prospect without describing it thus. Participants also reflected on the financial strain of being on the Jobseeker payment and the consequences for their mental health, particularly as the payment amount was to be reduced as Covid-19 support was being wound back. Below we present some participant comments that illustrate these experiences of job search and of the system and how they impacted the mental health of participants.

That some random person with low-level qualifications has more control over your life than you do and can basically ruin it just because they're in a bad mood (this has happened to me) is the problem. Zero agency leads to loss of hope, motivation and meaning. This has 100% caused people to suicide. It's brought me to the brink numerous times to the point where even the THOUGHT of going back to pre-COVID MO's [mutual obligation requirements] makes my heart pound (Participant 86, M, age 45, Cert. Level).

Unfortunately, my mood goes up and down in line with the number of times I have felt forced to apply for a job I know I won't get called for because I needed to make up the numbers required for my job search activities (Participant 79, F, age 57, Sch. Level).

[2] Resources were made available to those indicating distress as part of our duty of care during the project.

One painful account of the humiliating experience of searching for work whilst living on income support was expressed by this participant:

> *I feel undervalued as a person. I am intelligent, diligent, friendly and great with people but I feel I don't get a chance. When going to interviews I feel underdone. I can't afford a haircut, makeup, clothes, shoes etc. It's hard to be confident, presentable and cheerful at an interview when you don't look your best. I presented at one interview with a broken shoe. It broke whilst walking there. It was humiliating. I did try to laugh about it but afterwards I cried (Participant 106, F, age 51, Cert. Level).*

Work-related Activities

In addition to the job search requirements, people must also engage in other work-related activities, such as the Work for the Dole program or other 'approved' volunteering activities once they reach a certain length of unemployment or underemployment,[3] recurring each six or twelve month period depending on one's age. Participants who commented on these activities felt strongly not only about their lack of value in helping them find work or build skills but also of the humiliation and futility of them. For example:

> *The work for the dole program is terrible. Absolutely terrible especially for people over 55. My last task was 6 months of weeding and moving dirt under the Westgate Bridge. While the people that managed this activity onsite were wonderful and treated everyone with respect, as a woman over 55 with a master's degree rolling around in the dirt with a bunch of men in the middle of nowhere was of no value to me. It felt punitive and all the participants felt this way. This is an absurd program*

[3] For example, a person may be working 15 hours per week but is required to work for 20 hours per week to maintain income support.

that costs more to implement than it is worth. Resources would be better spend actually hiring people to do labour (Participant 130, M, age 56, Deg. Level).

When I turned 50 it was understood that I would only ever find "survival" work but with a GIANT govt told furpy (sic), at 52, I was dragged back into pointless work for the dole programmes - none of which have skilled me in anything I did not ALREADY know - nor have any lead to an interview. I have been put forward for one kitchen HAND and 4 cleaning interviews in my time with XXX [ESP] and two cases of being called in (on masse) to fill in a online form for a labour hire firm. Wot a WASTE of government money (Participant 240, age 57, F, Cert).

I did not want to work for the dole again as last time was spent pulling out weeds for a football club so how is that relevant to employment. These kind of jobs for work for the dole to me is just cheap labour instead of employing someone to do the work. Had to visit the office about this issue - feels like school days- and she kept telling me I had to do work for the dole - no choice- said no I did not want to do it again and can not see how it is beneficial to me. I kept saying no she kept on about it and said I had to do it then said you will not work outdoors which is crap as I am an ex mine worker and a labourer. Tried to explain this was not a potential job training for work so now I have to do a book keeping course (Participant 83, age 46, M, Sch).

Some participants who volunteered in order to meet mutual obligation requirements had mixed feelings about the experience, for example:

Because I am over 60 my job plan is volunteer hours only. I still job hunt but there are limited choices and I feel I need to update my qualifications but can't get help to do that. I would like to still access support for cover letters etc but they are not interested in assisting me I assume because they wouldn't get any money for it. I

have pretty much given up on believing I will find a job (Participant 52, age 62, F, Cert).

I love volunteering as this is one way of helping our community and connecting socially with others but thinking of it as a compulsory requirement to get paid is exhausting and humiliating at times even if I'm only getting a few dollars a fortnight. It also makes people feel insecure about their financial situation and undervalued in society (Participant 307, age 64, F, Deg).

For others, being sent to volunteer was yet another way they saw the lack of practical assistance manifesting, for example:

The fortnightly interviews are a complete waste of time. I am unemployed for the first time in my life and at 65 have very little expectation that I will get a job....but I still try. Job provider is now saying I will probably have to do volunteer work to keep getting my payment! I want to work and earn money, not volunteer for 10 hours a week (Participant 154, F, age 65, Deg. Level).

Structural Unemployment

In addition to the availability of jobs per se, unemployment can also be viewed in terms of the match, or more importantly, the mismatch between the skills and experience of people looking for work and the requirements of available jobs (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2021). In economics, this is a situation referred as 'structural unemployment' (Standing, 1983) and participants in our sample noted this mismatch in several ways. For some, the industry in which they were skilled had changed significantly, with the participant's age often playing a role, for example:

I have worked as a patternmaker in the clothing industry for 40 years and now everything has gone to China, AND THERE IS NO WORK IN THIS INDUSTRY, only a handful of jobs (Participant 60, F, age 62, Cert. Level).

In my area of CQ [Central Queensland] the skills I have built up over the past +40yrs are rapidly declining, contracting to fewer places in Brisbane and SE Qld [southeast Queensland]. Most of those are only seeking employees 20y my junior (Participant 205, M, age 58, Cert. Level).

For others, past work roles were no longer capable of being undertaken:

I'm just not physically fit enough to work full time in my trade or even every day and I'm not up with computers and such. To change careers at 60 is next to impossible and I feel we are just ticking boxes in applications. No one is actually going to hire me when my body is worn out and I have no desk skills. I'm expected to apply for more jobs than my experience and skills can meet. Therefore to meet quota I'm forced to apply for complete unsuitable jobs. I'm nearly 60 and my doctor says I need a desk job but I don't have the skills and am made to feel I'm too old to acquire them (Participant 186, age 60, M, Cert).

Complying with the Requirements

Despite the acknowledged existence of this mismatch between available jobs and jobseeker skills and experience, in practice, the welfare policy demands that jobseekers must apply for, and accept, any available job regardless of the jobseeker's assessment of suitability to their personal circumstances, capabilities, or work aspirations. Moreover, of relevance to the current exploration, it is the contractual obligation and therefore the role of ECs to enforce this policy in their engagement with jobseekers. Interestingly, some participants seemed unaware of how this system was structured and that the delivery of employment services prescribed the 'work first' requirements, for example,

I strongly feel that these providers are on an incentive based system. They don't care what job you might look for or take, even if it would last a short time because your (sic) not qualified or your (sic) not physically able. They rush and I can see its about filling a daily sheet and getting people off benefits even if it's for a short period of time. Which is counter-productive (Participant 54, M, age 46, Sch. Level).

When you're tertiary educated and the Employment Consultant is sending you job ads for a Warehouse Employee, it really does (a) make you wonder if they understand your skills and abilities and (b) cause you to lose hope and (c) wonder why the hell you ever bothered trying to improve yourself if the best you can hope for is an unskilled labouring position (Participant 49, M, age 53, Deg. Level).

Participants also felt that having to meet job search requirements was unrealistic and unfair and that the *'system has a one size fits all approach and does not cater for individual circumstances' (Participant 163, age 58, F, n/a).* As another participant remarked,

They're [job search requirements] a waste of time for most people over 55, or even over 50. I can't work in the field I previously did because of arthritis and back problems. What employer would even look at someone my age (58) and with injuries? NONE. I shouldn't have to meet Mutual Obligations in order to receive JobSeeker. I've worked and paid taxes since I was 17. Why do I have to jump through hoops to receive a piddly $300 a week? (Participant 110, F, age 58, Cert. Level).

