AARE ANNUAL CONFERENCE, HOBART 1995

Is Working Nation Working?
An Examination of the Dis-ease in the Relationship between Education and Employment from a Regional Perspective.

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Descriptors: Vocational Education, Continuing Education, Adult Learning

Abstract: This paper provides an overview of current research by the authors into the implementation of Working Nation initiatives on the North Coast of NSW. Attention will be focused on labour market programs (LMPs), with their emphasis on training and 'job readiness'. In line with the theme of this conference, the contribution of LMPs from the perspective of yesterday, today and tomorrow will be examined.

The paper specifically targets the problematic relationship between the education and labour markets. The discourse of 'outcomes' is examined in some depth. Concerns will be raised in regard to the difficulty of reconciling economic imperatives with social policy objectives using education as a vehicle. It will be argued that such instrumentalism will fall short of its intended objective of finding work for the unemployed.

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Introduction

This paper reports research which is currently investigating how the provision of labour market programs addresses the issue of unemployment on the North Coast of New South Wales. The study is still current and this paper reports progress to date. Although this paper is primarily concerned with examining the problematic and uneasy relationship between education and labour markets which is emerging in the study, it is important nevertheless to briefly provide you with the overall context in which the research is taking place. Ten major concerns will be highlighted in the paper.

The research is currently examining:

● the kinds of labour market assistance available to those categorised as 'long-term' and 'very long-term' unemployed (including the number of programs available and number of participants in each);

● how the region has responded to the reform of labour market assistance
in Working Nation - the 1994 government White Paper on unemployment, with particular focus on New Work Opportunity (NWO) projects and individual case management;

- the contributions of public and private providers of labour market programs, particularly in regard to subsequent job brokerage;

- the impact in this particular region, the North Coast of New South Wales, of increased competition for labour market program funding;

- the number of successful job placements following completion of labour market programs;

- 'outcomes' from labour market programs other than immediate job placement.

Key Issues Identified in the Research

The question relevant to this research is whether the current initiatives, which largely revolve around education and training, will provide long term solutions for the unemployed particularly at a regional level. Therefore the project is exploring the impact of the initiatives and the relationship between them and the education and labour markets in the following ways:

- by identifying which labour market programs are particularly successful in this region;

- by naming the factors which contribute to this success (based on data from both providers and participants);

- by identifying the difficulties involved in job brokerage; and

- by proposing a regional strategy for labour market assistance which will lead to 'real' job placements.

Collection of Data Phase

A database of labour market program providers in the region has been established, and over 70 interviews with providers and their clients have been held. Interviews with providers covered the funding, aims, content and implementation of different programs and the profile of participants (e.g. ages, educational background, time unemployed). Data was also gathered on links with government bodies, regional employers and educators.

Selected participants in labour market programs were interviewed to
build a profile of educational and unemployment history and attempts to gain work. These interviews included an exploration of the participants' perceptions of the programs they attended, as well as their knowledge about avenues of support in the region, their access to this support and to its benefits. Participants also identified what they saw to be barriers to finding employment.

Current unemployment statistics for the region are issued monthly and are being broken down and analysed to identify trends which could relate to the current labour market initiatives.

Analysis and Reporting Phase

All interviews and focus groups have been held and copious amounts of data is currently being transcribed, organised into categories, themes and taxonomies. Before April 1996, the reporting date, follow-up interviews will be held with labour market program participants to 'track' any progress or changes. The implications of regional unemployment statistics are being analysed as an integral part of the study. When a draft report has been prepared, there will be meetings with project participants to share findings and discuss strategies to address issues which have arisen. A final report will then be prepared.

Hence the data is in the very early stages of analysis. Today's presentation reflects this reality and therefore will draw on examples of raw data from interview text to highlight ten major concerns. As the study progresses a deconstruction of the interview text will be undertaken. This deconstructive analysis will involve reading the interview text in such a way that its underlying assumptions and inherent contradictions are revealed.

