

EVIDENCE BEHIND THE OUR PLACE ELEMENTS

# Adult engagement, learning, volunteering and employment



**ourplace**  
education is the key to the door

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Our Place acknowledges the First Nations people of Australia and Traditional Custodians of the lands that we live and work on, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and culture. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their Elders past, present and emerging. We are committed to working together for a brighter future.

# Adult engagement, learning, volunteering and employment pathways

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This paper outlines the evidence informing approaches for engaging adults in community activities, learning, volunteering, and employment. It draws on the growing evidence base on breaking cycles of disadvantage and the interrelated risk factors that impact social and economic participation. It synthesises an extensive evidence base on barriers and enablers for participation in education and employment, and the factors that support adults experiencing disadvantage to engage with their community, with social groups, with schools and other

learning organisations, and to connect with employment pathways. The paper is structured in four chapters:

1. **Why engaging with adults matters: breaking cycles of disadvantage and turning the curve for children.**
2. **Approaches to community participation: types of engagement and the role schools can play.**
3. **Adult learning: needs, barriers and enablers for better adult engagement.**
4. **Employment: pathways out of poverty and towards greater income security.**



# Why engaging with adults matters?

Effective approaches to engaging adults draw on the evidence on breaking cycles of disadvantage, including:

- The benefits of social connection, inclusion, and cohesion.
- The negative impacts of low levels of education, long-term unemployment and income insecurity.
- The benefits for children of having parents, carers and communities with stable relationships, quality health and wellbeing, and economic security.

Children develop through environments and relationships and are more vulnerable when exposed to adverse experiences, stressful households and entrenched poverty (Moore et al. 2017; NSCDC 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2010; and Price-Robertson, 2011). Community participation, adult education and employment are critical components of quality lives and livelihoods. Addressing factors which support adult social and economic participation can work towards building thriving communities, free from entrenched disadvantage, and setting children up for positive life outcomes by increasing education levels of families.

## BREAKING CYCLES OF DISADVANTAGE AND BUILDING THRIVING COMMUNITIES

Social and economic participation through community involvement, volunteering, education and employment:

- Builds social capital.
- Creates social connections and opportunities.
- Enables economic security.
- Underpins good health and wellbeing for stronger families and thriving communities.

Conversely, people living in more disadvantaged communities have poorer outcomes across almost every social indicator (Tanton et al., 2021; ACOSS, 2018). Growing up in communities with low rates of education and employment, high rates of social isolation, community violence / anti-social behaviour and substance misuse, can have negative impacts on children's wellbeing, social and emotional skills, and their achievement at school.

These impacts can be even greater when the child's home, community and school are all disadvantaged (Warren & Edwards 2017). For this reason, building the skills and capabilities of adults in the community is central to addressing intergenerational disadvantage and breaking the cycle (CEDA, 2015).

Entrenched disadvantage is multi-layered, persistent and intergenerational (Tanton et al., 2021). While there are many factors influencing disadvantage significant risk factors are low levels of education and unemployment. The longer the unemployment spell the more severe the disadvantage, including associations with low self-esteem, social isolation, poor mental and physical health, family conflict and violence and divorce, and suicide (Brand, 2015; and Gokce & Ofer, 2017).

Education is an enabler for more positive trajectories – higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of income and better employment, health and wellbeing outcomes (Laplagne, Glover, & Shomos, 2007, Forbes, Barker, & Turner, 2010; Gong & Tanton, 2018; Price-Robertson, 2011).

Conversely, unemployment or employment in low-income, casual or insecure work is a significant risk factor. As the Dropping off the Edge 2021 report emphasises, "income is an important enabler and protector for wellbeing. Low income is associated with low health outcomes, low food security, low educational outcomes, and intergenerational disadvantage" (Tanton et al., 2021, p.27).

