

ADVANCING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH - IMPACT CASE STUDY

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Title of Case Study:

UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING WORKFORCE
VULNERABILITIES IN MIDLIFE AND BEYOND

Researchers and Institution

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1. CONTEXT

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.

2. SUMMARY OF IMPACT

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 practice tools aimed at mature aged job seekers or employment consultants to counter age discrimination and unconscious bias. These are aimed at improving job outcomes for older people.

3. RESEARCH UNDERPINNING IMPACT

1. Age and Intergenerational Identity. 2010-2011. A qualitative study featuring inter-generational interviews of young and older people. Findings showed that negative stereotypes of both generations exist in the public sphere yet participants preferred not to subscribe to these. More opportunities for inter-generational interaction were recommended from this study.

2. Understanding and preventing workforce vulnerabilities in midlife and beyond. 2012-2015. This mixed methods study examined HILDA data, and 80 interviews were conducted with mature-aged job seekers. The study showed that age, gender and ineffective employment service responses interact to shape older jobseekers' experiences of occupational discrimination. The findings elevated understanding of the barriers facing mature-aged job-seekers and attracted media coverage in Australia and New Zealand.

3. Enhancing employment services for mature age jobseekers. 2015-2017. This research documented the level and quality of employment service practices towards older jobseekers and evaluated the effectiveness of the current model in supporting workforce participation for older men and women. The research team spoke with mature-age jobseekers and *jobactive* staff in four employment regions (Western Melbourne, North East Melbourne, and parts of Inner Metropolitan Melbourne and South Eastern Melbourne). In addition, employers, employer representatives and policy makers were interviewed. Resources to help mature aged job-seekers and service providers were developed.

4. Working longer, staying healthy and keeping productive. 2016-2019. This research extends a previous study on job seeking, and is focused on the health and well-being needs of mature aged workers.

4. DETAILS OF IMPACT

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.

Through the on-line communication strategies at BSL, Biggs and Bowman have engaged extensively with practitioners, policy makers and mature-aged job seekers. Bowman acknowledged that reporting engagement is problematic, stating that they don't keep records of engagement. Yet it is evident that their engagement with service providers, practitioners, policy makers and continues to grow and to be respond to the challenges faced by mature-aged workers. For example, an advisor to Bill Shorten MP sought out Biggs for advice on ALP policy for mature-aged workers. Agencies and individuals, such as: COTA (Vic), Human Rights Commission, and former Age and Disability Commissioner, Susan Ryan could validate the engagement and impact of the research.

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.

Submissions to public inquiries

Through BSL submissions and reports and through their own individual contributions, Biggs and Bowman have used many opportunities to advance their research findings through submissions to government inquiries. For example:

- Bowman, D. and Kimberley, H. (2015), Submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission Willing to Work National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability
- The Australian Law Reform Commission cited BSL report of Biggs, Bowman et al. *Grey Areas: age barriers to work* discussion paper, 2012, noting that stakeholders expressed strong support for a national education and awareness campaign in support of the workforce participation of mature age persons.

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-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 life 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: Advisor to 'Economic Potential of Senior Australians Advisory Group' (2011); and the Australian Government Dept 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:

- Wickramasinghe, S. & Bowman, (2018) *Help but not real help: Mature age jobseeker perspectives on employment services in Australia*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy (forthcoming)
- Bowman, D. & Kimberley, H. (2011) *Sidelined! Workforce participation and non-participation among baby boomers in Australia*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy.
- *Help but not real help: Mature age jobseeker perspectives on employment services in Australia*. <http://library.bsl.org.au/showitem.php?handle=1/10835>
- *On the front line: Employment services staff perspectives on working with mature age jobseekers*. <http://library.bsl.org.au/showitem.php?handle=1/10836>
- *Missing the mark: Employer perspectives on employment services and mature age jobseekers in Australia*. <http://library.bsl.org.au/showitem.php?handle=1/10837>
- *Working for everyone? Enhancing employment services for mature age jobseekers* (summary). <http://library.bsl.org.au/showitem.php?handle=1/10838>
- Biggs, S. (2011). Evidence to 'Economic Potential of Senior Australians' Advisory Group, Australian Treasury. Melbourne & Perth. (Biggs, 2011).

The infographics (BSL website) are also widely viewed.

