**Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability**

# Submission No 159

**Name** Mark Keogh

**Submission made by**

☐ Older Australian in work

☒ Older Australian looking for work

# Submission regarding Older Australians / Australians with Disability / Both

### **Your experience**

**Have you (or the person you are submitting on behalf of) experienced employment discrimination?**

[x]  Yes

[ ]  No

[ ]  Not sure

**Did you take any action in relation to the employment discrimination you experienced?**

[ ]  Yes

[x]  No

**Please tell us more, for example, what action you took and how effective you felt it was; or why you chose not to take any action.**

Only reported it to my case manager at my employment provider. Reported that a (private) employment agency recruiter informed me that the organisation she was recruiting for had never, in her experience, recruited a person over the age of 40.

**Did your experience of employment discrimination impact on your participation in the workforce? (For example, did you have to stop work, change jobs or take sick leave?)**

[x] Yes

[ ] No

**Please tell us more**

I have no choice but to look for work, as directed by Centrelink. However, at age 55 I am now allowed to do voluntary work in place of job searching. In reality though I am still looking for work.

### **Barriers**

**Do you think older Australians/Australians with disability face barriers when they look for work or are in a job?**

[x] Yes

[ ] No

[ ] Not sure

**If yes, or not sure, what do you think these barriers might be?**

Other people are better qualified than me to answer this, but I am sure that many employers have a ‘perfect’ mental picture of an employee, and I doubt that would be someone who is older and/or with a disability.

**Does employment discrimination have an impact on gaining and keeping employment for older Australians/Australians with disability?**

[ ] Yes

[ ] No

[ ] Not sure

**Are there any practices, attitudes or laws which discourage or prevent equal participation in employment of older Australians/Australians with disability?**

[x] Yes

[ ] No

[ ] Not sure

**Please tell us more**

Practices by the Australian Federal government, through their departments, such as the Federal Department of Employment, do not help older people, and most likely those with a disability, to find employment. Many policies, schemes and activities (e.g., Work-for-the-Dole) do not even seem to be based on evidence-based research or have any meaningful evaluation.

**What are the incentives and disincentives for older Australians/Australians with disability to work?**

**Incentives:**

Relevant employment programs to maintain individuals’ skills.

**Disincentives:**

Responding to many jobs and not getting an interview, despite spending many hours responding to selection criteria. It is impossible to keep responding to selection criteria when you are almost certain that you are unlikely to be invited to an interview by the employer.

### **Good practice**

**Are there examples of good practice and workplace policies in employing and retaining older Australians/ Australians with disability?**

[ ] Yes

[ ] No

[x] Not sure

**Please tell us of examples of good practice in employing and retaining older Australians/ Australians with disability in work that you are aware of.**

None that I know of, although I am encouraged by employers who advertised themselves age friendly, such as Westpac. Whether they actually are age friendly is a mystery, since I have not seen any figures that back up their claims.

### **Solutions**

**What action should be taken to address employment discrimination against older Australians/Australians with disability?**

It is important that the skills and experience of older people are maintained. This would at least give older job-seekers a reasonable claim to employment and (near) eliminate the claim that mature-age people are, to use the vernacular, ‘old dogs’ with ‘old tricks’. We also need better monitoring.

**What should be done to enhance workforce participation of older Australians/Australians with disability?**

I refer to a paper that I originally submitted to **[redacted—participant who was to attend]** to discuss with participants at the conference of Long-Term Unemployment (Melbourne tomorrow and Tuesday (9 – 10 November) (see the following). He later informed me that he was unable to attend the conference, but said he would pass it on to the relevant minister, which I gather was the minister for Employment.

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Although the following was intended to cover the issue of unemployment and mature-age people, I suggest it could apply to ageing individuals with disabilities. The ideas I present in the following (in an extended letter format) are formulated to create incentives for mature-age job-seekers and employers to be mutually involved in skills creation and skills maintenance, and to enhance mature-age unemployed peoples’ competitiveness in the labour market. They may also have application to other demographic groups.

**Terms**

1. **Mature-age unemployed**: unemployed individuals aged 45 to 64 (as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics).
2. **Long-term unemployed**: Those unemployed for more than a year, but less than two years (as defined by ABS),
3. **Very long-term unemployed**: individuals unemployed for two years or longer (as defined by ABS).
4. **Work for the Dole (WFD)**,
5. **Work-Training Scheme**.

**Background – work/training and mature-age unemployed**

Mature-age unemployed people have a wealth of experience, but despite this are more likely to spend more time out of work than younger age groups, and are more at risk of having outdated skills and experience. The key to assisting this group back into employment is to help them update their skills that are relevant and current to employers.

