From welfare to work in the Tamar Valley: Building skills into employment programs for disadvantaged job seekers

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Introduction

In 2005 the Australian Government introduced the 'Welfare to Work' reform program. It was designed to increase workforce participation and reduce welfare dependency. It was a key plank of the then Government's labour market reform program (Costello 2006). The main features of the reform include obligations of parents of children aged 6–15 years to seek part time work and increased services for those seeking work. People with disabilities who are assessed as being capable of working 15–29 hours per week are obliged to seek work. Newstart Allowance recipients over 50 years old are obliged to seek full-time work, the same as younger recipients. As part of the additional services provided through the program, more vocational education and training places were made available and the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program was expanded.

This paper draws on the findings of research conducted for NCVER by one of the authors (Guenther et al. 2008) on the topic of Welfare to Work and adds a set of case studies that highlights some of the important learnings from this research project. The case study showcases the work of Youth Futures Inc. in Launceston in supporting long term unemployed people or those who are employment disadvantaged in some way, transition to work. Importantly, this organisation has built in a training component into the work, which is carried out on agricultural, horticultural, viticultural and forestry enterprises in the rural area around Launceston. The methodology addresses a key concern raised in the NCVER funded research, that many welfare to work programs are based on 'work-first' principles, leaving training to chance or the good will of employers. While not diminishing the primary importance of work as a vehicle for transition from welfare dependence to independence, the stories highlight the critical role that training plays when it is integrated into the program—and not seen as an add-on. The methodology also shows how supported housing programs can also be used to in conjunction with the model to provide a ready pool of people.

Context

The Youth Futures Inc. program is based in Launceston but draws on employment opportunities that exist in the region more generally. Figure 1 shows the region in which Youth Futures operates. The organisations draws most of its clients from the Launceston (C) Pt B Statistical Local Area (SLA) and the location of much of the work is in Launceston (C) Pt C SLA. The dark shaded areas show regions with relatively high proportions of people with Certificate Qualifications while the lightest shaded regions are those where the proportion of vocational qualifications is relatively low.

Figure 1. Vocational qualifications in the Tamar Valley region (2006 Census)
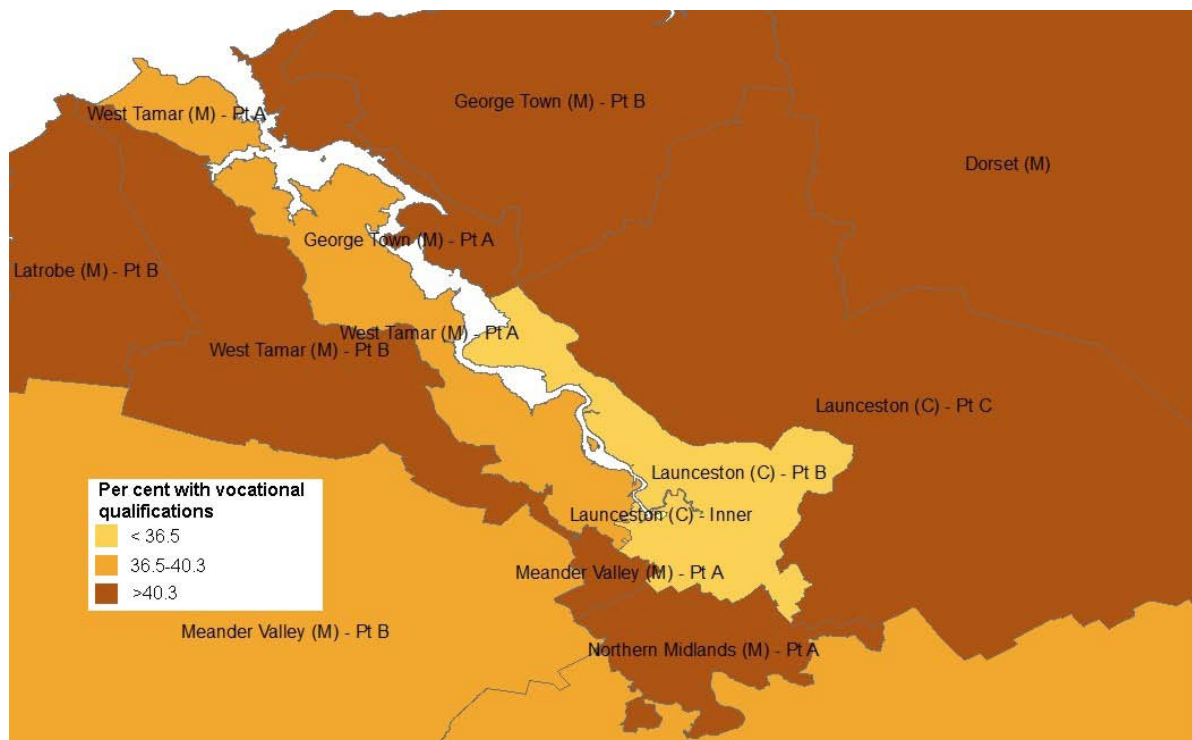
Source: ABS 2007, mapped with ARCMap to ASGC 2006 Statistical Local Areas

