

Employment White Paper response: Ensuring no one gets left behind

Jesuit Social Services: Who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services is a **social change organisation working with some of the most marginalised individuals, families and communities, often experiencing multiple and complex challenges**. We have been working for 45 years delivering support and advocating for improved policies, legislation and resources to achieve strong, cohesive and vibrant communities where every individual can play their role and flourish.

Our vision is to build a just society – a society where people have access to the opportunities they need to thrive.

Jesuit Social Services works where the need is greatest and where we have the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference. Our services span Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory.

Our Education, Training and Employment programs

Acknowledging that not everybody has the same access to education, training and employment opportunities, often because of circumstances beyond their control, **Jesuit Social Services' [education, training and employment programs](#) help people who have had limited access to learn, study and work**. This includes people who have left school early, people who have been impacted by generational unemployment, those who are from diverse backgrounds experiencing barriers to participation, refugees and asylum seekers, people with mental health conditions, sole parents, and people who have been involved with the criminal justice system. We support people to reach their potential by equipping them with the fundamental skills and pathways they need to ultimately thrive.

As an organisation, our approach is characterised by fidelity – not giving up on people and being open to new ways of solving challenging problems. Informed by Jesuit Social Services' *Our Way of Working* practice framework, we believe assisting people to overcome the barriers they face in achieving social and economic inclusion through access to services, supports and resources can play a key role in enhancing wellbeing and building social cohesion.

Background

The recommendations in this submission provide a clear framework for reform to **ensure that no person living in Australia is left behind**. They are grounded in the knowledge, expertise and experiences of Jesuit Social Services' program staff and participants, as well as academic research and evidence. More broadly, they are based on 45 years of Jesuit Social Services' experience seeking solutions and working with people who face barriers to education, training and employment.

It is now almost 30 years since the development of the Keating Government's Employment White Paper - *Working Nation* - in 1994. Jesuit Social Services believes **we must seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity** and deliver fundamental improvements and change in our employment strategies, policies and systems driven by the power of collective leadership, good will and a shared

vision. We are hopeful that the Federal Government's Employment White Paper can build that consensus.

The challenge: Structural and locational barriers to employment

At Jesuit Social Services, we believe everyone must have access to the opportunities that help them flourish. Our vision is to build a just society – a society where people are included and have access to the opportunities and resources they need to thrive. Fundamental to this is the role of education, lifelong learning and employment. We know that when people are able to fully access education, training and employment, this has significant benefits for their own wellbeing, their family's wellbeing and the wellbeing of communities.¹

Jesuit Social Services is deeply concerned that a number of communities across the country continue to bear the brunt of a complex web of disadvantage. We have conducted research into place-based disadvantage for more than 20 years, beginning with the ground-breaking *Unequal in Life* report in 1999. Our [Dropping off the Edge 2021 research](#) found that disproportionate levels of unemployment, housing stress and young people not engaged in education or employment, among a series of other indicators for disadvantage, are concentrated in a small number of communities across Australia. **This disadvantage is persistent and multilayered.** For example, the 10 most disadvantaged communities in Victoria, and nine of the 10 most disadvantaged communities in New South Wales, were also ranked as highly disadvantaged in the 2015 report. This disadvantage limits life opportunities for people in these communities, and also has a significant social and economic cost to the country.

Poverty has a two-way connection with employment. There is a strong connection between employment and a reduction in poverty. Poverty itself is a barrier to gaining work for current and future generations. Poverty can make transport to work problematic while lack of secure accommodation can be an insurmountable obstacle. And children in disadvantaged families are more likely to experience disrupted education, with lasting impacts on their employment prospects. Further, a lack of adequate income support measures can trap people in low paying insecure jobs.

What should be done?