Significance of the Study

This paper specifically addresses the question of whether economic and social policy imperatives can be reconciled, via the vehicle of education and training, as simply as the rhetoric of Working Nation suggests. This is an important issue because, in essence, Working Nation is redefining what we understand as the education of unemployed adults. That is, the development and promotion of a strong education/work/market economy nexus has considerably blurred boundaries. This also raises important issues for vocational education in schools.

In Australia, the long-term unemployed continue to be a serious problem. The latest figures (263,200 in April 1995) are significantly lower than the peak reached in March, 1993 - a staggering 370,900 people. At that time the calculated rate of long-term unemployment in
Australia was 2.4% while the United States, Japan, Canada and Sweden are all hovering around the 1% mark. Thus, the urgent need to shift the focus of unemployment policy onto the long-term unemployed particularly.

Current predictions in Working Nation argue that the long-term unemployed will fall to 200,000 by the year 2000 and that overall unemployment will drop to 5%. The problem is that a large number of jobs have simply disappeared and not many of the new jobs being created will go to the existing unemployed.

Little work has been carried out to investigate whether the infrastructure encapsulated in Working Nation, with its emphasis on training as the vehicle for employment, is meeting the real need of job placement for unemployed people. Certainly at a regional level there is a marked absence of research to determine whether the policy initiatives are in fact working.

Working Nation outlines the policies the Government will pursue to reduce unemployment. In the first full year of its operation (1995-96), the measures outlined in the Paper will add $1.7 billion to Commonwealth outlays. Over four years outlays will be $6.5 billion over previous projections. In the recent Federal Budget (May 1995) this amount has been reduced. Nevertheless, over $3 billion of this is to be directed through LMP's. This is being strongly targeted through the Jobs Compact to assist people unemployed for over 18 months.

Working Nation sets out the necessary increases in expenditure most markedly evident in the expanded array of labour market programs and their delivery. However, there are grounds for concern that the desire to extend program assistance to as many of the unemployed as possible will compromise program quality and outcomes. Freeland (1994a) suggests that it would be better, albeit more politically courageous, for the government to use the projected $4.6 billion additional labour market program expenditure (over 4 years) to assist a less ambitious increase in participant numbers.

It could be argued that this would ensure higher quality programs, more effective delivery, enhanced long term labour market outcomes for participants, a more highly skilled labour force and a capacity for a higher level of sustainable growth. An important aspect of this research project is to gather data which may determine whether, indeed, labour market assistance has been distributed effectively. This begs the question as to whether jobs will be available at the conclusion of the training. If there are no jobs, why are labour market programs provided for the unemployed? Does training necessarily lead to employment and should education be reduced to such a narrow focus? The case management initiatives now being widely implemented through both
public and private sector providers is intended to be closely linked with regional labour market requirements to ensure employment at the end of training.

LMP Assistance in Working Nation

Labour market programs (LMP's) are among a range of policy instruments by which government intervenes in the labour market to control the forces of supply and demand and to address inequities in the distribution of employment opportunities. Labour market programs were introduced as a supplement to the provision of income support allowances in the early 1970's. Labour market programs received a boost under Working Nation because they were seen to address the problem of high unemployment in times of recession and low rates of job growth. Indeed, Working Nation appeared to herald a more adequate policy response in terms of labour market programs than that proposed in an earlier Green Paper.

The current range of LMP's focus predominantly on removing impediments faced by job seekers in gaining access to employment. The rationale underpinning the programs is that individuals will be matched with available employment opportunities, their skills and experience developed to increase competitiveness in the labour market, while at the same time employment placements are subsidised for short periods.

From the early 1970's, LMP's aimed to address the employment and training needs of specific groups of unemployed people who were further disadvantaged in the labour market. These groups included women, indigenous Australians and people in rural areas. By the mid 1970's the number of LMP's grew exponentially. A major focus of new LMP's was expanded to include the growing number of young people who were unable to find employment.

Through the 1980's, the targeting of program assistance was widened to include people who were long-term unemployed (at that time those who were unemployed for more than 12 months, the definition of which has now shifted to those unemployed for more than 18 months) and, following the Handicapped Programs Review, people with a disability. These shifts represented a federal response to the increasing rates of long-term unemployed among various sections of the community.

