The growing number of mature age (45+ years) Australians on unemployment benefits—almost a quarter of a million in June 2015 (Department of Employment 2015)—and high rates of under-employment of mature aged people is a significant problem, yet employment policy and initiatives, such as Jobactive, tend to be geared more to the needs of younger people. Compounding the challenges for mature-aged workers are the tendency in social policy to view population ageing as a problem which pits younger generations against older ones and a policy focus from government on the extension of working lives. This is problematic for many people—both economically and emotionally—given the limited availability of decent work and changing expectations of retirement and identity.

Improved understanding of a policy problem: By exploring the institutional ageism and other barriers faced by older workers, the research raises awareness of (a) the disconnect between policy that extends working lives in a context of limited jobs; (b) the gap between the average age of employment services’ workers and mature-aged workers, and the resulting ineffective service; and (c) the impact of active labour market policies on mature age jobseekers. All research reports made concrete recommendations for employment services reform.

Impact on service delivery: The researchers have developed practical resources — the website Working for everyone that illustrates the situations of mature age jobseekers and the Working It Out Tool and how-to-guides, which are focused on the health and well-being needs of mature aged workers.

Impact on public policy and legislation: The researchers have successfully raised awareness among practitioners and policy makers as demonstrated by the numerous industry events and advisory meetings at which they have been invited to discuss their findings. According to the researchers, it is likely that the research and subsequent advocacy, has influenced changes in policies like the Career Assistance Transition Policy and wage subsidies for older workers, but they recognised that this cannot be attributed directly to any one influencer. Dr Bowman stated: “We are a voice in a chorus towards something.” With regard to Job Services, the researchers acknowledged that employment services contracts last until 2020… “so we won’t see any changes until new contracts are announced.” The findings show that employers have poor attitudes to long term unemployed people, and that an unconscious bias exists from job service providers that older jobseekers can be difficult to place and therefore be liable to ‘parking’. The researchers have reported these findings and pursued action, resulting in impact in two significant areas: (1) in making job-seeking resources accessible to mature aged people to improve their success in gaining employment, and (2) in informing policy makers, and service providers of ways to overcome these barriers into practices of publicly-funded employment services.

Approach to impact: The researchers planned their research and partnerships to expose the challenges and needs of older workers and unemployed older workers and jobseekers. The researchers have strong networks and relationships with employment services, community service organisations and policy makers. They have activated these networks in this research program to inform the research design, and seek improved responses to mature-aged job seekers, from these stakeholders. They have also engaged actively with mature-aged job seekers as participants in their research and as recipients of helpful resources to aid their job seeking efforts.

The researchers have successfully raised awareness among practitioners and policy makers as demonstrated by the numerous industry events and advisory meetings at which they have been invited to discuss their findings. According to the researchers, it is likely that the research and subsequent advocacy, has influenced changes in policies like the Career Assistance Transition Policy and wage subsidies for older workers, but they recognised that this cannot be attributed directly to any one influencer. Dr Bowman stated: “We are a voice in a chorus towards something.” With regard to Job Services, the researchers acknowledged that employment services contracts last until 2020… “so we won’t see any changes until new contracts are announced.” The findings show that employers have poor attitudes to long term unemployed people, and that an unconscious bias exists from job service providers that older jobseekers can be difficult to place and therefore be liable to ‘parking’. The researchers have reported these findings and pursued action, resulting in impact in two significant areas: (1) in making job-seeking resources accessible to mature aged people to improve their success in gaining employment, and (2) in informing policy makers, and service providers of ways to overcome these barriers into practices of publicly-funded employment services.

Approach to impact: The researchers planned their research and partnerships to expose the challenges and needs of older workers and unemployed older workers and jobseekers. The researchers have strong networks and relationships with employment services, community service organisations and policy makers. They have activated these networks in this research program to inform the research design, and seek improved responses to mature-aged job seekers, from these stakeholders. They have also engaged actively with mature-aged job seekers as participants in their research and as recipients of helpful resources to aid their job seeking efforts.