The data in Table 1 shows recent unemployment data for the region, based on Small Area Labour Market statistics for the region. What this table demonstrates is that while the pool of available labour in the rural Launceston area is very small (and unemployment rates are low) the pool of labour available in the suburban regions of Launceston is relatively large. When Table 1 and Figure 1 are interpreted together we can deduce that while vocational skill levels in the suburban Launceston region are low, the demand for skilled labour in the rural areas is likely to reflect the existing mix of skills in the area—with an emphasis on Certificate qualifications. Therefore it would be fair to deduce that supplying labour to that region is not enough. Rather, what is required is provision of a skilled workforce to meet the needs of industry in that region.

Table 1. Quarterly unemployment figures, Launceston SLAs (March 2007, March 2008)

	Unemployed persons		Unemployment rate %		Labour market	
SLA	March 2007	March 2008	March 2007	March 2008	March 2007	March 2008
Launceston (C) - Inner	11	12	6.9	7.4	160	163
Launceston (C) - Pt B	1,713	1,913	5.8	6.4	29,505	30,123
Launceston (C) - Pt C	49	65	3.2	4.2	1,514	1,546

Source: Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2008 (unsmoothed series)

Literature

The Youth Futures program operates within a Welfare to Work policy framework. However, it also is underpinned by principles of equity and a belief that learning, employment and addressing individual needs go hand in hand. The literature reviewed here briefly discusses some of these issues and presents findings from a recent NCVER funded project on the topic of Welfare to Work.

Welfare to work policy

A number of contextual factors have led to the current policies for the Australian Government's Welfare to Work initiatives. These include:

- An ageing population and the economic impact of this particularly in relation to skills and employment. The 2002 *Intergenerational Report* (Commonwealth of Australia 2002) suggested that as a result, higher labour force participation was required;

- A perception that a significant number of very long-term unemployed persons are not 'genuine' (Commonwealth of Australia 2005:6);

- Steep increases over the long term in the number of Parenting Payment and Disability Support Pension recipients (Commonwealth of Australia 2005). The Australian Government argues that these increases are unsustainable;

- Significant and sustained skills shortages in some occupations (DEWR 2004).

The measures introduced in the 2005 Commonwealth Budget and commenced on 1 July 2006 are most often described by the Government in terms of providing 'greater assistance' but with discussion of 'obligations' and 'compliance' (Centrelink 2006) for those receiving welfare payments. In summary, the need for Welfare to Work arises out of a tight labour market where skills and labour are in short supply. For parents returning to work, what this means is that many will be expected to contribute to the labour force sooner than they had otherwise hoped; for people with disabilities, the expectation is that 'disability' is not a way out of the labour force; and for mature aged people, perhaps considering retirement, there is an expectation that they will stay in the workforce for longer.

