



THE SOCIAL
RESEARCH CENTRE

PERSONAL ADVISER EVALUATION

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**BETTER ASSESSMENT AT RISK CUSTOMER GROUP
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT – FINAL**

PREPARED FOR:

EVALUATION AND DATA UNIT
DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES
TUGGERANONG OFFICE PARK
ATHLLON DRIVE
TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

PREPARED BY:

THE SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE
LEVEL 1, 262 VICTORIA STREET
NORTH MELBOURNE VIC 3051

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Executive Summary

Overview

This report presents the findings from qualitative research conducted by the Social Research Centre among a targeted sample of 37 Better Assessment at Risk (BA at Risk) customers. The purpose of this research was to assess the effectiveness of the Personal Adviser (PA) intervention for this diverse customer group. The BA at Risk customer group is made up of Indigenous New Start Allowance (NSA) customers, prison release customers and (non-incapacitated) Activity Test Exempt NSA customers - including homeless people, refugees and people facing a major personal crisis.

The findings in this report are based on in-depth interviews with BA at Risk customers conducted in metropolitan Melbourne, Sydney and Perth and selected regional areas in South East Queensland (Nambour, Toowoomba and Warwick). Data collection took place over the period 26 May to 8 June 2004. All customers who took part in the study had attended a PA interview within the previous three months.

In reading this report it is important to bear in mind that the sample used for this research was selected so as to access the opinions of as broad a range of BA at Risk customers as possible. This approach, while very useful for the purposes of obtaining qualitative insights, does not necessarily yield a representative sample. As a result, it is not possible to generalise from the results of this research.

Key Findings and Issues for Further Consideration

Initial Reactions to the PA Interview

In the main, the BA at Risk customer group valued the PA interview, with many customers grateful for the attention and impressed, and sometimes flattered, by the genuine efforts to help them. Many saw Centrelink in a more positive light than before as a result of their PA interview. This positive take-out, however, while the most prevalent reaction to the interview, was not universal.

Better Explaining the Purpose of the PA Interview

This research found that customers had very low levels of awareness of what the PA interview was going to be about. This is consistent with the findings from research among the mainstream PA customer groups. While this led to many customers being pleasantly surprised it also meant that in many instances customers attended the PA interview ill prepared for the ensuing discussion. In some cases this defeated the purpose of the interview altogether, as the customers never 'lowered their guard' and 'opened up' to the PA. In these instances lack of customer understanding about the purpose of the PA interview hampered the effectiveness of the intervention.

This suggests an enhanced role for the Centrelink Customer Service Officer (CSO) in explaining the role of the PA for cases where Day 1 servicing occurs and the need for improved pre-interview communications to better explain the purpose of the PA interview.

Streaming Customers to the Personal Adviser Interview

This research indicates that the current approach of streaming BA at Risk customers to PAs on the basis of target group membership, without prior screening, lacks sensitivity and can lead to some seemingly inappropriate referrals to PAs. This feeling was most prevalent amongst Indigenous customers that were singled out for a PA interview on the basis of their race only.

A more sensitive approach to the streaming of BA at Risk customers to PAs, perhaps based on an initial assessment by a CSO, or initial telephone screening by a PA, would improve the targeting of customers and the overall efficiency of the program.

Changing the 'Personal Adviser' Title

For some customers the 'Personal Adviser' title seems to create unrealistic, and often unmet, service expectation. Titles such as 'Referrals Officers', 'Planners', 'Gateway Advisers', 'Participation Advisers' or 'Planning Officers' may convey the essence of the PA function without raising unrealistic service expectations.

The Timing of the PA Interviews

The study points to there being room to better tailor the timing of PA interviews to the needs of individuals. Greater flexibility around policy settings may allow for PAs to better time the planning interview according to customers' circumstances and current participation or compliance activities.

There seems to be some merit in having all prison release customers seen prior to release. This would help identify those customers who need to be streamed to further assistance immediately upon release and also identify those customers that could be left to their own devices or handled as mainstream Centrelink customers. Where this system is in place it appears to work well.¹

It was also evident from this research that, on occasions, the PA interview took place at a time when it was almost impossible for it to have the desired impact. This was particularly the case for some customers in the midst of a major personal crisis. This is a difficult issue to resolve as in these situations the PA interview acts as an important 'safety net' to ensure appropriate support is in place for these 'at risk' customers.

¹ MOUs between Centrelink and all State Departments of Corrections have recently been signed which will streamline processes for Prison Release customers and increase awareness of the PA role.

The Motivational Aspects of the PA Intervention

Many customers reported leaving the PA interview more motivated and more optimistic about what they could achieve and about the support services in place to help them. This research suggests that the intervention has a greater motivating and enabling impact on customers that are 'contemplating' participation and already willing or able to participate. For these customers the knowledge and service awareness gained from the PA interview is very valuable.

For some customers, however, any increased motivation or enthusiasm engendered as a result of the PA interview is short-lived. For these customers there is some risk of the PA interview creating unrealistic expectations, in particular where there is a lack of service or referral options that meet the needs of customers.

For those customers that were not willing or able to contemplate work, the PA interview had no discernable impact on their motivation to participate.

The 'Participation Planning' Process

Feedback from the participants in this research suggests the value of the participation planning process but discounts the value of the actual paper plan. This contrasts with some PAs' view² that the plan itself has a strong symbolic importance connected to a customer's demonstrated commitment and as a tangible reminder of the goals and activities agreed to.

There is a possibility amongst the BA at Risk customer group that the need to produce a Participation Plan leads to the interview being perceived as too formulated and process driven, thereby working against being able to fully 'engage the customer' in thinking about their future. The requirement to produce a formal participation plan in every instance is perhaps too prescriptive for what is meant to be a tailored intervention.

The Adequacy of the Assessment and Referral Process

In the majority of cases, BA at Risk customers were appropriately referred to a broad range of programs and services including Job Network members, psychologists, emergency housing agencies, training/education providers, courses (including job search training) and the like.

As we would expect given the difficulty of the customer group, however, there were also many instances where inaccurate assessments and inappropriate referrals seem to have been made. In some instances these seemed to be as a result of 'prescriptive' or 'formulated' assessments on the part of PAs. This indicates the difficulty involved in trying to effectively assess and engage the BA at Risk customers in a 45 minute interview and perhaps also raises questions as to whether or not 'generalist' PAs have the specialist skills and knowledge to deal with the variety of complex and specific needs many of the BA at Risk customers are facing.

² A workshop was held with PAs and Jet Advisers in March 2004 as part of the PA evaluation research program.

This complexity underlines the importance of PAs consulting with, and referring customers to, internal Centrelink professionals and specialists to ensure accurate assessments are made.

In other instances where a referral has resulted in a positive outcome for customers, this has not been acknowledged by customers who fail to connect the PA process with the successful outcome.

Concluding Remarks

This research highlights the disparate nature of the BA at Risk Customer group and brings to light the multiplicity and complexity of the problems being faced by many of these customers. As a result, the difficulties faced by PAs in trying to achieve the best outcomes for these customers are also highlighted as is the need for a 'team approach' in order to ensure the most appropriate assessments and referrals take place.

The policy and service delivery issues raised in this report warranting further consideration include:

- providing better information to customers about the intent and purpose of the PA interview;
- ensuring that PAs have the flexibility to respond appropriately to customers' individual situations and access to appropriate assessment tools and expertise;
- allowing PAs more discretion as to who is interviewed and when;
- consideration of enabling some sort of pre-interview contact or screening;
- being able to tailor the timing of the intervention in accordance with an individual's circumstances; and
- ensuring the follow up interviews and progress checks that take place are more effective and take place more often.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This report presents the findings from qualitative research conducted by the Social Research Centre amongst a targeted sample of 37 BA at Risk customers as a means of assessing the effectiveness of the PA intervention for this diverse customer group. The BA at Risk customer group is made up of Indigenous NewStart Allowance (NSA) customers, prison release customers and non-incapacitated, Activity Test Exempt NSA customers including homeless people, refugees and people facing a major personal crisis. The broader PA customer base also includes Parenting Payment customers, Mature Aged NSA customers and Activity Test Exempt (Incapacitated) customers.

The research among the BA at Risk customer group is just one component of a broader PA evaluation methodology which also includes:

- a national phone survey of PAs and JET Advisers; and
- a 2-wave longitudinal telephone survey of 3,000 customers who participated in a PA interview (with the telephone interviews taking place approximately 6 weeks and then six months after the PA intervention).

The circumstances of many of the BA at Risk customers warranted a qualitative research methodology to provide a better understanding of how the PA intervention works for these customers. The qualitative method also acknowledges that the BA at Risk customer groups are less likely to be effectively enumerated by a traditional CATI survey methodology.

This evaluation research being undertaken with respect to the PA measure forms a key component of the broader evaluation of the Australians Working Together (AWT) package.

1.2 Background to the Personal Adviser Intervention

PAs were introduced as part of the Australians Working Together (AWT) package of welfare reforms. Located in Centrelink, PAs are a major part of an enhanced and individualised approach to service delivery and feature in Centrelink's role as the gateway to the social support system.

The role of the PA is to work with targeted income support customers to help them develop individualised strategies for increasing economic and social participation, achieving greater self-reliance and contributing to their community. The primary method of delivering this service and engaging with the targeted customers is through an interview with a PA.

Income support recipients targeted for the PA Intervention include mature age people; parents; new claimants of NSA and Youth Allowance who have recently been released from prison, are Indigenous, or are exempt from the activity test (special circumstances); and NSA recipients who are seeking an activity test exemption on the grounds of medical incapacity.

The main component of the PA intervention is a participation planning interview. As part of this process PAs conduct pre-interview research and preparation, make a detailed assessment of customer needs, identify opportunities for greater participation, match customers with appropriate types of assistance, motivate customers to take up referrals and activities, negotiate a participation plan and undertake referral, monitoring and follow-up activities.

The PA intervention had a staggered introduction. From September 2002, mandatory PA interviews were introduced for:

- Parenting Payment customers whose youngest child was aged 12 and over;
- NSA and Youth Allowance (YA) who were Activity Test Exempt due to a medical condition;
- Indigenous NSA and YA customers; and
- Activity Test Exempt non-incapacitated customers such as homeless people, refugees, persons facing a major personal crisis and persons recently released from prison.

At the same time, voluntary PA interviews were also available for:

- Parenting Payment customers whose youngest child was aged 6 to 11; and
- Mature age customers aged 50 and over on Mature Age Allowance, Partner Allowance and Widow Allowance.

From September 2003, mandatory PA interviews were introduced for:

- Parenting Payment customers (partnered and single) whose youngest child is aged 6 or over;
- Mature age customers aged 50 and over receiving NSA; and
- Widow Allowance customers.

Also from September 2003, mandatory participation requirements were introduced for Parenting Payment customers whose youngest child was aged 13 and over and mature age customers. In addition to attending a PA interview, these customers are required to undertake a part-time activity. This activity may be up to 150 hours over every 26 weeks. Most NSA customers will be required to do more.

1.3 About This Research

The findings in this report are based on 37 interviews with BA at Risk (non-incapacitated) customers across metropolitan Melbourne, Sydney and Perth and selected regional areas in South East Queensland (Nambour, Toowoomba and Warwick). Data collection took place over the period 26 May to 8 June 2004, with customers that had attended a PA interview during the previous three months. The structure of the final sample of customers interviewed is shown in the table below (and further methodological details provided in Appendix 1).

	Prison Release	Indigenous	Activity Test Exempt	Total
Melbourne	2	3	5 (2 x MPC ³ , 3 x Refugees)	10
Sydney	3 (1 x Indigenous)	2	2 (2 x Refugees)	7
Perth	2	4	2 (1 x MPC 1 x Refugee)	8
Queensland (Nambour, Toowoomba, Warwick)	3	6	3 (1 x MPC 1 x Refugee 1 x 'short course' who was MPC?)	12
Total	(10/10)	(15/15)	(12/15)	(37/40)

The key PA evaluation questions addressed by this phase of the research program are:

- how do customers view the contact with the PA and the utility of the assessment and planning process?
- to what extent is the PA intervention tailored to suit each customer's personal circumstances and assist in addressing customers' vocational and non-vocational barriers?
- what is the appropriateness of referrals, the take-up of support services and the availability of follow-up support?

³ Major Personal Crisis.

- what are customer attitudes, motivation, and participation intentions and do these change as a result of the PA Intervention?

This report is structured along broad thematic lines. Section 2 provides a contextual background for the analysis that follows by providing a profile of the BA at Risk customers interviewed. Section 3 looks at customers' perceptions of, and reactions to, the intervention. Section 4 examines the extent to which the PA Intervention is tailored to individual customers' personal circumstances. And Section 5 looks at short-term changes in attitudes, motivations and participation intentions as a result of the PA intervention.

Some concluding observations are provided in Section 6 to draw these findings together.

While the sample used for this research met the needs of a qualitative investigation, and produced many useful insights about the impact of the PA Intervention on customers, it is not necessarily possible to generalise from the results of this research.

2 Customer Profiles

While most BA at Risk customers are quite marginalised, have a myriad of complex problems to deal with and have inadequate vocational skills, others have main stream life experiences and skills and no major vocational or non-vocational barriers.

A brief profile of the main BA at Risk customer groups is provided in this section. These profiles capture and convey the circumstances in which these individuals find themselves and provide a context for the analysis that follows.

2.1 Indigenous Customers

Fifteen interviews were undertaken with Indigenous customers. The circumstances of the Indigenous customers interviewed varied considerably. At one end of the spectrum were tertiary qualified customers who were normally working but who found themselves temporarily out of work and in need of financial support. At the other end, were people who were homeless, drifting, isolated from family, and either lacking work experience or with experience in only short-term, casual, unskilled labouring jobs.

The first of these two 'groups' tended to be more highly educated and have good general and life skills. They tended to be fairly clear about their short to medium term goals and saw their current episode of income support as temporary. This group did not feel as though they needed any assistance from Centrelink. For these people the PA interview was generally of little use – they did not regard themselves as wanting or needing assistance. Some examples:

- a qualified 'junior' solicitor who had trouble finding a full-time job but who had been consulting and working casually and earning full time equivalent income on and off. Says he was registered as being on NSA but not getting payments currently due to his income;
- a social worker who worked with Indigenous people herself and was studying for her second degree. Registered with Centrelink due to imminent arrival of a new baby;
- a 40-50 year old male, worked most of his life in rural/remote areas in manual or semi-skilled jobs. Just signed up with Centrelink until starting his next job, which is already lined up (6 month contract carting water) starting in a month.

At the other end of the spectrum were the Indigenous customers for whom life 'on the dole' was the norm rather than the exception. Many of this group had low levels of education, became parents at a very young age, had large families and were estranged from their partners. Often they had experienced only marginal attachment to the labour force, often for cash in hand jobs. Many of this group had been in 'trouble with the law' and had debts (e.g. State Recovery Debts). Most had short term ambitions like "saving up to buy a car" or "I just want to be able to work at a place for twelve months and then get a loan" but lacked any clear way forward.

Most had little concept of long term employment or improved educational opportunities. For example:

- a homeless man who had not worked at all for 2 years and, when he did work, had only worked casually and itinerantly in labouring/cleaning/gardening jobs. No transport, no family and drifting;
- a young man (aged 17) who became a father last year (during Year 10) and dropped out of school at the start of this year. Previously on Abstudy, now on Youth Allowance. He lives with his mum and his girlfriend and daughter live nearby with her mum. Court commitments have been a barrier to meeting job search and Centrelink obligations. Hopes to get a job at the same place as his father;
- A 23 year old with three children. Left school at 15, worked cash in hand as a furniture removalist for a while. Has had spasmodic employment – not always been on the dole – working for cash and involved in ‘other’ activities. Trigger for recent PA interview was completion of a job that only lasted two and a half days (was meant to last longer) – went to see PA as soon as applied for the dole.

2.2 Prison Release Customers

The prison release customers interviewed (n= 10) could also be broadly categorised as either ‘job-ready’ or needing to overcome serious vocational and non-vocational barriers.

One ‘job-ready’ prison release customer had made arrangements to return to his former job and felt he was simply:

“... caught up in the system when I went in (to Centrelink) to sort out my EBT⁴. I had to wait around for nearly two hours before seeing this woman who crapped on about my short term goals and hobbies. I told her my short term goal was to get out of Centrelink, get some decent clothes, go down the pub... and get back to work next week. She wasn’t impressed. What a waste of time.”

Another prison release customer was a university student in much the same situation as the customer described above, but had three months to wait until the start of a new semester. He had completed one unit of his course whilst in prison and had made all necessary arrangements to continue his course when the new semester began. He was aware of all his Centrelink options, including the Activity Test Exemption which he felt was a basic right and should not be subject to a Personal Advisor interview.

“The Personal Advisor interview is a typical ‘one size fits all’ piece of bureaucratic garbage. I’m sure it could be useful for the average brain dead Centrelink customer, but it was demeaning for me and the poor woman who tried to go through the motions.”

⁴ Electronic Banking Transfer.

It was very apparent that she had to go through every silly question and then print out that tedious contract, or the system would label me persona non grata. It was excruciating. To make it worse, her word processing skills were appalling and she couldn't spell the most rudimentary words. I offered to do the whole thing myself and type in all the answers quickly so we could get it finished with, but she wasn't amused. I felt sorry for her".

At the other end of the spectrum were prison release customers who had served longer sentences and were uncertain of their prospects upon release from prison. Many of these customers had little in the way of family or social support. In addition to the 'anomie' they faced 'on the outside', they often had practical limitations such as parole conditions, a lack of licences or permits, literacy problems and severe financial and accommodation problems.

"Three days a week I had to go for urine analysis. I had to get two buses from my Mum's place, where I am living, and sometimes I had to wait more than an hour at the hospital. I also have to go for drug and alcohol counselling three times a week. That takes more than an hour, plus getting there and back. And then I have to see the parole officer once a week."

One prison release customer we spoke with (aged 34 years) was released from prison in Perth and lived on streets for a while before making his way back to Sydney via Adelaide. For this customer, and many others, access to temporary accommodation is an immediate priority.

"Moved into a Men's Hostel... right opposite the railway station."

"I've just moved into a bed sit and only been there for two weeks. I'm there for a maximum of six months, then I've got to move again, won't be any further than (nearby housing commission). They've got bed sits and... hopefully within the six months I'll get a Housing Commission."

In another example, a prison release customer, aged 38 years, had spent 13 of the last 20 years in jail and emerged paying State Debt Recovery and to find his father dying of cancer. "Me and the old man are both saving up to bury him, that's a more pressing problem than other things." This customer was waiting the outcome of his application for a Carers Payment.

2.3 Activity Test Exempt Customers

The Activity Test Exempt (non-incapacitated) customers included in this research mainly comprised refugees (n=7) and those undergoing a major personal crisis (n=4). There was also one customer categorised as 'attending a short course.'

Refugees

The refugees interviewed had a range of different life experiences and circumstances. For example:

- One young man had spent fifteen years (since the age of four) in impoverished refugee camps in three countries. He had not been educated beyond year four level;
- Another customer had spent her teens as a refugee (prior to coming to Australia) but had completed two years of a Bachelors degree in her last 'refugee camp'.

One couple were recent immigrants from South Africa where they had been refugees from Ethiopia. This couple are hoping to bring their family here from Ethiopia. They had their own 'street trading' business in South Africa and the husband was hoping to do the same here whilst the wife wanted to study to be a nurse. She needed and has received a thyroid operation since arriving in Australia. Neither have worked since being in Australia and both are studying English.

One female refugee has been here for 5 years after fleeing Ethiopia with her mother and sister. She suffers from depression and made references to torture about which she is still seeing a psychologist. She has worked illegally in hotels until getting her residency in 2003, and has only been able to start receiving NSA since getting this permit. She was studying English and had quite positive vocational goals and plans (which have now been thrown into disarray due to her becoming pregnant, with no partner, and being thrown out of home as a result).

Major Personal Crisis (MPC)

Some of the customers who were classified as MPC were not undergoing a single crisis but had months or even years of ongoing crises in their lives. Some examples are provided below.

A case in point is that of a female who had been on a methadone program for 5 years. This customer was on Parenting Payment until very recently but was moved to NSA when her daughter (aged 11 years) went to live with her grandparents from Monday to Friday so as to avoid having to change schools as a result of the mother having to move house (i.e. change housing commission accommodation). The customer was a long way from being 'work-ready' or 'Job Network ready' and believed she should be put back on Parenting Payment as her daughter was now back living with her again. Her barriers to work included a problem with her physical appearance (her ex-partner broke her jaws and teeth whilst she was pregnant and her jaw was wired shut for a long period, resulting in most of her teeth falling out). Now her facial appearance and speech are seriously affected, as is her self-confidence. She used to work as a typist but has not worked for over seven years so is quite daunted by the prospect of having to look for work. She also has a criminal record. She does not understand why she cannot go back to Parenting Payment but is very angry and confused. She also has a boyfriend who was released from prison only days prior to the research interview.

The crisis for another customer was the abrupt end of her 30 year marriage ...

"I had no idea what to do. I was fifty, I'd worked all my adult life except for about ten years when my kids were little. My husband walked out the day before our 30th wedding anniversary. I had a breakdown. I couldn't work; I had no money; I didn't know what to do. The Personal Advisor was just wonderful. He took time with me; he explained everything; he made me feel I wasn't a dole bludger.

I cannot speak highly enough about what that man did for me. I'm not back at work, yet, but I just feel he gave me hope when I was so completely lost. I think it (Personal Advisor program) is wonderful."

Attending a Short Course

One of the Activity Test Exempt customers involved in this research was attending a short course at the time of our interview. She had had two interviews with Personal Advisors in the past eight months, experiences which she found very different.

"The first man I saw was not long after I came out of hospital after my stroke. My speech was very bad and he could see that I couldn't do all the things like applying for jobs. So he just said my doctor must give me a medical certificate to bring to Centrelink and I would get a payment. He was so kind and explained everything to me.

Then I had to go and see another one (Personal Advisor). She was like the Gestapo. She told me I had to go to an employment agency and do all these job applications or my money would stop. You (interviewer) can hear that my speech is still very slow. Where can I get a job in the country when I can't talk properly? She made me sign this contract and I took it to my doctor. He was very angry and now I don't have to do that contract because my doctor phoned Centrelink. I am finishing off my last unit of a psychology degree and she (Personal Advisor # 2) said if I can do that I can get a job. She actually put my speech back a few months, I was so upset. But now I feel a lot better and when I get my degree I will start looking for a job. But how could she do that to me?"

3 Customer Perceptions of the PA Intervention

3.1 Expectations of the Personal Adviser Interview

The BA at Risk customers are similar to the mainstream PA customer groups⁵ in that neither group of customers had any special expectations with respect to attending the PA interview. In the main, BA at Risk customers did not expect the PA interview to be any different from any other Centrelink interview they had attended.

Few participants understood why they had been referred to a PA as the letter they received did not suggest anything about the purpose of the PA interview.

“You just do what Centrelink tells you to”.

For others this lack of forewarning about the interview meant that they assumed the worst:

I thought there was another problem with my payment. There’s always problems with payments in our house. So I knew I had to go.”

‘I’d assumed I’d done something wrong.”

“The government has it in for us.”

A few customers (refugees) had heard from family or friends about the PA interview and were less anxious because they knew what to expect and knew they had no reason to be concerned.

“My friends had been to an interview before and they told me what it would be about. They said they will ask you questions about what you want to do in your future.”

The absence of any information about the purpose of the Personal Advisor interview is counter-productive. Customers are not able to prepare for their interview in terms of bringing paperwork or records nor in terms of thinking about their own aspirations and being open to discussing them.

“I felt apprehensive about the interview to start with – why do I need someone to advise me?”

“I was expecting them to ask me for information and I was wary about them asking about jail. I didn’t know what to expect.”

“I felt ok about going but did not take my resume with me. It would have helped to show my work history. We talked about my work history – that’s why my resume would have been helpful.”

⁵ Findings from Telephone survey of 3,000 customers who had an interview with a PA conducted in June 2004 as part of the PA evaluation research program.

One prison release customer had been very concerned that his inability to meet his activity test requirements (due to strict parole conditions) was the reason for being called in – he thought he was being “busted”. He had no driving licence and relied on public transport to attend seven appointments each week as part of his parole requirements.

“How the hell can you do all that and still try and get jobs? And who’d give you a job, anyway, if you could only work about 4 hours a week? Yeah, I just wasn’t cutting it. I knew they (Centrelink) would bust me because I wasn’t getting those job interviews. That’s what I thought was going to happen when I had to see this bloke (Personal Advisor). I thought they was going to bust me.”

Several ‘Activity Test Exempt’ customers became highly anxious when they received notification to attend the interview. As with all customers, few of the ‘Activity Test Exempt’ respondents had any real understanding of the reasons for the interview but because of their circumstances this tended to cause greater distress for some of these customers.

The term ‘interview’ was a bit of a problem for some of the refugees that participated in the research as it can have powerful negative connotations for some refugees. Some expressed a deep concern about the receipt of a letter requiring them to attend an ‘interview’ with a Personal Advisor.

You know, I had to go to many, many interviews before I could come to Australia. Those interviews, they were very frightening. I think the people, they tried to catch you out. They asked the same questions lots of times. Maybe they try to see if we are not telling the truth. I was very scared with those interviews. Maybe they would say I can’t come to Australia.

I was so happy to come to Australia, and everybody is very kind. But when this letter comes and it says I must come for another interview, I was very worried. I was thinking all the time ‘What have I done wrong? Maybe they will send me to another camp.’ I was scared. I think, now, they (Centrelink) must not use that word ‘interview’. It is not a good word. Maybe, also, they must put some information with the letter to say ‘what is this interview about?’ Then maybe I would not be so scared. (20–25 year old male)

The term ‘appointment’ probably conveys the same meaning but with less connotations.

Based on the above, it is not surprising that the majority of customers felt that there should be some explanatory information provided prior to the interview to reduce any anxiety about the interview and facilitate its effectiveness. Suggestions about the content of such explanatory material varied considerably, from a brief A5-size note to a detailed and glossy pamphlet; the consistent theme, however, was clear and included words and phrases such as:

- ‘Advice about your entitlements’
- ‘Assistance with education’
- ‘A trained professional advisor’.

Unless there is a specific reason not to do so, the letter should emphasise that the Personal Advisor interview has **not** been scheduled because there is a **problem** regarding the customer's payments or entitlements.

3.2 Reactions to the 'Manner' in which the PA Interview is Conducted

As discussed above, some customers were genuinely grateful for, and impressed by, what they felt was a real effort to help them and get them on track. There were several very positive responses to the process, genuine surprise at how personal the interview was, how interested the PAs were, and how terrific it felt to have someone who seemed so genuinely interested in them. The increased awareness of services and entitlements that resulted from the PA interview was also pleasantly surprising and somewhat reassuring for some participants.

Some specific examples are given below:

"She was very nice, very understanding. Some people get short with you, but she was really nice. Wasn't stressed – took her time to explain things. Very precise. She communicated well. The best dealings I have had with Centrelink."

"This dude was really understanding. It blew my mind. My goal that we worked out was to keep clean and get through my parole time. I thought he was going to bust me and he said I didn't have to do all the job stuff (Activity Test) until my parole stuff was finished. Fuck me, mate, here was this guy from Centrelink giving me a break!"

"Yeah, he was cool. I'm checking out jobs and got this resume and stuff and doing, like, job interview practice. I never knew Centrelink would help you. I thought they always tried to bust you. I reckon this guy (Personal Advisor) did a lot for me."

For some customers, the PA experience made them feel better about Centrelink as a whole, although in certain circumstances it tended to cast the rest of Centrelink in a bad light ...

"Why can't they all be like that?"

"The only helpful time I have had with Centrelink in Melbourne was the interview. All the other contacts were to sign this, do that – just the basics. This was different."

Most customers were quite happy with how their PA handled their interview, how interested they seemed, the range of questions they asked, how well they listened.

Again we saw some evidence of PAs relating well to, and developing rapport, with their customers. For example, one respondent was due to have a thyroid operation and was quite worried about this but the PA assured her that it would be fine, as his sister had undergone the same operation.

Some customers, despite being helped by their PA or a subsequent referral, were less than enthusiastic about the PA intervention.