Participants also felt the impact of realising that the skills and experience they did have were not highly regarded when faced with the work first focus on available jobs. For experienced mature age workers, some noted being given advice to alter their resumes significantly, downplaying their experiences and skills to qualify for entry level jobs.

I am consistently "overqualified". Jobs available are low level/entry and I have worked as national manager and senior executive levels. Job search consultants have cleaning, hospitality and call centre jobs for entry level staff with few or no skills. I think my applications are ignored because there is an expectation that I am not serious about the application and will not stay with the job. I have been advised to rework my resume to look more non-professional! ie to misrepresent.

Even though I'm not required to, I have been doing volunteer work for the past 18 months where I have been given a supervisors role. Centrelink and my Job Agency will not recognise any of the 32 hours volunteer work as I'm not aged 55 even though I am still applying for jobs my job agency told me is unlikely I will find any business to employ me as I'm overskilled due to running my own company for 13 years and prior to that being in a partnership for 24 years. They advised me to dumb down my resume, which they did. It seems that if you are aged over 50 with a strong work background you are a threat to employers and overlooked (Participant 190, age 54, F, Sch).

Conversely, for others, their previous work experience counted for little without a qualification, for example:

It's a bit upsetting when you can't even get an interview. I have 20 years administration experience but have no certificates. We didn't need certificates as you just did your job after being trained (Participant 155, F, age 55, Sch. Level).

Career Changes and Alternative Pathways

The provision of specialist career transition assistance is one of the more recent strategies the government has introduced to support unemployed people into new lines of work. However, as the following participants observe, changing careers in later life is not a simple solution to the problem, with a lack of experience being cited as a barrier to employment even after retraining. For example:

I have found that being over 50, female and having to change careers from being a teachers aide (no work - due to no govt funding) my experience is deemed out of date, irrelevant, my health or I'm a female and the position requires a male – it's hard finding work when u have to change careers over 50 (Participant 80, age 52, F, Cert).

I feel like I am judged by my age not my experience or capabilities. I have retrained as a counsellor (Diploma) and am very good, but cannot get a chance to show my abilities. How can I compete with them? (Participant 108, age 51, F, Cert).

Its really hard when you have the cert for certain jobs but no experience to back you up especially when no one wants to give you a chance (Participant 279, age 47, F, Cert).

One participant observed that the way forward was not acceptable to the system:

Being made to apply for 8 jobs a month leads genuinely motivated people to apply for jobs they don't want, can't do or are simply not suited to doing. Eg there are a gazillion jobs available in aged care at the moment. I am not physically or mentally up to any job in this sector having cared for someone for so long and having also come away with injuries. And I did try. I held one job for 3 weeks but had to quit. When I mentioned to my provider that my preferred plan would be to find a way to continue to work part time work I had the feeling I was being 'written off'. I wasn't asked why, or even if I thought this was a sustainable solution that would lead to me coming off Newstart. It would be a viable path for me; finding the right job with the right hours is what's needed. Understanding individual circumstances is critical. At 58, I would think I should be trusted to be responsible for my own direction and apply for jobs I can honestly do (Participant 79, age 57, F, Sch).

Physical and Mental Health

Whilst there is a separate program to assist unemployed people with disabilities (Disability Employment Services), we found a significant number of comments related to the physical and/or mental ill-health and disability of participants, raising another aspect of the problem of the mismatch between available jobs and a jobseeker's capacity to either secure or sustain one. As one participant put it,

> *…my illness is quite debilitating but I still believe that having a job would actually be a positive thing for me overall… I know that I am not able to work a normal job the way I have in the past but disclosing my illness and challenges in an interview will no doubt take me out of the running. TBH [to be honest], I wouldn't hire me. (Participant 160, F, age 49, Cert. Level)*

Some comments also illustrate the multi-factorial nature of the mismatch faced by some participants, for example:

> *In my main experience, there are three main challenges in my job search. My age (most employers want younger workers), lack of recent experience (I haven't done paid work since the birth of my first child), and transport issues (living in the country, without access to a licence and car, or even decent public transport is limiting in terms of the jobs I can apply for). In recent years, I have also developed a medical condition that makes it painful to stand for longer than a few minutes and makes walking difficult, which limits the type of jobs I can apply for even further. All this is on top of the fact that country towns don't have access to the same range of jobs that are available in more urban areas (Participant 170, F, age 49, Cert. Level).*

> *My qualifications and experience have no relevance to jobs in my area of Hervey Bay. I battle with diagnosed bipolar and depression and the drugs side effects I use to control it. I also have rheumatoid arthritis which greatly impacts on physical*

effort. Given my age, I am not confident of finding employment (Participant 207, M, age 63, Sch. Level).

Perspectives on Employment Services

In addition to comments about the policy settings (mutual obligations and work first requirements) and their frustration with recruitment practices, participants offered perspectives related to their engagement with the employment services system. Again, we used a framework to deductively analyse these comments, parsing them via the three previously described functions of ESPs: the compliance function, the labour exchange function, and the employability improvement function. In the following section, we will provide examples of participants' perspectives on the delivery of employment services, and in particular, the impacts of these experiences on their mental health and job search activities.

Providing Assistance to Mature Age Jobseekers

As previously described, improving a jobseeker's employability through employment guidance, relevant training and assistance to overcome barriers is purported to be a key function of reemployment interventions.

Guidance and Support

A common perspective was that ESPs were not meeting the expectations that participants had of dependable, proficient and useful assistance, and that ECs were often poorly qualified and trained for the role. The mismatch between the age and experience of an EC and their unemployed client was also noted by a number of clients. To illustrate, the following comments reflects some of these points:

Dealing with my job active provider has been frustrating and humiliating. I have 20 years experience in my field and have to put up with being patronised by some 20-year-old who can't even manage to reliably file my paperwork and needs me to send her everything multiple times. Being 'accountable' to someone I'd fire if they were one of the 30 people I managed in the job I lost due to COVID is infuriating. What's

more, they've done nothing to assist me, and when I secured short-term employment entirely on my own, badgered me to provide them with details so they could claim government funding for the placement -- including at my place of employment. Jobactive is not fit for purpose and should be scrapped (Participant 25, F, age 47, Deg. Level).

Dealing with job search agencies causes me great anxiety. They make me feel like a second class citizen and it is somehow my fault I cannot secure employment. I get very depressed when agency employees, who are less qualified and skilled than me, imply that I am just not trying hard enough to find work (Participant 130, age 53, F, Deg).

For others, the employment services system was deemed to be not designed to be helpful to their particular occupational situation:

I am a casual academic. My job agency is not designed to help me to find work. The methods of job searching and resumé writing they support are not helpful for me and it is difficult to account for all the unpaid work I have to do to stay relevant in my field (e.g., reading, writing, reviewing, presentations). Mostly, they touch base with me now and then to make a record of any new jobs I may have found. I assume they take some credit for this (Participant 178, F, age 47, Deg. Level).

Improving Employment Prospects

One key function of ESPs is to improve the employability of unemployed people, that is, to provide practical assistance that helps jobseekers to be more successful in the job search process by addressing the barriers to employment they face. In terms of training offered to improve employment prospects, participant comments ranged from there being no training options available to not being supported into in-house training options.

…Also my job provider has at no point on any occasion offered help or solutions or possible course options I could do (Participant 7, age 54, M, Deg).

The only training offered to me over the few years I have been looking for work is one that was for traffic control, when no date given I asked when was the course - told had not enough numbers - so no training (Participant 83, M, age 46, Sch. Level).

My job provider has done nothing. I asked 2 months ago about a barista course as there are many jobs in my area. He said that he would organise some training. He always has an excuse why the training hasn't happened yet (Participant 154, F, age 65, Deg. Level).