In supporting people to reach their full potential, including to find and retain sustainable and secure work, **we must address the structural barriers to participation that many people face, including the complex and overlapping factors of disadvantage that recur where they live.** Jesuit Social Services' submission calls on the Federal Government to take action on the following broad areas:

- Commit to a **Living Wage** for all Australians above the current subsistence level of welfare payments, and expand eligibility.
- Address the persistent and intergenerational disadvantage and unemployment that is experienced by individuals and families in many areas around Australia by developing a **Social Inclusion Fund** and accompanying Strategy.

¹ Cole, K., Daly, A., & Mak, A. (2009). Good for the soul: The relationship between work, wellbeing and psychological capital. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 38(3), 464-474.

- Commit to **full access to employment** and employment opportunity to ensure no one is left behind.
- Create pathways to good **jobs in clean energy, land care and management, and other regenerative and sustainable industries.**
- **Guarantee opportunities for young people** leaving school to access education, training and employment so they don't get left behind and/or fall further behind.
- **Fully utilise the skills** of people who come to Australia through **skilled migration programs** or as refugees.
- Establish a **people centred and voluntary employment service system**, delivered by the community and not-for-profit sector.
- Implement a **Federal Social Procurement Policy that includes clear and ambitious targets** for creating meaningful employment opportunities for people experiencing disadvantage and addresses cultural issues related to the **safety of women and other minority groups in male-dominated industries.**

A living wage

The current rate of JobSeeker is simply not enough to live on. **We can't expect a person to find and secure a job when they are struggling to survive – when they are forced to skip meals, forgo healthcare and heating in winter because their income is so low.**² The temporary increase to JobSeeker through the Coronavirus Supplement showed how an increase in income support can drastically improve circumstances for people. With this increase, people were able to access rental accommodation, to afford medication or purchase items as simple, but essential, as warm clothes. Among people in households on the JobSeeker Payment, poverty fell by four-fifths, from 76 per cent in 2019 to 15 per cent in June 2020.³

CASE STUDY: Emma*

In a session with her Jesuit Social Services worker, Emma disclosed that once her Centrelink payment increased due to the Coronavirus Supplement, she was able to replace her underwear and obtain a proper winter jacket. This was something she could not previously afford. The increased payment also meant she did not have to decide between buying groceries or the medication she is on for depression and anxiety.

**All participant names are changed to protect privacy*

² ACOSS, "I regularly don't eat at all": Trying to get by on Newstart (July 2019) ([Weblink](#))

³ Davidson, P., (2022) A tale of two pandemics: COVID, inequality and poverty in 2020 and 2021 ACOSS/UNSW Sydney Poverty and Inequality Partnership, Build Back Fairer Series, Report No. 3, Sydney

Concerningly, research from ACOSS and UNSW shows that once the income supports in place were withdrawn during early 2021, income inequality and poverty increased above pre-pandemic levels.⁴ In light of this, the Federal Government's recent decision to raise JobSeeker, Parenting Payment, Youth Allowance and Austudy payments by only \$25 per fortnight was disappointing and has seen recipients once again living below the poverty line and struggling to pay for essentials such as food, rent, medicine and internet access.⁵

Jesuit Social Services commends the Federal Government's announcement of an independent statutory body to review and publicly report on the adequacy of income support before every federal budget, as part of an agreement with ACT Senator David Pocock. However, we are concerned that the base rate of income support remains too low.

Jesuit Social Services strongly supports ACOSS' [Raise the Rate for Good campaign](#) to **increase the base rate of JobSeeker** and related payments from \$44 per day to at least \$70.⁶ Further to this, we would like to see safety nets that accompany JobSeeker such as healthcare cards and rent assistance remain in place until a person has achieved sustained employment. This would enable people to afford essentials such as food, housing, transportation and healthcare as they transition to employment and remove the disincentive to employment caused by the too early loss of other support measures.