Following the recommendations of the 'Kirby Report' LMP's were integrated into a more clearly articulated group of programs (Committee of Inquiry Into Labour Market Programs, 'Kirby Report', 1985). Since this time, Australia has been developing what is termed an 'active approach' (based on approaches in other OECD nations) in its provision of assistance to people who are unemployed. This 'active approach' aims to increase the chances of people finding employment by requiring them to actively seek vacancies or participate in LMP's in order to receive
income support allowances. Indeed, under Working Nation there was an increase in the measures taken to ensure the implementation of 'reciprocal obligations'.

Under Working Nation, the Government increased its expenditure on LMP assistance from $1.4 billion in 1993-94 to $4.6 billion by 1996-97 (Working Nation 1994, p.189). The current spending on active measures places Australia in a more acceptable position among other OECD nations in its effort to reduce unemployment (OECD, 1993, p. 73). Obviously the success of the approach depends not only on the generosity of the expenditure devoted to LMP's, but will also be contingent on job growth. Current research (see for example Graham 1995) would indicate that unemployed people face not only the supply-side barriers to gaining employment (poor self esteem, low motivation, lack of access to transport, diminishing work-related skills and knowledge). They also have to negotiate the demand-side barriers such as the reluctance of some employers to take on the long-term unemployed, slow economic growth, inadequacies with regional infrastructure and limited employment vacancies.

Hence, the strategy that is required to reduce unemployment must include not only active spending measures but also the promotion (and resourcing) of an increased demand for labour.

Access to LMP's is granted to people who have been registered with the CES. Access is prioritised in terms of the duration of an individual's unemployment, or the individual's status according to a target group. Preference for access under Working Nation is focused on Job Compact clients who have been unemployed for over eighteen months. How effective these programs are in practice will depend largely on the number of job vacancies being offered to participants upon completion of a program.

Concerns Over LMP Assistance Under Working Nation

There are a number of ethical concerns which have been raised in regard to access, equity and quality assurance arising from the administration and delivery of the current range of LMP's under Working Nation (see for example ACSWC, 1994). The remainder of this paper will address these concerns that have emerged from the study to date.

Concern 1: Target Group

An issue of concern with the LMP 's under the Jobs Compact is that they are targeted to those unemployed for over 18 months. While this would seem to be a fair and equitable response (to offer priority to those who have been unemployed for the longest time), it means that others may experience extensive delays before they are eligible to
participate. The danger is that having to wait so long to gain access to employment-based LMP assistance may well aggravate problems of low self confidence and low motivation experienced by many unemployed, as well as loss of skills. More ready access to LMP assistance is needed to avoid the entrenched position that many find themselves in after 18 months. It would seem that this magic figure of 18 months is too simplistic an indicator to account for the diverse nature of disadvantage which forms barriers to employment. The Government must therefore ensure that people facing greater barriers to employment gain access to assistance that will prevent them becoming long-term unemployed. The question that remains largely problematic is what level of disadvantage will constitute at a high risk of long term unemployment (Working Nation, 1994, p. 112)?

We're creating the highest skilled unemployment queue in the world. (LMP Provider)

I can't figure out why I have to be on the dole for so long... I know I want a job in the child care industry and it's really frustrating not to be able to get access to the help I need to do it. You know I'm really keen... but the longer you're without work the harder it gets to keep up your spirits. I think it would be better to give people who really want to find jobs the best chance to do it whether they're in the right category or not (19 year old Job Club client)

Hence, the Government needs to ensure that a sufficient number of LMP placements are available to grant access to those who are long-term unemployed, at risk, or seriously seeking secure employment.

Concern 2: Funding Arrangements

A further access issue relates to the current funding arrangements to many contracted education and training agencies. Agencies that have their funding renewed or their tenders favourably considered on the basis of a program's level of employment-outcomes can discriminate against those that achieve other 'outcomes' from a course such as the more difficult-to-measure increases in self-esteem and motivation. An issue which needs to be raised is whether contracted agencies (out of necessity to maintain funding) will be tempted to give priority to those who are judged most likely to find employment on the completion of a program.

