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

# Submission No 190

**Name** Withheld

**Submission to the Commission for Human Rights**

**On Mental Health and Age Discrimination**

I won selective admission to Cambridge University and competitive scholarships in order to complete a PhD. Upon graduation, I held teaching and/or research positions at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne, and the Universities of Bamberg and Constance in Germany between 1997-2009 (where I taught in French and German respectively), as well as having spent one year during my PhD at the University of Tübingen. Before going to Cambridge, as an Honours graduate, I was a tutor for two years at Flinders University of South Australia; I also have other teaching experience. With the exception of a temporary research associate position at the Australian Catholic University, I have now been continuously unemployed for more than four years since returning to Australia. I have a breadth of professional experience that few, if any, other Australian academics have, but that has not been considered sufficiently valuable by any Australian university, or any other employer to whom I have applied, to obtain even one single job interview. I am therefore obliged to assume that other factors have ensured that I have remained unemployed.

I have accessed the websites of several universities in order to ascertain who has been offered positions for which I applied. They have typically been considerably younger and less experienced, and less qualified. There has, however, only been one position at any of Australia’s ca. 40 universities during this period for which I was ideally qualified and which was in my area of expertise, i.e. medieval history and philosophy. I was also not invited for interview for that position, which was offered to a French candidate who did not tick all the boxes of the job description – which I could – who was considerably less experienced, and who was approximately twenty or more years younger than me. The selection committee refused on four separate occasions to provide any feedback on my application, and also failed to acknowledge an offer of money to provide me with a temporary teaching contract under a ‘back to work’ scheme then still available. I am aware of several other positions at other universities in my area of specialisation which were not advertised, and I am also aware of other older qualified Australian academics who are unable to obtain any full-time employment; I would speculate that there are some thousands of under- or unemployed academics in this country. I have been explicitly told by a colleague at the university which refused to interview me for this lectureship in medieval history that I will not be offered a position anywhere because of my age.

It must be recognised that very few Australian universities even offer teaching in medieval history, which means that there are insufficient jobs in any case in this area for everybody who would apply for them; and to my knowledge, not one single university offers serious teaching in medieval philosophy. This situation is very different from most other OECD countries. I have experience in a broader range of history, philosophy, and literature, but the competition for positions in other areas likewise far exceeds the numbers of jobs available. I also have skills which ought to be recognised as transferrable, and I have been keen to find employment in other areas, such as university administration and public service research, the tertiary education department and other related agencies such as TEQSA, or think tanks, and I have also applied for a significant number of such positions, but I have not been interviewed for any of those positions, either.

Research by a number of agencies over recent years has consistently found that there are insufficient career opportunities in university teaching and research. There have been repeated cuts of academic positions by various universities (sometimes up to 200-300), while positions falling vacant have not been filled. This and other evidence has also shown that even for current numbers of enrolled students, universities should be appointing more lecturers than they do, and I have strongly supported calls for a senate inquiry into the universities, which is very warranted on a number of grounds. Unfortunately, to date, it appears that no such inquiry has been established. The vast majority of Australian PhD graduates will not obtain academic positions, and to that extent at least will be under-employed. Lecturers are also discouraging their best students from aspiring to academic careers due to the shortage of opportunities. It has also recently been estimated that approximately 50% of current academics have some level of mental health problem, caused directly by the stresses of their employment conditions; I am not aware that anything has been done about this. Over the past six years, I have written innumerable letters to many Labour and Coalition and other politicians about the issues mentioned here, often including detailed itemisation of the issues, but I have typically received no response. I have no confidence that government adequately understands either the complex nature of such professional unemployment or the extent and seriousness of the psycho-social problems which it causes, or that government is willing to effectively address the impedimenta to more Australian academics finding and retaining appropriate full-time continuing – not contract and sessional - positions. Quite simply, there should be more academic positions available to people at all levels of their careers and across all discipline areas, and I can see no excuse for my or any other suitably qualified Australian academic being unemployed. All of the practical problems mentioned here apply equally to all academics in similar circumstances.

