



## **PARTICIPATION AND OBLIGATIONS: Findings from the 2002 Job Seeker Survey**

While activity testing in some form or another has existed for over 50 years, participation requirements for job seekers have continued to evolve. In recent years, these changes have included increased participation requirements for some groups of job seekers, including younger job seekers and longer term unemployed.

Initiatives such as the Preparing for Work Agreement (PFWA), Mutual Obligation and Work for the Dole (WfD) have been developed by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and/or the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) to help encourage job search activity and participation in the community and decrease the risk of long term unemployment.

The policies of these departments are implemented by the service delivery agencies contracted to provide employment services and administer government allowances - Centrelink, the Job Network and Community Work Coordinators. These service agencies also inform job seekers of their rights, responsibilities and obligations.

Important issues for the success of these policies are the quality of information supplied to job seekers and whether job seekers understand what is required of them. As well as understanding the requirements, it is desirable that job seekers feel that the system is fair and that the process provides for choice in relation to activities they participate in.

Client surveys such as the 2002 Job Seeker Survey are part of an ongoing service quality monitoring programme to evaluate policies and in particular to assess job seekers' perceptions of information and services.

This paper presents a discussion of Centrelink services with a particular focus on the application of rules and regulations as they concern job

### **SURVEY METHODS:**

The 2002 Job Seeker Evaluation of Employment Services (Centrelink) Survey (JSECL) was conducted from 7 Feb–11 Mar 2002 using computer assisted telephone interviewing. Interviews were conducted with 3,018 job seekers who had registered with and/or contacted Centrelink in the previous 6 months. Specific survey sampling methods were used and the responses have been weighted to provide results that are representative of all job seekers. Sampling variance for the total sample of job seekers is approximately  $\pm 1.5\%$ . The calculations assume attainment of the Business Partnership Arrangement standard of 80% and were calculated at the 95% confidence interval. Demographic and equity group variables have been taken from administrative data. Further information on survey methodology can be obtained from the DEWR contact staff:

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seeker participation requirements. This paper predominately presents results from the 2002 Job Seeker Survey. There are, however, considerable bodies of research which have been undertaken by DEWR, Centrelink and FaCS since the late 1990's to investigate issues concerning Mutual Obligation, activity testing and participation requirements. These research reports are also drawn on and referenced where appropriate.

The paper concludes with a summary of key messages from the research with regard to job seeker views on information, understanding and exposure to these policies.

While this paper covers a specific area of interest, the survey covers a wide range of topics, some of which will be explored in more detail in other papers. More information on other research papers can be obtained from the Department's contact officers listed above.

## THE ACTIVITY TEST & MUTUAL OBLIGATION

Activity testing in one form or another has been in place in Australia for over 50 years. The current activity test requires those on unemployment related allowances to actively look for work; to accept suitable work offers; to go to all job interviews; not to leave a job or training course without a good reason; and to enter into a PFWA.

Requirements for some job seekers were expanded in 1998 with the introduction of Mutual Obligation. Under this initiative some job seekers need to meet additional activity test requirements. This may include study, part time work, volunteer work, WfD or other approved activities.

From July 2002, as part of *the Australian's Working Together* package, job seekers who are aged between 18 and 24 years and have been receiving an employment related job seeker allowance - Newstart allowance/Youth Allowance (Other) (NSA/YA(Other)) - for 6 months or more and those aged between 25 and 49 years and have been receiving allowance for 12 months or more are required to undertake additional activities. Note: At the time of the 2002 survey, Mutual Obligation activities only applied to job seekers aged less than 35 years.

### **Awareness of Requirements**

Research undertaken for FaCS in 2001 showed high levels of awareness of the job search and administrative requirements of the activity test amongst job seekers. Around 9 in 10 knew that they had to actively look for work and recognised various other specific aspects of the Activity Test when prompted.<sup>1</sup>

The 2002 Job Seeker Survey conducted for DEWR found that 82% of job seekers recalled being told about the rules and regulations that applied to them. This is similar to levels reported in previous years (Table 1).