The researchers have successfully raised awareness among practitioners and policy makers as demonstrated by the numerous industry events and advisory meetings at which they have been invited to discuss their findings. According to the researchers, it is likely that the research and subsequent advocacy, has influenced changes in policies like the Career Assistance Transition Policy and wage subsidies for older workers, but they recognised that this cannot be attributed directly to any one influencer. Dr Bowman stated: “We are a voice in a chorus towards something.” With regard to Job Services, the researchers acknowledged that employment services contracts last until 2020… “so we won’t see any changes until new contracts are announced.” The findings show that employers have poor attitudes to long term unemployed people, and that an unconscious bias exists from job service providers that older jobseekers can be difficult to place and therefore be liable to ‘parking’. The researchers have reported these findings and pursued action, resulting in impact in two significant areas: (1) in making job-seeking resources accessible to mature aged people to improve their success in gaining employment, and (2) in informing policy makers, and service providers of ways to overcome these barriers into practices of publicly-funded employment services.

Approach to impact: The researchers planned their research and partnerships to expose the challenges and needs of older workers and unemployed older workers and jobseekers. The researchers have strong networks and relationships with employment services, community service organisations and policy makers. They have activated these networks in this research program to inform the research design, and seek improved responses to mature-aged job seekers, from these stakeholders. They have also engaged actively with mature-aged job seekers as participants in their research and as recipients of helpful resources to aid their job seeking efforts.
Impact on service delivery: The initial research question — what challenges face older people in working longer — prompted the researchers to hear directly from unemployed and under-employed jobseekers about the barriers they were experiencing in getting and sustaining work, and the impact on their economic and emotional well-being. This led to the development of more targeted research and on-line resources: the website Working for everyone that illustrates the situations of mature age jobseekers and changes to the labour market, and the Working It Out Tool and how-to’s guides plus program and policy initiatives aimed at countering age-discrimination and unconscious bias. There is no direct measure of changes to service delivery and attitudes to older workers as a result of the on-line resources and research program, but the impact is aimed at improving job outcomes for older people. Impact on quality of Me for community members: This research program included job-seekers as participants to hear of their experiences, and resulted in online resources aimed at, and accessible to, older job-seekers, but it did not seek to measure improved quality of life or job outcomes specifically.

5. ENGAGEMENT

Significant appointments, memberships and recognition: Appointments to reference and advisory groups recognise the team’s expertise in ageing research and provide opportunities to use research findings to influence policy and practice. Professor Biggs has been invited as an expert advisor on work issues for older people by two government agencies: Commonwealth Treasury, ‘Economic Potential of Senior Australians: Advisory Group’ (2011), and the Australian Government Department of Human Services ‘Older Australians Working Group’ (2012). Biggs has also engaged with Federal Members of Parliament and Parliamentary Friends of Older People from 2012. Industry reports: Industry research reports enhance access to research for policy makers and practitioners.

- Media The media impact has been significant in raising awareness of the research findings, examples are. The New Daily “Why we need Bourke-styled work for older Australians” June 17 cites Dina Bowman “… tackling ageism needed to start at the business level, during the recruitment process. I’m not sure that government can do a lot. I think employers play a really important role… Recruitment strategies are really key” and Sydney Morning Herald “Caught in an unemployment networld: too young to retire, too old to get a job” The BSL research has found that people over the age of 45 are increasingly caught between work and retirement — too old for ageist employers to hire and too young to retire. It reveals mature age people are increasingly dependent on employment services and welfare and at risk of living in poverty —

- 2011 Vision Australia Radio 2/11/11 live interview 20 minutes A Morning Conversation —mature age workforce participation

6. RESEARCH INCOME

Category 1 (international and national competitive)

1. Strazdins, L, Balwant, G Carey, D Bowman, P Butterworth, Su Mon Kaye-Myint, P Thorning; Peng, Yu; S Makett, Working longer, staying healthy and keeping productive 2016-2019 ARC Linkage LP160100467 $408,000
2. Duncan, A.S., Biggs, S.J., Gong, H., Kimberley, H.E., & Bowman, D.D. Understanding and preventing workforce vulnerabilities in middle and beyond 2012-2015. A collaboration between the Brotherhood of St Laurence and researchers at the University of Melbourne, Curtin University, and the University of Canberra in partnership with Jobs Australia. ARC Grant $374,823.

Category 3 (Other industry)


7. RESEARCH OUTPUTS

The program of research has generated more than 30 scholarly publications as well as major reports (primarily published by BSL). Selected publications are: