

Enhancing career development:

The role of community-based

career guidance for disengaged adults

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# Key messages

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This project investigates learning and career development services for adults, particularly those who are in some way disengaged from the labour market or educational systems.

- ✧ Most adults do not understand that in the contemporary world of work it is important to develop the skills to be able to manage one's own career and life pathways.
- ✧ A strong culture of career development needs to be built in Australia, one which has a focus on all age groups and which encourages older adults to consider career and learning options before a crisis hits.
- ✧ When made aware of what career guidance services can offer, many older adults who are disengaged from the labour force recognise their value. This indicates a potential demand for a career guidance service which is conducted face-to-face in a community setting by people with appropriate qualifications in career guidance and adult learning. Those offering advice and guidance need to be familiar with local labour market conditions and the variety of formal and informal learning options available in the community.
- ✧ Such career guidance and advice is best when it is community-based, affordable and impartial; that is, when it is one step removed from agencies offering other assistance such as welfare, job matching or training.
- ✧ Timely personal intervention in career decisions is needed, as most adults disengaged from the labour force are not likely to be proactive in seeking career guidance. In this context career advice or guidance should be offered as early as possible to enable people to make informed decisions about their options.
- ✧ Local conditions will determine how an impartial, community-based career guidance service operates. To be sustainable, they will usually require a partnership funding model, with contributions from various public agencies and some fee-for-service revenue. In addition, providers will need to develop their counselling skills and build their capacity in terms of relationship building, negotiation, policy development, marketing, financial management and evaluation.

# Executive summary

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The aim of this project was to investigate learning and career development services for adults, in particular, those in some way disengaged from the labour market and educational systems. It took as its starting point a community-based career guidance model operating in Victoria, the Crossroads project, and focused on women seeking to re-enter the workforce, older job seekers and mature-aged workers only marginally attached to the workforce.

The research was informed by the comprehensive Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2003) study on information, guidance and counselling services. That study recognised that career guidance can play an important role in better allocation of human resources in the changing world of work and in an ageing society.

It should also be noted that there is a strong emphasis in the literature on the distinction between career guidance and job-matching services, with the former increasingly taking a client-centred developmental approach aimed at enabling individuals to manage their own career and learning pathways.

Another study of global labour trends (Standing 1999) argues that, in the twenty-first century, job security is coming to an end and needs to be replaced with a system in which more and more people are able to combine competencies to create their own occupation, moving in and out of economic activity as necessary, and having different work status at different times of their lives. The author, Guy Standing, argues that this new style of work could mean for many 'a careerless sort of nomadic existence' unless backed by a strong sense of community and connection with representative organisations (Standing 1999, p.397). The findings of this research project bear out this claim.

The research—a literature review, stakeholder consultations and group discussions with potential clients of a community-based career guidance service—was structured around the following questions.

- ✧ Is there a model for providing learning guidance to the target groups (women seeking to re-enter the workforce, older job seekers and older workers marginally attached to the workforce) which could be replicated around Australia?
- ✧ What are the obstacles to implementing locally based career counselling for those outside the system?
- ✧ What professional development is required in service providers and in the community to activate career guidance/learning brokerage?
- ✧ What further data collection, research and policy development are needed?

Overall, it emerges that more is required on the part of government, employers and individuals to embed the notion of individually managed career paths for Australians of all ages. The stakeholder replies revealed that the concept of career development does not have broad currency, although it did resonate more widely when explained in terms such as community building or addressing skills shortages. (An unanticipated but welcome benefit of the research

process has been its role in introducing people to the current thinking on career development.) The discussion groups held during the consultation phase indicated there would be considerable demand for a community-based career guidance service.

## Model

The overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that such a community-based service, with a strong networking role, could help in meeting the career planning and learning needs of the target groups, most of whom are not career-literate and who have encountered other barriers to finding suitable occupations. Providing them with help to develop fulfilling pathways, especially if the service is provided before too long a period of disengagement, can bring multiple benefits to the individual, their family and their community.

While the elements contained in the model presented for discussion—a face-to-face service offered in a community setting by a trained counsellor familiar with local conditions—were seen as replicable, the prevailing view was that the precise nature of the service, its location and funding would depend on local economic and social circumstances, pre-existing infrastructure and services, partnership dynamics and so on. It emerged that, while fee-for-service funding would be feasible in some cases, the service would require public funds to support basic infrastructure requirements and salaries, including underwriting the effort of building and maintaining partnerships.

## Obstacles

The experience of respondents threw light on the obstacles to effective career guidance within the current welfare system—those services offered by government agencies and by Job Network providers—and in technical and further education (TAFE) institutes. This reflects the widespread absence of career development services available to the target groups, the available services being primarily designed to cater to school children and tertiary students, rather than to older adults who cannot afford (or would not contemplate) private career counselling sessions. It also highlighted the remedial or ‘bandaid’ approach which colours current services for disengaged adults and the merits of investigating a system which encourages consideration of career paths before a crisis compels people to turn, in the first instance, almost inevitably to Centrelink. It should also be acknowledged that there are some state-funded measures designed to help fill the gaps (for example, Employment Directions Network in Western Australia and Skilling Solutions in Queensland).

## Professional development

Professional development was seen as a major element in the success of any community-based scheme. The strong message to emerge was the need for a system which responded to the client’s needs and also to the capacity of the providers. Most respondents felt that, depending on the nature of the task, different levels of competency were required, the beginning point being directing people to reliable information, and ending with the provision of professional counselling services. All agreed that much should be done to raise awareness about the importance of career planning and management in a wide range of occupations, from parent to youth worker, health clinician, educator, librarian, Job Network or Centrelink employee, factory manager and so on. This suggested a modular approach to professional development, whereby relevant elements of career development could be included in existing training. The work being done in the Department of Education, Science and Training on creating career education materials was therefore welcomed. There was no disagreement with the idea of greater regulation

of the profession, as long as this did not lead to an exclusive system which might run counter to the aim of fostering a career development culture.

## Data collection and further research

Given the lack of widespread appreciation of lifelong career management in the contemporary world of work, there is likely to be merit in further research which can demonstrate its advantages; for example, by undertaking cost-benefit analyses and supporting demonstration projects. While the research did not produce a generic community-based model which could be replicated around the country, it did identify several ways in which the elements of the Victorian model could be adapted to suit local circumstances. There would be merit in running pilots in several of these areas.

In addition, the project was able to develop some general principles to provide a basis for further investigation of ways to build a career development culture in Australia. These principles:

- ✧ recognise the importance in the current climate of work of building the individual's capacity to manage a career pathway, and argue that this is a joint responsibility of the state, the individual and the employer
- ✧ see equipping adults to resume and continue to learn as a critical factor in managing life transitions
- ✧ argue strongly for collaborative approaches which ensure that the individual receives the most appropriate advice, and that the community's resources are used in the most effective manner
- ✧ call for widespread awareness-raising in relation to career development, in particular, amongst people working with disengaged clients
- ✧ identify the potential, given the central position of occupation in people's lives, for a community-based career service to act as an important conduit between employers, education providers and social service providers, and as a source of local intelligence about labour market trends (including volunteering and informal work and learning opportunities).

## Ideas for action

Some ideas for specific action for governments, employers, providers and researchers are suggested at the end of this report. These build on initiatives catering primarily to school leavers introduced in the last few years, but concentrate on the needs of more mature clients, while also recognising the importance of intergenerational exchanges (between children and parents, for example). They suggest the need for a greater effort in building a culture of career development, with a move away from the emphasis on remedial approaches for adults who are changing career direction. This calls for:

- ✧ a public marketing campaign, as well as a continuation of the current efforts to raise the profile of the profession, a task being tackled by the newly established Career Industry Council of Australia
- ✧ greater support for affordable and independent career guidance services, with national leadership from government to encourage industry and welfare agencies and others to use such services
- ✧ the further development or adaptation of learning materials relevant to adults seeking to make career changes, taking into account the barriers that disengaged clients can encounter in accessing information, because, for example, of poor English language or the absence of information technology skills

- ✧ widespread professional development since without greater awareness about the way people think about work, how they learn and what barriers they face in changing direction, those seeking to help people to re-engage with society are not well enough equipped to do so
- ✧ capacity building of community-based organisations in relation to career advice to help them to become more effective in brokering their own solutions to problems. This can be achieved by giving citizens opportunities to both acquire skills in marketing, negotiation, financial management and evaluation and develop a greater understanding of how their community can connect with the wider world, whose influence is so pervasive in the twenty-first century's global labour market.