“

**Having a job and being socially connected within the community are key contributors to people's quality of life."**

***Mukherjee et al.,***

**2016, p.8**



A 2020 report by ACOSS analysing ABS survey data confirms that unemployment and underemployment are major causes of poverty:

- **Unemployment:** Being unemployed and of working age remains the greatest poverty risk factor, “with two-thirds (66 per cent) of people in households where the main income-earner is unemployed living in poverty”.
- **Underemployment:** Poverty in wage-earning households is concentrated in families with children and for whom work is only part-time or casual – 38 per cent of people in poverty are in wage-earning households and of these, 72 per cent are in families with children (Davidson et al., 2020, p.9).

Cost of living pressures are at historic highs, meaning that raising a family is challenging, even when working full time (ABS, 2022). However, higher levels of education, vocational skills and qualifications among the ‘working poor’ would increase employability and labour market competitiveness – and open up opportunities for more hours of work, higher paid work, and a potential pathway out of poverty for their family. Education enabling employment in secure, flexible, and appropriately paid jobs in turn enables thriving communities with increased parent wellbeing and economic security of families (Baxter, Gray & Alexander 2007; Baxter et al., 2012; Gray & Baxter 2010).

Beyond being a critical pathway out of poverty, learning and working over the lifecycle brings significant benefits to individuals, building wellbeing and quality of life. Lifelong learning enhances social inclusion, active citizenship, and individual development including employability (Ates & Alsai, 2012, in Leyretana & Trinidad,

2022) and benefits personal fulfilment and happiness (Gouthro, 2010, in Leyretana & Trinidad, 2022).

Employment brings financial security but also provides time structure, collective purpose, regular and intentional activity, social status and identity, social support and contact, opportunities for variety and stimulation, use of and development of skills, opportunity for control and for goals and for greater self-determination and agency (Qian, Riseley & Barraket, 2019). Engaging adults and providing information and opportunities for adult learning and employment is beneficial for quality of life in all communities.

## INVESTING IN PARENTS AND CARERS BRINGS LARGE RETURNS FOR CHILDREN

We know that environments and relationships significantly influence child life outcomes, and that growing up in lower socio-economic communities, and in households without material basics, is associated with higher levels of developmental vulnerability and a “snowballing” of risk factors (NSCDC 2004b; Warren, 2017; The Front Project 2022; Fox et al., 2015). Engaging with, and investing in parents, carers, and other adults in a child’s community can change a child’s negative life trajectories given the level of influence these relationships and environmental factors have.

Recent work from Harvard’s Centre on the Developing Child highlights the critical importance of building the capabilities of adults in children’s lives, including strengthening the self-regulation and executive function skills that are often impaired by poverty, stress and trauma but are critical to supporting children’s development.

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**Substantially better outcomes for vulnerable, young children could be achieved by greater attention to strengthening the resources and capabilities of the adults who care for them.”**

***Shonkoff and Fisher, 2013***

The Centre's work highlights the importance of working with children and their families, and indicates that to be maximally effective, policies and services should:

- **Support responsive relationships for children and adults** – particularly fostering strong 'serve and return' interactions, warm and responsive relationships, and support for learning.
- **Strengthen core skills for planning, adapting, and achieving goals** – enabling parents and children to develop the set of core skills that help people manage life, work, and relationships successfully.
- **Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families** – because reducing the pile-up of potential sources of stress will protect children directly (i.e., their stress response is triggered less frequently and powerfully) and indirectly (i.e., the adults they depend upon are better able to protect and support them, thereby preventing lasting harm) (CDC, 2021).

## IMPACTS OF POVERTY

Socio-economic disadvantage is associated with poorer outcomes for children in a range of different domains, including higher risk of emotional and behavioural problems. Australian data shows that children living in poverty:

- Have average test scores 59 points lower for reading and 54 points lower for numeracy at Year 3 NAPLAN – equivalent to around one year of schooling.