You balance it by looking at reality and reality says you've got to produce results to get future funding and reality also that you can't do anything with people or provide a service unless you've got the funding. So it's a balance between the two, you've got to look at the reality of the fact that you're working you're interfacing with bureaucracy and that they want results and they want it for Politicians, for Working Nation. (LMP Provider)
It would be naive to deny that some of these new players aren't just in it for the money. There's a whole industry growing around it. You've got to understand that in an area like this you can't just come into town, fill up a course or program with clients and pretend they'll get jobs. Sure they'll get an 'outcome' but they don't have the knowledge of the local labour market to secure anything long term. (LMP Provider)

The increased number of LMP 'players', along with increased competition, raises the possibility for such a dynamic to occur. Current research (Graham 1995, in progress) indicates that under Working Nation funding arrangements, together with the number of new private employment services which are being established alongside the CES, there is much concern among LMP providers that 'creaming' of 'easier clients' will occur.

The effect of the unemployment 'outcome' measure needs to be monitored so that it doesn't result in disadvantaging those most in need. Funding arrangements need to be modified to curb any hidden discriminatory practice.

Concern 3: Type of Training

Another relevant issue is that training provided by LMP's should enhance the employment and social opportunities of participants. The adequacy of training provided through LMP's has a significant bearing on how effectively the particular learning needs of individuals are addressed and the extent to which developed skills match those being demanded by employers. Hence, training which is inadequate in meeting the needs of participants is an ethical issue because it fails to foster or protect the professional aspirations of individuals, their renewed enthusiasm to search for employment and, ultimately, their sense of worth when failing to gain employment.

Oh, a lot of things. I feel better about myself for coming along. It's depressing sitting at home and it gets into a vicious cycle where the longer you mope around the harder it is to get a job. My self-esteem is better because I know I can do something - well sort of (laughs) - I know how to use a computer. I've met some nice people and I know I'm not the only one who can't get a job. You start to doubt yourself. (LMP Client).

It is therefore imperative that the Government, through the National Employment and Training Taskforce (NETTFORCE), guarantees that training provided by LMP's is both relevant to the demand of the market and gives participants an equitable footing with other job-seekers in the
search for employment.

Definitely, it's a training question absolutely in other words when we've always had reluctant people, but in former times the courses were more people who were there voluntarily, you might get one or two in there who didn't really want to be there and usually the weight of their peers in the course brought them around as well as the genuine the real x good stuff that was in the course, people responded to it. We've got very good trainers, we've got good content and it was fun, they start enjoying themselves and it was pretty easy to turn around a couple of reluctant people. So we've always had reluctant people but in smaller numbers and we've always managed to turn them around by force of the quality of the content and being in a room with people to similar to them actually benefiting and enjoying themselves. Now we have a higher percentage of reluctant learners and obviously it's a different trip. The trainers now have to do special training in reluctant learners and they have to build in different elements into the front the beginning of the course to just to cope with getting over that and trying to bring people round to at least not sit there with their arms folded. It's a very serious consideration.

(LMP Provider).

Concern 4: Relevance and Opportunity

The targeting of host employers and supervising agencies to provide LMP placements has similar implications in how relevant the assistance given will be to the existing and foreseeable demand for labour. A related concern lies in the ability of the employers to accommodate individuals in placements. Businesses and industries in many regions may not have the volume of work to offer unemployed people an adequate quality or quantity of LMP placements. In such cases, the question must be addressed as to whether unemployed locals should be expected to participate in LMPs or intensified job search programs when the likelihood of finding employment locally is minimal.