Building training into employment programs: findings from NCVER research

The findings of the NCVER 'Welfare to Work' research (Guenther et al. 2008) found several factors that contribute to transitional programs that work. The research found that training programs that support life skills and identity formation are important. These programs are designed to build a range of employability skills, and in particular contribute to individuals' sense of self-worth, self-confidence and self-esteem. Programs that support clients' social and employment networks were also found to contribute to positive outcomes. These programs could be said to add to participants' social capital by providing opportunities for relationship building. Some providers who were interviewed suggested that a further factor that contributes to effective outcomes is the active support of the provider. Follow-up and one-to-one support that extends beyond the training environment to the workplace were offered as examples of this. Interview respondents reported that training which builds on-the-job experience and career pathways also works. That is, the connection between training and work should be direct and immediate. Finally, respondents felt that flexibility is essential for clients. This is not just flexibility in terms of training provision but flexibility in terms of taking into account the needs of children, adapting to illnesses and disabilities and being mindful of transport constraints.

The researchers also commented on the inadequacies of 'work first' systems in meeting the needs of employment disadvantaged people:

While Welfare to Work may be appropriate in the current strong economic context within Australia, the research team are mindful of the tenuous employment situation that exists for many Welfare to

Work labour market entrants when a 'work first' approach effectively excludes the possibility of critical skills development for the individuals concerned.(p. 35)

Some of the issues described above are discussed in a recent Australian Government Discussion Paper: *The Future of Employment Services in Australia* (DEEWR 2008). The purpose of the Discussion paper is however to raise questions, not to provide answers. While 183 responses to the Paper have been received, at the time of writing this paper a formal position or a more advanced Green Paper had not been released.

Connections between housing, well-being, employment and learning

The connection between employment outcomes and skills development is well established in the literature and needs little further justification (e.g. Jones et al. 2004; OECD 2005; Statistics Canada and OECD 2005). Many labour market programs are premised on the assumption that building individual capacity in the form of skills and knowledge will enhance the likely employment outcomes of the programs. However, the benefits of learning are intertwined with a range of other outcomes, which are not so easy to disentangle. These outcomes include a number of social, identity and general well-being benefits (OECD 2001; Balatti and Falk 2002; Schuller et al. 2004). Some labour market programs are now recognising the value of a more integrated approach such that they address the broader needs of individuals as they prepare for the entry into the labour market. These needs will for example include housing, mental illness, physical disabilities, language and self-concept issues (Northern Territory Council of Social Service 2004; Corporation for Supportive Housing 2008). A recent report titled *Australia's Homeless Youth* (National Youth Commission 2008) recommended that 'foundation education, job preparation, training and job creation be embedded as part of the coordinated response to youth homelessness'. The recently released *Green Paper on Homelessness* (FaHCSIA 2008) highlights the apparent ineffectiveness of existing Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) services in achieving these kinds of outcomes. However, there are exemplar programs that highlight the effectiveness of these strategies (e.g. in New South Wales, The Salvation Army Oasis Youth Support Network 2008).

In Tasmania, Youth Futures adopts similar strategies and integrates employment programs with skill development and programs for homeless people, from the base of a supported accommodation facility. In the first 12 months of 2007-08, Youth Futures had supported 250 employment disadvantaged people find work in about 415 jobs. To achieve these outcomes, Youth Futures has drawn on array of funding sources—none of which are directly related to training (see Table 2).

Table 2. Youth Futures major funding sources

Funding source	Period	Amount
Tasmanian Government Department of Economic Development *Partnerships for Jobs* Program	2006-08	$270,320
Tasmania Community Fund	2006-08	$149,970
Tasmanian Government Department of Health and Human Services (SAAP funding)	2007-08	$441,000
Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Job Placement funding	2007-08	$100,000

The client group included a mix of people: migrants, refugees, Indigenous people, young people requiring emergency accommodation and others drawn from socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods around Launceston. An important aspect of the Youth Futures strategy is to take those from the relatively large pool of labour in the Launceston city and suburban region out to agricultural, horticultural, viticultural and forestry enterprises in the rural areas outside Launceston.