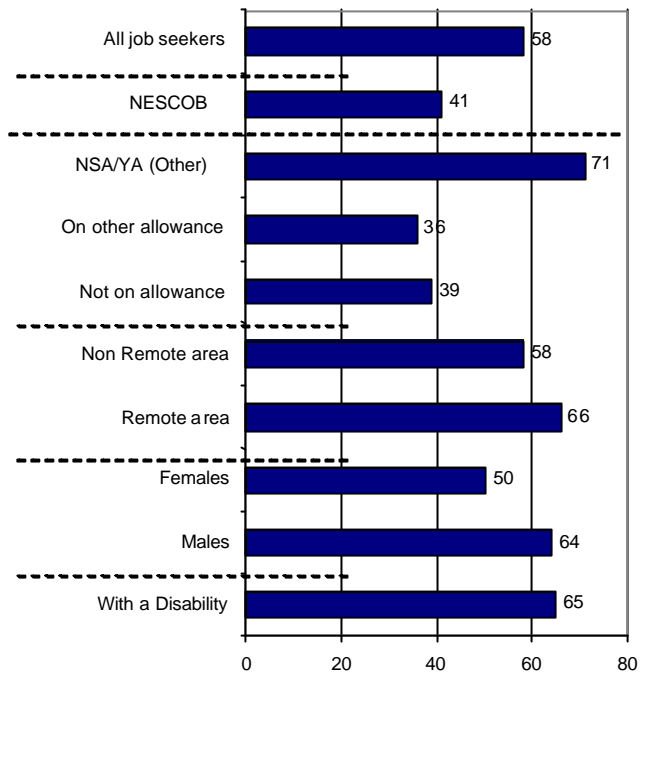
**Table 1: Centrelink explained rules & regulations (%)**

Base: All job seekers

|                    | 2000      | 2001      | 2002      |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Strongly agree     | 61        | 62        | 53        |
| Agree              | 21        | 25        | 28        |
| <b>Total Agree</b> | <b>82</b> | <b>87</b> | <b>82</b> |

Job seekers were asked if they had heard of the term 'Mutual Obligation' to gauge their unprompted awareness of the concept. In the 2002 survey 58% of job seekers had heard of the term Mutual Obligation; a similar proportion to that in 2001 (57%). Awareness was higher amongst those for

**Figure 1: % Heard of Mutual Obligation (unprompted awareness) Base: All job seekers**



whom Mutual Obligation applied, that is job seekers on NSA/YA (Other). Awareness was higher for men, for those in remote areas and people with a disability (see Figure 1).

Of those job seekers who recalled attending an interview with Centrelink about Mutual Obligation, a large majority felt that Centrelink explained what Mutual Obligation was all about (86%) and what their choices were in meeting their obligations (81%). Similar levels were also reported in 2001.

Those from a non English speaking country of birth and females were less likely to report that Centrelink explained Mutual Obligation and choices in meeting their obligation to them (Table 2).

**Table 2: Explanation of Mutual Obligation (%)**

Base: Those who recalled attending a Mutual Obligation interview

|                        | Centrelink Explained MO | Centrelink Explained Choices |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Males                  | 89                      | 83                           |
| Females                | 79                      | 76                           |
| Remote                 | 86                      | 86                           |
| Non Remote             | 86                      | 81                           |
| NESCOB                 | 72                      | 64                           |
| Disability             | 82                      | 67                           |
| <b>All job seekers</b> | <b>86</b>               | <b>81</b>                    |

<sup>1</sup> Activity Test Evaluation Customer Survey, Wallis Consulting, June 2001.

**Understanding of Mutual Obligation**

Qualitative research undertaken over several years shows a lack of understanding of Mutual Obligation amongst some job seekers. Essentially, the term Mutual Obligation means different things for and evokes different reactions in different people. In some discussions, Mutual Obligation became an 'object' rather than a concept:

*“doing my mutual obligation”  
“...going to put me on mutual obligation”*

Many related the term Mutual Obligation with something negative and punitive: *“something to give the government an excuse to break you”*.

Despite the confusion related to the term Mutual Obligation, a telephone survey of recent registrants undertaken by Centrelink in 2001<sup>2</sup> found that job seekers reported they were aware of and understood many of the elements of Mutual Obligation (see box).

**CENTRELINK SURVEY RESULTS<sup>2</sup>:**

(% agreeing with statement)

- Your payments can be stopped if you don't attend interviews (95%)
- You should complete your job diary each fortnight (93%)
- You must accept all offers of suitable work (91%)
- You would have to sign a PFWA (74%)
- You would need to nominate a future Mutual Obligation Activity in your PFWA (61%)

**Support for Mutual Obligation**

Support for Mutual Obligation is complicated by the lack of understanding and the different perceptions held by job seekers about what it actually means. Qualitative research found that younger job seekers seem more accepting of activity testing and Mutual Obligation than older job seekers.

*“I suppose you get money so it's alright. It's only once a fortnight you have to do it.”  
(job seeker, female, aged 18-20, on job diaries)*

Some admitted to cheating on the diary, believing that Centrelink never checked them:

*“that's easy; just get out the yellow pages.”  
(job seeker, male, aged 18-20)*

Older job seekers sometimes felt confusion about the rules. When they sought clarification they found themselves frustrated: *“between a rock and a hard place”*. Some older job seekers found it demeaning and felt strongly that they had “paid their dues” through paying taxes while working.