Unless there's some penetration in the private sector there won't be any change. What it will do it'll keep unemployed people busy, it'll get them probably a bit motivated and that's fine, it's better that they do that and get involved and maybe provide them access to the work environment. So that's all positive I'm not saying it's not positive, I'm all for people doing that, but for New Work Opportunities, just because the name says that to create self sustaining employment we've seen a lot of the projects - they won't, they're community infrastructure projects. You can't just employ 50 people a Council or

100 people with a Council and this is all over the place, if a Council has 150 people and they take on 50 to 100 to do projects, not unless they've got a factory or something. What it will do it will certainly build up some community infrastructure and it will keep people active
and it will keep people access skills and so that's all positive, but to actually get the big picture, that's a pretty tall order unless it penetrates in the private sector which New Work Opportunities can, but it isn't there's not much experimentation going on and the Unions are going to be pretty hard on us. How are they going to allow a factory to put on 20 or 30 New Work Opportunities people on a training allowance, with no super, no annual leave, they're already against it. There's a lot of questions, I just think they put a lot of faith into one new program that doesn't look much different to the other one and also someone's basically said look well here's some money we're getting into the billion dollar category it is, we're talking about big money and I'm sure you've done it, and we're willing to back it, so it's a fairly tall order. (LMP Provider)

Poor targeting of host employers and supervisory agencies has repercussions on both the employment prospects of participants and the operation of agencies. It would seem that after suffering the effects of long-term unemployment people need more than an assurance of 6-12 months of temporary employment or the ongoing possibility of only a marginal position in the labour market.

Concern 5: Skills at the Margin

Freeland (1994b) argues that the Government appears to be avoiding the very real possibility that many of the unemployed will be left in the labour market margins with insecure prospects. To date, Jobstart employment experience has only a marginal impact on participants' skill levels. These same participants will be left competing for insecure jobs in the low skill margins. The training wage will carry a condition that employers provide site specific on-the-job training and NETTFORCE will fast-track training approval. Those who complete the training will be eligible for an industry recognised certificate of competency. The difficulty here is the specification of the Australian Standards Framework skill level 1 as the minimum competency outcome. Without venturing into the problematics of CBT, low or redundant occupational skills are the reason most of the long-term unemployed are and remain unemployed.

(In reply to a question about whether the LMP program had helped) Well, I'm not sure it has. My case manager said I should do it so I did. I'm a bit cynical about the whole thing I suppose because how is this going to help me to get a real job? I've done other training courses and I still can't get work. (LMP Client)

I think that the biggest problem is there won't be any positions for young people or anybody who has literacy problems who are unskilled or semi-skilled. And that's a fair few of our clients... We have one of the highest quotas of youth unemployment in the country because there are such limited training and work opportunities. (LMP Provider)
Even with the new subsidies and the training wage most will be able to secure only a marginal low-skill job. Level 1 training will not provide a significant improvement in their long-term job prospects. Level 1 competencies will not suffice for the multi-skilled team-based workplace of the future. In addition, jobs secured by many Jobstart, Training Wage and New Work Opportunities participants will be marginal and short-term. The question arises again then, as to whether the current initiatives will provide long-term solutions for the unemployed.

Concern 6: Reciprocal Obligations

The implementation of a policy like Working Nation requires the development of appropriate administrative strategies. One of the most significant of these is the concept of 'reciprocal obligations', a strategy aimed at making people who are unemployed even more 'accountable' in meeting their obligations. This appears to be based on the argument that unemployed people have an obligation to accept 'reasonable' offers that will improve their immediate and long-term job prospects.

I actually had to put a fellow off yesterday who started a week and a half ago. The day I went down to do the sign-up I walked in the door and he threw a punch at me and he was violent and aggressive and threatened his TAFE teachers he had 4 of the students scared stiff of him, he was bashing into them, he has a problem, he should never have been there, he wouldn't allow you to tell him anything, he didn't want to know anything he just wanted to be violent and after trying to solve his problems for him he just wasn't going to have his problems solved, he didn't want to be there, didn't want to be part of that and if he's got that much aggression to be perfectly honest he should have been going to some sort of counselling, he should have been assessed and counselled. Yesterday I put him off the program and to-day his Case Manager rang me up and said oh I should cut his benefit off, I said I don't think you should cut his benefit off at all, I think you should get him along to some sort of assessment because this man has a problem and he wanted to go the other way, which was ludicrous. (LMP Provider).