Examples of this type of reaction include the prison release customer who was assisted in applying for the Carer's Payment in order to be able to care for his dying father. He told researchers "they suggested the Carer's thing" but nonetheless barely had a nice word to say about the intervention. Another MPC customer was appropriately referred to a counsellor, yet didn't follow up on the referral, and her over riding comments on the PA interview related to a lack of follow up on the PA's part.

"I know she referred me to a counsellor, but I don't remember who or when or where. And there was no follow up. She should have contacted me again, or checked to see if I went to the counsellor. I might be ready to see someone, now, but not then. I was just a mess. And I can't afford to see a private counsellor or a psychiatrist, so what do I do now? I'm just marking time."

This lack of attribution, perhaps best characterised as a failure or reluctance to acknowledge the role of the PA or a subsequent service provider in the attainment of a positive outcome, is an important consideration in research of this nature. The fact that customers are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge a favourable outcome, let alone attribute such an outcome to the PA intervention, means that, based on customer testimony alone, reactions to the intervention may seem more negative than otherwise warranted.

In some instances, however, the negative reactions of customers to the PA interview were unequivocal.

"Must have been lunch time."

*"He was an arrogant d***head."*

"I felt like she was just waiting for a chance to catch me out and grab an excuse to stop my payments."

The title "Personal Adviser" created an expectation amongst some BA at Risk customers that they were gaining access to their own case manager (a perception also fairly common amongst the general PA customer groups). As such the title does, on occasions, raise false expectations about the level of service and to be provided by PAs.

"Every time I go back there they've got someone with them so you'd have to wait for hours."

"They were good but I only ever saw them once didn't really make any difference."

Others, however, felt they could go back and see their PA at any time and would actually do so.

"I phone her a lot. Absolutely I would go back and see her, without fail. I have her card, a direct line. I felt very comfortable with her. She made me feel at ease. I could tell her whatever, did not hold back on anything."

"If I'm in the area I pop in and visit him. He had faith in me and I had faith in him, he's a great guy. Our first interview was 3 hours, now I give him progress reports regularly as to how things are going."

4 Tailoring Services to Individual Needs

A key question to be addressed by the PA evaluation research is the extent to which one of the underlying principles of the PA Intervention, that is, providing a personalised service tailored to each customers' individual circumstances, is being achieved. Addressing this issue requires an examination of issues pertaining to the streaming of customers to PAs, the timing of the PA intervention, the motivational aspects of the PA interview, the effectiveness of the planning process and the appropriateness of the subsequent referrals / activities.

4.1 The Streaming of Customers to PAs

Feedback from the various qualitative research projects undertaken in support of the PA evaluation (e.g. the PA/JA workshop held at the outset of the research process and this research amongst the BA at Risk customers) suggests that the policy governing streaming of customers to PAs is an area with scope for refinement.

Based on our interpretation of the findings from BA at Risk phase of the evaluation, it seems that the decision to stream customers to a PA interview based on the customer group to which they belong (i.e. Indigenous, Activity Test Exempt or Prison Release) rather than according to their needs leads to some inappropriate referrals to PAs⁶. In circumstances where inappropriate referrals do result (and are obvious to both parties) this leads to a situation where both parties merely end up “going through the motions”. The customers that most often tended to feel this way were the Indigenous customers who believed they were being singled out for no good reason (this is discussed in more detail below).

In the main, the current process for streaming Activity Test Exempt and Prison Release customers to Personal Advisors appeared to be effective and potentially fruitful in terms of the intended outcomes of the intervention. In particular, it seems appropriate that all prison release customers get streamed to the intervention as a check for re-entry into society, even if some have no real need for it (i.e. only been in a short time, have plans sorted, jobs ready). One possible enhancement to the current process for streaming prison release customers to PAs would be to undertake all such interviews while the customer was still in jail⁷. This would help identify those customers that might benefit from a further interview upon release and may also help overcome the tendency for some members of this customer group to fall through the cracks upon release from jail.

⁶ Appropriateness for PA assistance could perhaps be determined by a file review, via initial interview with a CSO or via a PA generated screening call.

⁷ Memorandums of Understanding between Centrelink and all State Departments of Corrections have recently been signed which will streamline processes for Prison Release customers and increase awareness of the PA role.

A number of the Indigenous customers felt that their status as Indigenous Australians was the only reason they were streamed to the PA interview and disliked, and had no need of, this special attention.

One Indigenous customer was a social worker who had worked with Indigenous people herself and was studying for her second degree in this area. She was pregnant and referred to a PA interview after going to Centrelink just to assess her entitlements for after her baby was born.

I was pretty sure I knew all the options, but I just wanted to double check. When I was given an appointment with a Personal Advisor, I assumed it was because I had an Indigenous background. To be honest, I went along mainly because of a professional interest in what the Personal Advisor would do. I think the whole idea is probably very good, for the right people, but it didn't tell me anything new. I sort of 'went through the motions' and I will certainly use the experience to advise customers in the future, but it was an academic exercise for me. I suppose I got 'caught up in the net' because I am an Indigenous Australian, but that would be the only reason I could see for an interview with a Personal Advisor. (20–30 year old female)

Another Indigenous customer was a solicitor who had previously had a discussion with a PA by telephone at which they had even agreed that he did not need any help. This time the interview was not voluntary so he happily went along, even though he still did not think he needed help.

They don't have many jobs for solicitors. I have other qualifications but my impression is they are not very helpful for any professionals of a business nature. I have to go through professional recruitment firms, ads, search engines, they are more useful to me. The job network is not. I have Law institute facilities to use as well. The job network facilities are there if I need to use them, but I don't. When I went on to benefits this year they already had my records that I was Aboriginal, therefore was automatically sent a notice that I would have a PA interview. Aboriginal heritage gets a special support. Last year, I was contacted by the PA and she discussed my needs and she asked me "do you really think you need support"? I said, not really, I didn't think I needed it. Whereas this time, I wasn't given a choice so I went to the meeting because I had to, which was fine as I was curious to see what support could be offered. I understood it was going to be extra support for people with Aboriginal backgrounds that may need assistance." (Indigenous solicitor, Melbourne)

Whilst the PA did her best to help him, and he felt she was actually helpful, this help was very minor in nature. He was intrigued by the prospect of Centrelink wanting to help him and attended not because he wanted or needed Centrelink's help but partly out of curiosity and partly because he knew he was required to.

Neither of these Indigenous customers had any need for the intervention. Sometimes both parties – the PA and the customer – were aware they were going through the motions to satisfy ‘the system’ rather than the customer having a genuine need for PA assistance.

Several Indigenous customers very much disliked being singled out on the basis of their race. These customers wanted to be treated like other jobseekers and felt quite uncomfortable with the attention. Indeed, some of these customers were openly hostile about the process and felt it was a complete waste of time and resources.

“She gave me another card, another agency to sign up with for Aboriginals. When I was in there (at Centrelink) I was keen but when I got out the front..... I don’t like to be singled out like that, I like to go to any agency. I wasn’t keen on that, I don’t want to go there, expect special attention. She was trying to push me but I didn’t want to do all that Aboriginal stuff.”

*“I finished my first year of Uni (B.A. Communication Studies) and couldn’t afford to do my second year. So I decided to take a year off and earn enough to go back and complete my Uni. I had been working for three months when I was retrenched, so I went to Centrelink until I got another job. When I got the letter saying I had to attend an interview with a Personal Advisor, I knew it was because I had an Indigenous background. This has been an embarrassment all my life. I get funds, benefits, all sorts of stuff that my school mates and friends never got. I went to the interview because I had to. It was rubbish. I already had a job organised. I felt demeaned. It might be a good idea for some people, but I went so they wouldn’t cut my benefit. For me, it was such a waste of time. I was unemployed for 3 weeks. My friend (who attended the interview) doesn’t have any Indigenous background; she has been unemployed for over 6 months, but Centrelink hasn’t done anything for her. This is serious reverse discrimination. They shouldn’t demand that you go for an interview (with a Personal Advisor) just because you are an Indigenous Australian. There are a lot of ‘white Australians’ who need much more help. You want my honest opinion? It (interview) was a crock of s**t.”*

Another Indigenous customer had worked most of his life in rural and remote parts of Australia. He had successfully completed 12 years of schooling and worked in a variety of manual and semi-skilled positions. He had previously been unemployed for short periods and had “signed on for the dole” on those occasions but was rarely out of work for more than four to six weeks. Income support merely assisted him when he found himself between jobs. He was non-plussed by the requirement to attend a Personal Advisor interview and clearly felt it was a waste of time given his circumstances.

“I do all sorts of contract work, mainly in the bush. Some of them go for years; some of them go a few months. I got truck, semi, crane, forklift licences, the lot. I can get work easy. I got a 6-month job starting next month, carting water.”

I just finished a 2 year contract. So I had nothing for a coupla months before this next contract. So I thought I'd spend a bit of time with my family, because I'm always out bush. So I signed up until I start the water tanker job.

Then I get this letter, says I gotta go for interview or they'll stop my payments. So I rang them and says 'What's the problem?' But they says I gotta go. So I go and this lady asks me all this stuff about what I'm gonna do. And I told her I got this job all fixed up. But she says I gotta go to (employment agency) and look for work. I told her I got a job already, but it starts next month. She says I still gotta go. So she gives me this contract to sign and I just chucked it in the bin on my way out.

*F**kin' waste of time. I can get a job in one day, any day. But I'm not gonna go and get a job for one month. That pisses the employer off. So, anyway, you (interviewer) got here just in time, mate, 'cos I'm off bush in 2 days.*

Yeah, maybe for some people, this interview is OK. But anybody can get a job. You see a construction site and you go and ask for some work. Any work. Then they see you are OK and then you get better jobs. But lotsa kids, today, they have to have flash jobs. They don't know where to look. I know how to get a job in one day". (40 – 50 year old male)

These examples highlight the potential for the intervention to be completely wasted on customers who feel their involvement in the process is not warranted in the first place.