# Background

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The Good Society of the twenty-first century will be one based on the promotion of the right of occupation, or occupational security, where increasing numbers of people will be able to combine competencies to create their own occupation, with varying work status, and moving in and out of economic activity ...

There is a real danger that, without a collective anchor, individual flexibility could mean for many a careerless sort of nomadic existence ... Individual security without collective security is inconceivable. The character and strength of representative organisations and the networking that they facilitate will be crucial to both personal security and the development of the right to occupation. (Standing 1999, p.237)

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) review of policies for information, guidance and counselling services put the spotlight on the issues of career and life planning in the twenty-first century, highlighting the role career guidance can play in fostering efficient allocation of human resources, reducing labour market failure, shortening terms of unemployment, and supporting mobility (OECD 2004).

Guidance is being seen as a lubricant to ease frictions in the labour market, in the educational system and between the two, leading to greater individual and societal wellbeing (Plant 2001, pp.15, 20; Hughes 2004).

This project into community-based career guidance takes the comprehensive OECD study as its starting point and builds on the growing consensus on the importance of lifelong career guidance in the knowledge economy. It recognises that the OECD review of Australia has already generated considerable activity, in terms of both research and policy initiatives, and therefore concentrates particularly on those adults least accommodated by the existing arrangements.

The current interest in career guidance has been prompted by the profound changes in the nature of work most countries are now facing. While in Australia the importance of equipping school leavers with career management skills is being recognised (see <[http://www.dest.gov.au/career and transitions](http://www.dest.gov.au/career_and_transitions)>), there has yet to be a comprehensive effort to make career advice and learning guidance available to those who need it most—people not working in the mainstream and the disengaged learner. Young people who have not completed school, the long-term unemployed, women returning to work and casual low-skilled workers face the prospect of training with trepidation. Their aspiration is for a job, rarely a career—a term usually associated with middle-class professionals. Their previous experiences have often been negative, and the notion of planning ahead alien.

Moreover, career guidance is usually beyond their reach. A career counsellor is not someone they often encounter in the services they do use: private counselling is too expensive and computer-based programs can be daunting because these people do not have sophisticated information technology skills and/or because they are not equipped with the answers the computer demands. Nor, as Mary McMahon sets out in her recent paper, *Shaping a career development culture*, has the idea of a lifelong need for career services taken sufficient hold, and where it has, for example, in

assisting adults registered as unemployed, is often narrowly focused on getting a job (McMahon 2004, p.5).

As the OECD review of Australia noted:

The extensive and at times seemingly exclusive focus on initial transitions to full-time work is not adequate in a world of work in which there is increasing and pervasive change. Some 70 percent of the Australians who will form the workforce in ten years' time are already in the workforce now; yet some of the occupations that will comprise this workforce do not yet exist, and others will have changed beyond recognition. (OECD 2002, p.19)

Since that review, the 'Australian Blueprint for Career Development' has been developed. The blueprint is based on the assumption that life, learning and work, although sometimes distinct, are not separate and are best designed (and re-designed) in harmony. It identifies and elaborates the eleven career competencies that all Australians need to build their careers. These competencies are grouped across three key areas—personal management; learning and work exploration; and career building (Miles Morgan 2003, pp.98–9).

The blueprint also notes that those adults who have had access to career guidance are most likely to be attached to tertiary education institutions, employment placement service providers, rehabilitation service providers, recruitment and outplacement specialists, as well as career coaches and counsellors. In the changing world of work, this is no longer enough. More effort is required to help those adults who entered the workforce expecting to be in the same job all their working lives to adjust to the prospects of many changes in their career paths, and the need to keep learning new skills and knowledge, whatever their place in the workplace hierarchy. The rollout of the blueprint has the potential to raise awareness about lifelong career development services. Unfortunately, from the point of view of this research, few of those interviewed had yet to encounter the blueprint.

# Methodology

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This research project was inspired by the Crossroads project, a Victorian community-based career service. It investigated whether such a service might usefully be established elsewhere in Australia and if so, how. The study took a multi-method approach, using a range of sources to gain qualitative data. These were:

- ✧ a literature review
- ✧ consultations with a reference group (appendix) made up of representatives of several national government agencies, peak bodies and the University of South Australia, which is also conducting research sponsored by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) into career guidance.
- ✧ questionnaires and interviews with a diversity of carefully selected stakeholders
- ✧ structured conversations with potential users of a community-based service (focus groups were conducted in Gunnedah, western New South Wales; in Fremantle and Midland, on the outskirts of Perth; and in several suburbs of Melbourne).

These research strategies were designed to feed into each other in an iterative way in order to identify trends and recommendations for further research and policy development.

## Target groups

On the advice of the project's reference group, the target groups were narrowed to older job seekers or people marginally attached to the workforce, and to women returning to the workforce, as these groups were likely to have had periods of disengagement from mainstream employment and training. Indigenous people were not targeted, as the team did not have appropriate cultural background and contacts; neither were youth at risk, as a considerable body of work is underway in this area. The target groups included the experiences of people with poor English language, low literacy and numeracy, and physical and mental disability. The project has resulted in the distillation of some general principles which have some applicability to other groups.

## Research methods

Through purposive sampling, the stakeholder questionnaire was sent to 64 individuals or organisations from all states and territories and representative of policy, research and delivery agencies, and included people in career development, employment services, community development and in the manufacturing and construction industries. To ensure sampling breadth, a further 15 people were interviewed during the course of fieldwork. The overall response rate was a pleasing, well-spread 44% (nil response from Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory), with many people preferring a face-to-face/telephone interview rather than the questionnaire. Nineteen respondents represented the delivery area (for example, career

development practitioners, Job Network providers, educational institutions); 13 were in policy positions and three were researchers.

The discussion groups were held in Gunnedah, Perth and Melbourne. Participants were identified through learning community and other networks and from the literature review. The majority of the 42 group participants were women needing to return to the workforce and were predominantly over 40 years old, with low educational attainment, varied work experience and facing a personal or health crisis. Others consulted included long-term unemployed men, a state emergency service training group of men and women from 18 to 60 years of age, and a group of more highly educated people wishing to change career direction.

## The Crossroads model

The consultation phase of the research introduced stakeholders to the 'Crossroads' model and asked them to consider what elements might be replicated. It did so cognisant that the adult and community education (ACE) sector varies considerably across the nation, and that, in some states, the model may need to be modified to fit local circumstances. Community development principles of local responses to issues and of strong collaboration within a community underpin the Crossroads approach.

Experience in the United Kingdom and Canada informed the development of the Crossroads project (Lorey 2000), as did the premise that learning is a crucial aspect in finding a suitable career and retaining it. The nexus between training and work is well understood; however, the role of less formal learning is often undervalued, as are the important issues of learning styles and barriers, which will often influence a successful outcome from training (Cross & Brennan 2003; Department of Education, Science and Training 2003). The extent to which learning guidance played a role in successful career development was also explored in the research project.

### Box 1: The Crossroads model

Crossroads: Careers Guidance in ACE for Victoria is a Victorian government-funded project led by Morrison House (an ACE) provider and registered training organisation.

The Crossroads project began with the establishment of an ACE Careers Guidance Cluster in 2000. A member of each provider in the cluster of eight undertook the RMIT University Graduate Certificate of Career Counselling. Between 2001 and 2004, the cluster, now consisting of six providers, offered a range of services to their local communities, including open access to a small career resource centre, career workshops for the community, career and life planning classes for the Certificate of General Education for Adults and vocational education and training (VET) students and/or one-to-one career guidance for students and the local community.