“

**Adults need certain capabilities to succeed in life and support the development of the next generation. These capabilities help us to get and keep a job, provide responsive care for children, manage a household, and contribute productively to the community. When these skills have not developed as they should, or are compromised by the stresses of poverty or other sources of ongoing adversity, our communities pay the price in population health, education, and economic vitality.”**

**Harvard Centre on the Developing Child, 2016**

- Are at least three times more likely to have clinically significant emotional and behavioural issues.
- Experience worse health, poorer nutrition and reduced physical activity (Warren, 2017).

Increasing a child's access to material basics and improving the quality of home environments directly contributes to better outcomes. Parents with lower levels of education, lower household income, and without stable and sufficient hours of work, struggle to provide the basics for children and have less capacity to provide the environments, relationship interactions, and stimulating experiences needed for child development and learning (Guerin, 2014; O'Hehir & Savelsberg, 2014; Banerjee 2016; Rioseco et al., 2020; Warren, 2017). The influence of parent education and employment are shaped by:

- **Resources:** Not enough money to provide for basic needs (like nutrition or stable housing) and resources like books, toys and activities.
- **Stress:** The stress and anxiety caused by poverty can contribute to a chaotic home environment, make it challenging for parents to model good social behaviours and emotional wellbeing, and result in fewer warm, responsive interactions between adults and children.
- **Home learning environment:** Less capacity to provide a stimulating home learning environment, so that children are read to less often, hear and talk about fewer stories, have fewer conversations with adults that help develop their language and vocabulary, and have fewer opportunities to learn through play and participation in community (Gershoff et al. 2007; Green et al., 2009).

## IMPACTS OF PARENTAL EDUCATION

Many researchers have found that family background factors – most typically defined as social economic background, including family income, parents' education level, and parents' occupation – influences child academic achievement and that family background can play a more important role than schools (see for example Berkowitz et al., 2017; and Lawson & Farah, 2017). Higher levels of parent education and households with at least one parent or carer employed are associated with better outcomes for child development. Past studies have measured mothers' education, in particular, as a strong influence and a powerful lever for positive change in children's health, development and academic achievement. Each additional month of education for mothers is associated with improvements in children's academic achievement (Harding, Morris & Hughes 2015; Magnuson, K. 2007; Magnuson, Katherine & McGroder 2002).

While mothers have traditionally been the primary carer, spending more time with children and having significant influence over child development as a result, family structures and caring roles are evolving. Research shows that when fathers are engaged in children's education, student achievement, attendance and engagement improve; and the influence of fathers on child development is separate to that of mothers (Fatherhood Institute, 2013; Fletcher et al., 2014).

Evidence continues to emerge on the importance of parent and carers' backgrounds, parenting styles and access to resources on student education achievement. This includes children in diverse families in contemporary family settings, where fathers play a greater caring role, including, for example, same sex couple families (Mazrekaj, De Witte & Cabus, 2020). Engaging all parents and carers in education is influential for child development outcomes.

## IMPACTS OF PARENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Improving parental mental and physical health and improving social connection, supports parents to parent more effectively. Recent Australian studies on the role of parents' mental health, health behaviours and capacity to engage positively for child social and emotional wellbeing, show that investing in the wellbeing and skills of parents, pays off for children (Rioseco et al., 2020). Positive parent-child relationships and most notably good maternal mental health partially mediate the effects of poverty on children's outcomes (Warren, 2017).

Positive parenting has been proven to mitigate the risks of living in disadvantaged locations and the investment in parenting programs to develop these skills shown to be of benefit for all families for a range of child outcomes (Macvean, 2016). Investing in parents, and in parenting, helps children, families and communities.



# Increasing community participation

All families benefit from opportunities to participate, connect, and learn in their community. Disadvantaged communities often have higher levels of social isolation, less access to informal social support, and reduced social capital.

Activities that enable participation and engagement play a significant role in building a sense of community, bringing people together, and being a foundation for the environments and relationships that help children thrive. Schools can be particularly powerful catalysts or hubs for engagement. Volunteering can be an effective approach for parents and carers to become more involved in both school and community, with benefits for quality of life and happiness through social participation.