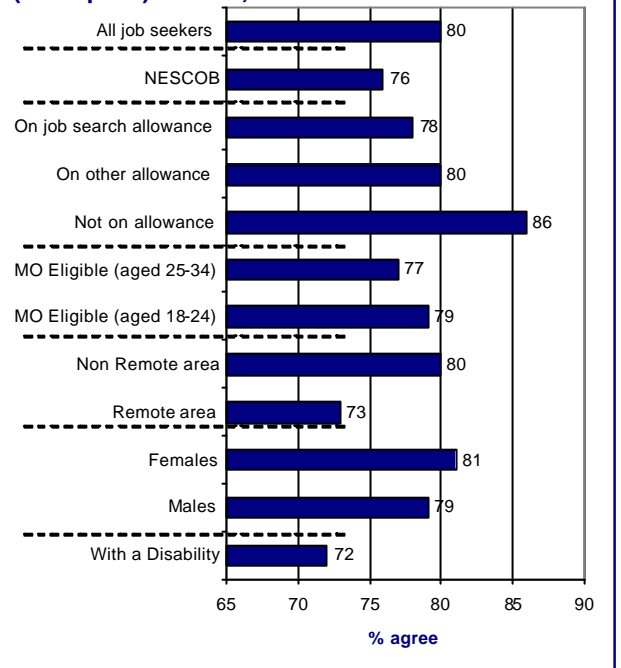
<sup>2</sup> Evaluation of Centrelink Job Seeker New Claim Processes, Seminars and Related Support Materials, Newton Waymon Chong and Associates, 2001

They objected to the implication that they were not really trying to find work and felt their skills and experience were not valued.

In the 2002 survey 80% of job seekers agreed with the idea of Mutual Obligation as explained to them, which is a slight reduction from the 2001 level of 85%.<sup>3</sup>

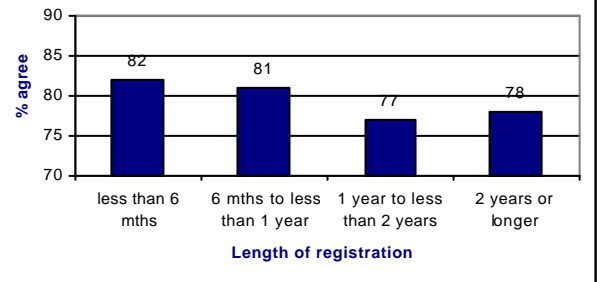
Those from a non-English speaking country of birth, those with a disability and those living in remote areas were less likely to agree with the idea of Mutual Obligation as put to them in the survey. Job seekers who were not on an allowance were more likely to agree with the idea of Mutual Obligation.

**Figure 2: % Agree with idea of Mutual Obligation (Prompted)** Base: All job seekers



Agreement with the idea of Mutual Obligation was slightly lower for those job seekers who had been registered at Centrelink for over 12 months compared to shorter term registrants (Figure 3). This is the group for whom additional activity under Mutual Obligation is more likely to be required.

**Figure 3: % Agree with idea of Mutual Obligation (Prompted)** Base: All job seekers



<sup>3</sup> The 2001 and 2002 surveys stated: Mutual Obligation is based on the idea that people who receive New Start Allowance or Youth Allowance should give something back to the community in return for receiving a benefit. They may be expected to undertake some kind of approved activity like training courses, Work for the Dole or part time work.”

## MUTUAL OBLIGATION AND THE PREPARING FOR WORK AGREEMENT

### Signing a Preparing for Work Agreement (PFWA)

The PFWA is a document discussed with and signed by the job seeker at registration. Job seekers are required to consider and nominate what activity they will undertake should they remain unemployed and be required to undertake additional Mutual Obligation activities.

The purpose of the PFWA is to provide job seekers with an understanding of requirements from the outset, ensuring job seekers are fully aware of increased requirements after a period receiving assistance. This change in focus is an alternative to the previous model of informing job seekers of their responsibilities when the time falls due. It aims to provide a focus on gaining employment and encouragement to follow a planned job search strategy, reducing the likelihood of longer periods of unemployment.

#### Job seeker Awareness

The volume of information provided to job seekers at registration and subsequent interviews can be daunting for some job seekers. Qualitative research undertaken by the Department shows that particularly when a person initially contacts Centrelink, their focus is on the financial aspects of assistance and information about employment services may be secondary. As a result, recall of specifics such as the signing of a PFWA may be diminished.

The majority of job seekers (74%) recalled having signed a PFWA at Centrelink. This was similar to levels reported in 2001 (71%).

Recall was highest amongst shorter term unemployed and recent registrants (77%). Older job seekers, those with a disability and those from a non English speaking country of birth had significantly lower recall of having signed a PFWA, see Table 3.