There were certainly some Indigenous customers, however, who found the Personal Advisor interviews to be valuable because they had 'gained information' or had been referred to useful resources they were not previously aware of. By and large this group were open to the idea of participating in paid employment and saw the Personal Advisor interview a positive entrée into further education and/or finding employment. For several of these customers the Personal Advisor was the first person in a 'position of power or influence' who seemed to make some sense in terms of their future prospects.

4.2 Timing of the PA Interview

Being able to schedule the PA interview such that the intervention coincides with a point in time when the customer is not only receptive to 'participation planning' but also in a position to take active steps to help themselves (e.g. free of parole commitments and the like) is crucial to the overall success of the PA intervention. However, the participation requirements for some groups mean that PAs may have little choice in pursuing participation outcomes for customers who are required to have a Preparing for Work Agreement in place, lodge forms and attend Job Network services.

Prison Release

Some of the prison release customers felt that customers in their situation need to have the PA interview prior to being released – as a check that they actually have somewhere to go, somewhere to sleep and because going to see Centrelink after release is a major, challenging step for some. Having the interview after release might mean some customers (perhaps those who have been in longer) are less likely to attend and more likely to ‘fall through the gaps’.

The quote below captures the positive elements of a pre-release interview ...

“Getting towards the end, near my release ... about a week before I got out I had these two lovely people from Centrelink come to see me. Right from then I had my Health Care Card and my EBT card right from the start. Talked to me about what my short term goals were and what my long term goals were. My short term goal was to get out of Adelaide ASAP which I did at eleven o’clock that morning.” (Prison release 40-50 year old)

In the absence of a pre-release interview some customers felt ill-prepared ...

“When I got released, they don’t prepare you for when you get out of jail. Centrelink was supposed to see me in Prison but they didn’t. Normally they do but they don’t get to see everyone. My family helped me so that was ok but I feel sorry for the people who don’t have family help. I went to Centrelink - it was very daunting to have to face up to the fact that I was at Centrelink because I had just got out of jail.” (Prison release)

In one situation a prison release customer who presented to Centrelink after release became extremely frustrated with not being ‘on the system’, a situation that a pre-release interview may have been able to avert.

*“It’s been one big f**k around. Didn’t get spoken to in jail, left jail and went straight to Centrelink to get a payment and that was about it. Didn’t get spoken to until I got back here now. I wanted to sign up for a PFWA⁸ – I’ve signed up twice for that ...something wrong with their computers... just like giving the people the run around ... don’t want people to work”*

“I went to the Job Network member for Intensive Assistance. You’ve got to do 100 hours over 15 days I think it is and I went to sign up for that and they couldn’t do it... I just couldn’t believe it. I had to go back to Centrelink and do it all over again. I’m going back to the Job Network today with the agreement to sort it all after I finish here ... if it doesn’t work today I’m just not going to worry about it... I’m not getting no help.”

⁸ Preparing for Work Agreement

Activity Exempt - Refugees

A number of the refugees interviewed as part of this process were still doing their 500 hours of English tuition when they had their PA interview. In most cases these customers were able to combine their study requirements with attendance at their PA interview, however, this was not always the case. In some instances the customers did not advise Centrelink that they were studying or that their PA interview was scheduled during class time. They believed that an interview at Centrelink “*must be more important than my studies.*” As previously mentioned, an explanatory letter to be sent to customers explaining the purpose of the PA interview – perhaps indicating, as required, that the interview can be scheduled around study / parole commitments and the like may mitigate these types of conflicts with existing participation activity and requirements. However, it is also acknowledged that letters, no matter how informative and well-worded, will not meet the needs of some customers with low literacy and English language skills.

Activity Test Exempt – Major Personal Crisis

The timing issues for MPC customers can be very difficult. Some customers were not at all prepared to participate in a discussion about their work prospects or future plans at the time of the PA interview and became quite emotional when recalling the PA interview and their frame of mind at that time.

“I was just a blubbing mess. I honestly can’t remember much about it. I couldn’t think. I suppose I must have given some sort of answers. There were lots of questions; that I do remember. But I don’t think it helped me. She (Personal Advisor) should have sent me away and made another appointment. I was a total mess.”

This customer, on reflection, was favourable about the PA concept and felt that had the interview been undertaken at a time when she was more receptive it could have been helpful. However, because of her highly emotional state at the time, she did not follow up any referrals or recommendations made during the interview. As discussed below, it would seem that Personal Advisors have little discretion in terms of the ‘process’ requirements of the interview and feel ‘compelled’ by the system to complete an interview once it has begun. As this customer, herself, stated, it might have been more productive had the PA “*sent me away and made another appointment. I was a total mess.*”

I know she referred me to a counsellor, but I don’t remember who or when or where. And there was no follow up. She should have contacted me again, or checked to see if I went to the counsellor. I might be ready to see someone, now, but not then. I was just a mess. And I can’t afford to see a private counsellor or a psychiatrist, so what do I do now? I’m just marking time.”

The timing of the intervention for some of the other MPC customers was also not ideal but there was no obvious alternative time that would have been better.

These customers typically had a fairly long history of drug/crime/relationship problems and were unable or unwilling to focus on their future at the time of the PA interview.

“At that time I was feeling really angry with Centrelink for taking me off Parenting Payment. Yeah, nice to know there is help, but I was still reeling from what they did to me. Until I get it sorted out, I am only half here. To be honest I can’t remember – I really can’t. I am upset and confused about everything.”

A single interview could miss its goal entirely if these people were not ready to go through a participation planning process at that time (frequent personal dramas, up and down in the drug use, no particular fixed career goals). They are different to other PA customers in that they are not experiencing a single or temporary crisis (e.g. have just had baby, have just been left by husband) that a one month wait might overcome.

Indigenous

Generally there do not seem to be any timing issues for Indigenous customers. Some seemed closed to any advice or information at the time of the interview, although they acknowledged that since the interview they had changed their minds and should perhaps have taken more notice and not stifled the discussion. This is not unique to Indigenous though.

She asked about what courses I would like to do. At that time I was settled with the cleaning work, so I only took the accommodation numbers. Because I had the cleaning work I didn’t think about the drama then. She went through other options, but I wanted to stick with the cleaning job during the day. I wanted to get into a routine. Everything she offered me, I virtually said no to as I wanted to stick with this. I am now re-thinking this. (Indigenous)

It is difficult to know how this can be improved for all the customer groups, other than with improved communication from Centrelink so that customers understand what the PA interview could potentially do for them. And also with perhaps more discretionary power for PAs to decide if customers are genuine candidates for the intervention.

4.3 The Utility of the Planning Process

The planning component of the PA interview was sometimes considered useful. Many customers felt somewhat flattered and pleasantly surprised that someone at Centrelink was asking them about their plans for the future.

One young Indigenous customer response to be taken through some of the probing questions included in the PA interview was as follows ...

“She was alright. That’s how they all should be, like to honest with ya. She was nice, polite. I just told her everything, straight out. I didn’t hide nothing, you know. Out of all of them I spoke to at Centrelink, she was the best. What’s your family like... personal questions, not the sort of stuff you get asked by strangers everyday, so I spoke to her and gave her all the answers.”

A prison release customer also responded favourably to the tone of the interview and the nature of the questioning and planning process

She was very good, very helpful, tried all the ways to get me back onto some sort of level ground. She understood my situation. When she was speaking to me, she was speaking to me as if she was really there to help me. In prison they treat you like a criminal and she didn’t. She treated me differently. It felt good and I felt comfortable.

While several customers clearly recalled discussing and signing a Participation Plan, for most recall of the actual plan itself was sketchy. They might have signed something but were not sure what it was. Either way, in most instances not a lot of salience was attached to the actual document itself. Most of the customers who recalled having a Participation Plan felt that it didn’t make any real difference to their intentions or how they went about things. Sometimes the Participation Plan was simply a statement of a customer’s existing plans and intentions. One customer brought her Participation Plan along with her to our interview. It stated her goals as- Continue with English / Discuss immigration (i.e. bringing family over here from Ethiopia) / Do a nursing course that will allow you to work after 1 year of study / Refer back to Centrelink for LLMP (customer did not know what this was). This customer simply confirmed that these were already her goals and had been prior to the interview. In other words, no additional value had been added by the PA participation planning process.

I had to put down my long term goals, I was happy to sign it because they were my goals.

Some customers, however, did find the actual planning process to be of benefit. Several refugees found the goal setting process extremely useful (one has adapted her ‘contract’ and uses it to continue to set achievable short term goals). They valued the personal contact, have followed up on several referrals made by the Personal Advisor, and both have made several subsequent calls or visits to their Personal Advisor when faced with a dilemma.

In one very positive instance ...

We both came up with a plan, it was a mutual discussion. I had planned a lot of the steps myself but there was a lot I had left out and he sat down and filled in the gaps, i.e. how to pay the bills off, what commitments I had. Plans started coming into place. Goals were written down. Pay visa card, pay this, pay that, I took it home with me. Don’t go backwards, move along the steps.

In several cases the customers acknowledged that they probably 'knocked the planning discussion on the head' by saying they did not need any help, that they wanted to pursue their current intentions (i.e. '*stick with cleaning for now*', '*go back to painting*' the following week, etc.). These people felt that their PAs were completely ready to help them plan and to provide the required information but that they themselves deliberately cut off this line of discussion. The PA tried to do the planning but the customer claimed to not need it.