The project placed considerable emphasis on the individual as an active agent, aiming to equip each client with the skills to make their own decisions and to be able to carry these out. The assistance extended depended on levels of skill (e.g. ability to use websites), self-esteem, learning styles, and life circumstances, such as family obligations and peer relationships. It also took into account a point often raised in the literature that, to be as effective as possible, career guidance services must be seen as non-aligned, in other words, focused on the individual's needs and not on the services a provider can offer or on a vacancy to be filled (Watts 2001, p.11). For example, Morrison House located its service in the local library in order to establish some distance between the guidance being offered and its own educational facilities.

In 2003 workshops throughout Victoria introduced a further 100 providers to the concept of career guidance in the ACE sector. Several regional and rural ACE clusters set up career centres and five more people from ACE organisations underwent career guidance training through RMIT University.

The cluster project was designed to develop a sustainable career component in ACE provision that would enhance community learning and vocational pathways and inform program planning in ACE. The project was also striving to develop a strong career and life planning ethos to support lifelong learning through ACE. Its key facets included a website on ACE career guidance and life planning, <<http://www.morrisonhouse.org/crossroads>>; a manual for career provision; and liaison with organisations at local, regional, Victorian, Australian and international levels. (This project represented one facet of that liaison.)

## Research limitations

The project did not assume that formal learning providers were the only potential hosts for community-based career guidance services. It also investigated other community-based organisations, in particular, local technology centres in Western Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania. However, more investigation is required into the most suitable brokers in specific local communities. Experience in Britain has shown that, if these are to be learning providers, they must be able to act as intermediaries who can identify all the training/occupational options and who are able to refer clients to the most suitable one (Haughton & Watts 2004).

# Research findings

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Findings from the research are presented below. These are grouped under headings used in the stakeholder questionnaire:

- ✧ definitions
- ✧ learning environments
- ✧ delivery models
- ✧ professional development
- ✧ the Australian Blueprint for Career Development. (Note that very few respondents were familiar with the blueprint and data collected in relation to its implementation were insufficient to offer any substantive comment, although its potential to assist in the development of a career culture was recognised.)

## Definitions and their marketing

### **Box 2: Broadening the concept**

Career no longer refers to particular pathways through work or to an occupational title. Career is the sequence and variety of work roles (paid and unpaid), which one undertakes throughout a lifetime. More broadly, 'career' includes life roles, leisure activities, learning and work.

(Miles Morgan 2002, p.15)

Respondents agreed with the use of the word 'career' when it embraced elements of life roles, leisure and learning, as well as work. However, they believed that, particularly for the target groups considered in the research, and indeed for many other working adults, 'career' continued to be associated with the professions and not with their own lives. For that reason, while the use of the word 'career' was acceptable, it needed to be accompanied by explanations that the term embraced all kinds of occupations and that other terms could also be used when career services were being marketed to the potential client base. Other terms considered appropriate included life journey, pathway, competency portfolio, skills set, work–life balance.

It was suggested that it was equally important to make the career aspect of job seeking and skill development more explicit to providers of employment and training and to their clients. The vocational profiles, résumé writing and job-matching activities carried out by employment agencies are often considered to be the equivalent of career guidance. However, while, as is currently the case, they are dependent on getting a payable outcome—any job rather than the most suitable occupation—they will often be inadequate. Moreover, such services place less emphasis on values than does career guidance, which goes beyond the identification of particular skills and aptitudes, to matching these with a person's motivations (for example, money, job satisfaction, social interaction, social contribution) and beliefs, rather than an available job, training course or volunteering opportunity.

Much of the work being done in technical and further education (TAFE) bridging courses and ACE does contain elements of career development. However, it became clear in talking to providers that this is rarely labelled as such, nor is it undertaken by people with specific qualifications in career guidance. It would contribute to the building of a career development culture and in gaining wider acknowledgement of the benefits of more informal learning, were providers to make more explicit the career development aspects of pre-vocational learning options. This might also raise awareness about the important work that adult literacy teachers, counsellors and others do to prepare people to cope with change and take responsibility for managing career or life pathways.

### **Box 3: Building on experience**

*It's more than knowing where to find vacancies—it's about being able to recognise skills and experience from past positions (paid and unpaid) and being able to sell these to potential employers.*  
Stakeholder response

In line with the comments above—that career guidance for adults needs to become less corrective in its focus—the term ‘career development’ rather than ‘counselling’ was generally preferred. The term ‘development’ also better encompasses the fact that a variety of services can be offered (web-based and printed information, telephone or face-to-face advice about how to access and use such resources, group activities and one-to-one counselling), depending on an individual’s needs and abilities for self-directed research. It should also be noted that, for some people, even this term may be off-putting until they decide what their future learning and life pathways might be.

A recurring problem for older adults seeking to re-enter the workforce or to change jobs was knowing where to start. People in the discussion groups felt out of touch and, upon reflection, realised that they had often stumbled into a course or taken advice from Centrelink, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service or others without a clear idea of where it would lead them. When it took them down the wrong path, the setbacks were often manifold—reinforcement of a sense of failure, bitterness about the welfare system, plummeting self-esteem, anxiety, pessimism about the ability to make a new start—and therefore more difficult to rectify.

### **Box 4: Advising people early**

*Two years after arriving in Australia, a migrant with teaching qualifications came across the Multicultural Development Association (MDA) in Brisbane. The association sees its main job as linking people into the system, advising on such things as teachers' registration boards and Australian recruitment practices. The migrant's comment: 'I struggled for two years. I wish I'd met you then.'*  
Stakeholder interview

Participants in the discussion groups had usually not received effective, if any, career education at school. Indeed, many told the story that they were encouraged to leave school early ‘because that’s what girls did’ or in order to get any job that was going. Once they had spent some time discussing the notion of career guidance, the great majority suggested that what was needed was a concerted information campaign alerting people to the benefits of seeking career advice to help them to understand the contemporary labour market, to identify transferable skills and training needs and to engage constructively with prospective employers. Such a campaign would require resources and, importantly, the ability to meet the demand generated. It would also need to have a proactive flavour rather than a remedial one, underpinned by the ability for early intervention. Various channels were mooted: through schools to target parents; in shopping malls or healthcare facilities; as part of inductions for new arrivals to Australia; and through the media.

Some of this sort of promotion is already underway. For example, in Western Australia the Employment Development Network has set up a program, Parents as Career Partners. This has the support of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, which is

introducing other means to engage parents. There is, however, scope for such programs to place greater emphasis on getting parents to think about their own career development as well as that of their children.

Particularly striking during the research was the potential for greater recognition of the nexus between health and career development. While time and again career change is forced by illness, which in turn is often accommodated or overcome by re-engagement in occupational activity (for example, learning, paid or unpaid work), this is not something always adequately addressed by health professionals.

#### **Box 5: Thinking about health**

*My injury forced me to look at an alternative career path ... but agencies seemed to be pushing me back to a hands-on role in cooking which I cannot do anymore.*

*I became a nurse when I left school at Year 10 and continued for the next 30 years until I had an injury which forced me to leave. I signed up to do a business administration course full-time but found it wasn't for me. Now I'm doing a course in computer applications, which is better. None of the doctors was helpful in terms of pain management and none suggested coping with disability through learning strategies. I just had to do something to keep my mind active.*

Discussion group participants

While industry does not appear to be thinking much about career development, it is growing alarmed about skills shortages. The Australian Industry Group estimates that 170 000 people will be leaving the manufacturing industry in the next five years, with only 40 000 being trained to replace them. And, while a recent Australian Industry Group survey of 760 companies showed that firms regarded skills enhancement as important to their business competitiveness and were focusing on retraining existing staff (Australian Industry Group 2004), hopes are still being concentrated on making manufacturing and construction more appealing to the youth labour market rather than on attracting older workers. As long as this mentality, which reflects the persistence of at least latent age discrimination among employers, prevails in a tightening labour market, it may be difficult to sell the concept of 'career development' to industry. Instead it will need to be couched in terms of retaining good staff and getting the best return on investment in training and re-skilling. It also indicates the need for more work in encouraging mature-aged workers to return to learning and in ensuring that the nature of training matches both learners' and employers' needs.