**Table 3: % Recall Signing a PFWA**

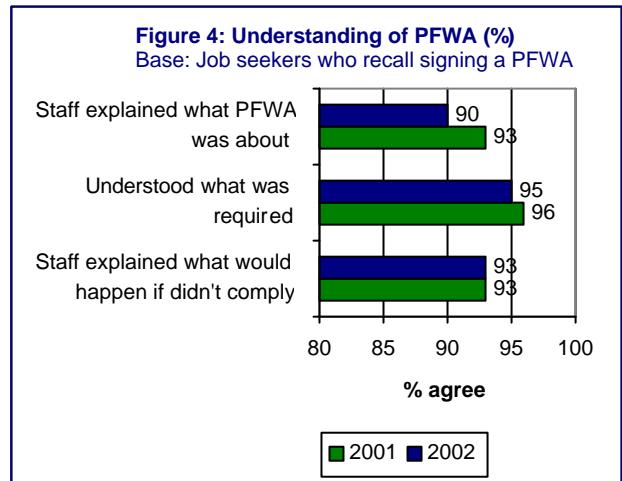
Base: All job seekers

|                                       | %  |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| Males                                 | 74 |
| Females                               | 74 |
| Remote                                | 70 |
| Non Remote                            | 74 |
| Registered in last 6 months           | 77 |
| Registered more than 6 months ago     | 72 |
| 15-24 years                           | 78 |
| 25-34 years                           | 71 |
| 35-44 years                           | 75 |
| 45-54 years                           | 74 |
| 55 years or over                      | 68 |
| Non English speaking country of birth | 72 |
| With a disability                     | 62 |

Of recent registrants, those who had been to an information session were more likely to recall signing a PFWA (82%) compared to those who had not been to an information session (75%).

#### Job seeker Understanding of the PFWA

Almost all job seekers who recalled signing a PFWA felt that staff had explained what it was about and that they understood what was required of them under the PFWA. Recall of this information was high across all job seeker groups.



#### Perceptions and Impact of PFWA

The majority of job seekers who recalled having signed a PFWA believed that it helped improve their chances of getting a job (82%) and a similar proportion were satisfied with the process of signing the PFWA (86%). Reasons for dissatisfaction centred around a lack of choice and/or a feeling that the PFWA was unsuitable/not taking individual circumstances into consideration.

Levels of satisfaction were similar across all job seeker groups. In 2001, job seekers with a disability had lower levels of satisfaction with the PFWA process (79%). This increased to 85% in 2002.

Job seekers who had signed a PFWA were no more likely to agree with the idea of Mutual Obligation than job seekers who had not been through this process (and the explanation of Mutual Obligation concepts) with a Centrelink staff member.

## MUTUAL OBLIGATION ACTIVITIES

### Job seeker understanding of participation

Of those job seekers eligible for Mutual Obligation, only 16% reported having attended an interview and 26% reported having undertaken a Mutual Obligation activity. A lack of recognition of the term Mutual Obligation may be contributing to these low results.

Qualitative research has shown that many job seekers are confused about what Mutual Obligation is and which activities are relevant. Many associate Mutual Obligation with WfD and a large proportion of job seekers in the survey reported having undertaken WfD as their Mutual Obligation activity (23% of those reporting Mutual Obligation activities).

Administrative data, however, show that part-time work or study make up larger proportions of job seekers meeting Mutual Obligation requirements than does WfD. Job seekers may be less likely to report these types of activities in the survey, not realising that through part-time work or study they are actually fulfilling their obligations. Similarly, some job seekers may not realise that attending Intensive Assistance satisfies their Mutual Obligation requirement.

In 2002, 14% of job seekers reported that they have undertaken or were currently doing a Mutual Obligation activity. This represented 26% of those who were eligible for Mutual Obligation (21% of those eligible and aged 18-24 and 34% of those eligible and aged over 24). One in ten job seekers not eligible for Mutual Obligation reported having performed an activity under the initiative.

Table 4 shows the proportion of job seekers reporting having undertaken particular Mutual Obligation activities. While the data show some variability across time it is difficult to distinguish whether this variability in reporting is due to changes in activities undertaken or changes in awareness of Mutual Obligation (awareness of the term and the initiative and/or awareness of whether activities fall under Mutual Obligation). Rates of participation can also vary due to changes in eligibility or funding for places in particular programmes.