The value of the quality and relevance of work-related activities and training courses offered was also commented upon, with the following reflecting the issue in terms of the individual's needs and relevance to meeting labour market demand. For example:

I am a tertiary qualified female who is repeatedly required to participate in pointless IN HOUSE "upskilling" courses to make me "workforce ready"… (stock replenishment/check out operation, etc). [The courses] have resulted in ZERO interviews and their refusal to allow the "training" money to be used to keep professional qualifications or even a drivers licence - which can be used in the real world - make it transparent as the rort it is. Almost laughable was advising my consultant although I had applied for many shelf stacking jobs during Covid I progressed on NONE. His reply was "but that's a job for men'. So WHY. THE. HELL. MAKE. ME. DO. THEIR. COURSE? No tertiary educated person needs to be on a course where the outcomes are "paper cutting" and "computer identification" (yup matching ONLY a monitor, keyboard and CPU title to its picture FFS) 🤦 *(Participant 232, F, age 57, Cert. Level).*

As one participant observed, holding a tertiary qualification can also be a hindrance to accessing job-related training:

> *Despite multiple degrees I should be allowed to take subsidised Cert IV courses - such as book keeping. Vocational skills and industry certifications seem more important than degrees. Training for industry certifications is significantly more expensive than a degree unit and cannot generally draw on Gov VET loans or Qld State Gov subsidies (due to previous quals) (Participant 235, age 60, M, Deg).*

Another participant noted the lack of support to engage additional vocational training paths:

> *New job training courses are designed to train people for jobs that don't even exist for example floristry and tourism (there's no work) and don't cover jobs that have a lot of vacancies like hairdressing (Participant 45, F, age 54, Cert. Level).*

Despite there being a specific program of assistance for career transition available for those who are over 45 years of age being delivered by new providers throughout the study period (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2022), inexplicably, none of our participants mentioned it being offered to them.

Help to Finding Suitable Jobs

A common criticism of participants' engagement with ESPs was the lack of assistance to find suitable available jobs despite this being a fundamental component of the contract for services with the government (the labour exchange function). Whether they had recently joined the program or were longer term clients, participants wrote similar accounts of the absence of the promised assistance to connect them with work.

> *The only job offer I received was a 3 and a half hour drive away for a temporary job pruning apple trees because there are no foreign workers. With the threat of*

robodebt why would you even consider a temporary casual or part time job? (Participant 271, age 56, M, Deg.).

Participants also wrote that jobs were found through their own personal networks rather than through the execution of the promoted labour market exchange function:

I have been caught in a cycle of temporary/casual roles for the last 4 years. The local jobs I rely on all come about because I have learned how to navigate the 'it's not what you know, it's who you know' system. Local networks keep me going, not any service provider (Participant 79, F, age 57, Sch. Level).

In fact, one participant's experience was that ECs did not consider this type of assistance to be a part of their role.

Also found one's resumé is of no real importance to them [ECs] they either cannot find it or [are] aware of the experience you have on it. When asked about this told they are not there to find jobs for me (Participant 83, age 46, M, Deg. Level).

I hate it that job search organisations do nothing to help you but still get paid when you manage to get a job without their help. Its a bureaucratic nightmare all the paperwork that has to be done per client. All funding for job search organisations should be scrapped and used to pay jobseekers enough to live till they get a job (Participant 178, age 62, F, Deg).

Overall, it appears from participants' comments that their expectation that ESPs would work to actively connect them with available jobs went largely unmet.

Self-employment

One strategy being used to mitigate the challenges of reemployment is support to become self-employed, known as the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS)[4]. Participants of the scheme undertake an accredited training program in business (certificate level) and gain access to business mentoring support. Income support equivalent to the single, no children rate of the Jobseeker payment is available for up to 39 weeks (and rental assistance if eligible). As an 'approved activity', this means participants are not required to search for work for up to 13 weeks (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2023). Some mature age participants had decided to go down this pathway, hopeful that it might provide a good alternate solution:

> *Having worked as an adult ESL instructor for the past 20 years, I am now in a position where re-skilling is necessary in order to start a new career but I am not eligible for any supported programs and I do not have any Certificates required for most other professional jobs. Obtaining suitable and rewarding employment will be quite difficult given my age, qualifications and experience in this new COVID era. My Employment Consultant has referred me to the NEIS program - and I begin the online training this week in order to start my own micro-business with my husband. We are very excited about this (Participant 278, age 48, F, Deg).*

> *New age technology in todays world is very different from when I was actively seeking work. It's like employment agencies are like ships in the night with elder unemployed. We don't not only get the pathway they set and to elderly it doesn't appear to work. I have chosen to engage in my own business as I know I can do it. Currently with the help of my son built the website for my business. I am opening*

[4] From July 2022, NEIS has been replace with the Self-Employment Assistance program.

doors and moving towards self employment as I know it better than the confusion of looking for employment (Participant 64, age 63, F, Cert).

However, for some, engagement with NEIS providers cast doubt on their capacity to deliver quality assistance:

I signed up to participate in the companies NEIS program and have experienced more incompetence and non-attended phone meetings, and abrupt, terribly constructed emails. The overall incompetence I am experiencing with the company has me seriously doubting whether they could actually provide the relevant information of how to run a business, and are in the midst of looking into other providers who may! (Participant 4, age 50, M, Cert).

As my circumstances are very unique they have been fair but they are next to useless is achieving anything constructive other than to listen for a bit and set another appointment. I am trying to start my own business and the NEIS system is clueless. I know with COVID it is a new online world but there is little explanation or mentoring in the early stages (Participant 55, age 46, M, Sch).

For others, the answer is to look even further afield:

I am probably joining the army, so my efforts have been focused there! And I would like to mention that my job service provider has been absolutely of no assistance to me. All my searches and efforts are self-motivated. I don't believe that the average person who depends on help from [ESP name] will actually find a job (Participant 310, age 55, F, Deg).

The Psychological Impact

Overall, participants frequently used terms such as tiring, frustrating, depressing, demoralising and humiliating to describe their job search experience. They reported feeling stressed, worried and

scared about how they were going to make ends meet both now and in the future. Some reported feelings of hopelessness and resignation, that job search was futile and some acknowledged that they had simply given up. Of concern was that 'suicide' was mentioned 10 times in the data, whilst many more people alluded to the prospect without describing it thus. Participants also reflected on the financial strain of being on the Jobseeker payment and the consequences for their mental health, particularly as the payment amount was to be reduced as Covid-19 support was being wound back. Below we present some participant comments that illustrate these experiences of job search and of employment services and how they impacted the mental health of participants.

One painful account of the humiliating experience of searching for work whilst living on income support was expressed by this participant:

> *I feel undervalued as a person. I am intelligent, diligent, friendly and great with people but I feel I don't get a chance. When going to interviews I feel underdone. I can't afford a haircut, makeup, clothes, shoes etc. It's hard to be confident, presentable and cheerful at an interview when you don't look your best. I presented at one interview with a broken shoe. It broke whilst walking there. It was humiliating. I did try to laugh about it but afterwards I cried (Participant 106, F, age 51, Cert. Level).*

Positive Comments

Whilst the overwhelming majority of comments were critical of many aspects of the system, some participants did write favourably of their engagement with ECs and their receipt of useful assistance. For example:

> *My job search experience has been good. I have exceeded the number of job searches each month and I never had a negative experience with the team. I was given the opportunity to do a certificate course which was very much appreciated*

as I am a learner it was fabulous to have the challenge of the course (Participant 258, F, age 59, Cert. Level).

I have been lucky with my job provider who put me through training and got me into the aged care sector and helped me with my rego [car registration] when I was going through a rough time. I am in casual work and enjoying it (Participant 297, F, age 52, Sch. Level).