## **SOCIAL PARTICIPATION – BENEFITS FROM THE CONNECTIONS WITH OTHERS**

Opportunities for social connection are particularly critical for communities experiencing disadvantage, where families often have higher levels of social isolation, less access to informal social support, and reduced social capital (Tanton et al., 2021, and Price–Robertson, 2011).

Effective community engagement increases self-esteem, perceived social support, sense of belonging and community and leads to behaviour that benefits individuals and families such as engagement in positive health programs (O’Mara–Eves et al., 2015), protecting families from experiencing further disadvantage (AIFS 2016a; Deloitte Access Economics 2016; World Bank 2018). Opportunities for informal social connection and to spend time with others, in safe spaces, mitigates against the social distress of poverty and isolation, improves mental health and wellbeing, develops personal skills and confidence, and builds social capital (Shield et al., 2011; AIHW, 2021b; Price–Robertson, 2011).

Research highlights four key benefits of social and community engagement activities:

### **Lifting community aspirations**

People living in communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage may have experienced few opportunities

for pride and success – they may have disengaged from school early, struggled to find or sustain employment, had health and mental health challenges, and be socially isolated (Emerson, Fox & Smith 2015; McLachlan, Gilfilan & Gordon 2013).

Low self-confidence and self-esteem are common for people experiencing poverty, as is shame, loss of hope, and a low sense of self-efficacy, or faith in their capacity to change (Batty & Flint 2010; Fell & Hewstone 2015). People may have had low expectations of them from childhood, and so they have low expectations for themselves and their children – especially in communities where there are few pathways available (Campbell 2015). Opportunities to participate in and contribute to community, to learn and develop new skills, in non-judgemental, encouraging and empowering environments can be extraordinarily powerful in developing self-esteem and self-efficacy (McDonald 2011).

### **Protective factors of social connection:**

Social connections and informal support networks are associated with improved mental health, more effective parenting, improved child behaviour and stronger social cohesion (Crisp & Robinson 2010; Zubrick et al., 2008).

Families who lack social support are 2.5 times more likely to report clinically significant symptoms of distress, and social isolation is a risk factor for abuse and neglect (Zubrick et al., 2008). In Australia, young parents, lone parents and migrants and refugees report the lowest levels of community connectedness – and families grappling with multiple life stresses, those not in contact with family, and those on very low incomes are the least likely to feel that they have people to support them in difficult times. Highly vulnerable and stressed families may not have the social and interpersonal skills that help people to develop friendships or be part of a group.

### **Skill development and employment pathways**

Involving local community members, parents and carers in the running or administration of the activities,



and providing training or potential for employment opportunities, is also beneficial for skills development for both social and economic participation. Enabling volunteering in a variety of ways, including parent representative roles or volunteering at school, can build parent confidence; give voice and agency to adults; provide personal and employability skills development; and lay foundations for entry into learning and employment pathways (Giancaspro & Manuti 2021; and Kragt & Holtrop 2019).

## Community engagement

Creating more opportunities for community activities and facilitating engagement and enrichment activities that meet community needs is a common component of many place-based community development programs and collaborative initiatives for neighbourhood renewal.

Activities can be a catalyst for collaboration and lead to mutually beneficial agreements for meeting the needs of children and families and growth in the skills and capacity of local organisations, clubs or agencies. Sharing of ideas and development of shared goals and mutual agendas is a significant part of the community development achieved through collective impact programs. See the companion evidence paper *The glue that makes place-based initiatives work* for a more detailed discussion of community collaborations of this nature, and the role schools play in community partnerships and community development.

## A ROLE FOR SCHOOLS

Schools are often the first port of call for parents and carers in need of support (McArthur et al., 2010). As such, schools can play a significant role in building the capacity of parents and carers (McArthur et al., 2010). Schools traditionally engage parents as passive recipients of information through school-led and directed involvement (Goodall & Montgomery 2014).