The government has increased the 'withdrawal of income' penalties which apply to people who are 'breached' under the activity test. Penalties have been dramatically increased (from the current 2 weeks, 6 weeks, 12 weeks for first, second and third offences) and will escalate the longer one has been unemployed. It appears that these will be most harsh on those who are the most disadvantaged. Raper (1994) argues that the measure would appear to be unnecessary and punitive, and lacks considerable justification in either the Green Paper, White Paper or
subsequent correspondence from Mr. Crean.

The recent strengthening of the reciprocal obligation under Working Nation raises the question as to whether such coercive measures are appropriate when there are limited activities from which unemployed people can choose to satisfy test requirements. The concept of a 'reasonable offer' is a relative term which, due to the limited range of employment opportunities available, is sometimes reduced to any offer of work or LMP (ACSWC 1994).

Concern 7: Case Management

In response to some of the criticisms that have been targeted at the past system of service delivery to the unemployed, the Commonwealth Government introduced two policy initiatives which aim at improving the quality and outcomes of the assessment, job matching and LMP delivery procedures. These are:

• case management

• private employment services

The thrust of these initiatives is that long-term unemployment will be best tackled by providing personalised case management service through the community and private sectors in competition with the public sector. Under case management, people who have been unemployed for over eighteen months will be referred to a specific Officer for ongoing assistance. The inclusion of community-based groups to provide private employment services in addition to those services already being supplied by the CES, has placed an emphasis on competition in the provision of case management and job brokerage. It has been strongly argued that emphasis on competition is inappropriate to this service area and will have the undesirable effect of shifting the prerogatives of providers from a client-centred to a funding-centred focus (ACSWC 1994).

The Employment Services Regulatory Authority (ESRA) is responsible for regulating this new case management market. In July 1994, the Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Simon Crean, appointed former Victorian Premier Joan Kirner as chair of an Interim Board of ESRA in anticipation of ESRA being formally established after passage of the legislation in November 1994.

A key part of ESRA's role is to encourage and regulate competition, and to encourage best practice in case management. To do this ESRA will:

• accredit and select case managers;
• promote fair and open competition between case managers;
• monitor, evaluate and report on the operation of the case management system including the operations of Contracted Case Managers (CCM's) and Employment Assistance Australia (the public sector case management service) and their compliance with the Codes of Practice;
• in consultation with DEET, develop, implement and monitor best practice principles in case management;
• advise the Minister on payment arrangements for case managers and on ways of promoting competition within the case management system.

Why case management? A case manager works with a job seeker to negotiate an agreed return to work plan. The overriding objective of a return to work plan is to assist the job seeker to get and retain lasting employment. The plan will set out a course of action, agreed by the job seeker and the case manager, designed to reflect the abilities and needs of the job seeker and to assist them to become 'job ready'. Case managers provide counselling and job search assistance supported by the access to vocational training, courses in English language literacy, numeracy, or community based work experience or subsidised employment. Case management aims to ensure that the best available assistance is offered and that the job seeker is committed and obligated to pursue the agreed plan.

The case manager will be paid a fee in two parts. The first payment is for developing and implementing the return to work plan. The second will be paid 13 weeks after successful placement. These include full-time work, a part-time job, full-time education or training, Job Compact or self-employment, for example, the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) or a traineeship (Kirner 1994).

You've got case managers with client loads of well over one hundred.

I'd seriously question whether they can give adequate support in the way the Government rhetoric would suggest. (LMP Provider)

I'm being case managed and I don't even know what that means. Nothing new is happening. (LMP Client)

There's a real concern that within the public sector people were expected to change over into case management roles and they really didn't have either the skills or the commitment to be able to deliver the service adequately. (Case Manager)
It is still too early to evaluate the success of the case management approach, but early indications are that there are still a number of significant issues to be addressed. These include the (in)adequacy of funding to provide the service successfully, the caseload of individual case managers, adequate training and support for case managers particularly in the area of job brokerage and the effects of competition between the public (CES) and private sectors.