This may be a timing issue (i.e. the customers acknowledged they felt differently now and should go back and see the PA again, they were not open to it at the time) although it is probably more an issue of conveying the purpose of the interview beforehand – so that customers are more likely to be prepared to talk about their hopes for the future.

We didn't narrow down on anything. Because I said I was going back to painting, it was knocked on the head there and then. But the resources and information were limited. I had to be unemployed for 6 months to qualify for having the course paid for, and I was only a couple of months into it, so I went straight back onto the building site and did painting again.

Based on the observations available to us from this research it seems that for some customers it was relatively easy to 'close down' the planning process.

While the participation planning process is very valuable for some customers the effectiveness of the planning process is not universal across the BA at Risk customer group. The need to produce a participation plan does provide an overall structure for the PA interview process with some PAs using the information gained through the process to make appropriate assessments and relevant referrals. On balance, however, it seems that there is some risk that too great a focus on the production of the 'participation plan' runs the risk of the intervention becoming somewhat process driven.

4.4 The Adequacy of the Assessment Process and the Appropriateness of PA Referrals

The most tangible thing a PA can do to try and effect a good outcome for each customer (more than motivational interviewing and goal setting) is to make a sensitive and accurate assessment of their situation and to make an appropriate referral with a view to either stabilising their circumstances or trying to effect an increase in social or economic participation.

An important aspect of the PA intervention, and one perhaps not fully appreciated by the customers involved, is the role of the PA interview to act as a 'check' to ensure that customers with specific problems are receiving the required support. In some instances it seems (to the customers) that the PA did little more than ask sufficient questions to establish that a particular issue was being dealt with. For example, the customer was already seeing a psychologist, was already in drug and alcohol rehabilitation or had already found temporary accommodation.

In these cases, the PA intervention seemed to serve as quite an effective checkpoint to ensure these people had support in place, but, from a customers' perspective, did little else.

There were many instances when BA at Risk customers were happily and appropriately referred to Job Network members, psychologists, emergency housing agencies, training/education providers, courses (including job search training) and the like.

Several Indigenous customers attended the PA interview with very low expectations of what it could do for them, yet were pleasantly surprised because the PAs provided them with very relevant course information that they have acted on and are feeling very positive about.

"I didn't know why I had to see this lady. I thought there was another problem with my payment. There's always problems with payments in our house. So I knew I had to go. But she was OK. Yeah, I liked her. She asked me all these things about my hobbies and stuff. At first I thought it was crap. But then she said I could maybe get a job doing some of the stuff I like. I like gardening and stuff. So she told me there might be some trainee stuff I could do with, like, the Council and stuff. I never thought about that. So she gave me this contract thing to sign, but I can't read so good. So she said I could do some special reading courses.

So, anyway, I started these reading and writing courses and it's much better than school. And I started doing some half day training with the Council to be a gardener. It's cool. My mates think I'm stupid, but it will be cool.

Yeah, this lady (Personal Advisor) made me think all about how I could get a job doing something I like. I didn't know Centrelink had people that helped you." (Indigenous, 18–25 year old female)

"I never learned how to read proper and write and numbers and stuff. I kept getting the sack because I couldn't do stuff. But I never told no-one. I thought I was in the shit when I had to see this man after I signed on at Centrelink. I had to wait about an hour. I nearly just buggered off. But he was quite good. He told me I could learn to read and stuff and still get the dole. I never knew that. And he made an appointment to see this lady who teaches people like me to read and stuff. She's cool. Not like teachers. I think maybe I'll be able to get a job when I'm finished this course. I'm glad I didn't just bugger off, hey! (and miss the Personal Advisor interview). (Indigenous, 18-25 year old male).

Both of these customers almost did not attend their appointments because they were unaware of what this appointment could offer them – they had no idea it was different to any other Centrelink contact they had and are now relieved they did not 'miss out' on this assistance. These instances further reinforce the need for the purposes of the PA interview to be explained to customers prior to attending. In the case of Day 1 servicing, for appointments such as those described above this role would most likely need to be a role fulfilled by the CSO.

In another case where an appropriate assessment and referral was made, a prison release customer had moved to the city from his remote area home after release, because his 'past' made it "impossible to live in the bush any longer – too many people were out to get me." He had never been on any government benefits / payments before, but had run out of money and had been advised by a charitable organisation to go to Centrelink. He had tried to gain employment at several building sites, but did not have the necessary 'tickets' to operate machinery. The PA organised for him to get a bank account and to get his ticket to allow him to work in the city.

In the bush, mate, nobody has 'tickets'. You learn to weld by watching someone. If you a bit clever, you do a good job and then everyone knows you is a welder. Same with graders and tractors and stuff. Shit, mate, here you gotta have a bloody ticket to use a chainsaw. You people in the big smoke are full of shit with all these 'tickets'.

Yes, I spoke to this lady at Centrelink. Yeah, she was OK. She really want to help me, I reckon. So she says I can get government money, but I got no bank account. But she sent me to see somebody to help. And she sent me to see these blokes to get some 'tickets' so I can work. All this ticket stuff is bullshit, but she really helped me. Now I got a job weekends and I'm getting all my tickets at this school. Yeah, I'm learning a lot. Maybe it is very good. But the 'big smoke' is a crazy place. And this lady (Personal Advisor), she really helped me. She is a good lady. (50 plus year old male)

Several customers were referred to warehouse/forklift driving courses. Some were happy with this as it fitted in with what they had done before and they were happy to go in this direction. For others it was not a welcome referral at all and they would attend because they were expected to, but not with any real intention of getting work in a warehouse or driving a forklift. They were unable, for whatever reason, to do what they wanted to do (in this case start their own business) so felt obliged to accept this referral instead.

Short term accommodation was an area where several customers received real help and good referrals to various types of emergency / short term accommodation services. On the whole, PAs seemed to have the appropriate community linkages in place to make these referrals,

I was working but threw the job in last week (early morning cleaning, 5 hours a week). As I did not have a permanent home, it was hard to get to work at 6am by public transport. I am sleeping on friends' floors and you have to keep moving somewhere else. So lack of permanent accommodation made it very difficult. So she gave me all sorts of information, contacts of housing places - have never been helped like this before.

One prison release customer was linked to a scheme that provides a financial incentive for employers to employ prison release customers (they pay five weeks wages) which he was feeling quite hopeful about. He was also referred to an employment agency. He also wanted to get his own computer and get on-line for job search, resumes, etc so she referred him to a scheme that provides affordable computers. Further, to return to the building industry he needed his union tickets brought up to date so she explained that Centrelink could pay for those for him.

He was very pleased with the range of areas Centrelink could provide real help in. At the end of this interview this customer felt well informed and felt he had been referred to quite appropriate places that appeared promising.

I felt I was very well informed, not like the Centrelink of 10 years ago when I went. Being in jail I was worried about the job-market, but there are people there willing to help. The Ascendancy people are going to help me with employment and with getting my tickets. She was very helpful in helping me deal with the situation and it was good that she made the phone call straightaway.

He identified pretty much everything – what was holding me back and what would help me move forward. He sat down and worked out all my bills, got it all down on paper. He put me in touch with Salvation Army Employment Plus and she's been wonderful. She's arranged for me to do heavy rigid truck driving license and there is heaps of work in this field. And they're paying for the course which is great.

Ultimately, of course, it is up to the customer to reveal what they want to reveal about themselves – and if they choose not to reveal important information then there is little the PA can do to improve their assessment of the customer.

We didn't talk about the drug problem. She probably would have given information on it but I played it down and said it was under control so she didn't know how bad things were.

In contrast to the positive outcomes cited above, just as many of the participants in this research did not appear to have their specific situations and underlying circumstances accurately assessed, or followed up with appropriate referrals.

There were some instances where inaccurate assessments and inappropriate referrals resulted in customers getting their hopes up and then being disappointed. For example, a refugee from Ethiopia, now living in Melbourne, had previously lived in South Africa where he had operated a small trading business (buying goods from wholesalers and selling 'on the street'). During the PA interview he expressed interest in starting a business in Australia and was duly referred to the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) by the PA. He felt very pleased at the time by the prospect of receiving some financial support from the government to start his own business. However, when he spoke to NEIS, he was informed that he would not be able to start his own business, as starting and operating a business in Australia was very different and there were rules and regulations governing how business is conducted here. He was also advised that he would have to have some money of his own in any case, which he does not have. He felt very disappointed by this process and, after going back to his PA, is now doing a forklift drivers course which he is not happy about.

I am not happy about doing the forklift course but I have to do it to earn money but I don't have any interest in driving a forklift but I have to work. It is not what I want to do.

In another case a customer's underlying problems were seemingly ignored or at best glossed over. The case in point involved a Melbourne mother, who possibly could have been on Parenting Payment at the time of the research, and was facing multiple problems (on methadone, in very unstable accommodation, requiring some serious dental work before feeling she could face prospective employers or course managers, and with a boyfriend less than one week out of jail). Her take out of the PA interview was that the PA wasn't interested in her circumstances, only the types of courses she could do and, even then, there was only 20-30 minutes worth of discussion. There was no chance this customer would attend any courses or job interviews until her teeth were fixed, plus there was clearly some real question as to whether she should be on Parenting Payment in the first place, however none of these issues were discussed.

"I was there for 20 or 30 mins. She talked about working. I was telling her what was going on but she said it was nothing to do with her – she wanted to talk about Newstart and about courses."

Some customers felt pressure to work when they were not at all ready, whilst others felt pressure to work when they wanted to study instead. A refugee who had her heart set on becoming a nurse felt the PA wanted her to find a job instead of study. She had already heard previously that 'Centrelink pushes people to work'.