Schools can play a significant role in facilitating engagement that helps parents, children, families and communities. Designing schools as community hubs and leveraging the school environment and school community relationships to draw others in, creating welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate spaces for adults; as well as access to services, practical supports and learning opportunities can be significant (McShane et al., 2012 and McShane & Wilson 2017).

Community activities make sure schools are safe and engaging places for families, provide opportunities to build social connections, and to share or develop new skills through social activities such as cooking, sewing, or art classes, walking groups, community gardens, social enterprises, playgroups, and café spaces.



School communities need to understand the barriers and enablers to parent engagement, for parent engagement to be meaningful, especially for those within the community who experience significant disadvantage. Families' financial stability, health, personal beliefs towards education, the school's culture (Watson et al., 2016), discrimination and community infrastructure all influence the way families living in disadvantaged areas perceive and respond to services (Price-Robertson, 2011; Skattebol & Redmond 2018). Effective community engagement requires a strong sense of belonging, where people feel supported, welcomed and know each other and schools can assist in creating this environment and these relationships (Moore et al., 2016; O'Mara-Eves et al., 2015).

## COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION APPROACHES AND ACTIVITIES

Broad community participation opportunities help adults and their communities, and when connected to schools, can also aid parent engagement in schooling. Activities often leverage the benefits of a welcoming school environment but can also reach out into communities and connect participants and organisations, building networks and better cohesion across communities more generally.



These activities have objectives and benefits for both individuals and communities including opportunity for social connection, creating social networks, inclusion and community belonging; and developing interpersonal skills and confidence, personal capacity, self-esteem and pride.

Community participation connected to coordinated or collaborative services can lead to better access to services through developing life skills and capabilities for navigating systems, as well as support such as providing help with language, communication and access to practical resources and services (Mukherjee et al., 2016). Various experiences can lead to connection with learning and provide a stepping stone towards, or soft entry into, more formal education and employment (see Chapters 3 and 4).

School participation includes, for example, attending events, support in class or providing help with gardening, library book covering, canteen duty or could be in more advisory or leadership roles such as parent committee or representative positions. This increases the positive relationships between parents and schools and builds social connections and skills for adults (O’Hehir & Savelsberg, 2014).

Social interest groups include for example, arts, crafts, conversations / language groups, common interest groups and social activities such as walking groups, community choirs, sewing and wood crafting. These constitute social inclusion – forming social connections, benefiting mental health and lowering risk of social distress (Shield et al., 2011; AIHW, 2022; Price–Robertson, 2011; and Renzaho et al., 2012).

## VOLUNTEERING

Establishing volunteering, supporting people to take on specific roles in the school or be part of a specified community group providing outreach, help or services to others, are proven ways of fostering community participation and skills development. Literature reviews and meta-analyses collate the substantial evidence on the benefits of, and outcomes from, volunteering in particular, for different target groups from migrants to isolated seniors, unemployed and younger adults (see for example Giancaspro & Manuti 2021; and Kragt & Holtrop 2019).

The evidence is clear that volunteering can provide:

- A form of active social engagement countering social isolation and improving mental health and wellbeing, through social connections and from making contributions that are helping others.
- Opportunities to develop communication and interpersonal skills, learning to work in teams, develop shared responsibilities, relationships and networks.

- Opportunities for learning about oneself – inclinations, interests, capabilities – increasing self-belief and self-efficacy, influencing perceptions of identity and motivations for future activities, study or vocational choices through greater self-awareness and self-confidence.
- Development of higher order employability skills such as decision-making, leadership, creative thinking, strategic thinking, and conflict resolution.
- A voice and agency to isolated community members especially when participating in forms of representations such as taking on advisory and leadership roles in committees or working groups.
- A sense of community, improving social cohesion and giving communities broader purpose (Stuart et al., 2020, Haymes et al., 2019, and Kragt & Holtrop 2019).
- A wide range of benefits from parents volunteering at school, including role modelling about the importance of education and schooling and the potential for volunteer roles at school building parent confidence, creating opportunities for pride and achievement, and potentially leading to more formal and paid roles within the school (Woodrow et al., 2016).