Embedding and sustaining place-based approaches to full employment

Jesuit Social Services strongly believes that place-based approaches together with systemic change must be used to address the complex and interconnected web of challenges impacting access to education, training and employment. While [Dropping off the Edge 2021](#) shows that the pattern of entrenched disadvantage in each state and territory is persistent over time, change can be achieved when the inter-related factors causing disadvantage are understood and community-led solutions are properly resourced. Evidence suggests communities empowered to make their own decisions find solutions that have a greater impact in the long term.⁷

There can be no one-size-fits-all approach to working towards full employment in locations with multiple disadvantage. **Each community has its own specific strengths and challenges**, and what may improve education, training and employment outcomes for an urban community in Victoria will be different to what helps a regional community in Queensland. Jesuit Social Services' [Centre for Just Places](#) recent research - 'What works for place-based approaches in Victoria' - showed that tailored initiatives co-designed with communities can address barriers to employment and social inclusion. These locally tailored approaches differ from broad or universal employment programs as they are targeted to local populations who are often excluded from the job market.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Martin, P. (2022). Unemployed Australians on JobSeeker are set to break two pay rise records – but it's a sign of a broken system, long overdue for a fix. *ABC News*. ([Weblink](#))

⁶ See: [Raise the Rate For Good](#)

⁷ Fraser, E. D., Dougill, A. J., Mabee, W. E., Reed, M., & McAlpine, P. (2006). Bottom up and top down: Analysis of participatory processes for sustainability indicator identification as a pathway to community empowerment and sustainable environmental management. *Journal of environmental management*, 78(2), 114-127.

Jesuit Social Services calls on the Federal Government to **introduce a Social Inclusion Fund resourced at the same level as the \$15 billion National Reconstruction Fund to create local opportunities for people who have had limited opportunities to learn, study or work**, particularly in locations of complex disadvantage as identified in the [Dropping off the Edge \(DOTE\) research](#). Social inclusion Boards should be established to centre community decision-making and to identify local priorities and opportunities for increased jobs in the care, community service and environment sectors. The fund would be used to create local job to meet these local needs.

To achieve intergenerational change, we call on the Federal Government to **commit to a 10 to 20 year comprehensive Social Inclusion Strategy** to address the persistent disadvantage experienced by the most disadvantaged communities in Australia as identified through DOTE.

Full access to employment without the NAIRU caveat

Full employment – where all people who want to work are able to and there is no involuntary unemployment – is **the single most powerful mechanism to improve the wellbeing of everyone in society**. It increases living standards across the board, disproportionately helps the most disadvantaged, and can contribute to stronger productivity growth, the source of further welfare gains. Importantly, work is a source of self-esteem. On the flip side, as the Grattan Institute⁸ has argued, the unemployment associated with a weak labour market not only has long lasting effects on the incomes of families and individuals but negatively affects mental health and life satisfaction. So it follows that **removing barriers to achieving full access to employment must be a high priority of economic and social policy**.

The barriers to employment are many and varied. Barriers to inclusion include level of English language proficiency, overseas qualifications, mental ill-health, lower educational attainment, drug and alcohol misuse, disability, involvement in the criminal justice system or discrimination. Overly restrictive monetary and fiscal policies unnecessarily limit the pace of economic growth and hence employment opportunities, particularly for less qualified workers and those in minority and disadvantaged groups.⁹ The optimum level of employment is often seen in terms of the (potential) impact of low unemployment on inflation (the so-called NAIRU or non-accelerating rate of inflation). This has been used to justify higher interest rates and tighter government spending as unemployment falls to relatively low levels. Yet the evidence for this relationship is poor¹⁰ and the costs of unemployment to individuals and the economy is very high.

Making a just transition to ‘green’ jobs

Recognising that environmental challenges pose particular risks to the communities that Jesuit Social Services works with, for over a decade we have been bringing an ecological perspective to our practice,

⁸ Ballantyne, A. & Coates, B. (2022). When unemployment falls, disadvantaged workers benefit most. *Grattan Institute*. [\(Weblink\)](#).

⁹ International Labour Organisation. (2022). Moving towards full employment: An interview with Aurelio Parisotto. [\(Weblink\)](#)

¹⁰ Klein, M.C. (2017). Debunking the NAIRU myth. *Financial Times*. [\(Weblink\)](#)

policy and organisational identity. Jesuit Social Services has embraced social and ecological justice, encompassing both human and environmental equity.