There are few opportunities for mature-age people to update their skills, except for voluntary work. However, research on the most ubiquitous voluntary employment program in Australia, WFD, suggests that this program has failed to provide individuals with useful skills to take to an employer, regardless of the economic environment. A reason for this failure is the restrictive nature of WFD, which prevents participants taking part in the same work as paid employees. Such is the failure of WFD that I believe it should be abolished and replaced with a temporary part-time work scheme, such as that described in the latter section of this letter (see **work-training schedule**). The purpose of this training scheme would be to:

* Provide mature-aged unemployed people with current work experience in a formal employment setting, with the same rights, conditions and protections as other employees. This would allow individuals to be more competitive in the labour market, by having more relevant real-world job skills, which is currently lacking in WFD and voluntary work arrangements. And,
* Update individuals’ skills to current standards. Mature-age jobseekers, who are prone to ageism and, because of this, long-term unemployment, are especially at risk of their skills becoming less relevant to employers, due to the length of time they spend out of work. This is compounded by changing technologies and workplace/technology driven productivity improvements.

Ideally, a work-training scheme would target:

* Those with medium skills and experience who may experience frequent short-term employment and are at risk of becoming long-term unemployed, And,
* Those with minimal skills and job experience, who are likely to have few skills or experience to make them competitive in the job market. This group is more likely to be very long-term unemployed. In some instances, individuals in this group may be from intergenerational unemployed households.

**Work-training schedule**

The work-training schedule (referred to as ‘training’ for brevity) refers to training days worked and to trainee-employer arrangements and conditions. The following is for the purpose of providing a starting point for the Federal government to consider how to structure the program. Given that some occupations are likely to be more complex than other occupations, and that different individuals are likely to have different needs and abilities, it is likely that there will be a need for some flexibility between employers, participants and the Federal Government. Moreover, the following refers to an outline of the proposed scheme, so human and training factors are covered only in passing. The scheme would most likely include:

* Inviting employers to be part of the scheme. I would recommend no more than one participant per workplace or branch/subsidiary of a firm,
* Employers providing evidence that they can train individuals with actual skills that can be taken to another employer,
* Making the scheme voluntary for participants. This will allow the participants to judge the relevancy of the position to their long-term employment plans. It would also give the trainee a sense of empowerment rather than feeling they were being forced into another employment activity,
* Rewarding participants an nominal amount (e.g. $50 each week) by the Federal government, as reward for taking part in the program, and to cover transport expenses,
* Giving trainees a cooling-off period (e.g., after six weeks) to ensure their training is meeting their personal expectations. Employers should also be contacted at about the same time to ensure the employee is working to their expectations and whether they need additional assistance to achieve a successful outcome. Examples of where problems may arise, although potentially many, can include a trainee with dyslexia who needs additional training assistance, life/personal issues affecting individuals ability to train or remain in employment,
* Giving the employer and trainee the option of moving the trainee into two day per week work training. I would strongly recommend that where the trainee and employer are genuinely in agreement with extending training to two days per week that it is on the condition of being a **full extra day, and that half of that day be paid for by the employer at a rate commensurate with the position**. This will, I believe, give trainees the incentive to be a competent and diligent in their traineeship, to the point that convinces the employer that they are worth the employer’s financial investment. Payment to the trainee for half a day’s work would also be a disincentive to employers intending to exploit the program, and taking work away from regular employees. In addition, two days work for half a day’s pay is, arguably, excellent value to the employer.

As I have mentioned, the ideas I have presented should be viewed as a starting point for discussion. I would urge you, Prime Minister, to consult with academics and peak groups to further investigate traineeships for mature-age people, and the relevant government departments, since these organisations have resources that can inform any follow-up policy.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this letter, and hope it provides some useful ideas at the conference.

**What outcomes or recommendations would you like to see from this National Inquiry?**

Promoting more creativity in helping people into work and not the passive system we have now, that provide inadequate incentives (e.g., wage subsidies of $10,000).

A recommendation to the government that it has to take an active part in recruiting disabled and other people who are shunned by employers.

There is need for more and thorough monitoring of the workforce. As it stands, studies are vague and possibly even bias in favour of government policy (e.g., Work for the Dole).

It is important that reliable and meaningful statistics be gathered by Federal and State governments on older job seekers. The Australian Bureau used to keep statistics on recruitment by age and sector (unsure of the catalogue number) but these figures have not been kept for more than 20 years to my knowledge (ceased I think in either 1996 or 1998). Having these would enable the government to monitor sectors who are not recruitin