## Learning environments, styles and impediments

The research started from the premise that, in the current working environment, career development for the target groups must involve reviving the appetite for learning and ensuring this is developed in a way that imparts the ability to adjust to changing circumstances in the workplace and beyond.

Most respondents agreed that learning is a vital aspect in re-engaging adults and that it must be facilitated in a non-threatening environment. Outcomes from pre-vocational courses and activities designed to build social networks and self-esteem, uncover talents and assist in deciding on the most appropriate learning path were highly valued. This is not, however, always matched by a dollar value in the system. If the individual does not have the motivation, time and/or the financial means to fund their own training, opportunities can be very limited. With older adults who might well have experience to build upon, the complexity, and often obscurity, of recognition of current competencies processes are also impediments.

#### Box 6: Time for decision-making

*We need to recognise that people need time to feel good about themselves as learners before they have to go down a VET track or even to think about a career. This needs to happen in non-institutional settings that don't look and feel like the schooling system that let them down in many cases.*

Stakeholder response

Those who attended discussion groups displayed remarkable willingness to overcome their own barriers to learning and employment. Nevertheless, many were hampered by financial constraints (poor and expensive transport options was a prominent issue), health problems and the rules of the system, including disincentives for training and working (for example, income support calculations). Nor were they confident that their efforts would be rewarded, feeling their options would be circumscribed by employer attitudes to older workers and the youth focus of many training programs, which did not take due account of life experience or the responsibilities of parenthood and other family obligations.

#### Box 7: Starting over

One male participant started doing a certificate III course to regain his confidence after having had to cope with the setback of illness. He then answered a job ad in the paper and took up a customer service position. But he 'fell over' and needed to start again. For the next six months he delved into self-help books, career information, mind-mapping. 'I got to know myself pretty well but wasn't able to take action—I just couldn't take the next step.' The cost of seeing a career counsellor was too high so he stumbled back into customer service work even though he thinks he'd be better suited to something in the area of complementary medicine. 'What I need is a mentor—the ability to discuss things which might open up different viewpoints, perspectives, clarifications. This would help me make choices. But the mentor needs to have credibility and I need to be able to trust them' (Participant in a discussion group).

These experiences reinforce the argument for more flexible learning pathways in the training system. Short, often non-accredited courses have proved to be very useful in assisting people to get back on track and to identify their future pathways. These are not, however, adequately recognised or supported in terms of funding from educational budgets or as stand-alone outcomes within the Job Network.

An idea that has arisen from the research is the development of short course material which would be appropriate to introduce into existing pre-vocational programs, or which could be offered as stand-alone sessions to small groups from various agencies, such as disability service and Centrelink clients. This would draw on the experience of existing programs such as the semester-long New Opportunities for Women (NOW) course offered by Challenger TAFE in Western Australia, but might be offered over shorter timeframes and incorporated into literacy classes, rehabilitation programs and so on.

There are already learning products, for example, the Awareness of Career Development component of the Department of Education, Science and Training's Australian Career Development Studies, on which to base such material. It may also be possible to make the adult version, or an adaptation, of *The real game* series, currently mostly used in schools for young people between eight and 18 years old (<<http://realgame.dest.gov.au/index.htm>>), affordable for application in community learning settings. The 11 competencies devised in the Australian Blueprint for Career Development would provide a good basis for bringing consistency into learning materials.

From the group discussions it also emerged that learning circles would be a cost-effective way of assisting people to plan their career paths. Learning circles are self-directed forms of group learning, guided by a set of materials and an agreement to strive for concrete actions arising out of the learning. Much of the material for learning circle kits could be drawn from existing

sources. An essential component, however, would be the inclusion of specific local information about job opportunities, learning venues, volunteer organisations, social services and so on. The identification of suitable facilitators would also be desirable, either by someone within the group or by an educator or the career development provider. The Learning Circle Program for Female Lone Parents conducted at Mt Druitt, western Sydney, in 2003 is a successful model (Hannan 2004). It was funded by all three tiers of government and resulted in the re-engagement of nearly all its participants.

Australia's TAFE system caters to a significant number of disengaged older learners, who have been referred to its courses by Job Network, Centrelink, other welfare agencies, friends and relatives and health workers. This group is also attracted through TAFE outreach programs. These learners often need help with literacy and numeracy, close direction, guidance and sometimes counselling. Many TAFE institutes are taking a strategic approach to community capacity building, for example, by assisting in local community work-creation schemes to build local assets and to create more opportunities for both disengaged individuals and their communities (TAFE Directors' Association response to stakeholder questionnaire).

The experience of those TAFE students interviewed during the research was generally positive because they were learning with peers in relatively small groups and at a suitable pace. However, there were complaints about the lack of facilities (computer access in particular) and uncertainty about the future. This was particularly the case in small centres which could not guarantee that a course would be run until it had the requisite numbers. The TAFE students we spoke to had not had significant contact with a TAFE-employed career counsellor.

A theme that emerged in stakeholder consultations was the need for TAFE to adapt itself further to current circumstances, for example, by being more receptive to delivering training in different ways, such as short courses to small groups out of normal hours, and by placing greater emphasis on helping people emerge from the system who were equipped to deal with the local job market. The inadequacy of financial support for career counselling within the TAFE system was also a frequent comment.

Not everyone will want or need to attend a course, although for the disengaged clientele who were the focus of the research, the social interaction gained in a classroom setting emerged as a positive element in their re-engagement. For some, the opportunity to find peer support was important; others were seeking a mentor who could provide advice during the process of deciding on a pathway and embarking on the journey.

Most of those interviewed indicated that some kind of work experience was very useful in helping people decide upon future career directions. Work experience is accepted as an important part of assisting young people in their transition from school. It should not stop there and is likely to be a particularly effective learning strategy for people who are reluctant to use printed resources or to attend traditional classroom orientation courses. Insurance represents a practical hurdle for extending work experience opportunities to those not covered by institutional arrangements, such as those in place in TAFE institutes or state emergency services groups.

#### **Box 8: Work experience**

One participant in the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) course at Challenger TAFE undertook a work experience placement in an aged care facility. 'It wasn't for me. I didn't know what to say to the residents. Still it was a great way to make sure I was on the right path and not about to commit to the wrong course' (Group discussion at Challenger TAFE, Fremantle).

To identify potential partners in work experience, including those able to offer insurance cover, as well as to build a comprehensive picture of opportunities for occupational participation—volunteering, learning (formal and informal) work experience and paid employment—it can be useful to conduct a community learning audit. This was done in Mt Evelyn, the site of one of the

community-based career services used in this study, as well as in an activity in the Crossroads project, which embraced nine regions in Victoria. Not only did the audit uncover learning sites previously not recognised in the local area (for example, the garden centre), it also encouraged new thinking about available resources and identified possible partnerships within the community. Consultations during the research confirmed there is also potential for such an audit to assist in rationalising or pooling resources, identifying community work projects, encouraging better cross-promotion of existing services, seeking out mentors and so on. This suggests that part of the role of a community-based career advisor could be to act as a learning broker/coordinator in the town. It is conceivable also that an explicit part of the job would be to identify skills and training gaps and to channel this information into more formal labour market data collection systems.

## Delivery models

Because the research sought to examine the experiences of people disengaged from the labour market and the education and training system, the majority of those who responded to the invitation to participate in group discussions were or had been Centrelink customers. Typically they were women on parenting support or disability pensions who had been referred to the Job Network, TAFE bridging courses or, in Perth, the Employment Development Network, a community-managed career guidance service funded by the state government. Some, however, were not eligible for government assistance but had taken steps to retrain because they needed a change in direction. Significantly, none of the participants had considered seeking private career guidance before they had entered the system, and only a minority had chosen the New Opportunities for Women bridging course at Challenger TAFE without a referral from another agency.