## ENGAGEMENT BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

While the benefits of community activities and volunteering more specifically, may be realised for many diverse groups and communities, the research emphasises that consideration of the nuances of subgroups is important given diverse needs, interests and skills. For example, for some, self-confidence is a precursor for participation, and establishing a sense of belonging with others can aid engagement. Some groups will have language and cultural barriers to participation and will need tailored approaches which consider these issues.

Placed-based, community-led initiatives and tailored offerings have been shown to draw people in given they are of the community and reflective of those nuances (Moore et al., 2016; Renzaho et al., 2012; and Mukherjee et al., 2016). While all target groups will have nuanced needs requiring special consideration for how activities are implemented, past research has identified more common organisational barriers and enablers for engagement which are widely applicable, see Table 1.

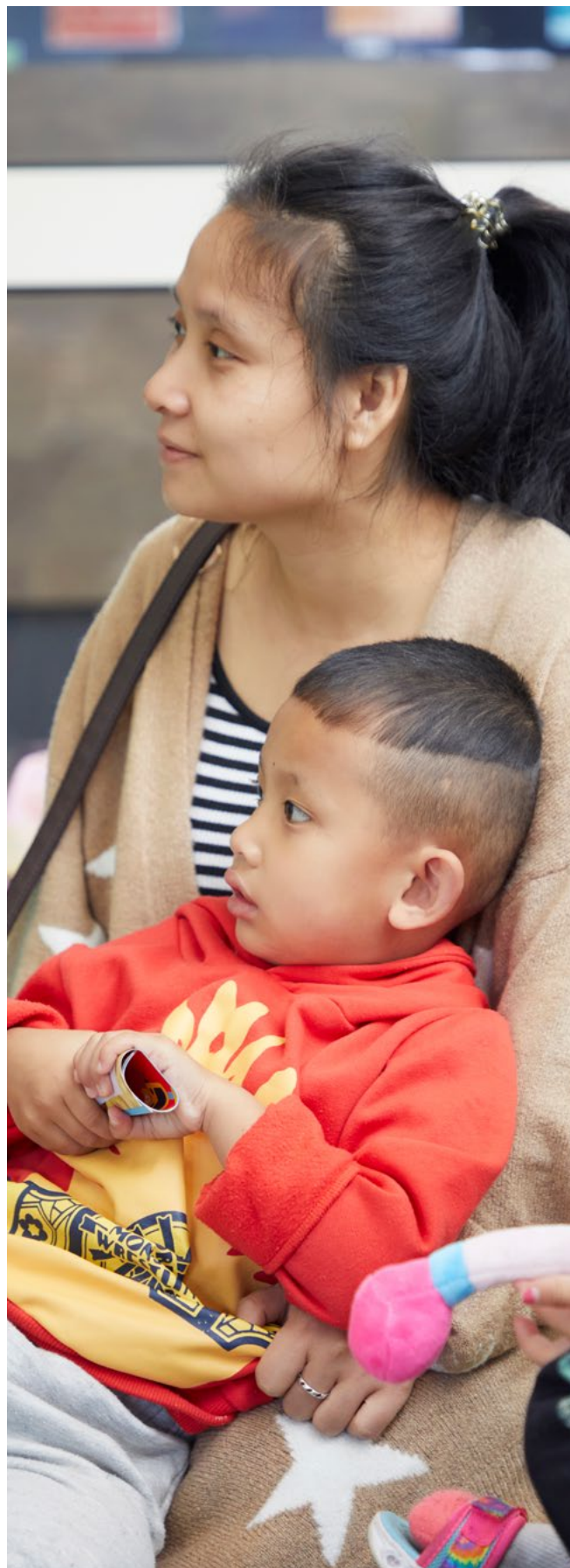


Table 1: Organisational level barriers and enablers to community engagement.