Positive comments were also typically associated with the ESP/EC providing emotional support as well as practical assistance to manage the participant's mutual obligations, for example:

My service provider is very understanding of my mental health problems and caters my job plan around it (Participant 24, NB, age 46, Cert. Level).

I have never been without work. It has been traumatic. The job access agency XXX have made this as easy as it can be. They have shown great empathy and understanding, great warmth and I am very grateful for this (Participant 290, F, age 59, Sch. Level).

However, several participants commented on the variability of their engagement with ESPs and ECs, which was sometimes a function of high staff turnover and sometimes as a result of the choice to move to a new ESP. For example:

XXX [ESP] is better than some I have experienced. ABC [ESP} was eye opener wanted me to door knock door to door and would not accept my mutual obligation unless I agreed (Participant 83, age 46, M, Sch).

Perspectives of Participants on Employers

With regard to participants experiences with employers, two key themes emerged: age discrimination and a failure to respond to job applications. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

Age and Reemployment Discrimination

As has been reported for decades, mature age job seekers have been subject to age discriminatory recruitment practices (for example, see Gringart & Helmes, 2001; Wanberg et al., 1996). Yet empirical evidence has largely debunked common stereotypes associated with mature age workers. For instance, common stereotypes, such as older workers being resistant to change, having lower job performance, or having a reduced ability to learn and develop have been contradicted in many studies (for example, see Ng & Feldman, 2012; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Despite this evidence, recent studies and reports commissioned by the Australian Government and other organisations indicate that these stereotypes persist in the labour market, impacting the recruitment and retention of mature age workers negatively.

For example, a recent study, commissioned by the Australian Government (Outpost Consulting, 2021) provided evidence of the problematic attitudes of a range of Australian businesses (*n* = 293) with regard to the recruitment and retention of mature age workers. The research found evidence of ageism and negative stereotypes, lack of consideration of age as a component of a diverse and inclusive workplace, beliefs about older workers (reduced/limited) physical capabilities and higher risk of injury, their lack of technological skills, lack of capacity to adapt to change, as well as the associated higher wage costs.

Following on from that research, a sample of small businesses (*n* = 15) were engaged in an intervention to determine whether tools such as training to identify and address biases and misconceptions, managing mature age workers for performance, engagement with employment facilitators, or fact sheets could change some of the aforementioned perceptions of employers. Notably, the intervention only managed to improve the assumption about adapting to change; the other negative beliefs persisted in more than half the sample (Outpost Consulting, 2023). The latest report from the Australian Human Resources Institute report (2021) echoes these findings with almost half (49%) of human resource professionals reporting that the recruitment practices at their organisations negatively impact mature age workers, citing the same concerns about physical ability,

technological competence, and ability to adapt and change. As data from CEPAR research has shown, this varies across industries, with those from the information, media and telecommunications sector reporting the least perceived discrimination (22% agreed there was discrimination) whilst respondents in the public administration and safety sector (52%) and the wholesale trade (54%) agreed there was discrimination in recruitment (Andrei et al., 2019).

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that participants in our study report ageism and discrimination. Interestingly, however, it was not only those who were closer to retirement age who made these comments, with the age at which these barriers were experienced being notably low. As one participant, aged 54 wrote, '*I have discovered that age discrimination is a real thing - I started experiencing this from about early 40's* (Participant 162, F, age 54, Cert. Level), whilst another younger participant declared, '*Ageism is alive and well in this day and age*' (Participant 42, F, age 48, Cert).

Several other participants used the term 'discrimination', with one observing how employers manage this bias in the recruitment process:

> *As usual being 62, employers have no interest in even giving me a chance, use excuses such as "We don't think you fit into our culture", they of course will never say because of your age difference. Or those jobs mostly advertise to say "we are a tight knit young team" or such (Participant 94, F, age 62, Sch. Level).*

Being 'too old' was also discussed in the context of the type of work for which the participant was either seeking or was qualified. For example, where the job requires physical stamina:

> *I'm just not physically fit enough to work full time in my trade or even every day and I'm not up with computers and such. To change careers at 60 is next to impossible and I feel we are just ticking boxes in applications. No one is actually going to hire me when my body is worn out and I have no desk skills (Participant 180, M, age 60, Cert. Level).*

In other areas of work, however, participants who were highly experienced and suitably qualified also believed they were experiencing employer preferences for younger employees:

> *I am 65 years of age. My resumé was professionally reconstructed a few years ago and its presentation is often positively commented on by prospective companies. However, in spite of my gaining an average of 1-2 Zoom interviews per month for the last six months once the interviewing company discover my age group once I appear on camera and start to recite my long and wide experience it is apparent they are not going to employ me and this is confirmed a short time later by email or phone call. 'Ageism' is administered subtly but alive and well all the same. My qualifications and experience oftentimes exceed the role spec (Participant 109, M, age 65, Cert. Level).*

> *I'm a school teacher who has given up finding work as a teacher (I do relief teaching to earn a small income) and instead I am looking for SSO work which is an assistant teachers role, working in Special Education or in curriculum support. My work provider asked me if I wanted to load and unload trucks for a living, I said, 'Yes' but is that what I want to do? No! For the past 4 years I've tried to remain optimistic in my job search efforts, but I've become frustrated. I have a teaching degree but no one wants a 50 year old male to join their work force. I've now begun applying for SSO positions and still cannot find work. I also have to apply for non education positions which I'd prefer not to take, but I have no choice (Participant 75, age 50, M, Deg).*

> *Although I am applying for jobs I am experienced in and I know it would always be denied I really believe I am not getting interviewed because of my age which is 65 all my friends who are in the same boat as me agree, there is age discrimination in play. Most of us are being told we are over experienced and do not fit the criteria*

for fear we will become bored doing a job which required less experience. You cannot get a 20-30 year old with our experience (Participant 81, age 65, F, Sch).

At the policy level, a number of participants felt that the government were not only ignoring the issues mature age jobseekers faced but that they were exacerbating it by insisting on enforcing unrealistic expectations of job search numbers for older workers. Moreover, some felt the government were actively discriminating against them by providing incentives to employers for choosing workers between 16 and 35 years of age in the scheme known as JobMaker (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020). Similarly, at the street-level, it was also felt that employment services providers were not equipped to help mature age jobseekers, with one participant even being told by her EC that she *"…may be too old"* (Participant 43, F, age 54, Cert. Level).

Many mature age participants described feelings of worry about the future and that they were 'struggling mentally, emotionally and financially', often referencing retirement, or more specifically, being able to access the age pension[5]. For example:

I am applying for every job that I think I can do, but I never get any interest. At my age no employer is interested. This is the first time in my life I have been unemployed and it's humiliating! I have had two interviews for teaching jobs but didn't get either job. Both times I was interviewed by a person in their 20s! Nobody wants me, I am too old and worry that now I just have to make do until I qualify for the pension :((Participant 154, F, age 65, Deg. Level).

Perhaps the most succinct summary of the problem and the solution for unemployed older workers was offered by another participant who wrote: '*Such a debilitating exercise. You tell us to job search but there are only a few jobs on offer. Bring down the old age pension to 60 and leave us alone'* (Participant 173, F, age 62, Deg. Level).

[5] In Australia, to qualify for the age pension you must be 67 years of age.