Inevitably, therefore, much of the discussion focused on services delivered by Centrelink, Job Network agencies and the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service. Stakeholder interviews were conducted with private and not-for-profit Job Network providers (two in Gunnedah, two in Perth and one working in South Australia); as well as with the National Employment Services Association and a career counsellor contracted to undertake work for Employment Plus; a Centrelink personal advisor in Gunnedah; the Centrelink Career Information Centre in Perth; and a Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service career counsellor in Sydney.

People find the welfare system a maze. While instances were cited where individuals within service providers had responded with compassion and useful advice, the overall impression is that an encounter with Centrelink is a dehumanising experience, and that Job Network providers are not equipped to offer career guidance services in an atmosphere conducive to reflection and considered decision-making. While providers do recognise that older people in the system are often tackling multiple problems; for instance, unemployment, injury, family dislocation, financial hardship and/or literacy problems, it is not apparent that there is enough flexibility to ensure that clients are given the appropriate opportunities to absorb information and to act upon it as befits their best interests. This is a function of a system whose emphasis is understandably on outcomes and accountability, but which does not have built into it a recognition of the importance of the incremental nature of career development and the importance of allowing sufficient time for the process, particularly at the initial period of re-engagement.

The Employment Development Network, on the other hand, does offer the mixture of information and guidance which helps people to navigate the maze more successfully. Unfortunately, it is not necessarily the first port of call; its clients may have already taken some wrong turns in the system, making them, in the worst case, ineligible for further assistance of the type that would actually benefit them.

### Box 9: An accessible service

*I would love to know that there is an easily accessible service that provides guidance in life pathways that is not through Centrelink and Job Network—somewhere that is not demeaning and where I don't have to pay a large sum for advice on careers.* Discussion group participant

A distinction needs to be made between the general assistance that clients receive from the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service and the career services the agency runs under contract to Department of Education, Science and Training. The research interviews suggested that many people were getting only sporadic help with career planning and that, where there was no local Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service office, visiting career seminars were often too general, without specific local knowledge or focus on relevant industries. As a Sydney-based counsellor acknowledged:

Local knowledge is important. The service needs to be responsive. If people wait too long they lose motivation. A community-based service could fill the gaps where the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service may be less well equipped to respond.

(Stakeholder response)

### Box 10: Opportunities missed

A client on a disability pension followed the suggestion of her Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service advisor to enter training (tertiary preparation certificate). She loved the course but was facing its completion with trepidation, fearing that all that awaited her was more daytime television and fewer friends, who had been neglected during the period of intensive study. She had not had any follow-up discussions with her advisor about options after the course nor was she referred to a Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service career planning session, perhaps because of the restrictions on eligibility to attend such sessions.

In the interview with the National Employment Services Association it was agreed that early intervention with career guidance would assist in achieving better outcomes for job seekers. Under the current arrangements, however, this is not possible for people unless they immediately qualify for intensive assistance. It was suggested that this was the real blockage, and that in fact, Job Network providers did offer career guidance services—to the extent that the current administrative arrangements (and burden) allowed them—and that the solution to reaching more people was to change the contract, not to introduce another player into the system.

This is not, however, a universal experience. Some Job Network providers acknowledged that being able to refer clients to an outside service was desirable, and potential clients liked the idea of being one step removed from the job-seeking/job-matching process. This accords also with the literature which recommends an impartial service able to guide people according to their own preferences, skills and circumstances, rather than those of the employment service or training provider. (This message was confirmed by the popularity of the Training Information Centre in Western Australia which was able to give advice about all TAFE options in the state rather than those offered in a specific institute.)

While there is a strong message about the need to further ameliorate the bureaucratic nature of the welfare system—a message the Australian Government has heard and has responded to with the creation of the Department of Human Services—when it comes to career development, it is not certain that a one-stop shop is the answer. Many found the idea of a separate service, removed from benefits and obligations, attractive. It offered a place before engaging with the system to contemplate and research options, to bounce ideas and to explore alternative pathways and to consider the financial and health aspects of various choices. It may also be more attractive to those who are not in the welfare system but who are nevertheless seeking advisory services (for example, women wishing to return to the workforce, older employed people wanting to change direction, employers looking to fill skills gaps). This may sound like an unnecessary

luxury, but it is in fact essential in embedding the process of career development and realising the benefits of better decision-making and more streamlined use of the various types of assistance available for retraining and job seeking.

To create such a place does not mean building an entirely new infrastructure. A single model will not work across the country, but there is certainly scope and interest in developing local responses around the notion of community-based career development using various existing structures.

People want information before making decisions. They research health matters on the internet, pore over the weekend property section and seek out the advice of doctors or real estate agents. But when it comes to careers they are less certain about where to go. When the library was suggested, many respondents agreed that libraries could be suitable places because of their friendly, non-threatening environment, and the appropriate information resources. In addition, they were places people could return to, helping them to spread the career planning process gradually over time, rather than having to make a quick decision forced by circumstances. Indeed, many local libraries find that one of the main reasons people visit is to use the computer to look for jobs on the internet and to write résumés.

#### **Box 11: The library as a potential career resource centre**

Today's local library is a social space for community engagement and an equitable one, providing free access to a range of print-based and IT-based resources, but with a particular goal of involving the disenfranchised within the community.

Libraries provide signposts to information. They do not interpret that information for patrons. Theirs is the job of 'opening the gate', not of doing someone's work for them. From the perspective of Mt Evelyn public library, hosting the community-based career guidance service offered by Morrison House resulted in bringing new users to the library; in additional promotion of the benefits of library membership; helped to identify particular needs within the community; and contributed to the library's community profile and engagement.

Geoffrey Guilfoyle

As has been seen from the Crossroads project, the departure point for this research, in Victoria the adult and community education sector is being seen as a community hub from which such services might emanate, based either in community centres or other facilities, such as the local library. In Western Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania, community-run online access centres might incorporate some level of career information, advice or guidance. In Queensland, it would be worth exploring the capacity of local libraries and other community-based organisations, already working with the disengaged on state-funded programs, to offer the service, perhaps in conjunction with the Skilling Solutions initiative. Another model may be based on an industry–community partnership motivated by the need to address skills shortages in a certain locality, such as that being investigated in Shepparton (see box 12).

#### **Box 12: The Goulburn Valley proposal**

*A Career Development Centre will close the gap in the Goulburn Valley between the individual's latent skills and capacity and industry's need for skilled, capable and motivated people.' Such a centre would be:*

- ◆ *owned and operated by a community-based board, consisting mainly of industry and business representatives*
- ◆ *extensively used by industry when recruiting, thus reinforcing the message of people making an informed choice and having appropriate aptitude for work they choose*
- ◆ *seek financial support from industry as well as from federal and state governments*
- ◆ *generally charge a fee for services provided, including to people on Centrelink benefits, employees, parents, schools.*

Worktrainers Ltd 2004

The rollout of any community-based service would be greatly facilitated by the availability of so much information now held centrally on several nationally run websites, for example, *My Future* and *Jobsearch* and in the future, possibly telephone help lines. Such a service would be greatly

enhanced with links to the Centrelink-run Career Information Centres, which have the ability to direct career advisors and/or clients, whose understanding of federal and state programs may be limited to specific information about available benefits, subsidies and so. In addition, as was suggested by the Career Information Centre in Perth, the centres may be able to assess career questionnaires completed at community-based centres in rural and remote areas. A note of caution is needed here. Throughout the research, people expressed hesitation about the sole use of computer-based programs. While these might be suited to some people, the majority are more likely to benefit from them only if they are combined with guidance from a person who understands their particular circumstances.

#### **Box 13: The computer's limitations**

One discussion group participant, while knowing a great deal about IT, expressed scepticism about computer programs offering careers guidance. He did such a test which suggested he'd be good in a call centre. He disagreed. First, the computer had not asked if he spoke English. (It is his second language and while better than he thinks, heavily accented—something the computer could not detect.) Moreover, he said, it did not delve into his own feelings about such a job. He knew he would never find the patience to sit for hours at the end of a phone.

More immediately, we heard repeated requests for clear, written guides to navigating Centrelink for its first-time customers. This highlights the fact that many disengaged clients do not have the information literacy skills to access web-based and other printed material. They need guidance and, often, training in basic computer skills.