### Satisfaction with activities

One of the key issues for success of the Mutual Obligation initiative is that activities are relevant to participants and participants feel they have adequate choice in selecting an activity which will improve their chances of finding work. While most job seekers

**Table 4: Mutual Obligation Activities (%)**

Base: Job seekers currently doing or who have undertaken an activity under Mutual Obligation in last 6 months

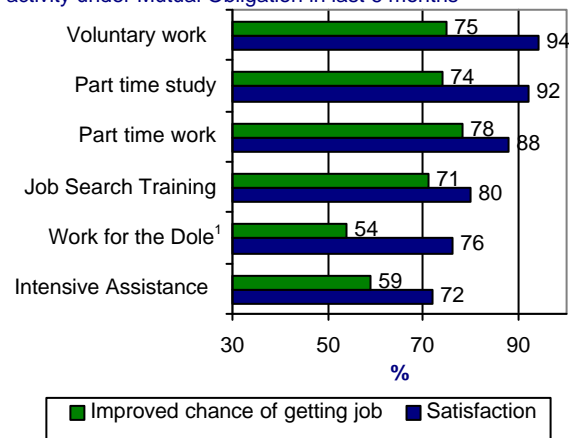
|   | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 |
|---|------|------|------|
| Work for the Dole                                 | 21   | 40   | 23   |
| Intensive Assistance                              | 11   | 12   | 19   |
| Job Search Training                               | 15   | 10   | 18   |
| Part time work                                    | 34   | 13   | 12   |
| Voluntary work                                    | 21   | 7    | 11   |
| Part time study                                   | 17   | 11   | 9    |
| Job Placement Employment and Training (JPET)      | 4    | 3    | 4    |
| Literacy/Numeracy training                        | 3    | 3    | 2    |
| Community Development Employment Programme (CDEP) | -    | 2    | 1    |
| Career Counselling                                | 2    | -    | 1    |
| New Apprenticeships                               | 3    | 1    | -    |
| Access Programme                                  | -    | -    | -    |
| Defence Force Reserves                            | -    | 1    | -    |
| Green Corps                                       | -    | 1    | -    |
| Jobs Pathways Programme                           | 3    | -    | -    |

were referred by Centrelink (58%), over one third (39%) volunteered to participate in their activity. The large majority (84%) of job seekers undertaking an activity felt that the activity suited them. This compares to 76% for 2000.

Satisfaction with Mutual Obligation activities was 81%. Of those who were dissatisfied, the main reasons for dissatisfaction were that the activities were unsuitable or unhelpful and didn't help to get them a job. Two thirds (67%) felt the activity improved their chances of getting a job. Satisfaction was highest for those doing voluntary work (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Evaluation of MO activity (%)**

Base: Job seekers currently doing or who have undertaken an activity under Mutual Obligation in last 6 months



1. Only includes those who nominated WfD as an MO activity

## WORK FOR THE DOLE (WfD)

### **Awareness and Support for Work for the Dole**

Work for the Dole aims to build self esteem and confidence; provide work contacts; recent work experience; referees; and a work routine. It is a well recognised programme which is often raised by job seekers in focus groups.

Despite a perception gained through focus groups that there is generally high awareness of WfD, its place within the Mutual Obligation initiative is not well understood. Over one in five (22%) of those in the survey who had undertaken WfD responded that they had not undertaken/were not currently undertaking a Mutual Obligation activity.

WfD, particularly in the first stages of implementation, was targeted at younger unemployed to assist job seekers who may have little or no work experience to offer employers. A survey of the general population was undertaken by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) in 1999<sup>4</sup> and showed broad support for Mutual Obligation activities, with greater support for involvement of younger unemployed - 83% supported participation in WfD for unemployed persons aged under 25. A similar survey of community attitudes by Wallis Consulting Group<sup>5</sup> compared attitudes within the community to those of young unemployed people. The survey showed similarly high levels of agreement with statements about WfD.

### **Referral to Work for the Dole**

The process by which a job seeker enters WfD can vary. Job seekers can negotiate to undertake WfD as part of their Preparing for Work Agreement, volunteer to participate in WfD (where places are available); or Centrelink can refer job seekers to WfD if they are within the eligible age group and are not fulfilling their Mutual Obligation through an alternative activity.

Of those who participated in WfD, just over half (60%) recall being referred to WfD by Centrelink, while 33% reported having volunteered for the activity. Around a third (30%) of those who volunteered for WfD were not eligible for Mutual Obligation (based on age and length of unemployment criteria) and therefore not required to undertake any additional activity. Younger and older job seekers had similar rates of volunteering for WfD.

Of those who participated in WfD 60% recalled attending an interview with Centrelink. Most of these job seekers (90%) felt that Centrelink explained WfD adequately for them/told them what Mutual Obligation was all about.