"I have heard Centrelink push you to work and I just want to study to be a nurse. He kept talking about work, work, work, but all I want to do is study to be a nurse." (Refugee, Melbourne)

After completing her English course, she wanted to do a one year nursing course, and then start working as a nurse, rather than starting to work straight after her English course in a job she did not want. She felt there was little support for her chosen path, she had to persuade the PA she was not going to start working and jeopardize her nursing training goals.

Others felt pressured towards taking on study / training when the thought of study / training was really very daunting for them and what they really wanted was work. This seemed to be the case amongst Indigenous customers in particular

"She did mention something about courses but it's just not me, but if she wanted to talk about a job, well that's a different story. When I picture a course I think two years dedication – that's not me, I haven't got two years for a course."

"Why can't they just get me a job without having to do all this other junk? Why can't they just get me a job?"

In another case the PA *"talked about going to TAFE... it was a waste of time... I just want to work."*

As previously discussed, the inclination to refer Indigenous customers to specialist Job Network members or to single them out for special treatment was sometimes counter productive. The feeling to emerge from this research is that some PAs tended to make assessments and referrals on the basis of the customers race more so than on the basis of the customers individual needs, circumstances and preferences. This type of formulaic thinking sometimes resulted in inappropriate referrals and low take up of referrals.

“She was trying to push me but I didn’t want to do all that Aboriginal stuff. “I just want to be able to work at a place for twelve months and then get a loan. I haven’t even got a credit rating.”

There also seem to have been some instances where PAs have missed making assessments or referrals that would have been to the customers’ benefit. In one case involving a Sudanese refugee the PA did not inform the customer about the need to have their qualifications accredited. This resulted in a considerable delay for the customer and missed opportunities and was regarded by the customer as a big oversight by the PA and a source of considerable frustration and annoyance.

“I have a Bachelors Degree in Chemistry and Education in Sudan, sent this to the NOOSR.⁹ Unfortunately I wasted all my time, the Personal Adviser never told me – found out from the Counsellor (at Macquarie Community College) – that it takes four to five months to get recognised, could have started this process in September if informed by PA. Unfortunately didn’t find out until February”. (Refugee)

“She can’t help us... maybe it’s a lack of knowledge, she deals with many people from many different cultures, that’s what makes it difficult for her I think”

“The fact that the PA (back in September) didn’t say get your qualifications assessed by NOOSR, this is what makes me a little bit angry at her.”

Given that the BA at Risk customer group only accounts for about a quarter of the total PA customer group, the types of oversights mentioned above and the tendency for formulaic assessments and referrals to sometimes occur, calls into question whether or not PAs, being generalists, have the specialist knowledge required to effectively assess the circumstances of the BA at Risk customer group and to come up with appropriate recommendations and referrals.

⁹ National Office of Overseas Skill Recognition.

5 Changes in Attitudes, Knowledge and Participation Intentions

There are clearly customers at both ends of the ‘willingness to work’ spectrum as well as customers for whom the current barriers to participation are such that any form of economic or social participation is not a realistic short term goal.

From this research it seems that customers that are genuinely open to the possibility of work or other forms of participation can be motivated by the PA Intervention to move forward. For example, to move from the stage of *contemplating* some form of participation to actively taking steps towards participation.

For customers of this ilk the PA interview has the potential to facilitate this progression towards economic or social participation. The PA interview might serve to confirm the customer was already getting the right help, or steer them in the right direction. The difficulty for these customers relates not so much to motivation to work per se as to their knowledge of available options and their confidence and commitment to pursuing them. Some customers certainly felt enabled as a result of receiving information passed on during the PA interview and as a result of their increased awareness of the services available to them. For these customers the PA interview was mostly about showing them the options that were available to them and helping them choose the most appropriate ones. Some also received inspiration just by virtue of the fact that their PA tried really hard to help them – a situation some regarded as unique in their dealings with Centrelink.

“I suppose it made me feel better in myself – I didn’t have a job but I felt there was light at the end of the tunnel. A direction ahead of me. Overall it was very helpful. When I went there many years ago you got your payment and that was it. Now there is some direction and they want to help people get a job.”

A prison release customer spoke of feeling very grateful that he could talk honestly with his PA, as he could not do so with any of his family or friends.

“It is easier to ask for help outside of your immediate circle of family and friends. You feel like you are continually letting them down. Whereas I have been able to speak to the psychologist and the PA openly, with no inhibitions. You can’t express yourself to your family because of the history.”

The support this customer received went beyond establishing rapport and trust, the PA was able to understand the financial problems faced by this customer and give appropriate help. This PA reportedly put a lot of effort into ensuring this customer did not slip back into debt and it appears to have been successful.

“I felt much more positive at the end than when I walked in. Being able to tackle the responsibilities I had. He helped me plan and he formulated it all for me. I felt someone took an interest in me. I am a lot happier with the path I am taking now.”

*Ultimately I'd like to take most of the glory, but the support behind me has been crucial."
(Prison release)*

Whether having such a positive experience at the PA interview, with a caring and understanding PA, is significant or lasting in terms of any outcomes is unknown at this stage. It certainly made some of these customers feel very good about the contact and if such a positive relationship with Centrelink helps motivate them then one would have to conclude that the PA interview produced a good outcome.

"She made me feel good – encouraging me to study or work and get on with my life. She got me excited. She spoke to me nicely and gave good guidance. It made me feel more confident and made me want to finish the English course". (Melb AE – refugee)

For some participants in this research program the motivation and enthusiasm engendered by the PA interview was short lived. A young Indigenous customer expressed a temporary heightening of enthusiasm as a result of attending the PA interview.

"I was keen after all that. Even though I'd got laid off. I thought, I'm not going to slack off. I did go for a couple of more (jobs) after that. I went back to the agencies (Job Network). I rung up a few other jobs - container places out at Blacktown... no good, maybe the time of year."

This renewed enthusiasm for work, however, soon dissipated. She (the PA) *"gave me an appointment but I didn't show up.* For this customer, who didn't follow through in any meaningful way on the referrals and recommendations provided by the PA in the end the only benefit they attributed to the PA interview was the 'novel' experience of being able to talk honestly and openly to someone at Centrelink ...

"The best thing was probably just telling her. Just being honest about working."

While some customers were very positive about the PA interview and subsequent referrals there were clearly some participants in this research for whom the PA interview was of little value; indeed, for some it was seen as completely negative; an unnecessary intrusion and a waste of time. For this group, a 45 minute interview with a PA is unlikely to 'motivate' them to change. They already have plans or circumstances that make Centrelink's intervention irrelevant for them. (e.g. they are temporarily between jobs, are about to have a baby, attended interview purely out of interest, are already earning 'cash in hand' and do not want or have time for a proper job, feel they can find a more appropriate job themselves as soon as they want to, just having a short break, and so on.) For these customers, the PA interview was just a matter of going through the motions

*Well, I kind of bummed around with my mates and got some money here and there doing odd jobs. But, like it was all cash stuff, you know. But then one of my mates got on the dole and he could do jack s**t and still get paid. So I went and signed on at Centrelink.*

Then I had to go and speak to this chick – yeah, that interview. Yeah, they said when I signed on that I had to wait and speak to this person. Mate, she asked me all this crap about my hobbies and stuff. Mate, you don't want to know my hobbies and I didn't tell her. Now I have to check in every two weeks to give my book to say I have tried to get all these jobs. It's a crock, mate.

Look, mate, maybe one day when I want a job, this chick (Personal Advisor) would be OK. Right now, mate, we all play the game and we get paid. I bet that chick (Personal Advisor) really thought I was serious, mate. Her fuckin' contract stuff that I had to sign never even got home. I don't even remember where I chucked it. Mate, anybody could tell those chicks any crap. They believe anything. (18 – 25 year old male)

Customers like this will 'go through the motions' and attend the interview and go to the Job Network member etc, but they have no commitment whatsoever to the goals of the process and are doing it solely to avoid being 'cut off' and retain their income support.

For the most marginalised of all BA at Risk customers facing serious barriers to participation such as drug addiction, the PA interview process acts as an important safety net ensuring that these customers are getting the support appropriate to their situation. For this customer group the best short term outcome that can be hoped for is that they are put on a pathway towards stabilising their circumstances with a view to overcoming their serious non-vocational barriers to participation. A future file review will be used, in part, to provide information on the outcomes achieved by these customers.

The PA didn't help my problem or improve it, but helped me out financially. It was nice to know the avenue was there if I needed it. There was not much else they could do, I was impressed, the rest is up to me.

6 Concluding Remarks

The diversity of the BA at Risk customer group and the complexity of the problems sometimes being faced by these customers means that drawing out the main themes from this research is a difficult task. Nonetheless, based on these 37 in-depth interviews with BA at Risk customers across three states, some consistent themes and issues for further consideration have emerged.

Initial Reactions to the PA Interview

In the main, the BA at Risk customer group valued the PA interview, with many customers grateful for the attention and impressed, and sometimes flattered, by the genuine efforts to help them. Many saw Centrelink in a more positive light than before as a result. This positive take-out, however, while the most prevalent reaction to the interview, was not universal. For some, the whole PA process was considered to be a waste of time, sometimes prompting quite negative reactions.

Streaming Customers to the Personal Adviser Interview

This research indicates that the current approach of streaming BA at Risk customers to PAs on the basis of target group membership, without prior screening, lacks sensitivity and can lead to inappropriate referrals to PAs. This feeling was most prevalent amongst Indigenous customers that were singled out for a PA interview on the basis of their race only.

