



11 February 2008

RE: Response to Minister Brendan O'Connor

Dear Minister O'Connor

We thank you for the opportunity to inform the review of the current range of employment services and have the following main comments.

1. Contract issues:

1.1 Flow figures have been reduced since NESAs requested a change in the DEEWR system. It appears staff across CWC's were not consulted or informed of the DEEWR EA3000 online changes that impacted on referral rates. This has effectively reduced flow rates by at least 10% in the last performance period which has had a significant impact on contract outcomes and income for CWC and PSP providers.

1.2 CWC income per client has not been increased for several years and consequently decreased in real terms. This is compounded by the cost shifting of administration tasks and responsibilities in addition to IT hardware and maintenance costs to maintain DEWR system operations.

1.3 The contractual compliance of administration requirements appear to have taken precedence over participant outcomes. This has reduced interaction and appropriate support to participants to a minimum, to the extent that contractual compliance and monitoring by DEEWR appears to be the primary objective of the program rather than social and economic outcomes for the participant. This is also the case for the JPET and PSP programs. The Star rating system is an example of the emphasis on administrative compliance rather than a measure of qualitative outcomes for participants.

1.4 The WEF training funding for each participant is not considered adequate to cover basic training costs, i.e. green card, Cert II (minimum expectations of employers). Pre-employment 'Soft skills' training is not viewed as essential skills development that increases self confidence and employment preparedness, particularly for very long term unemployed and those with significant barriers.

1.5 As an aside, the cost of each tender process, (that is anything between 8k – 12k), is a significant amount of funds for NFP sector providers to commit, that could be better utilised on providing increased resources to better support participant outcomes. The cost of tendering and administration could also deter quality providers from entering the sector thereby restricting diversity and innovation.

2. Working with jobseekers with multiple barriers.

Many jobseekers referred to WFD have multiple barriers but more often than not have been classed as 'just being difficult or uncooperative by their JNM consultant. This is not meant as a direct criticism of the employment consultants but more an observation of the lack of training by Job Network management of their consultants to be able to identify jobseekers that have real issues (barriers) and are not just being obstructive.

In these cases, the issue for CWC is their inability to refer the participant directly for a JCA with an accompanying report on behaviour patterns observed, (once the behavioural patterns have been observed and/or we have tried to work through the issues with the participant/s).

The current process that CWC have to contact the participants' employment consultant, talk to them about the issues and strongly recommend a referral to a JCA. It is then in the hands of the consultant as to whether they act on our recommendation.

The only other option opened to CWC (if the participant is not complying) is to submit a PR to Centrelink and talk to the Participation Solutions Team when we do submit to let them know what we are trying to achieve.

With many of the cases we have had, the participant has been totally compliant but shows unusual behaviour patterns which are unacceptable in a work place, however they do not realise (even after being spoken to) that their pattern of behaviour is not considered normal or acceptable in a workplace. This takes up enormous amounts of time and has exposed CWC staff to risk situations in some cases that they are not trained or expected to deal with.

For the participant, the complexities and confusion of the system can often exacerbate their issues and problem behaviours.

Our experience shows that beneficial outcomes in terms of skills development, better training, employment and social inclusion outcomes are significantly improved for participants when CWC, JPET and PSP staff have time to build positive working relationships and provided with a range of training pathways that includes personal skills development.

3. Meeting Employment Outcomes

When the "Skills in Demand" list is formulated for each ESA by JNMs it does not take into account industries who have labour shortages but do not (for whatever reason) put their vacancies through their local JNM. This can leave big gaps in skills areas that WFD could be addressing.

Many jobseekers are willing to travel to find the type of work they are interested in. This is evident in most large metropolitan areas (eg Sydney LMR) where jobseekers will travel across a number of ESAs to find employment in their area of choice.

WFD has always fundamentally been a work experience program. In other words participants are expected to gain hands-on work experience in 'real work' situations with the work skills training provided on-the-job as you would with any staff member.

The funds for training inhibits the training needed as it detracts from the money that supplies the materials.

We have noticed an increase in the number of participants being referred with significant barriers that include poor language skills, literacy and numerical skills and interpersonal skills. In addition participants may also have mental and or physical health issues that impact on their employability and training options.

Possible solutions

Increasing employability Skills including social and communication skills are fundamental requirements for employers and assists social inclusion in society. When developing Skills in Demand lists we suggest that consideration is given to areas of employer high demand that are advertised in major newspapers as well as information fed back from JNMs.

There should be clear guidelines for JNMs that support appropriate assessment for employment before they place people into full time WFD.

Incentives, (even if it's not a cash incentive), for CWC's to actively place people into paid employment would give greater focus to employer and participant outcomes.

There needs to be a confidential indicator on the system to inform CWC's and JNMs management if a participant has a history of being aggressive- much like the ' EP63" system Centrelink uses. (a flashdoc describing the customers behaviour to enable staff to be supported if having to interview customers in an outreach situation).

Rather than restrict CWCs to using Skills in Demand in their ESA or borrowing from a neighbouring ESA, it would be productive to allow a LMR approach that enables more choice to meet participant's goals when designing projects.

Separate training that is required for a participant to undertake a project and the project itself. In other words, let the CWC's do the work preparation (PD), Green Cards, First Aid etc that might be required for a participant to go on-site and then the project concentrates on the purely hands-on work experience side.

This would ensure quality and continuity of any training provided and set minimum standards. When a participant is referred it would be understood that the first 3 weeks (maybe 6 weeks) depending on what path the government wants to go down is training and the remaining 20-23 weeks of the performance period are solely about the hands-on, on-the-job work experience.

These are likely to be common issues across employment service providers. We feel common contractual objectives should ensure outcomes across providers enable participants access flexible training and employment opportunities that support individual's personal development and work skills that are congruent with the requirements of employers.

As an organisation committed to supporting social inclusion and beneficial outcomes for participants we would welcome improvements that decrease the administrative burden and duplication of time and resources for CWC in job seeker assessment and counselling.

Kind regards

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