Concern 8: The Future of Work

One of the critical issues that currently needs to be addressed is whether current policy (in the form of Working Nation) provides sufficient critique and debate in regard to the future of work, employment and unemployment in this country. Wiseman (1994) argues that Working Nation appears to abandon the full employment objective without any clear identification of the kind of social and economic arrangements which might replace it. Indeed, such criticism, while acknowledging that Working Nation does include a number of progressive policy reforms, indicates that the overall direction is not only inadequate, but also unjust. Underlining such debate emerges some critical questions such as:

• How should work and income in Australia be distributed, so that possibilities for citizenship are broadened within the context of increasingly globalised social and economic relationships?

• How does Working Nation provide a focus for a new understanding and interpretation of the discursive boundaries of 'work'?

• Who emerges as the winners and losers under the revamped arrangements and why?

• How could the principle of full employment be redefined?

In response to such questions it would seem that the future of work debate has been derailed because of the conflict between those defending the right for paid work for all and those arguing for the right to choose not to be engaged in paid work in a post-employment society. Wiseman (1994) suggests that a more desirable set of principles might emerge from a position which involves an emphasis on decent paid employment and at the same time opening up possibilities for new mixtures of paid and unpaid work. This mix might vary at different stages in life and might involve significant choices about rights and responsibilities, income and time, autonomy and social responsibility. The data from LMP clients suggests that they still very much perceive a 'real' job to be paid, full-time and permanent, while at the same time the Providers of programs are struggling to find other ways of perceiving the future of work:

I don't want to work part-time. I feel used. I get a bit of work when
the tourists arrive but they're not prepared to give me any more. I can't survive on that. (LMP Client)

I'm not prepared to do just anything. I'd be better off doing this (training). (LMP Client)

So job sharing I would like to see become a strong factor in Australian life, because relating back to what we were talking about people undergoing life-long learning, if you think about quality of life the capacity to be able to combine working with learning and again that's an intangible thing but I think it results in a more productive society, rather than people being tied into full time slog. If you look at recent figures on the number of hours full time managers work it's not 40 hours a week it's 60 or 80 and yet we have this whole range of people who are completely under-utilised. Also this work mix idea, I'd like to see that advocated more as real option for people. That people might get a small amount of their income from some kind of supplementary benefit and then they might do some part-time work and then they might do some enterprise stuff like making a product that they'd sell themselves at the markets or entering into a small business, or any range of things that might comprise an income, a livable income. I'd really like to see the capacity for the system to actually support people in developing that, not endlessly but at least you know for a period which would enable them to get on their feet. Especially in areas like this, there's so much black market activity that happens in local economies anyway with people producing goods and selling them and but not within an official taxation structure and whatever, if that kind of flexibility was able to be absorbed into the system, then we might find that would have an impact on long-term unemployment in areas like this. (Program Provider)

Concern 9: Unemployment, Education and Training

So how does all this discussion relate to the current role of education and training in this new and increasingly unequal employment market. The National Training Reform Agenda draws attention to the centrality of education and training in sustaining, supporting and stratifying the employment market. There now appears to be little problem with core workers and their employers understanding the need for a substantial investment in education, training and the updating of skills and knowledge, whereas peripheral workers or unemployed adults have had much more limited access to much more limited training (Graham 1995), a situation encapsulated in the aphorism 'enrichment for the rich, and training for the rest' (Johnson 1994).

'Unemployment' is an essentially negative concept. It is defined not in
terms of any positive attributes of its own, but simply in terms of the absence of employment. Yet from the time many children are very young they are socialised into the expectation that they will have access to paid employment. As Watts (1983, p.iv) states:

Unemployment is not an educational problem, it is essentially due to economic forces, and political responses to those forces. It is, however, a problem for education, since it challenges many of the basic assumptions built into the structure of our education system.

A vital question for those responding to the unemployment and employment situation of the 90's, is how the education and training process can be developed to incorporate individual autonomy and the fostering of social change as well as social control. This is an issue which begs much consideration in the ways in which the policies and programs of Working Nation are implemented.