Workers are taken to work in vans (driven by a volunteer from within the group), which then serves as a lunch room, before being driven home at the end of the day.

Youth Futures case studies

The following three short case studies illustrate how Youth Futures works with disadvantaged people, using training with employment strategies to re-engage individuals. The cases are written from the perspective of staff. The first two cases tell the stories of individual clients. The third is written as a journal in the form of a 'day in the life' of a Youth Futures worker. Names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.

Troy: from prisoner to forestry worker

Our first contact with Troy was twelve years ago—when he was 13 years old—as a client of the Youth Shelter. He was disengaged from school and community, involved with the Justice System and Child Welfare. Troy trusted no one. His family were 'street people'. He had three stints in Ashley Youth Detention Centre, and four at Risdon prison, totalling nine of 13 years. Prison became part of—and accepted as—his routine culture. When Troy was not in Prison, he would keep contact with workers at the Youth Shelter even if he was not an in-house client. He was always welcomed for a chat and coffee.

Two years ago, on release from Risdon Prison, Troy presented at the Shelter. He now had one child, another on the way, and people who were dependant on him. He had responsibilities. Troy knew hat in order to keep out of prison he needed to be occupied. This would reduce his boredom and thus his use of alcohol and drugs. With inadequate transport, unstable housing, low educational standards and a history of violence and crime, Troy felt he had little to offer.

After several unsuccessful starts, Troy was placed in a Forestry Industry position in 2006. This was a seasonal position and time limited, which would give him time to overcome some of the obstacles he was facing without a full-time work commitment, but would enable him to develop a culture of work routines, increase his skill levels and build a work history in a supportive environment.

Our mentors often act as mediators between employer and employees, resolving potential problems and miscommunications for example when people don't go to work for basic things such as Job Network or Centrelink appointments. Employers are not always aware of the barriers facing some of our client group. With mentoring from our staff and his employer Troy has now worked his way up the chain of command to become a trusted and respected overseer of a crew of 12. His anger management has improved. He is reliable, punctual and well disciplined. Troy has now adopted the responsibility of mentoring and supervising his crew. He now conducts himself in a manner which gives encouragement and lifts morale, for which in turn he receives respect from his peers.

It is 18 months since Troy had his last trip to prison. With the cycle of criminal and violent behaviour broken we now have a platform of stability on which to provide training. Troy was apprehensive about his learning capacity, past experiences, low literacy and a fear of being humiliated as a failure among his peers. We therefore adopted a 'covert' method of training on the job—that is a seamless assessment process that drew directly from competencies gained at the workplace. Troy didn't know he was engaging in formal training until he was shown that he could demonstrate competencies he had already achieved. This has given Troy the confidence and skills to pursue further training, off the job while still following his employment pathway—the skills and training directly useful in meeting his present responsibility. He has obtained an All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) Licence, having been unable to obtain a Motor Vehicle licence for eight years, and a Chain Saw Licence. Both required literacy

skills. Completing these courses has given Troy the confidence to now tackle Certificate II in Forest Industries.

Through employment and training Troy has developed social connectivity, economic independence, self-esteem and reduced his risk of criminal behaviour. Training has been an escalator out of disadvantage.

Tanya: from welfare dependence to self-sufficiency

Tanya is a 45 year old mother of three. She left school after completing grade 9 and became a mother at a young age. The next 26 years were spent caring for her family. She had been dependent on welfare payments for most of her life and has lived in a low socio-economic suburb in Launceston.

Tanya came to Youth Futures approximately two years ago seeking employment. Although she faced many barriers, such as low educational achievements, isolation, lack of transport and very little work experience, she did possess a demonstrated desire to work hard, learn and participate. This desire was the basic foundation for her to take control of her life and the environment in which she lives.