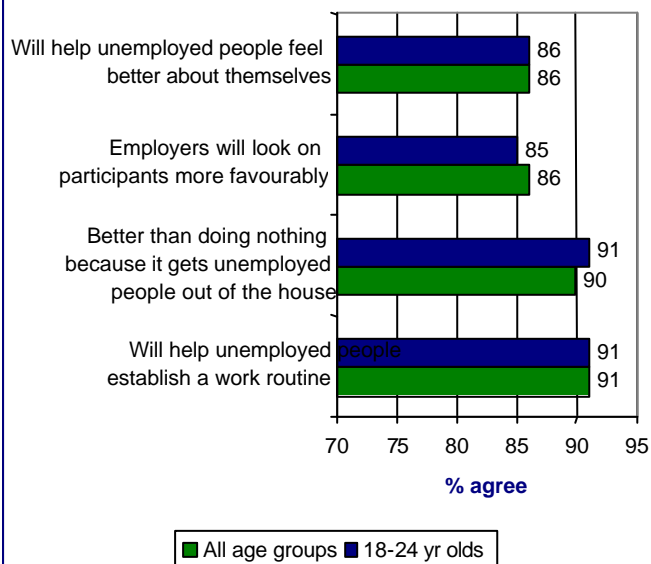
### **Satisfaction with Work for the Dole Activities**

Qualitative research with job seekers in 2002<sup>6</sup> found mixed views on WfD. Common criticism by job seekers involved in WfD are that activities are not related to work aspirations; are poorly organised and/or are not jobs that really need doing. Some also felt that WfD stopped the creation of real jobs and time spent in WfD programmes could be better used looking for a job. Younger job seekers seemed more positive towards the programme as long as it was relevant. There was however, considerable cynicism towards WfD in the regional areas included in the studies.

Overall job seeker satisfaction with their Mutual Obligation activity was 77% for WfD participants, similar to levels reported in 2001 (75%). The majority of job seekers felt that the projects provided a useful service to the community (79%) and improved their chances of getting a job (60%).

**Youth** (aged 15-24 years) were more likely to feel WfD improved their chances of getting a job (65%) compared to job seekers 25 years of age and over (54%). They also had similar levels of satisfaction with WfD (79% compared to 75% for older job seekers).

**Figure 6: Attitudes to Work for the Dole (%) (Wallis general population survey)**



<sup>4</sup> Community Attitudes Towards Unemployment, Activity Testing and Mutual Obligation, SPRC Discussion Paper No 107, May 2000

<sup>5</sup> Young persons Attitudes to Unemployment, A Research Report for DEWRSB, Wallis Consulting Group, 1999

<sup>6</sup> *Australians Working Together* Communication Research, NFO Donovan Research, 2002 and Development of Attitudinal Survey, NFO Donovan Research, 2002

## PARTICIPATION REPORTING (BREACHING)

At the time of the 2002 Job Seeker Survey, Participation Reporting was a relatively new term for job seekers. To facilitate comprehension, the questionnaire used the more familiar term 'Breaching'. An important part of the Mutual Obligation initiative is the application of regulations including penalties that apply for breaking these rules. When job seekers fail to undertake an activity which is a requirement of receipt of their payment they can be breached. This can involve a reduction in payments for a certain period of time depending on the nature of the breach and the number of previous notifications made.

Participation reports can be lodged by Job Network members and CWCs. Centrelink can instigate an administrative participation report. Reports are then investigated by Centrelink and a Participation Report is upheld if necessary. Some service providers are hesitant to use participation reporting as a means of working with their job seekers finding it punitive and not conducive to building good rapport. Others, however, find it a useful way of motivating job seekers who frequently fail to keep appointments<sup>7</sup>.

### **Awareness and support for Breaching**

Around three quarters of job seekers have heard of the term 'breaching' (73%) although the proportion was slightly lower than in 2002 (78%).

Job seekers from a non-English speaking country of birth were less likely to have heard of breaching (58%) as were job seekers over 45 years of age (65%). Those who were eligible for Mutual Obligation were more likely to be aware (82%) as were those who reported having participated in WfD recently (92%).

A survey of unemployed people conducted for FaCS<sup>8</sup> showed that the majority of unemployed people supported breaching, with 78% agreeing that *"unless they have a really good reason, job seekers that don't meet their activity test requirements should have their payments reduced for a period of time."* Support was slightly lower, although still high at 69%, for those who had incurred a breach. Support was considerably higher for those on Youth Allowance (86%).

<sup>7</sup> Job Seeker Attitudes and Service Provider Strategies, NFO Donovan Research, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Survey of FaCS Unemployed people: Attitudes Towards the Activity Test, 2001.

### **Being Breached**

Although the job seeker survey does not seek to estimate rates of breaching, the survey shows a similar level of breaching across survey participants in 2002 to that of previous years. In the 2002 survey, 16% of job seekers recalled being notified of a breach and 70% of these reported they had actually had payments reduced or stopped as a result.