McGann, M. et al. (2015), Ageism and employment infographic http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/7904/1/Ageism_and_employment_infographic_Oct2015.pdf.

McGann, M. et al. (2015), Mature age jobseekers infographic http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/7903/1/Mature_age_jobseekers_infographic_Oct2015.pdf.

Media

The media impact has been significant in raising awareness of the research findings, examples are:

The New Daily. "Why we need Bunnings-style 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 netherworld: 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.

- Bowman, D. (2016) Mature age unemployment *Star Weekly* <http://www.starweekly.com.au/news/tudy-focuses-on-mature-age-jobseekers/>
- 2017 The Panel with Jim Mora Radio New Zealand, on-air discussion about ageism www.radionz.co.nz/2/6/17 http://www.radionz.co.nz/audio/player?audio_id=201846188#
- 2017 research featured in James Adonis column on ageism <http://www.theage.com.au/small-business/managing/work-in-progress/matureage-workers-research-reveals-three-themes-of-ageism-in-the-workplace-20170601-gwidjo.html> 2/6/17
- 2016 quoted in Anna Patty's article on mature age unemployment for Sydney Morning Herald <http://www.theage.com.au/business/workplace-relations/caught-in-an-unemployment-netherworld-too-young-to-retire-too-old-to-get-a-job-20160823-gqyv2w.html> syndicated through Fairfax media
- 2011 Vision Australia Radio 2/11/11 live interview 20 minutes A Morning Conversation –mature age workforce participation.
- 2011 Michelle Griffin 'Working 9-to-5 not that easy for older women' page 5 *The Age* October 11 this was syndicated and published widely in national and regional press.

6. RESEARCH INCOME

Category 1 (international and national competitive)

1. L Strazdins; C Banwell; G Carey; D Bowman; P Butterworth; Su Mon Kyaw-Myint; P Thorning; Peng Yu; S Mallett, *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 midlife 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)

3. Bowman, D & Kimberley, H. Enhancing employment services for mature age jobseekers, 2015-2017. Lord Mayors Charitable Foundation \$274,204.
4. Biggs, S. Age and Intergenerational Identity. Youthworx. National Ageing Research Institute (NARI) & BSL (Biggs) media based collaboration. 2010-2011. \$24,000. Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, Melbourne.

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:

1. Biggs, S. (2018), *Negotiating ageing: cultural adaptation to the prospect of a long life*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK.
2. Biggs, S., McGann, M., Bowman, D., and Kimberley, H. (2017), 'Work, health and the commodification of life's time: reframing work–life balance and the promise of a long life', *Ageing & Society*, 37(7), 1458–83.
3. Bowman, D., McGann, M., Kimberley, H and Biggs, S. (2017), 'Rusty, invisible and threatening: ageing, capital and employability', *Work, Employment & Society*, 31(3), 465–82.
4. Bowman, D., McGann, M., Kimberley, H. and Biggs, S. (2016). Activation and active ageing? Mature-age jobseekers' experience of employment services', *Social Policy and Society*. Published online 20 June. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1474746416000245>
5. McGann, M., Kimberley, H., Bowman, D., and Biggs, S (2016). The netherworld between work and retirement, *Social Policy and Society*, FirstView article, published online 3 June.
6. Ong, R., McGann, M., Bowman, D., Duncan, A., Kimberley, H and Biggs, S (2016). A gendered analysis of age discrimination among mature age jobseekers in Australia' *Economic Papers* DOI: 10.1111/1759-3441.12155
7. Biggs, S. McGann, M, Bowman, D and Kimberley, H. (2016), 'Work, health and the commodification of life's time: reframing work–life balance and the promise of a long life', *Ageing and Society*, FirstView article, published online 23 May.
8. Appannah, A. and Biggs (2015): Age-friendly organisations: the role of organisational culture and the participation of older workers, *Journal of Social Work Practice: Psychotherapeutic Approaches in Health*, 29.1, 37–51
9. McGann, M., Bowman, D., Kimberley, H., and Biggs, S. (2015). *Too old to work, too young to retire*. Melbourne: Brotherhood of St Laurence. – Too old to work, too young to retire report.
10. Biggs, S. (2014), 'The promise of a long life? Cultural adaptation to productive aging, spiritual empathy, and a sustainable future', *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*, no. 26, pp. 96–108.