A just transition has transformative potential for Australians experiencing disadvantage. Jesuit Social Services' paper, '[Just transitions – Expanding the conversation](#)', highlights that a just transition must ensure disadvantaged communities receive the help they need to adapt and build resilience, and should also achieve transformational change by addressing the underlying and interrelated drivers of social and ecological vulnerability.

Our education, training and employment programs across the organisation increasingly include skills needed in transitioning economies, and create models of sustainable and ecologically just living.

A just transition calls on the Federal Government to **increase training and education pathways into employment in clean energy, land care and management, and other regenerative and sustainable industries:** activities that reduce our climate risk and build the economy of the future.

Youth transitions to education, training and employment

Engaging in education or commencing work after finishing secondary school allows young people to grow their skills and abilities, and builds a socially cohesive and inclusive society.¹¹ Conversely, an absence of education or employment after completion of high school can lead to future unemployment, lower incomes and employment insecurity.¹²

Where a young person lives impacts their vulnerability to becoming disengaged from education, training and/or employment after secondary schooling. In May 2020, **the proportion of young people who were not in employment, education or training was more than twice as high for those living in the lowest socioeconomic areas** as for those in the highest.¹³

The COVID-19 pandemic only compounded challenges faced by young people who struggle to transition to education or employment.¹⁴ While young people only make up 14 per cent of the workforce, they made up 55 per cent of people who lost their jobs during 2021 lockdowns.¹⁵ Further, in May 2019, 92 per cent of young people aged 15 to 24 were engaged at some level in education and/or employment. This declined by 4 per cent in May 2020 to 88 per cent (2.8 million people).¹⁶

This means that 381,820 young people were being left behind at this time.

¹¹ AIHW. (2021). Australia's youth: Engagement in education or employment. [\(Weblink\)](#)

¹² de Fontenay C, Lampe B, Nugent J & Jomini P 2020. Climbing the jobs ladder slower: young people in a weak labour market: Working paper. Canberra: Productivity Commission; Pech J, McNevin A & Nelms L 2009. Young people with poor labour force attachment: a survey of concepts, data and previous research. Canberra: Australian Fair Pay Commission.

¹³ AIHW. (2021). Australia's youth: Engagement in education or employment. [\(Weblink\)](#)

¹⁴ Littleton, E. & Campbell, R. (2022). Youth unemployment and the pandemic. *The Australian Institute*. [\(Weblink\)](#)

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ AIHW. (2021). Australia's youth: Engagement in education or employment. [\(Weblink\)](#)

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the longer-term prospects and outcomes for young people, including their longer-term employment prospects, access to secure housing and their mental health.¹⁷

Jesuit Social Services calls for a Youth Job Guarantee that would **ensure all young people are supported into secure employment, education or training that is aligned with their interests and goals**, within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed. Further, we recommend that local jobs and skills opportunities are created through the introduction of the Social Inclusion Fund to meet local care, community and environmental service needs, for young people who might otherwise be left behind.

Skilled people from migrant and refugee backgrounds

The importance of meaningful work for newly arrived people is significant. **Employment fosters broader participation in society, provides a sense of purpose, and creates opportunities** for migrants to become contributing members of the community. Unfortunately, due to Australia's current skill and education recognition system, many people from migrant and refugee backgrounds face unemployment and underemployment – with their skills underutilised.

Evidence increasingly suggests that a significant number of migrants and refugees with overseas-obtained post-school qualifications are working in lower skilled jobs, due to a lack of recognition of overseas obtained qualifications and skills.¹⁸ This has significant economic and social costs.¹⁹ Currently, **the Australian skills recognition system is complex, expensive and time-consuming** for newly arrived migrants and refugees. Jesuit Social Services strongly supports ACOSS' call for the Federal Government to **streamline the recognition of overseas qualifications and access to training** to meet Australian licensing and accreditation requirements.²⁰

Further, Jesuit Social Services believes that **the role of business as an enabler of social inclusion should be more actively explored and promoted**. This requires moving away from a transactional relationship between business and marginalised people to one grounded in an understanding of the capacity of business to work with organisations and the community.