#### **Box 14: JustASK—State Library of Queensland**

ASK Now Career advisory service will be launched in early 2005. This service will provide personal online assistance from specialist librarians to help people find information on the internet about the learning opportunities and pathways available to them (<http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/find/help/ask>).

A national platform like *My Future* could also host 'how to' manuals to assist community agencies to set up career information services. The Crossroads project created such a guide, and similar manuals have been produced overseas, for example, the 'how to set up a career centre' for community libraries in the United States (Durrance 1994). Adding such an area to the website might also serve to broaden the current focus on services to assist young people.

## Professional development

The introduction of such services would necessitate funding, most significantly for professional development. While the perspective of professional counsellors consulted during the project was that those giving advice need to have university-level qualifications, the more widespread opinion was that there should be a move towards greater awareness-raising of the importance of career development and that this would be achieved by offering a variety of training tools—such as the Australian Career Development Studies being developed by the Department of Education, Science and Training. It would be desirable to have more people—Centrelink staff, Job Network providers, community workers, health professionals, union officials and occupational health and safety officers, librarians, ACE providers—with a range of knowledge and skills to point people in the right direction and to refer those in need of specialist services, rather than limit the field to those with postgraduate-level qualifications. However, it was also acknowledged that the profession would have a leading role in ensuring the appropriate certification of all tiers of training. In the shorter term, while the industry explores the implementation of standards, there may need to be added incentives to get people to have their learning assessed and certified. These might be offered as an extension of Department of Education, Science and Training's

Scholarships for School Career Advisers managed by the Curriculum Corporation to community-based providers with a demonstrated ability and commitment to offering career guidance.

A strong case also emerged for the inclusion of elements of career development and adult learning principles in the training of others associated with the mature-aged and disengaged clients, or more broadly in employment services and community development. Centrelink staff who were more aware of the importance of career planning and to the variety of learning styles and options may be better equipped to ask the right questions at that crucial first encounter with a customer. Employers able to refer people on workers' compensation to a career advisor may find their employees back in productive work quicker than they anticipated. Local economic development officers could discover a pool of volunteers able to take on community regeneration projects. Group training organisations, also, could usefully consider incorporating career development activities in their pastoral remit in order to deliver better outcomes for apprentices and trainees.

## Funding

Neither the Crossroads model nor the other potential sites for community-based career guidance could operate without subsidies (for example, provision of physical infrastructure, part-payment of salaries, professional development scholarship schemes). These might be provided by all three layers of government and other partners. For example, one idea floated during the research was that those undertaking postgraduate study be encouraged to undertake placements with a community-based service, a model already effectively implemented by some universities in other, similar, fields. There is also potential for some revenue-raising activity through brokering partnerships with agencies who might outsource career guidance services, and by introducing graduated fee-for-service arrangements.

### Box 15: CareerCare

One stakeholder pondered a future where career guidance services were valued in the way health care is today; where there were proper referral mechanisms; and when clients did not forget to turn up for counselling sessions. What, she speculated, about a CareerCare scheme—perhaps a means-tested rebate provided to those seeking careers counselling. Would offering a service which was not entirely free, but still affordable and through a subsidy, acknowledged as important, help get career guidance better valued by the community?

Job Network providers would (and some do) pay for the service provided to those job seekers with access to Job Seeker Account funds. Ideally, in the future, all those registering with the Job Network would be eligible for some career development services, some of which might be delivered by external providers. It is possible that employers may also use such a service, should it be seen to assist in retaining workers and filling skills gaps. Some individuals in Mt Evelyn having had a free taster, have sought further assistance, for which they have paid a fee. Indeed, to offer a totally free service may not serve the cause of increasing the public's appreciation of the benefits of sound career advice. Instead a scale of fees might be introduced, starting with free information and direction on how to get started, with subsequent advisory and counselling services charged according to the intensity of the service.

In parallel with this research project, Barb Lorey (Morrison House career advisor) has been investigating ways in which to maintain the viability of the community-based service offered in Mt Evelyn. This has entailed discussions with a wide number of players in the district, including Job Network providers, Centrelink, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service, state disability and corrections services and industry, all of whom have indicated initial interest in supporting the service by referring clients for group sessions and possibly paying for some one-to-one counselling. The service plans to build in reporting mechanisms, so that referral agencies are kept

informed of their client's progress in establishing and streamlining pathways to employment and training.

## Sustainability

Much of the success of a community-based service will depend on the individuals involved in delivering advice or making referrals, and on the partnerships subsequently forged. However, to assist in sustainability and replicability, there will need to be a broader commitment to the concept. This means, for example, that government schemes should be explicit about the importance of career development and allow payment for career guidance services from Job Seeker Accounts and other social service funds. It will also entail capacity-building programs to ensure that those involved at the community level have, in addition to appropriate professional qualifications, adequate skills in negotiation, policy development, marketing, financial reporting and evaluation.

With these elements of collaboration integral to the success of a community-based career guidance service, the research has found that a generic model would be unlikely to meet a community's demands. Instead, there will need to be local adaptations of the collaborative model brokered by the most relevant agency in a particular region. The process of setting up and maintaining that service will also represent a significant part of the service. This includes the networking entailed in gathering information relevant to the client seeking to find new directions and pathways.

Nevertheless, the research did identify the potential to build community-based career development services into existing partnerships involving government, business and community, such as rural information technology centres, library networks, programs assisting mature-aged job seekers and so on, most of which attract government subsidies to support infrastructure and some salaries. These stakeholders would be able to draw on the significant information and training resources being developed by the Department of Education, Science and Training, although additional public funds would be required for essential training and professional development. Fee-for-service arrangements could provide some revenue and possibly contribute to the viability of the other public services being offered in local communities.

# Conclusion

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This project set out to investigate the replicability of the community-based career guidance service being offered by some ACE providers in Victoria. It found that there is a widespread need for affordable, locally based careers information, advice and guidance, although this does not always translate into demand, given that prevailing attitudes towards occupations have yet to adjust to the new realities of the changing world of work and of an ageing demographic. This suggests the need, articulated strongly by the OECD as well as in McMahon's recent work on behalf of the Career Industry Council of Australia, for policy development to encourage a career development culture in Australia.

The research, which focused particularly on adults who had been disengaged from mainstream employment and training, produced very similar findings to those of the OECD's review of national career guidance policies, which found:

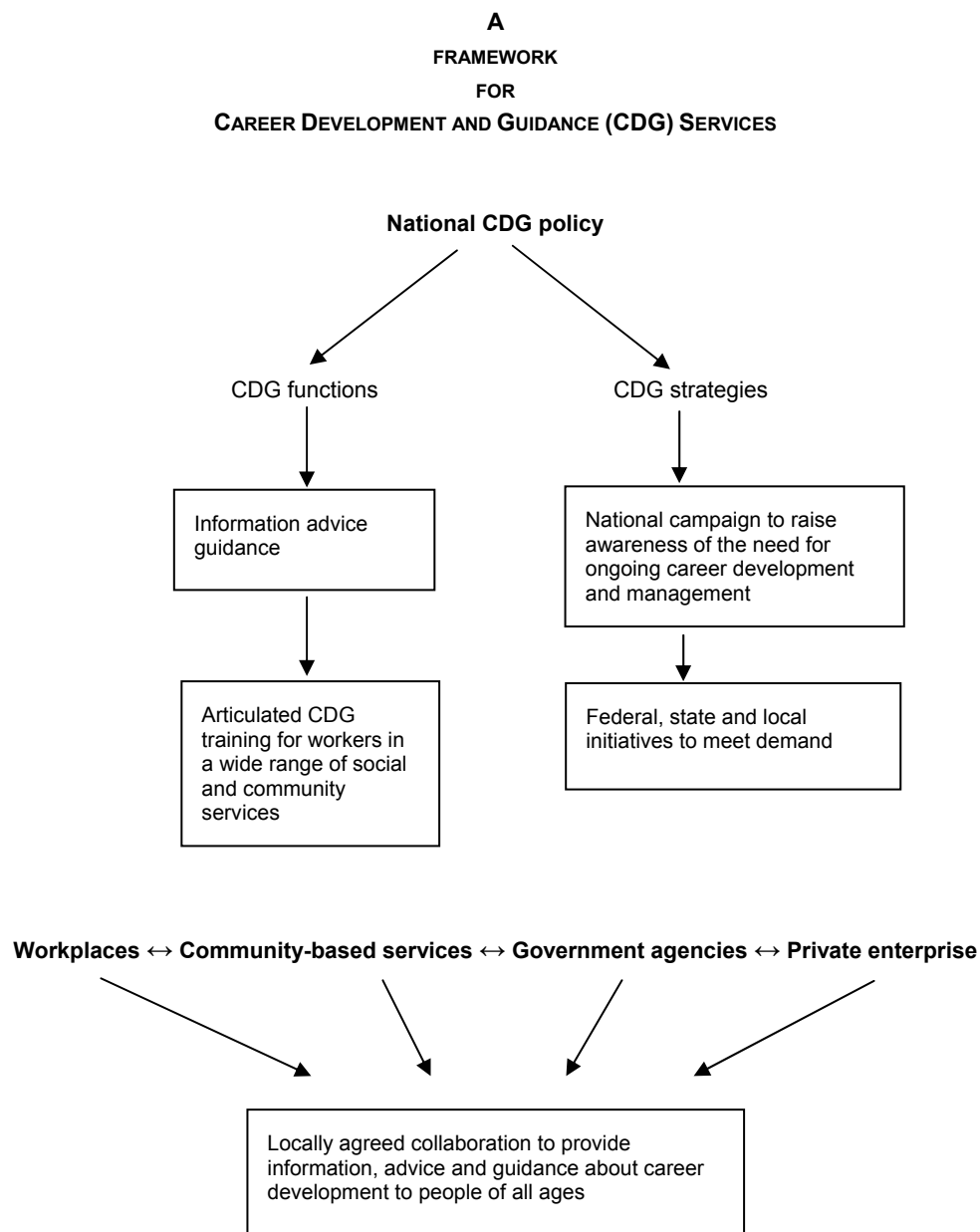
There are major gaps between how services are organised and delivered on the one hand and some key public policy goals on the other. Access to services is limited, particularly for adults. Too often services fail to develop people's career management skills, but focus upon immediate decisions. Training and qualification systems for those who provide services are often inadequate or inappropriate. Co-ordination between key ministries and stakeholders is poor. The evidence base is insufficient to allow proper steering of services by policy makers, with inadequate data being available on costs, benefits, client characteristics or outcomes. And in delivering services insufficient use is made of ICT and other cost-effective ways to meet client needs more flexibly. (OECD 2004, p.3)

To encourage coordination and the improvement of services, a national framework for career development and guidance services would be useful. A framework, in which the focus of this research—community-based services—could be located, is suggested at figure 1.

The conclusions from the research can be read with this framework in mind. They do, however, focus on community-based provision and are presented in two parts:

- ✧ general principles which can be applied to community-based provision and which may have broader application for career guidance services
- ✧ ideas for specific actions in the areas of policy development; improvement of current services offered to the target groups considered in the research project; the development of learning materials; professional development; and further research and pilot projects.

**Figure 1: Framework for Career Development Services**



## General principles

### Building a culture of career development

To be able to cope with the rapidly changing nature of work, Australia needs to nurture a culture which encourages people to develop and manage their own career pathways. This has to be accompanied by further measures to:

- ✧ address age discrimination
- ✧ foster collaborative approaches to skills development which involve all tiers of government, employers, training providers and social service providers.

## Creating opportunities for learning

With people facing increasing numbers of career changes (they are said to be capable of having 23 jobs in a lifetime), continuous learning is an essential element in the adjustment process. Moreover, for those who have been out of the workforce and/or the education system, learning is often the trigger to re-engagement, particularly when it takes place in non-threatening environments and offers social interaction.

This sort of learning may not initially be focused on training for a particular job; rather, it may aim to develop generic skills (akin to employability skills, such as the ability to communicate, work in a team and so on) or to rebuild self-esteem and confidence.

Greater accommodation within the education and training system is needed for this sort of learning as a precursor to accredited training. Provision of such learning is normally relatively inexpensive, but it does demand that learners are given adequate time to rekindle a desire for learning and to develop self-confidence and study skills.

## Impartiality

Career guidance is, ideally, a service intended to assist individuals of any age and at any point throughout their lives to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers (Watts & Sultana 2003). It focuses on values, as well as skills and aptitudes. ‘The opposite of career guidance is trial and error—an economically expensive process for both individuals and employers’ (Hughes 2004, p.5).

To be most effective, the service should be one step removed from agencies offering other assistance, in terms of welfare, job matching or training, thereby ensuring a holistic focus on the client and not on a given outcome.

## Timely intervention

Up until the time when most individuals are managing their own career pathways and there is a culture of career flexibility, most adults are not likely to be proactive in seeking career guidance. They will find themselves having to change direction because of the loss of a job, ill health, family crisis etc. In this situation career advice or guidance should be offered as soon as possible in order to help people to find relevant information and consider their options. It should also be seen as an opportunity for reflection and preparation for informed decision-making rather than a corrective or obligatory activity.

## Professional development and capacity building for career development practitioners

To improve current employment services as well as to encourage a less remedial career development culture, there is a need to raise awareness about career management and lifelong learning within the broader community. A tiered system of training for people whose jobs involve aspects of career development is desirable, beginning with the inclusion of modules on career development in other relevant training packages or as stand-alone short courses, and finishing with diploma and degree-level qualifications. This would produce a workforce able to cater for a range of clients’ needs—from referral to information or to more specialised services, through to professional counselling. Community advisors are also likely to need support to engage in professional development programs.

Community-based providers of career guidance need to build their capacity in terms of relationship building, negotiation, policy development, marketing, financial management and evaluation. They should also have the capacity to act as important hubs of local knowledge, for

example, by conducting audits of local learning, employment and other occupational opportunities, and collection and dissemination of labour market data.

## Ideas for action

The following suggestions are made with the aim of encouraging a career development culture in Australia. They follow on from the general principles and also take into account relevant elements of the 2004–10 national strategy for VET (ANTA 2003), namely, strengthening communication, increasing VET participation and achievement for mature-aged workers, and establishing innovative partnerships.

The major government effort in career education and guidance over the last few years has focused on youth. This has created a sound basis from which to launch further services tailored for more mature clients, in particular, for those for whom private career counselling is beyond reach. The following proposals emphasise professional development and are influenced by the strong message emerging from the research, that a tiered system of career development services is desirable.

### Building a culture of career development

The consultation phase of this research project revealed that there is little recognition of the role of career development in addressing the changing circumstances of work, the growing skills shortages, the retention of older workers and the encouragement of lifelong learning. Social marketing initiatives would help people to recognise the contemporary need to manage and monitor their own careers, in other words, to improve Australia's career literacy.

- ✧ A focus on parents, not only as advisers to their children, but as potential clients of career guidance is a good starting point. While parents may be aware of the career education their children are receiving, many would not consider career guidance relevant to them. Awareness-raising through programs provided in schools could be a first step towards more broadly targeted campaigns. The 'Awareness of Career Development' component of the Australian Career Development Studies and the work being done by the Employment Development Network (parents as career partners workshops) provide a basis for such work, which needs to extend much further into school (and pre-school) communities.
- ✧ Any campaign to encourage wider recognition and endorsement of lifelong career development and guidance services would benefit from more evidence of the concrete benefits these services offer. It is therefore recommended that some economic modelling be undertaken to measure the effects of early intervention through career advice to adults seeking to return to the workforce or to other forms of participation. Similar research into the economic benefits of improving the match between student and course, thus reducing dropout rates, would also be useful. Such research could be an early task for the proposed National Career Development Research Centre. It might also produce useful data for the work on social capital being undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- ✧ Marketing campaigns must consider carefully the language used to communicate with particular target groups. While 'career development' is a useful umbrella term, it needs to be accompanied by concepts more readily understood, such as work–life balance, changing direction, life-planning, skills development. For example, in order to engage industry in the support of career development services, these concepts need to be presented in terms of creating a flexible workforce, improving skills, retaining experienced workers and attracting the right recruits.
- ✧ In order to reach groups who may not be exposed to mainstream efforts to raise awareness, tailored campaigns will be necessary. For example, it would be useful to include career

information in migrant induction and citizenship processes to ensure that people are aware of the options they have to learn English, gain Australian credentials, retrain and so on.