Support and mentoring offered by the staff at Youth Futures includes advocating on behalf of the client and dealing with life peripherals which often preclude a commitment to work. This may include dealing issues ranging from Centrelink, housing, family issues and legal matters while the client is at work. This has allowed Tanya to develop a reliable work ethic, which has not only boosted her self-esteem and self-sufficiency but has increased her earning potential and ability to stay employed.

Tanya had doubts about her ability to further her education and training. This may have been due to her self-doubt in succeeding or her previous (negative) educational experiences. Her low levels of literacy also contributed to her reluctance to engage in further education and training.

Over eight months of employment we assessed Tanya 'covertly'—(removing the fear of failure and the unknown)—in Units of Competence for a Certificate I in Rural Studies. On completion of three units we presented Tanya with the certificates, leaving in her eyes, an obtainable three more to complete. This generated a culture of 'can do'.

Not only has Tanya increased her desire to learn, she has encouraged and mentored others within her local community—often with entrenched problems—to seek out and value education and training, thus assisting others to escape the cycle of social disadvantage. Two of Tanya's children are now engaged in the job training through Youth Futures. After 26 years of being welfare dependant Tanya is now completely free of Centrelink benefits.

Bill: Notes from a day on the job at an orchard

6:00am: Check weather and prepare for the day

6:30am: First of crew arrive. Coffee and chat. Centrelink forms – fax off. Resolve and address any issues, appointments etc. to be dealt with. Take team to work site.

On-site induction done by Youth Futures staff. This included explaining further training available, specific job requirements. Encourage clients' input, generate and encourage pathways and a culture of learning.

7:00am: Crew arrive at work.

Discuss with Orchard manager any training needs, foreseen issues, work. Organised equipment, pruning gear/saws for workers, negotiated price with wholesaler. Managed to get most gear funded by employees' Job Networks.

7:30am: Work with individual crew members.

Grey	Discussion around Grey trying to stay off the drugs. Aim is to have full-time employment. Has not used marijuana for 3 weeks, maybe just the odd set back in that time.
Lottie	Talk about her three children. All adult age however none assist in contributing to the household financially. Is having trouble keeping her head above water with bills, some advice on budgeting. Arrange some assistance with food until pay day (fortnightly). Will find work for her children.
Ruth	Pulls me aside. Asks if she can participate in training like other members of the crew. Is very keen. When offered to her several months ago she turned it down: 'Not interested, what is the point'. Comes to light that over the past twelve months she has endured several close family deaths ranging from murder to suicide. Work and company has pulled her out of depression.
Allan	Worried he is at work today instead of attending an important appointment in town— Probation Office. Called his Probation Officer. Allan has Community Service Work Orders on a Wednesday. Have arranged that these now be done on Saturdays. His probation officer will now make all future appointments after work hours. Whilst on telephone to Probation Officer he discusses another potential client who is interested in work.

Managing the workers alleviates the pressure put on the orchard owner, who does not always have the time to deal with 'complexity' of staffing issues. They are ill-equipped. All the above leads to retention, enthusiasm and stability of team.

Discussion: what works and why

The three cases highlight some important aspects of what could be described as an effective welfare to work program. Several themes emerge from the case study stories, many of which connect directly to the findings of the Welfare to Work research conducted for NCVER.

Underpinning the success of the Youth Futures program is the importance of **relationship building and trust**. While the support and practical measures are important, without an existing and long-term relationship with the clients the strategies used would simply not work. Troy's story, for example, illustrates the critical importance of trust built over several years—where the relationship was interspersed with periods in prison—in achieving a very positive employment and training outcome.