Breaching was more prevalent amongst participants in WfD with a quarter (27%) of those having done WfD also reporting receiving a breach notification in the previous 6 months. As would be expected, those eligible for Mutual Obligation activities were most likely to have received a breach notice as were those job seekers in Job Search Training or Intensive Assistance which have more requirements/greater obligations.

**Table 5: Recall of Breach Notification (%) \*#**

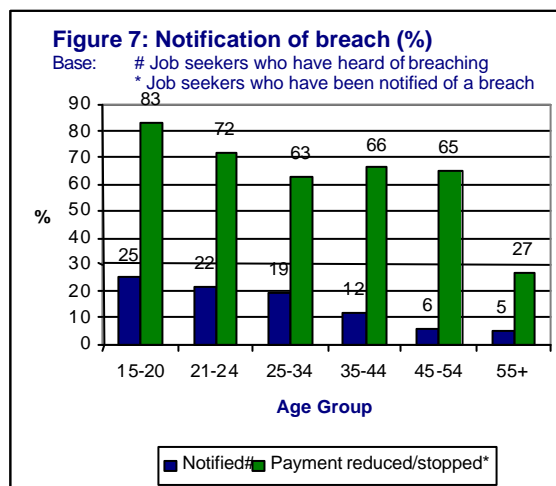
Base: Job seekers who have heard of Breaching

|                                    | %  |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Males                              | 18 |
| Females                            | 12 |
| Job Matching                       | 6  |
| Job Search Training                | 20 |
| Intensive Assistance               | 16 |
| WfD participant in last 6 months   | 27 |
| Have not done WfD in last 6 months | 15 |
| Not MO Eligible                    | 13 |
| MO Eligible (aged 18-24)           | 26 |
| MO Eligible (aged 25-34)           | 21 |
| NESCOB                             | 17 |

\* % of those who have heard of breaching who recall being notified or actually being breached in previous 6 months

# People with a Disability have not been reported as the estimate is based on a small number of responses.

Younger job seekers were also more likely to have reported receiving a breach notification and the majority of those notified (83%) had payments reduced or stopped as a result of the breach (Figure 7).



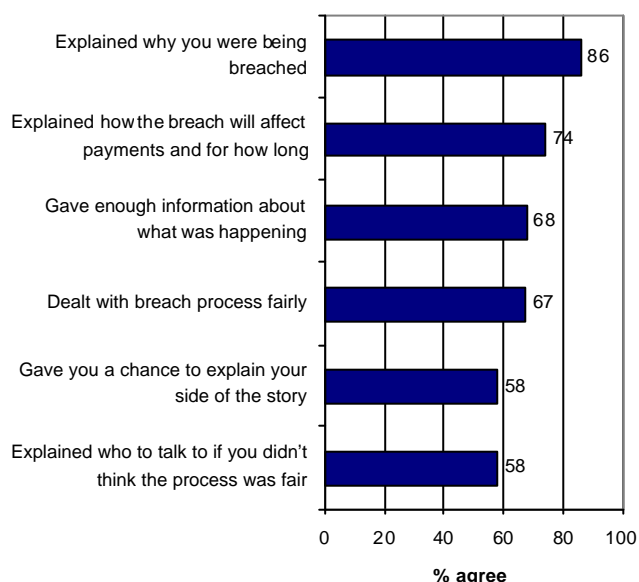
**Satisfaction with the Breaching process**

Job seekers may feel angry or upset about losing part or all of their allowance for a period of time. For many this can be a very stressful circumstance. The ways Centrelink staff apply a breach are important for minimising anguish and ensuring understanding of why the breach has occurred and preventing future breaches.

Job seekers who had been breached generally felt that Centrelink staff had explained why they were being breached and how the breach would affect their payments. Job seekers were less likely to agree that they were given a chance to explain their reasons and that they were dealt with fairly (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Centrelink staff and the breach process (%)**  
Base: Job seekers who recall being notified of a breach

Centrelink staff.....



Job seekers may not agree with the policy of breaching and/or may feel that they have been wronged by the process. Reflecting this, only 50% of job seekers were satisfied with the steps taken in deciding whether they should be breached. This is a similar level to that reported in 2001 (48%).

The main reason for dissatisfaction with the breaching process was overwhelmingly that the job seeker perceived that the breach was the result of a Centrelink mistake (46%).