I have been unable to obtain any research funding through either the Australian Research Council or any fellowship offered directly by universities, because all such positions are restricted to early career researchers, i.e. who have graduated with their PhDs within the past five years, approximately (this in itself could be regarded as age discrimination); I graduated in 1998. Alternatively, an ARC research grant requires that the applicant have an offer of a position from a university or that they already have a position, it requires that the applicant have a high publication output, and only an estimated 5-10% of all such grants are made to Humanities applications in any case. These factors exclude me. I have been unable to obtain any affiliated position with a university that would at least have enabled me to complete more publications and to re-integrate better into a university environment. The only opportunity open to me has been to enrol once more as a PhD student. Because I already have a PhD, Centrelink prevents me from enrolling in this full-time, it does not recognise this as retraining, and I am ineligible for any scholarship or similar financial support. Not only do employers make it difficult for me to return to work, but various Centrelink and other regulations also impede instead of facilitating such a return.

The requirement of a high publications output has significance for the universities in terms of their funding and their international rankings, and it has therefore become a decisive selection criterion over experience and qualifications. I have prepared successful funding applications in Germany, both my teaching and my research have been highly commended by students and peers, and I have continuously undertaken research as well as teaching, but due to factors relating to my teaching load and the nature of my research, I have not completed as many publications as would be expected. I have not been afforded any opportunity in person to explain this. While I do have completed and partially completed book and article manuscripts, lack of access to overseas library borrowing (to compensate for the lack of foreign-language research publications in my areas held by Australian universities) has prevented me from preparing any of those projects for publication while unemployed. This has created a Catch-22 situation: I cannot obtain a position due, possibly, to insufficient publications, but lack of an affiliate or other position has prevented me from completing publications which I would otherwise have completed, and which might otherwise have made me more eligible for employment. Only my enrolment for a second PhD since mid-2014 has allowed me such access. I also lack financial resources to attend conferences, which would have enabled me to network and which might thereby have improved my opportunities. I do not expect that completion of this PhD will result in my return to full academic employment, as I will be approximately 57 or 58 years old by completion, though it may enable me to obtain contract employment.

This sustained unemployment has directly caused mental health problems, including suicidal ideation, severe depression, and other symptoms characteristic of PTSD (e.g. sleep disturbance, panic attacks, paranoid episodes, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, diminished concentration, aggression). Due to my inability to live as a single person on the Newstart allowance in Sydney, I am forced to live in the Southern Highlands with my mother. Mental health services here and which are available to the unemployed are extremely inadequate on several counts (e.g. insufficient psychiatrists, limited funding for consultation with psychologists, insufficient services proportionate to demand, and difficulties in obtaining appointments with bulk-billing professionals). I do have mental health diagnoses and I continue on anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medications. I have effectively stopped applying for jobs, because constant disappointment exacerbated my mental health problems. New legislation effective as of 1st July this year has meant that previous mental health assessments have become invalid, and the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service, which was my agency and which provided excellent support, has been closed by this government and I have been transferred to a less qualified, less resourced, private agency. These developments have caused me to apply for a disability support pension. While it would be desirable for the unemployed to have better mental health support, I believe that my problems are a direct consequence of a high achiever being denied any opportunity to continue in his chosen career path, with the additional consequences of long-term unemployment (including continued indiscriminate stigmatisation by politicians who need to be subjected to a cultural or paradigm shift, lack of financial autonomy and the numerous consequences of that, social isolation from peers, and lack of validation of self-esteem through appropriate employment), and that were I able to return to an academic career, my mental health problems would be reduced.

I do not recall if I have indicated on any job applications that I have these diagnoses, but I do not have the impression that my mental health conditions have been significant in preventing me from returning to appropriate employment. Rather, I believe that my age, combined with other factors mentioned above, have been the principal problems. It is of course impossible for any job applicant to be certain that age discrimination is a factor; at best, this can only be a more or less substantiated inference.

I have refrained from making any formal complaint or initiating any investigation into any of my job applications, because to have done so would have led to a risk of being black-listed by potential employers. I know that such black-listing has occurred within the university sector.