Lack of Feedback

In relation to unemployed people's interaction with the labour market during the job search process, a frequently reported issue was not receiving feedback from employers on either their applications or in some cases, even after being interviewed. Participants often described the situation in terms of the impact on their mental health and being able to sustain their job search, citing feelings of despondence and frustration. For example:

> *Over the past 1 ½ years I have sent numerous applications for roles I am very capable of performing. In preparing these applications I spent many hours writing application letters and feel that in most cases they are probably not even read. Generally there is no response, it is exhausting and currently I feel I have no words left to write (Participant 19, F, age 63, Deg. Level).*

> *It is difficult to constantly apply for jobs and to never hear back from the contact person about how your application faired. On average I hear back from 1 in 10 maybe? Nothing destroys your confidence more than the thought that you are not worth the time to be contacted (Participant 79, F, age 57, Sch. Level).*

> *Biggest gripe is not hearing back from applications if unsuccessful - this is inexcusable as you've done all the work, applied online, they have your contact details, and could just send a templated email to say "sorry, you were not successful this time" - that would take a lot of the wondering what was occurring and makes it easier to let go of that job and move on to the next, rather than waiting and hoping to eventually hear something back (Participant 134, M, age 61, Deg. Level).*

> *It takes 50 applications to get an interview. Usually after applying there is no further contact. No one ever provides feedback not even after an interview (Participant 130, F, age 56, Deg. Level).*

> *I very rarely here [sic] back from any of the jobs I apply for so I sit around wondering and jumping to the phone as soon as it rings in case it is about a job (Participant 187, age 56).*

Whilst some participants viewed getting no response as disrespectful of the time and energy they had expended on the applications, one participant pondered which scenario was worse; getting pre-formatted *'standard tick and flick, thanks but no thanks replies to your applications'* or receiving no response at all, concluding that the impact of the rejection letter was worse than being left wondering (Participant 121, M, age 63, Cert. Level).

Discussion

In the previous sections, we presented examples of the perspectives of participants through three broad themes: participants' experiences of the policy of mutual obligations and program requirements and initiatives, and second, the perceptions of the practical assistance offered by employment services providers. Finally, the voices of mature age jobseekers provided insights into their engagement with the labour market.

Confronting Ageism

The findings of this study suggest that mandatory engagement with the Australian employment services system presents a complex set of challenges for mature age jobseekers. Our qualitative analysis found ample evidence of the mismatch between what our participants had to offer as employees and what the market wanted in an employee. Being of mature age was cited as a significant barrier to job search success and, consequently, led to feelings of frustration and despondency at what they described as unacknowledged age discrimination, some having noticed this as early as when in their 40's. These observations are consistent with existing academic literature (for example, Lyons et al., 2014; Zaniboni et al., 2019) and the previously described consultation and industry reports that confirm the existence of age bias against mature age workers.

Notably, one study involving older job seekers in the United Kingdom and the United States underscores the damaging effects of age discrimination. It outlines how age discrimination can lead to withdrawal from job search and even early retirement among older individuals (Watermann et al., 2023). In the Australian employment services context, the issue of discrimination for mature age jobseekers becomes even more problematic as many will not have the option of considering early retirement, becoming what is known in economic terms, a 'discouraged worker' due to their need for income support. They are instead bound by stringent program requirements to continually engage with a labour market that seems designed to marginalise them.

This places mature age jobseekers in a difficult position, as they frequently encounter a labour market reluctant to employ them in roles that match their skills, experience, or career aspirations. As a result, they often find themselves compelled to apply for unsustainable, insecure, menial, or entry-level positions. To increase their chances of at least reaching the interview stage for these roles, some participants reported receiving advice to downplay their extensive work histories or occupational identities, so as not to appear 'overqualified' or 'too old.' Whilst perhaps well-intended, advice to disguise one's age not only reinforces the reality of ageism but highlights a critical limitation in ALMPs and these types of reemployment interventions. That is, as described earlier, the programs are designed with a focus on 'enhancing the employability' of the individual by correcting perceived deficits, such as skills or motivation through training or sanctions, respectively. Yet when faced with immutable individual factors such as age, and the acknowledged age discrimination in the labour market, the design of the employment services system seems woefully inadequate for mature age jobseekers.

Alternative Pathways: The Limits of Retraining and Self-Employment

For individuals who find their previous roles are no longer viable employment options, career change may appear to be the next logical step, and the recent introduction of a Career Transition Assistance program likely to have been created to meet this need for mature age jobseekers. However, the retraining path could introduce its own set of challenges. As our participants reported, those who retrain in new fields may still find themselves unable to secure employment due to a perceived lack of relevant experience by employers. The additional burden of educational debt compounds the issue, making it evident that retraining alone is insufficient as a policy response to mature age unemployment; that is, without some shifts in the labour market itself, mature age graduates may remain at a disadvantage. These challenges again highlight the need for broader, systemic solutions that consider both the individual's circumstances and the reality of the labour market for mature age workers.

Exploring Self-Employment Opportunities

Additional governmental programs like the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) offer another avenue to employment by supporting jobseekers in transitioning to self-employment. While this initiative was met with some enthusiasm by our mature age participants, concerns were raised about the capability of providers to offer adequate support, especially in light of their own organisational shortcomings, although it is noted that as of 2022, the NEIS will offer training and mentoring through specialist providers. Regardless of this support, however, given the high rate of small business failures in Australia, one must question the appropriateness of encouraging mature age jobseekers toward self-employment. Is this truly a viable path to sustainable income, or is it merely shifting the economic risk of unemployment to the individual?

The Need for Systemic Change

The analysis presented underscores clear gaps in the existing policy landscape concerning mature age jobseekers. It illuminates how current employment services, as a representative form of an ALMP, are ill-equipped to handle the clearly immutable factor of mature age as a barrier to gaining employment. Within this framework, the strictures of mutual obligations often exacerbate the challenges faced by mature jobseekers, lacking the flexibility to account for individual circumstances such as age discrimination, structural unemployment, and age-related constraints. As policymakers consider these systemic changes, it is imperative to reassess and amend mutual obligations to incorporate greater flexibility and sensitivity towards the unique needs of mature age jobseekers.

Whilst some initiatives have attempted to offer alternative pathways, we argue the limitations identified in both career change and self-employment options highlight a pressing need for systemic policy shifts. As well as supporting those who can (or wish to) retrain, policymakers must look beyond promoting short-term individual employability deficits to address broader labour market conditions that perpetuate the marginalisation of mature age jobseekers. This necessitates the implementation of evidence-based initiatives aimed at both employer engagement to counter age-based biases and specialist job transition programs. As policymakers consider these systemic changes, it opens the door

for a broader discussion on diversity and inclusion initiatives, to foster a labour market that is equitable across demographic variables in addition to gender, race, and disability to address the factors impacting many mature age jobseekers.

Diversity and Inclusion in Employment Services

In addition to the critical need to promote diversity and inclusion approaches in the broader labour market, we argue that these concepts could be of equal relevance for ESPs in Australia. ESPs have faced staff issues such as chronically high staff turnover for many years (Lewis et al., 2016), and research in similar contexts (human services organisations such as social work, child welfare, rehabilitation workers) suggests that outcomes such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and turnover intentions can be improved through effective diversity management strategies (for example, see Acquavita et al., 2009; Hwang & Hopkins, 2012; Travis & Mor Barak, 2010). With regard to age diversity, the adoption of age-inclusive HR practices has been associated with organisation-wide age-diversity climate, and in turn to improved outcomes on collective turnover intentions and company performance.

A common factor in these types of organisations is that, like ESPs, they serve a diverse client base, across not only age but gender, ethnicity, and other demographic variables. Whilst little research has focused on the satisfaction of jobseekers in this context, some research in the retail domain has found a strong positive relationship between the diversity climate of the organisation and customer satisfaction (McKay et al., 2011). Similarly, the degree to which the demography of an organisation was representative of the community demographic was found to be positively related to civility experienced by patients in a hospital, and ultimately, to improved organisational performance (King et al., 2011). It might therefore be expected that an employment services workforce that mirrors the diversity of unemployed people would not only align with the presumed ethical aspirations of a human services organisation but may also enhance the quality of service provided to their jobseeker clients.