Jesuit Social Services has a long history of working in partnership with companies to support people from diverse backgrounds to move into work aligned to their skills and qualifications. Effective models already exist and can be built upon, including the African Australian Inclusion Program (AAIP), and Jesuit Social Services' Corporate Diversity Programs.

A person-centred employment service system

Weight of evidence clearly shows that the Federal employment services system, with its focus on compliance and meeting narrowly prescribed outcomes, is failing disadvantaged people looking to

¹⁷ AIHW. (2021). COVID-19 and the impact on young people. [\(Weblink\)](#)

¹⁸ Productivity Commission. (2016). Migrant Intake into Australia Inquiry report. [\(Weblink\)](#)

¹⁹ Deloitte. (2018). Seizing the opportunity: Making the most of the skills and experience of migrants and refugees. [\(Weblink\)](#)

²⁰ ACOSS. (2022). Restoring full employment: Policies for the Jobs and Skills Summit. [\(Weblink\)](#)

secure work. A government-commissioned report on the jobactive system noted there was one consultant to 148 people seeking work and that one in five people had been in the system for more than five years.²¹

Australia's new employment service for people who are unemployed – **Workforce Australia**²² – **remains heavily focused on compliance rather than providing practical support for people that makes a difference**, such as wage subsidies for employers and training that is relevant to career aspirations and employment opportunities.²³ Evidence of peoples' experiences of accessing employment support through Australia's previous employment service, jobactive, shows that a focus on compliance has grave impacts on people's mental health and undermines confidence and independent efforts to secure employment.²⁴ Some argue that the privatisation of employment services has "failed to prepare many disadvantaged jobseekers for work and made others less employable by demeaning them".²⁵

Jesuit Social Services believes that the employment services system must be non-compulsory, that it not be the policing arm of the welfare system, and that it be delivered by community and not-for-profit providers. The shortcomings of contracting out employment services to for-profit organisations have been evident since its establishment. Further, it must enable the time and resources to be invested in those who are most disadvantaged.²⁶ **The most effective support for disadvantaged people occurs through building a relationship with a person** and taking the time to understand their strengths, hopes and aspirations.

The Victorian Government Jobs Victoria Employment Services (JVES) provides a model of employment service able to support people who face significant barriers, including past justice involvement, mental-ill health or other complex needs, into jobs. JVES, with its focus on supporting the most disadvantaged, stands as an example of an employment services scheme that is largely working well.

Gender justice in male-dominated industries

Jesuit Social Services has been working with boys and men for many years. This work has included boys and men involved in the criminal justice system; establishing Victoria's first dedicated counselling service to working with young people struggling with concurrent mental health and substance abuse problems; and the Support After Suicide program which provides free individual and family counselling to people bereaved by suicide and runs a specialist men's group.

²¹ Employment Services Expert Advisory Panel. (2020). I Want to Work: Employment Services. [\(Weblink\)](#)

²² In July 2022, jobactive was the main employment service for people who are unemployed. It has been replaced by a new system called Workforce Australia.

²³ ACOSS. (2022). Restoring full employment: Policies for the Jobs and Skills Summit. [\(Weblink\)](#)

²⁴ ACOSS (2022), Voices 2: Survey of people using jobactive services.

²⁵ Henriques-Gomes, L. (2022). Chair of Australia's job services inquiry questions privatisation, likens compliance to Squid Game. *The Guardian*. [\(Weblink\)](#)

²⁶ Jesuit Social Services. (2019). Submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee's inquiry into jobactive. [\(Weblink\)](#)

Many of the boys and men we work with use violence, and we see many of them hold harmful attitudes towards girls and women. The boys and men we work with are in trouble, and causing trouble. Spurred by our proximity to these issues, and in response to an unmet need, in 2017, Jesuit Social Services established [The Men's Project](#). The Men's Project focuses on supporting boys and men to live respectful, accountable and fulfilling lives, where they are able to develop loving relationships free from violence and contribute to safe and equal communities.