It is well-established that the vast majority of unemployed adults want, as a top priority, a paid job and the money and the self-esteem that go with it (Johnston 1994). However, the education and training policy response to this is not so unproblematic. Taking into account the present employment market, Johnston (1994, p. 44) highlights a number of key factors which appear to raise fundamental questions about the current overwhelming emphasis on narrow vocational training for unemployed people and so locate this approach firmly in the realm of social control:

• there are not enough paid jobs to go round: even in areas of high employment, the number of people unemployed usually exceeds the number of vacancies;

• there is a three way mis-match between the skills that the 'market' requires; the existing skills possessed by the unemployed; and the generally limited skills training currently being promoted in a wide range of job training schemes;

• there are a number of practical barriers that keep many adults out of the employment market eg. care of children and elderly relatives, transport and so forth.

A lot of them are very comfortable with where they’re at, and to move outside that comfort zone to find employment to have to front up everyday on a regular basis to miss the soapies and we all have a bit of a chuckle about that, but it becomes Ophra etc become a major part of their life, they live for that, that's their motivation, it's a point of interest and so to change their lifestyle so dramatically often times is very daunting to them and then the prospect of earning very little more than what they're getting on unemployment benefit
anyway, just takes all the incentive out of it. We're finding some frustration coming through some of the groups going through New Work Opportunities because they're people who are long term unemployed, very comfortable with where they're at, who are feeling like they have been forced into six months of paid employment where the pay is only about what they're getting on unemployment benefit anyway, they're feeling like they're working for the dole, they're feeling like they've been pushed into it and they're sitting back scratching their heads thinking what am I really going to get out of this in the end where am I going to end up am I going to end back on the scrap heap again, watching days of our lives or am I actually going to get a job. Most of them can't see that they will get a job out of it, most people think they will do the six months and they'll be back (truck) and not only that but they will have lost all of their qualifications to certain programs because they've been working for six months. There is a lot of issues there that are very touchy issues. A small percentage of those might find permanent work in the end or might want to find permanent work, most of the others perhaps not. (LMP Provider).

The difficulty that these circumstances highlight is one which the Australian Government currently needs to come to terms with, that is, an increase in short-term vocational training ignores the reality of the employment market and is self-defeating unless there is a clearly documented long-term labour shortage area where appropriate skills can be developed within the right time-scale. The exercise needs to be carefully orchestrated so that the unemployed are not simply 'recycled' because the factors highlighted by Johnson (above) are not adequately taken into account. Likewise, the current direction implicit in Working Nation of encouraging or pressurising unemployed people to do whatever they can to get any kind of job in the short-term, appears to be based on the false assumption that there is enough paid work to go round and/or on a very particular view of the psychology and motivations of unemployed people which overlooks the psychological impact of being rejected for positions.

Concern 10: The Social Construction of Work

Working Nation has made a considerable contribution to policy development for the unemployed. This White Paper indicates that the Government has learned a lot from the suggestions in the Green Paper which counselled against the temptation of pursuing the maximum number of program participants at the expense of program quality. The quality of training is to be improved, while vocational training courses will be accredited and will articulate with the mainstream vocational education and training system. Employment experience programs will be lengthened and measures taken to provide related training. More
intensive sequences of program support custom-designed to meet the requirements of individual clients will be available. Program sequences will be better targeted and, on average, will be significantly lengthened. The CES will move to a case management approach for the long-term unemployed and those identified as being at risk. Clients will have the option of CES or external case management.

Needless to say, the discussion around employment and unemployment cannot be expected to subside after the implementation of some of its policy measures. It may be that the full benefit of these qualitative improvements will not be achieved. Campbell (1994) suggests two main reasons for this. First, many of the programs and initiatives announced in the White Paper appear lacking in detail and open to serious question concerning their implications for the labour market. These programs and initiatives will demand careful scrutiny as they continue to be put into affect. Second, although there was much discussion which preceded the release of the White Paper and indeed much rhetoric with its unveiling, it remains a somewhat limited contribution, where the main initiatives are aimed primarily at boosting the employment prospects of the long term unemployed. Whilst this is certainly necessary, it never the less puts to one side many of the other issues which need addressing, such as current constructions of work, the future of work, employment and unemployment, as well as opportunities for and constraints on governmental action. These issues will not go away. Indeed, they will continue to command attention in coming years. Examining some of the gaps and silences in current policy for the unemployed is critical to such discussion.

References