Data available from studies of employment services organisations (Considine et al., 2008; Considine et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2016), however, suggest a notable disconnect between the demographic profiles of ESPs' workforce[6] and their jobseeker client base (Department of Social Services, 2023), particularly with respect to age. For instance, while 35% of staff fall within the 45-64 age range, 41.6% of jobseekers are 45 years and older. Notably, within the 55-64 age cohort, the gap is even more pronounced: only 11.1% of ESP staff belong to this age group, compared to 21.5% of jobseekers. This discrepancy in age representation between staff and clients not only highlights a potential problematic imbalance within the organisational teams in ESPs but an opportunity for improved organisational outcomes. It also raises concerns about whether the lack of diversity in the workforce might mean the unique needs and challenges of older jobseekers are not being adequately understood and addressed. It must be acknowledged that the diversity and inclusion literature reveals mixed results on some outcomes and that scholars continue to examine the influencing factors, varying dynamics and organisational contexts (for example, Guillaume et al., 2017; Mannix & Neale, 2005; Shore et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2011).

More recently, work by Parker and Andrei (2020) has offered a comprehensive synthesis of the literature, proposing a framework of three meta-strategies which can serve as a guide to organisations aspiring to build an age-inclusive workforce. The first strategy, 'Include' aims to create a work climate that is welcoming and equitable for mature workers, exemplified by inclusive hiring practices and unbiased performance evaluations. The second, 'Individualise', seeks to adapt job roles and tasks to suit the specific needs and preferences of older workers, for example, work redesign or flexible working arrangements. Lastly, the 'Integrate' strategy focuses on harnessing the benefits of age diversity within the workforce, such as implementing mentoring schemes that allow younger and older workers to learn from each other more effectively.

[6] Respondents in these surveys are assumed to be representative of the workforce of employment services providers.

Importantly, Parker and Andrei call for intervention studies to enrich this area of organisational research, and although not focused on ESPs, their call for empirically grounded interventions is particularly salient for a sector in urgent need of evidence-based approaches. For guidance, we can look to recent work by Sinclair et al., (2023) which examined workplace interventions aimed at improving attitudes towards older workers and reducing age discrimination in the workplace. At present, age diversity workshop interventions, of one-hour or longer duration, appear to have offer the strongest likelihood of delivering positive changes in attitudes about mature age people in the workplace. In addition, de-biasing prompts at appropriate points, such as prior to the regular meetings between ECs and their unemployed clients, might also offer improvements. Such research could be highly constructive, impacting not just job outcome metrics but also the lived experiences of both staff and their clients.

Conclusion

Overall, the picture these findings paint is one of frustration, humiliation, and despair; of stress and hopelessness for unemployed people. Describing their interactions with the employment services system, participants comments could be summarised as 'they don't care' and 'they don't help'. Disturbingly, these findings are not a revelation; in fact, they reflect the findings of numerous studies over a long period that have explored the lived experience of unemployed people who must engage with the employment services system (for example, see Bowman et al., 2016, 2017; Casey, 2020; Marston & McDonald, 2008). Moreover, an independent review of the jobactive system, entitled 'I Want to Work' (Employment Services Expert Advisory Panel, 2018) also pointed to these same deficits. However, whilst the perspectives provided by our participants might not be new, they are nevertheless important, not only because their voices deserved to be heard but precisely because the inherent flaws in the system continue to produce the same results as they have been doing for decades.

As the pension age has extended to 67 years of age, and expectations shift towards longer working lives for Australians, the complexities facing mature age jobseekers intensify. Under the current policy settings, these broader policy shifts exacerbate the paradox these individuals experience: being obligated by conditional income support to seek and accept any available work whilst forced to face systemic barriers like age discrimination and inadequate support structures. This discord between policy objectives and the lived realities of mature age jobseekers calls for a more nuanced and individualised approach within Australia's employment services system: one that goes beyond simplistic solutions. Addressing these unique challenges is not merely a matter of social justice but also a pressing economic imperative as the nation grapples with an ageing workforce.

Recommendations

The challenges facing mature age jobseekers in Australia are complex, warranting a comprehensive and targeted strategy for effective resolution. This section outlines a series of recommendations that span both high-level policy changes and service delivery improvements. These recommendations are rooted in the empirical findings of the present study and advocate for the rigorous research, evaluation, and co-design of future interventions and programs.

Policy Reform

1. **Prioritise mature age employment issues**: with the policy review into Workforce Australia pending, we urge that any forthcoming policy amendments or systemic reforms address the specific challenges facing mature age jobseekers.
2. **Incorporate measures of well-being:** given evidence that the employment services system impacts negatively on jobseekers' mental health, the system's performance metrics should extend beyond job placements to include measures of mental health to ensure the system is helping, not harming, jobseekers.
3. **Reform mutual obligation requirements**: the existing policy framework, although offering some flexibility, needs re-evaluation of conditional income support policies to introduce more age-specific flexibility and accommodations which address age discrimination, caring responsibilities, and the age-related health constraints of mature age people.
4. **Co-Design Skill Programs through Industry Partnerships:** government should facilitate collaborative partnerships between a diverse range of sectors facing skill shortages and mature age jobseekers. Such partnerships should involve all stakeholders (including jobseekers) in co-designing tailored training and work experience initiatives which are tailored to meet both the sector-specific needs of employers and the work interests and capabilities of mature age workers. This co-designed approach ensures that training programs are both relevant and effective, leading to mutually beneficial outcomes for all involved.

5. **Support age-inclusive workplace initiatives:** as large employers, governments should set an example by promoting and enacting age-inclusive HR policies and practices. Additionally, they could recognise and celebrate employment service providers that have demonstrated outstanding commitment to diversity and inclusion, both within their organisations and in their engagements with jobseekers. This non-financial incentive will spotlight best practices, encourage service providers to improve their inclusion strategies, and foster a culture of equity across the employment services sector.

Provider Improvements

6. **Deepen employer engagement with employers:** employment service providers should go beyond superficial partnerships with employers and engage in more substantive, evidence-based programs that genuinely address age-specific employment barriers. These programs could include workshops, seminars, or joint research initiatives that focus on the value of age-diverse workforces. Additionally, these partnerships should aim to promote a range of job opportunities for mature age jobseekers, moving beyond entry-level or menial positions to include roles that fully utilise their skills and experience and provide sustainable employment pathways.

7. **Adopt diversity and inclusion principles:** Employment service providers themselves should model diversity and inclusion within their own organisational structures and client interactions. Adopting such principles will not only improve service delivery but also signal to employers and jobseekers alike the importance of an inclusive approach to employment.

8. **Establish a professional and stable workforce:** Employment service providers should prioritise a move towards a professionalised and stable workforce. Specialised training that tackles age-specific employment barriers and support of the psychological needs of unemployed people should be mandatory. High staff turnover should also be addressed to ensure continuity and quality of service for all jobseekers, including mature-aged individuals.

Supplemental Exploratory Quantitative Analysis

In addition to the qualitative analysis, we also present an exploratory examination of three variables of interest to the study of mature age workers in the context of mandatory employment services and mutual obligation requirements: worker identity, occupational identity and perceived future work prospects. It might be noted, however, that the intention of this analysis is not to present an exhaustive examination of identity in this context but rather to expand the discourse on how these factors might impact those who, by virtue of length of time in the workforce, have developed a particular occupational or strong work identity and be of mature age. This examination is particularly salient given the limited existing research in this domain.

Identity Research

Identity research is a broad area of psychological enquiry that has examined both the structure and formation of identity, and the function identity performs (Schwartz, 2011; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). A number of constructs have described identity in terms of the context of work, including occupational identity, vocational identity, career identity, work-related identity, professional identity and organisational identity (Bothma et al., 2015), with each implying various contextual distinctions between them. For example, occupational identity has been defined as 'the conscious awareness of oneself as a worker' (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011, p. 693) and has been posited to be a core element of one's overall sense of identity.