Through our work, we know that **there is a compelling need to address the root causes of harmful behaviours in the workplace such as violence, gendered violence, sexism and sexual harassment**. The best available evidence suggests a key way to achieve this is through primary prevention efforts that promote cultural and attitudinal change related to masculinities and gender. Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins' report *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces* echoes this and advocates for strategies that promote gender equality by recognising and shifting the gendered drivers that underpin sexual harassment.²⁷

Similarly, the Victorian Government's 2021 Building Equality Policy also details the need for 'respectful workplace training to all workers throughout the subcontracting supply chain.' It encourages actions which 'promote diversity of thinking, to challenge the status quo and achieve innovative outcomes' with an overarching goal of 'disrupt(ing) the existing gender stereotypes, norms and roles in the construction sector.' The Victorian Government's emphasis on women's equality and safety as one of seven social procurement objectives is also beginning to have an important impact on workplace practices and culture.

The capacity for Federal Government procurement spending to contribute social value should also be meaningfully pursued, including in relation to creating sustainable job opportunities for people facing barriers to employment. The size of government procurement contracts underlines the significant potential for a proportion of this spending to be targeted to achieving positive social outcomes. The Victorian Government's [Social Procurement Framework](#) is a promising model that could be drawn upon.

For further details regarding building gender justice in workplaces, please see Jesuit Social Services' submission to the Department of Justice and Community Safety's consultation on addressing sexual harassment in Victorian workplaces (linked [here](#)).

Ongoing consultation to inform the White Paper

Jesuit Social Services is concerned that the very short consultation period to inform the Employment White Paper means there is limited time for organisations, community and those with lived experience to prepare a response. We know that to address the barriers and foster pathways to employment we must listen to those who have lived experienced. We therefore recommend that **additional opportunities to inform the White Paper be provided to service providers and members of the community, particularly those with lived experience of persistent disadvantage and unemployment**.

²⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC]., (2020). *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*, Australian Human Rights Commission: Sydney

Jesuit Social Services calls on the Federal Government to:

1. Increase the base rate of JobSeeker and related payments to at least \$70 per day and expand eligibility to people on bridging visas and other temporary visa holders.
2. Extend safety nets that accompany JobSeeker such as healthcare cards and rent assistance for a period of time after a person has gained employment.
3. Develop a Social Inclusion Fund and an accompanying Social Inclusion Strategy to address generational disadvantage and to create new opportunities for access to employment, particularly in areas of high disadvantage.
4. Create pathways to good jobs in clean energy, land care and management, and other regenerative and sustainable industries.
5. Develop a Youth Job Guarantee that would ensure all young people are supported into secure employment, education or training that is aligned with their interests and goals, within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed.
6. Invest in and call on public service agencies and corporate organisations to consider shared social impact initiatives to support under and unemployed skilled professionals from migrant and refugee backgrounds into employment, such as the Corporate Diversity Partnerships program.
7. Streamline the recognition of overseas qualifications and access to training to meet Australian licensing and accreditation requirements.
8. Develop an Australian employment service that is person-centred, voluntary, that has no role in welfare compliance, that prioritises intensive, flexible and individualised support for disadvantaged people seeking work, and that is delivered by community sector and not-for-profit organisations with their unemployed participants' wellbeing and success as their core purpose.
9. Implement a Federal Social Procurement Policy that includes clear and ambitious targets for creating meaningful employment opportunities for people experiencing disadvantage and addresses cultural issues related to the safety of women and other minority groups in male-dominated industries.
10. Offer service providers and members of the community, particularly those with lived experience of persistent disadvantage and unemployment, additional opportunities to inform the White Paper.