The **support and mentoring** provided for people with complex needs is also critical to the success of the program. Bill's story, for example, shows how personal issues, dealing with Centrelink, parole officers and employers are supported by staff working with clients. While not explicitly stated in the stories, underpinning the mentoring and trusted relationships is a committed staff, many of who have worked in the program for a number of years. The staff reflect an organisational culture that is willing to experiment and take measured risks, while at the same time placing highest priority on clients, not as 'cases' to be managed, but as human beings with needs and rights.

Both Tanya's and Troy's stories highlight the importance of **flexibility and intertwining training into the employment experience** in an apparently 'covert' way. The realisation that skills learned on the job were formally recognised led to increased self-esteem and confidence. In Tanya's case this not only led to a personal 'can do' value but enabled her to encourage and mentor others within her family and community to do the same as she had done.

Overcoming **transport** issues, noted in Tanya's story, is critical to the success of the Youth Futures approach. Many of the jobs that are available in rural areas outside Launceston would not be accessible to disadvantaged job seekers if it were not for transport provided by the program. Public transport is not available and most clients do not have reliable transport.

Getting the **right mix of clients** is also important. Youth Futures draws on its connections with homeless youth, migrants, refugees and others from disadvantaged backgrounds to form work teams that will work together well in the rural environments where work is available.

Many of these 'what works' factors are mirrored in the Welfare to Work research cited earlier in the paper (Guenther et al. 2008). The stories provide a tangible expression of how programs like Youth Futures, can effectively support people in their transition from welfare to independence. Further, Youth Futures—which has essentially emerged out of a supported accommodation program for youth—shows how an integrated strategy, which sees the needs of individuals beyond simply 'homelessness', can extend outcomes well beyond merely providing safe shelter. Youth Futures shows how a well-integrated and supported accommodation program can build capacity through training and work, but perhaps more importantly can build individual identity in such a way as to shape the future of a whole community. It is not unlike many of the good practice exemplars that are cited in the Australian Governments *Green Paper on Homelessness*, which recognises that: 'Employment, education and training are critical paths out of homelessness and disadvantage' (FaHCSIA 2008:48).

Despite these apparent successes, Youth Futures is not immune from challenges. Youth Futures is not just a supported accommodation program and this raises questions about funding from SAAP sources. It is not a Job Network agency and does not receive significant funding (except for small Job Placement fees) for placing disadvantaged people into work. It is not a Registered Training Organisation either (though it has a strong partnership with a Registered Training Organisation that specialises in working with disadvantaged young people). It therefore does not receive funding that otherwise might accrue from usual RTO sources. Youth Futures is an integrated service that provides a multifaceted service that combines all of the above services but which does not neatly fit into any one 'box'. It depends on a mixed bag of funding and donations that sometimes make it difficult to sustain the range of services provided. The organisation is currently working through these issues.

Conclusions

The model adopted by Youth Futures, while the principles and practices are not 'secret', is not necessarily directly transferable to any setting. It works in Launceston, but would the program work in another regional setting? That would depend on the presence of multiple factors that have been highlighted at least in part, within this paper. It is not as simple as just translocating the model to another region.

However, in terms of a welfare to work and training program, Youth Futures embodies many—if not all—the principles identified in the NCVER welfare to work study cited earlier. It is a tangible expression of a local initiative that integrates training into an employment program. It doesn't depend on luck or the goodwill of employers to achieve skill and knowledge outcomes for clients. Rather, it builds capacity in individuals through a deliberate combination of methods using both

formal and non-formal learning approaches. Mentoring and support mixed with 'covert' assessment and learning strategies lead to meaningful skill development, formal vocational qualifications, strong future employment and training prospects, positive self-esteem and improved social relationships.

Questions remain about how this kind of model can and should be funded. Because of the complex nature of the program—not just an employment program OR a training program OR a supported accommodation program, but a combination of all these and more—finding reliable funding sources that fit the model is a problem. These questions apply not only to Youth Futures, but to hundreds of other organisations in Australia that are attempting to do similar work. Current Australian Government policy relating to welfare to work is still emerging.

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