In the context of being unemployed and searching for work, the degree to which one identifies with a particular job role or working more broadly and the implications for the self would therefore seem critical to understand. For example, work-role centrality, described in terms of the general importance of work to an individual's sense of self, has also been shown to have a significant negative relationship with mental health for those who are unemployed (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Occupational identity has also been related to job search behaviour, with those having a weaker occupational identity more likely to use a haphazard search strategy whereby trial-and-error, frequent

search goals, and more passive information gathering are used because they are uncertain about their career goals (Koen et al., 2010). Having a lower occupational identity might be more likely found in those of a younger age who have not yet experienced sustained employment in a particular role, or those who are long-term unemployed and have lost connection with that role. Conversely, it might be expected that many mature age workers would have higher levels of identification with work and jobs given the length of time they have been in the workforce.

One study has considered identity in the context of unemployment and 'active ageing', proposing four common perspectives could be found: *Resisters*, those for whom work was central to their self-identity and therefore were significantly impacted by the failure to secure work; *Jaded by work*; mainly older workers for whom work had been central to their identity but who, when unable to secure work, had adapted to their situation by taking up other interests; *Individuators*, those who had shifted their perspective away from work and towards other more rewarding experiences; and *No choice but to work*, most of whom (like the participants in the present study) were on income support (Bowman et al., 2016).

For this exploratory analysis, two identity-related variables were selected for examination: *occupational identity*, a self-reported measure of the individual's identification with their last job role (on a scale of 0 – 100); and *worker identity*, similarly measured and referenced in relation to the variety of life roles one has, for example, "a partner, a member of a family, a member of a social group, or a work role".

Perceived Future Job Prospects

Following Vansteenkiste et al. (2005), the other variable of interest was *perceived future job prospects* (or reemployment expectations), a measure of the individual's own assessment of the likelihood they will get a) a job that was a good fit with the type of work they were seeking and, b) any job, regardless of whether it was a good fit within the foreseeable future (next four weeks). Responses to both questions were given on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (extremely unlikely), 2 (somewhat unlikely),

3 (neither likely or unlikely), 4 (somewhat likely) and 5 (extremely likely). The data from the two items were highly correlated (r = .799, p <.001) and therefore an average score was computed.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics for the variables of interest for the whole sample and the two groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Variables of Interest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	411	18	65	44.88	12.851
Worker Identity	401	0	100	55.57	28.538
Occupational Identity	384	0	100	63.33	30.250
Perceived Future Job Prospects	406	1.00	5.00	2.3424	1.19403

Preliminary Analysis

All data were analysed using SPSS version 28. Prior to analysis, a binary variable representing 'mature age worker' was created using the 'age' variable, that is, whether a participant was 45 years of age or older, or younger than 45 years of age. As it is intended to examine whether there are any differences between the groups on selected variables, differences in higher means between the older and younger group will be reported as a positive number and lower means as a negative number.

In addition, we also assessed for equality of variances and as assessed by Levene's test, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not met (p < .001) , and accordingly, in that at analysis, the Welch t-test statistic for unequal variances will be reported. The normality of the distribution for each variable was also assessed using Shapiro-Wilk tests, which indicated that none of the variables

were normally distributed, all $p < .001$. Therefore, non-parametric Spearman's rho correlations were used for the analyses.

Group Differences

Worker Identity

A Welch's t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in 'T1 Worker Identity' scores between the two age groups , t(382.769) = 2.577, p = .010, with older workers scoring higher than younger workers. The effect size, as measured by Cohen's *d*, was medium (*d* = .259).

Occupational Identity

A significant difference was also observed in 'T1 Occupational Identity' scores between the two age groups, t(349.012) = 3.415, $p<.001$). Again, older workers scored higher than the younger group. The effect size was medium (*d* =.354).

Perceived Future Job Prospects

A significant difference was noted in Perceived Future Job Prospects scores between the groups t(393.355) = −2.260, $p = .024$. In this case, younger workers scored higher than older workers. The effect size was small (*d* =−.225).

Correlations

After assessing group differences in the variables of interest, we sought further to understand the interrelationships among these variables. This additional layer of exploratory analysis aims to identify whether the constructs are related and, if so, the strength and direction of these relationships. Understanding these connections is crucial for comprehending how these aspects of employment experience might jointly influence each other, thereby providing a more holistic view of the employment landscape for mature-age workers. We performed correlation analyses both for the entire sample and within the predefined age groups to explore these relationships. Full details are presented in appendices 3 and 4.

In summary, in the whole sample, worker identity and occupational identity were strongly correlated (r = .541, p < .001) as were worker identity and perceived future job prospects (r =.191, p < .001). A moderate correlation was also found between occupational identity and perceived future job prospects (r =.150, p = .003). For those less than 45 years old, worker identity and occupational identity showed a strong correlation (r =.519, p < .001) and a moderate correlation with perceived future job prospects (r =.194, p = .009). For those aged 45 years or more, strong correlations were observed between worker identity and both occupational identity (r =.550, p < .001) and perceived future job prospects (r =.225, p < .001). A moderate correlation also existed between occupational identity and perceived future job prospects in this cohort (r = .203, p = .003).

Occupational and Worker Identity in Mature Age Jobseekers

In the mature age cohort, higher scores were observed in both occupational and worker identity compared to younger workers. A positive correlation between both forms of identity and perceived future job prospects, suggests that older individuals who strongly identify with their occupation or work roles are somewhat more optimistic about their future job opportunities. Using the broader dataset from this study, perceived future job prospects were also found to be strongly correlated with job search intentions, r = .47, CI [.318, .593] (Sykes, 2022). Therefore, with extant research finding strong support for the positive relationship between job search intentions and search behaviour, (for example, van Hooft et al., 2004; van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992; Wanberg et al., 2005), factors which might influence perceived future job prospects should be of interest in this context.

While the two constructs are closely related, occupational identity and worker identity may have distinct implications for older workers as they navigate the complexities of unemployment and job search in the context of employment services and mutual obligation requirements. As measured in this study, occupational identity pertains to how strongly participants identified with their last occupation or job role. Whilst it is possible that, in the current context, the job participant referenced a role which was not a previously held one, it is nevertheless likely that older workers, with their long history in the workforce, are more likely to have a well-developed occupational identity which might

be a source of professional pride, giving a sense of continuity and self-worth. As we saw in some of the comments from participants, however, a strong identification with a particular role, for example, an experienced manager, an academic, or a teacher might become a source of frustration when faced with the mutual obligation requirements to apply for and accept any job, irrespective of its fit with their established occupational identity. This strong attachment to a specific occupation could make it emotionally and psychologically challenging to consider roles that are deemed less aligned with their skills or interests.

Worker identity is a broader construct that relates to the significance the role of a worker plays in an individual's life. For older workers, a strong worker identity might provide resilience and serve as a psychological buffer during the job search process. Conversely, failure to secure work may conflict with this self-identity and explain why some people choose to engage in alternative activities and interests, perhaps an unexamined factor in what has been described as a process of psychological adaptation in those who experience long-term unemployment (De Witte et al., 2010) and the 'normalisation' of the state leading to less psychologically distressing experiences of unemployment (Houssemand et al., 2020).

In essence, while both forms of strong identity offer a sense of purpose and can act as psychological assets, they also have the potential to create conflicts when interfacing with the indiscriminate job application and acceptance requirements under mutual obligations. While their strong occupational and work identities might make them highly qualified candidates, age biases in recruitment practices are a significant barrier to securing suitable employment. A strong occupational identity might make the acceptance of 'any job' a painful compromise, while a strong worker identity might be related with a higher propensity to become a disengaged worker. Identity may be an additional factor in the psychological cost of engagement with employment services and its mutual obligations regime for older workers, making their job-seeking journey not just a quest for employment, but also a struggle for identity preservation.