**Table 6: Reason for dissatisfaction with process (%)**

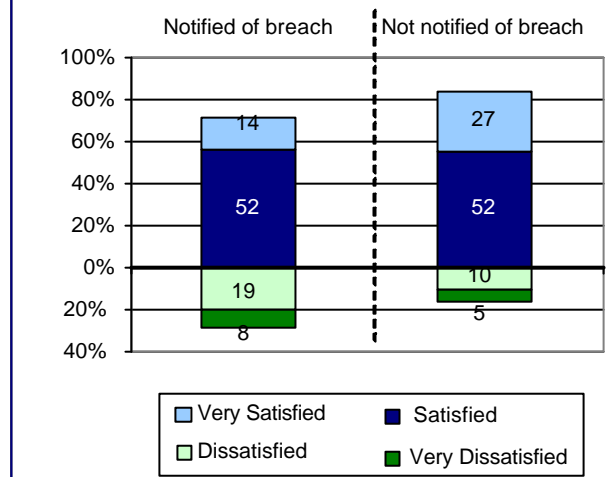
Base: Job seekers who recall being notified of a breach

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Breach was Centrelink mistake/not my fault       | 46 |
| No information/notification/warning of breach    | 29 |
| Centrelink did not let me explain/did not listen | 29 |
| Can't afford it/lose too much money              | 9  |
| Took too long to sort out                        | 9  |
| Too inflexible                                   | 7  |
| Centrelink didn't explain reason for breach      | 6  |

Job seekers who had been notified of a breach reported lower levels of satisfaction with Centrelink employment services overall (Figure 9). Similarly, those very satisfied with the steps taken were satisfied with employment services overall (86%) while those who were very dissatisfied with breaching processes were less likely to be satisfied with services overall (38%).

**Figure 9: Satisfaction with Employment Services (%)**

Base: Job seekers who have heard of Breaching



**Reasons for Breaching**

The most frequently reported reason for being breached was non-attendance at a Centrelink interview/appointment (20%). Not completing paperwork (13%) or declaring income incorrectly (17%) were other common reasons.

Not attending Job Network and/or Mutual Obligation activities were reported by only a few job seekers as reasons for being breached (less than 10% combined). This is a similar pattern of reasons to that reported in 2001.

## YOUTH AND BREACHING:

Critics of breaching policies have argued that younger job seekers are more severely disadvantaged through a lack of understanding of information and ability to navigate through the Government system of rules and regulations than more experienced job seekers.

The survey presents mixed results for youth:

- Support for breaching high (86% of Youth Allowance recipients in FaCS survey).
- Younger job seekers were almost twice as likely to have recalled been notified of a breach (23%) compared to those over 25 years of age (12%).
- The breach was more likely to result in stoppage or reduction in payment (78% compared to 62% of those over 25 years).
- Youth were more likely to be satisfied with the breach process (54% compared to 45%).
- Youth were more likely to feel they were dealt with fairly (66% compared to 57%).
- Youth were just as likely as older job seekers to feel that Centrelink:
  - explained why they were being breached (86%);
  - let them explain their side (67%);
  - gave them enough information (70%); and
  - explained the effect on payments (73%).

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The research suggests that while job seekers have high recognition and recall of information about rules and responsibilities explained to them by Centrelink staff, they are less familiar with the term Mutual Obligation and which activities apply to the initiative.

Research suggests details on activities are 'muddled' by the low levels of awareness/understanding of the term. For those job seekers who were aware of Mutual Obligation and related activities, satisfaction with choice of activities was high. Furthermore, the majority of job seekers felt the activities improved their chances of getting a job.

The link between WfD and Mutual Obligation is not clear for one in five WfD participants who did not recognise the term Mutual Obligation or did not see WfD as a Mutual Obligation activity. Over one third of WfD participants volunteered for the programme and many of these were not eligible for Mutual Obligation which may contribute to the lower understanding of WfD's place under the Mutual Obligation initiative.

While the majority of WfD participants were satisfied with the activity and felt it improved their chances of getting a job, satisfaction was lower for WfD than for other Mutual Obligation activities.

Satisfaction with steps taken to decide on breaching remained low and a significant proportion of job seekers felt they were not treated fairly when it came to applying a breach. The large number of job seekers dissatisfied with breaching who felt that the breach was a Centrelink error may have contributed to greater dissatisfaction with employment services overall.

## KEY MESSAGES: PARTICIPATION

- Recall of information from Centrelink staff was high, reflecting good processes for informing job seekers.
- Recall of information was lower for those from a non-English speaking country of birth, suggesting further attention may be required.
- Given the low awareness of Mutual Obligation, activities to increase awareness of the term Mutual Obligation and understanding of the initiative may be beneficial.
- A focus on elements of job seeker requirements (job diary, attending interviews) in other studies appears to be providing higher levels of recall/understanding, showing communication methods to be working. Increased emphasis on these issues in subsequent surveys may be useful to look at the success of communication methods.
- While the results suggest that youth appear more accepting of Mutual Obligation, WfD and breaching policies and are more likely to feel they are being treated fairly in breaching processes, rates of breaching are higher. Prevention of breaching through stronger messages about attending interviews and completing forms (two major reasons for breaches reported in the survey) may assist.