A more sensitive approach to the streaming of BA at Risk customers to PAs, perhaps based on an initial assessment by a CSO, or initial telephone screening by a PA, would improve the targeting of customers and the overall efficiency of the program.

Better Explaining the Purpose of the PA Interview

Consistent with our research amongst the mainstream PA customer groups, this research found very low levels of awareness amongst customers regarding what the PA interview was going to be about. This, in almost every case, led to customers attending the PA interview ill-prepared for the ensuing discussion. In some cases this defeated the purpose of the interview altogether, as the customers never 'lowered their guard' and 'opened up' to the PA. In these instances lack of disclosure hampered the effectiveness of the intervention.

This suggests an enhanced role for the CSO in explaining the role of the PA for cases where Day 1 servicing occurs and the need for improved pre-interview communications to better explain the purpose of the PA interview.

Changing the ‘Personal Adviser’ Title

Consideration should be given to changing the ‘Personal Adviser’ title to something else. For some customers the ‘Personal Adviser’ moniker seems to create unrealistic, and often unmet, service expectation. Titles such as ‘Referrals Officers’, ‘Planners’, ‘Gateway Advisers’, ‘Participation Advisers’ or ‘Planning Officers’ may convey the essence of the PA function without raising unrealistic service expectations.

The Timing of the PA Interviews

A related issue to that discussed above with respect to the streaming of customers to PAs is the issue of the timing of the PA intervention. In particular, there seems to be some merit in having all prison release customers seen prior to release. This would help identify those customers who need to be streamed to further assistance immediately upon release and also identify those customers that could be left to their own devices or handled as mainstream Centrelink customers.

It was also evident from this research that, on occasions, the PA interview actually took place at a time when it was almost impossible for it to have the desired impact. This was particularly the case for some customers in the midst of a major personal crisis.

This is a difficult issue to resolve, other than to have the timing of the interview negotiated between the PA and the MPC customer. The downside of this suggestion, however, is the PA interview acts as an important ‘safety net’ in these situations, providing an opportunity to ensure appropriate support is in place for these ‘at risk’ customers.

The ‘Participation Planning’ Process

While it emerged from the PA workshop conducted earlier in the evaluation that PAs themselves find the planning process a very useful way of structuring the PA interview and working through the issues with customers, feedback from the participants in this research suggests the value of the participation planning process and the actual document itself is negligible.

There is a possibility amongst the BA at Risk customer group that the need to produce a Participation Plan leads to the interview being too formulated and process driven, thereby working against being able to fully ‘engage the customer’ in thinking about their future.

The requirement to produce a formal participation plan in every instance is perhaps too prescriptive for what is meant to be a tailored intervention and something that needs to be re-considered. These plans could be produced at the PA’s discretion or offered to clients as part of the participation planning process should they so choose.

The motivational aspects of the PA intervention

Our research supports earlier findings from internal reviews of the initiative, which found that PAs are good at engaging and motivating customers, however, for many customers in the BA at risk target group, non-vocational barriers are not easily resolved, even when referrals are possible and are taken up.

In particular, we find that the intervention has a motivating and enabling impact on customers that are ‘contemplating’ participation and already willing or able to participate. For these customers the knowledge and service awareness gained from the PA interview is very valuable.

For some customers, however, any increased motivation or enthusiasm engendered as a result of the PA interview is short-lived. For these customers there is some risk of the PA interview creating unrealistic expectations.

For those customers who were not willing or able to contemplate work, the PA interview had no discernable impact on their motivation to participate.

The Adequacy of the Assessment and Referral Process

In the majority of cases BA at Risk customers were happily and appropriately referred to Job Network members, psychologists, emergency housing agencies, training/education providers, courses (including job search training) and the like.

As we would expect given the difficulty of the customer group, however, there were also many instances where inaccurate assessments and inappropriate referrals seem to have been made. In some instances these seemed to be as a result of ‘prescriptive’ or ‘formulated’ assessments on the part of PAs. This indicates the difficulty involved in trying to effectively assess and engage the BA at Risk customers in a 45 minute interview situation and perhaps also raises questions as to whether or not ‘generalist’ PAs have the specialist skills and knowledge to deal with the variety of complex and specific needs many of the BA at Risk customers are facing. This complexity underlines the importance of PAs consulting with, and referring customers to internal Centrelink professionals and specialists to ensure accurate assessments are made.¹⁰

¹⁰ Some offices use panel case discussions among specialist officers to resolve issues, ensure accurate assessments can be made and develop options for customers with complex needs.

Appendix 1: Methodological Notes

BA at Risk customers were randomly selected from customers who had been recently interviewed by a PA.

The in-depth interviews were held in a range of venues, including motel apartments, focus group venues and conference rooms.

All respondents were given \$50 for their time and to cover their costs.

A total of 37 interviews were conducted out of our target of 40 interviews. The customers who did not attend at their appointed interview time were contacted and replaced where possible – approximately 10 interviews were replaced in this manner, sometimes with the original customer, other times with a replacement from the same customer group. On several occasions in Queensland, replacements were made in the next regional town visited.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Appendix 2: Discussion Guide

Better Assessment at Risk Depth Interview Discussion Guide

Introduction

Introduce self (and any observer). Refreshments, need to record all interviews (for note taking purposes) but not reporting at an individual level. One of only 40 interviews like this across Australia. Anything you say is treated as completely confidential. Nothing you say is linked with Centrelink or can affect any dealings you have with them. We are bound by the Commonwealth Privacy Act, our contract with FaCS and we've had to personally sign a Deed of Confidentiality to work on this project. Give incentive up front.

Explain Project

The research is being done for the Department of Family & Community Services. It is one aspect of a much larger project evaluating the Personal Adviser interviews that are being conducted at Centrelink. You have been selected because you attended a Personal Adviser interview at Centrelink fairly recently.

We want to talk to you about your Personal Adviser interview and find out what you thought about it and whether it helped you or not.

Explain if necessary: The Personal Adviser would have spoken to you about the types of services that might be available for you and about your goals and how you might be able to achieve them. These interviews are nearly always face-to-face meetings (they can sometimes be over the phone) and can take about an hour.

Situation at time of the Personal Adviser interview:

Before we get your opinion about the Personal Adviser interview I'd like to find out a bit about what your situation was at the time of the interview.

Prison Release Customers:

We understand that you had your Personal Adviser interview either just before or just after you were released from prison. Is that right? What was your situation at that time? For example, did you have accommodation organised? Work to go to? Plans for what you were going to do? Where you were going to live? Family situation? Family / friends to help out. Any study/training, volunteer work to go to?

Anything in particular that you thought would make it difficult for you to find a job? (Any personal problems, any health problems?)

Was this the first time you had been on government payments? Payments history?

What were your plans for the future at that time? (If hoping to work at some stage) What sort of job would you like?

(Establish whether at pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action or maintenance stage.)

Other Customers:

What was your situation at the time you had your Personal Adviser interview? For example, what were your living arrangements / family situation? How long had you been out of work / on Centrelink payments for? Were you looking for work? Any study/training, volunteer work at that time?

Anything making it difficult for you to look for work / find a job? Any personal problems? Health problems? How long since you had a stable job?

Was this the first time you had been on government payments? Payments history?

What were your plans for the future at that time? If hoping to work at some stage – what sort of job would you like?

(Establish whether at pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action or maintenance stage.)

The Personal Adviser interview

Now some questions about the Personal Adviser interview ...

Did you have any trouble attending the interview / keeping the appointment?

How did you feel about having to go to this interview? What were you expecting?

How did you find out that you had to attend this interview?

Did you feel like you were ready to talk to the PA about plans for the future at that time?

What about the person who interviewed you? What were they like? How did you get on with them?

Did you feel comfortable talking to them about your personal situation?

Could you describe the interview in your own words?

What sorts of things did you talk about?

What was the most helpful part of the interview? The least helpful part?

Did you discuss your plans for the future? The types of things that you'd like to do?

Did the Personal Adviser give you any information, help or advice about your plans for the future / the types of things you could be doing? How were plans made? Were they really your goals? How are you going so far in achieving those goals?

Did you do a **Participation Plan**? You would have been asked to sign it and been given a copy. Can you describe the goals that were set in the Participation Plan?

Did the PA give you any hand outs / brochures / pamphlets, etc. Did you read any of this? Was any of it useful / helpful? What did you find out?

Referrals

Did the Personal Adviser refer you to someone else? Suggest people or services that you might be eligible for / might be able to help you?

Who to? / What type of service (name, nature of service?)

Possible referral agencies (if prompt is needed): Job Network, Transition to Work, voluntary work, Work for the Dole, language, literacy and numeracy, Mature Age Workers program, community agency, CDEP, crisis assessment team/social worker, other specialist eg psychologist, Personal Support Program, career counseling, training/education, housing, drug and alcohol

Have you followed this up? Has this referral started yet? What is it like? How relevant / Helpful?

Outcomes

How did you feel immediately after the Personal Adviser interview? Why?

Did it make any real difference in terms of:

- helping you to overcome any problems you may have been having?
- improving your personal circumstances?
- feeling more positive about how to look for work?
- how you felt about yourself?
- improving your confidence about your own prospects, your own ability
- getting motivated to find work or do other things like education or training, voluntary work, other community activities?
- planning for your future?

Did the interview identify any specific things that would help you out? (pre-vocational – eg. licenses)

Overall, how helpful do you think the PA/JET interview has been to you?

Was there any negative aspect of attending the interview? (eg. got my hopes up, made me feel like I've got a long way to go, etc)

Improvement suggestions?

(Establish whether NOW at pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action or maintenance stage – any shift?)

May need to ask about intentions, plans, current activities, etc.

Can you see yourself getting off payments? How long do you think this might take?