Conclusion

Whilst not intended to be an exhaustive account of identity in this context, this exploratory analysis illuminates the relevance of two variables of relevance to mature age jobseekers: occupational and work identity and, in particular, the effects of this identification in the context of employment services. Through exploratory quantitative analysis, the research provides insights into the relationships among these variables and the need to consider them when addressing the experiences of mature age job seekers.

One noteworthy finding is that mature age workers display stronger occupational and worker identities compared to younger individuals. This double-edged sword may have implications for retraining and career transition initiatives. On the positive side, strong identities may act as a resilience factor, lending older workers a sense of continuity and self-worth during emotionally taxing job searches. However, these strong identities may also present challenges; they can create psychological barriers to retraining or transitioning into different occupational sectors, as doing so could be perceived as an affront to their deeply ingrained sense of self. Hence, retraining programmes should not merely focus on skill acquisition but also address identity-related concerns to facilitate a smoother career transition.

Furthermore, the study identifies a correlation between strong occupational or worker identities and a more optimistic outlook on future job opportunities. Given the significant relationship between perceived job prospects and job search intentions, this finding necessitates a nuanced approach to policy considerations.

In light of these insights, the employment services system must move beyond a one-dimensional focus on job placement. A more nuanced strategy is called for, one that takes into account identity-related and age-specific challenges. Recruitment biases based on age, along with the emotional and psychological costs associated with engagement in employment services, create a complex set of hurdles for mature age workers to overcome.

In summary, the current research underscores the imperative of adopting a holistic framework to tackle the issues of unemployment and reemployment among mature age people. This framework should consider not just broader economic concerns but also the critical elements of individual psychological well-being and self-identity. Future research in this domain will contribute to the development of a comprehensive and human-centric model of employment services, which, as a human services system, should be based on the guiding principle to, 'first, do no harm'. Ultimately policy and practice should be focused on creating an inclusive labour market for individuals across the entire age spectrum.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Demographics for Sample and Comparison with the Population of Interest

	Merged Dataset (*n* = 422)		Population Estimates	
	n	Valid %	*n*	Valid %
Age by Cohort	Sample		ESP Data*	
<20	5	1.2%	1427	5.4%
20 - 39	137	33.3%	12832	48.7%
40 - 59	199	48.4%	10077	38.3%
60+	70	17.0%	1988	7.6%
Total Valid	411			
Missing	11	2.6%		
Total Sample	422		26324	
Mean age (SD)	44.9 (12.9)	Range 18-65		
Gender	Sample		Government Data**	
Male	162	39.4%		
Female	237	57.7%	645600	48.7%
Prefer not to say	5	1.2%		
Prefer to self-describe	7	1.7%		
Total Valid	411			
Missing	11			
Total Sample	422			
Education Level	Sample		ESP Data*	
Postgraduate Degree (Masters, Doctorate)	24	5.9%	505	2.0%
Bachelors degree/Grad Cert./Grad Dip.	104	25.4%	2490	9.7%
Trade Certificate or Diploma	153	37.3%	8901	34.5%
Finished high school (Year 12)	46	11.2%	4986	19.3%
Primary, some high school or finished year 10	76	18.5%	8900	34.5%
Other & Prefer Not to Say	7	1.7%		
Total Valid	410			
Missing	12			
Total Sample	422		25782	

Note. * denotes population estimates sourced from a large ESP
** denotes population estimates sourced from the Australian Government

Appendix 1 (Continued)

	Merged Dataset (*n* = 422)		Population Estimates	
	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
State	Sample		Government Data**	
Australian Capital Territory	3	0.7%	19236	1.4%
New South Wales	127	30.8%	396059	28.8%
Northern Territory	0	0.0%	9493	0.7%
Queensland	217	52.7%	317213	23.1%
South Australia	10	2.4%	106758	7.8%
Tasmania	2	0.5%	33528	2.4%
Victoria	39	9.5%	346577	25.2%
Western Australia	14	3.4%	146517	10.7%
Total Valid	412			
Missing	10			0.0%
Total Sample	422		1375381	
Ethnicity	Sample		Government Data**	
First Nations People/Indigenous/ Torres Strait Islander	35	8.6%	108820	7.3%
White Caucasian	301	73.6%		
Prefer to self-describe	41	10.0%		
Prefer not to say	32	7.8%		
Total	409			
Missing	13			
Total	422			
Period of Unemployment				
Less than 12 months unemployed	241	57.1		
More than 12 months unemployed	181	42.9		
Total	422			

Note. * denotes population estimates sourced from a large ESP
** denotes population estimates sourced from the Australian Government

Appendix 2

Comparison of Demographics Between Qualitative and Total Merged Datasets

	Qualitative Dataset (*n* = 298)		Merged Dataset (*n* = 422)	
	n	Valid %	*n*	Valid %
Age by Cohort				
<20	2	.7%	5	1.2%
20 - 39	83	27.9%	137	33.3%
40 - 59	153	51.5%	199	48.4%
60+	59	19.9%	70	17.0%
Total Valid	297		411	
Missing	1		11	2.6%
Total Sample	298		422	
Mean age (SD)	46.72 (12.4)	Range 19-65	44.9 (12.9)	Range 18-65
Gender				
Male	121	40.7%	162	39.4%
Female	168	56.6%	237	57.7%
Prefer not to say	3	1.0%	5	1.2%
Prefer to self-describe	5	1.7%	7	1.7%
Total Valid	297		411	
Missing	1		11	
Total Sample	298		422	
Education Level				
Postgraduate Degree (Masters, Doctorate)	21	7.1%	24	5.9%
Bachelor's degree/Grad Cert./Grad Dip.	77	25.9%	104	25.4%
Trade Certificate or Diploma	120	40.4%	153	37.3%
Finished high school (Year 12)	24	8.1%	46	11.2%
Primary, some high school or finished Yr 10	49	16.5%	76	18.5%
Other & Prefer Not to Say	6	2.0%	7	1.7%
Total Valid	297		410	
Missing	1		12	
Total Sample	298		422	

Appendix 2 (Continued)

	Qualitative Dataset (*n* = 214)		Merged Dataset (*n* = 422)	
	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
State				
Australian Capital Territory	2	.7%	3	0.7%
New South Wales	92	30.9%	127	30.8%
Northern Territory	-	-	0	0.0%
Queensland	151	50.7%	217	52.7%
South Australia	89	3.0%	10	2.4%
Tasmania	2	.7%	2	0.5%
Victoria	29	9.7%	39	9.5%
Western Australia	12	4.0%	14	3.4%
Total Valid	297		412	
Missing	1		10	
Total Sample	298		422	
Ethnicity				
First Nations People/Indigenous/ Torres Strait Islander	24	8.1%	35	8.6%
White Caucasian	222	74.5%	301	73.6%
Prefer to self-describe	34	11.4%	41	10.0%
Prefer not to say	17	5.7%	32	7.8%
Total	297		409	
Missing	1		13	
Total	298		422	
Period of Unemployment				
Less than 12 months unemployed	164	55.0%	241	57.1%
More than 12 months unemployed	134	45.0%	181	42.9%
Total	298			

Appendix 3

Correlations Between Age and Variables of Interest

Variable	Age	Worker Identity	Occupational Identity
Age	-		
Worker Identity	.178**	-	
Occupational Identity	.227**	.541*	-
Perceived Future Job Prospects	-.118*	.191**	.150**

Note. Spearman's rho

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Appendix 4

Correlations Between Age and Variables of Interest for Two Age Cohorts

Variable	Age	Worker Identity	Occupational Identity
Less than 45 years old cohort			
Age	-		
Worker Identity	.166*	-	
Occupational Identity	.173*	.519**	-
Perceived Future Job Prospects	.072	.194**	.137
45 years of age or greater cohort			
Age	-		
Worker Identity	.091	-	
Occupational Identity	.185**	.550**	-
Perceived Future Job Prospects	-.098	.225**	.230**

Note. * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

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