Successful marketing initiatives will stimulate demand for services. The existence of national websites such as *My Future* ensures that, together with a diverse range of services around the country, this demand can begin to be met.

- ✧ There is, however, a need for greater mapping of the services currently on offer, including the degree to which these meet acceptable standards in terms of trained staff, impartiality and sustainability. This research should also identify gaps and the potential for the introduction of community-based or other career guidance services, including those in tertiary education institutions. Trials of the Australian Blueprint for Career Development might incorporate such a mapping exercise. Other research being conducted under NCVET auspices will also produce useful data in this regard.
- ✧ It is also recommended that work continue in exploring the viability of adding telephone support to web-based services such as *My Future*, and a system whereby this is linked to community-based initiatives. In this way local knowledge and advice can be coordinated with state and federal programs and services. This might be a task allocated (with appropriate funding) to the Centrelink Career Information Centres.

## Creating opportunities for learning

Much of the work of career development practitioners concentrates on facilitating learning by encouraging clients to build their self-esteem and to further develop skills. This also involves identifying the barriers to learning (for example, the lack of available courses, transport difficulties, learning difficulties, poor health, inadequate finances, work and family responsibilities). A learner-focused approach to advice, and to the provision and funding of training, will realise significant benefits.

A diversity of providers of career development and learning services, from local libraries and community centres through to ACE providers and TAFE colleges, and government programs offered by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations or the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service would benefit if learning materials about career development were available. These might assist in the design of short courses or in the conduct of self-directed learning groups.

- ✧ The Department of Education, Science and Training's Australian Career Development Studies (<<http://www.career.edu.au>>) and an adaptation for adults of *The Real Game* materials offer an excellent starting point for the development and dissemination of a learning circle on career development, including a facilitator's guide, and would assist in promoting a career development culture in which people learn to manage their own career pathways. The learning circle would be useful to facilitate peer support and self-directed learning, thus alleviating the load of paid staff in libraries, the Job Network, training providers and so on. It would also assist in the self-help groups such as those being sponsored by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. This work might also provide the basis for developing career development modules to be used in more formal classroom settings.
- ✧ The TAFE sector might explore how it can extend its capacity to cater to disengaged people, for example, through collaboration with local career services on work experience/community work programs or through greater emphasis on career development in literacy and numeracy and other pre-vocational courses, as well as paying greater attention to career development services for all TAFE students. (TAFE's involvement in work experience programs may provide a solution to some insurance issues.) It should also examine its commitments to in-house career development services.

- ✧ At present only two universities offer postgraduate qualifications in career guidance: RMIT and Edith Cowan universities. Both are encouraged to consider community-based career guidance as a destination for work experience/industry placements for course participants.

## Impartiality

This study has concentrated on community-based career guidance. The research suggests that an independent service based in the local community and able to cater to clients who are isolated, on low incomes or in receipt of welfare benefits, can deliver cost-effective results and has the potential to act as a link between the many players involved in the economic activity of a community (private employers, government agencies, training providers, welfare services, volunteer organisations, cultural institutions etc.).

While the research did not uncover a model capable of precise replication around the country, it did identify a number of common elements which might serve as a model for a community-based career development service: a face-to-face and ongoing service offered in a community setting by trained staff familiar with local conditions.

The next step might be to pilot such a model in organisations other than adult and community education providers, for example, in online access centres and library networks. Funding for the pilot might be offered jointly by the Commonwealth Government (in terms of training) and the relevant state government (to support infrastructure and networking).

There is evidence that a community-based service could raise revenue, for example, through entering into fee-for-service arrangements with Job Network providers, welfare agencies and local industries, as well as by charging individual clients. In the absence of a mature culture of career development, however, it is unlikely that the service could be entirely self-sufficient. Partnerships with other community-based services could, however, defray some of the overhead costs. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognise the significance of establishing and maintaining partnerships and networks to ensure the sustainability of the community-based approach. Support for salaries and capacity building must therefore be factored into budgets.

## Timely intervention

There is a considerable likelihood that, for the disengaged clients examined in this study, the first port of call in a crisis will be Centrelink and then a Job Network agency. It is important that, in these first encounters, clients are given adequate opportunity to consider information about their options before making a decision on a certain pathway. Access to career information and advice, and, in some cases, counselling are likely to assist in this decision-making process. For that reason, the following suggestions are made.

- ✧ The induction processes for those entering the current welfare system could be improved by reviewing written information made available to first-time Centrelink clients and exploring the feasibility of early referral to a community-based career development session. (The nature of this referral will depend on the client's needs. It could simply be a suggestion to consult certain websites and other information, or to attend a learning circle or to book a face-to-face session.)
- ✧ Career development could be included as an explicit component of registering with the Job Network. Clear guidelines to Job Network staff about referral systems would be integral to this process. This means making sure that the distinction between career development and job matching is understood. In addition, the incentives within the Job Network contract for training should be examined in light of the evidence that, for many older people, shorter courses delivered outside the formal classroom, combined with effective recognition of current competencies, may produce good outcomes for all parties, particularly if engaged as soon as possible after registering. Streamlined procedures for the recognition of current

competencies are also another way to facilitate early intervention and to fast-track skills development.

## Professional development and capacity building

It is through professional development that headway will be made in creating a career development culture. Several initiatives are already in place on which to build in this area.

- ✧ Develop further the Australian Career Development Studies (<<http://www.career.edu.au>>) by exploring the feasibility of including a career development module for integration into other nationally accredited training and core competencies, including for staff in employment services, group training organisations, Centrelink, libraries, adult learning providers and health centres. Such a module could also be included in management/leadership programs. This would alert managers to the need to encourage staff to develop career plans.
- ✧ Expand the Department of Education, Science and Training-funded career education scholarships to include people in the community education and community development sectors, the local library sector etc. Such a scholarship scheme might be piloted in places where this project has uncovered interest in pursuing the idea of community-based provision for adults, for example, the Western Australian Telecentre network, Queensland local library service and Victorian ACE sector.

Furthermore, community-based career development practitioners would also benefit from programs to build their capacity in terms of relationship building, negotiation, marketing, policy development, financial management and reporting and evaluation.

## Funding

Neither the Crossroads model nor the other potential sites for community-based career guidance could operate without subsidies (for example, provision of physical infrastructure, part-payment of salaries, professional development scholarship schemes). The research did, however, uncover the potential for partnership arrangements where the cost of the services would be borne by governments, the community and individuals.

- ✧ It would therefore be important for any pilot projects to investigate further the economic viability of such arrangements. The economic modelling suggested above might also help to build the case for subsidisation of community-based provision.
- ✧ In addition, further research needs to be undertaken into other models, such as a system of rebates for eligible people who pay up-front fees, set on a sliding scale and depending on the complexity of the career guidance service. Again, such research might be undertaken by the proposed national Career Development Services.

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# Appendix

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## The project's reference group

The reference group was convened to help the research shape recommendations relevant to policy development and implementation. The research team thanks all those who participated for their constructive ideas and criticism, and for giving up their time for the two half-day meetings in which the project was discussed.

Agencies represented in the reference group were:

- ✧ Adult Learning Australia
- ✧ Australian Association of Career Counsellors
- ✧ Australian National Training Authority
- ✧ Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work, University of South Australia
- ✧ Centrelink
- ✧ Department of Education, Science and Training
- ✧ Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
- ✧ National Centre for Vocational Education Research

# Support document details

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Additional information relating to this research is available in *Enhancing career development: Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVET's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>. The following information is contained in the support document.

- ✧ Literature review/issues paper
- ✧ References
- ✧ Appendix A: A blueprint
- ✧ Appendix B: Research questions



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