BARRIERS	ENABLERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff attitudes</li> <li>• Poor resources</li> <li>• Limited time (rushed)</li> <li>• Perceived clash of values between parents and school</li> <li>• Unfamiliar systems and processes</li> <li>• Poor or inaccessible communication</li> <li>• Poor understanding of how to support learning</li> <li>• Negative experiences</li> <li>• Performance pressures – narrowing interest to what is required for performance measures</li> <li>• Lack of systemic support</li> <li>• Lack of specialist knowledge</li> <li>• Lack of specialist staff and support</li> <li>• Lack of cultural awareness, (poor knowledge, behaviours and skills of culturally diverse population groups can act to exclude cultural groups)</li> <li>• Waiting times</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcoming environment</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> <li>• Supportive staff</li> <li>• Shared skills and resources</li> <li>• Active promotion of good practice</li> <li>• Time and patience</li> <li>• Joint focus (staff, community and organisation)</li> <li>• Relationship building</li> <li>• Good communication</li> <li>• Innovative communication</li> <li>• Provision of community resources</li> <li>• Designated spaces for parents and families to connect</li> <li>• Inclusive practices</li> <li>• Inclusive classrooms</li> <li>• Parent committees</li> <li>• Staff training, e.g. diversity awareness, inclusive practice</li> <li>• Community engagement staff</li> <li>• Strong links with community services</li> <li>• Lasting links for parents, carers and community</li> <li>• Creative, informal and formal learning opportunities</li> <li>• Cultural awareness</li> </ul>

Sourced from: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth 2016; Baxter et al., 2011; and Jenkin & Wilson, 2009.

## BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO PARTICIPATION VIA SCHOOLS

While organisational level barriers outlined above also apply to schools, there are further considerations in engaging parents and carers in school-based activities. There are known barriers to parent engagement and involvement such as a lack of flexible work options or shift work hours, poor physical or mental health and disability, low levels of parent literacy, non-English speaking backgrounds, and parents with younger children and no access to childcare. Some parents see the school environment as intimidating or have had negative experiences of school themselves which create personal barriers to engagement (O’Hehir & Savelsberg, 2014).

Teacher attitudes and their lack of understanding of disadvantage can also isolate parents who feel judged, misunderstood or incapable. Teachers can see these parents as simply ‘disinterested’ or ‘lazy’ or teachers see parent engagement as extra work for already stretched teaching resources (O’Hehir & Savelsberg, 2014). Further family social isolation can result and is linked to mental health problems, abuse and neglect within families (Zubrick et al., 2008). Teacher education, training and resource support are needed to enable teachers to empathise and communicate effectively with parents and reach out to diverse, disengaged families (OECD, 2016).

Socio-economic backgrounds and family upbringing shape parent attitudes towards parental involvement, and towards school-home relations, which also influences their engagement. Coupled with the real challenges of poverty and disadvantage, where families are less likely to have access to resources and more likely to have language barriers, limited access to transport and childcare, means these parents are less informed, less involved and less represented in school communities (O’Hehir & Savelsberg, 2014).

Providing opportunities for parents and carers to engage and creating opportunities to volunteer in the classroom and at school can build confidence and capacity (Moore et al., 2016; Goodall & Montgomery 2014). Actively linking parents and carers with opportunities (McArthur et al. 2010), e.g. personal introductions to teachers, staff and activity providers and including parents and carers in the planning and delivery of activities /programs is engaging and empowering (Goodall & Montgomery 2014). Schools need dedicated and skilled staff who can facilitate volunteer opportunities; provide training and support; and respond to parent, carer and staff needs (McArthur et al., 2010).

For a broader discussion of evidence relating to parent engagement in learning and schooling, see the companion evidence paper *High Quality Schooling*.



# Adult learning

While increasing levels of education, vocational skills, and qualifications is a key to improved quality of life, there are significant barriers to participation and learning outcomes for many adults in disadvantaged communities. An understanding of the nature of the educational needs and gaps, as well as potential barriers, motivations, and triggers for participation and achievement in learning is necessary to develop effective approaches and supports.

## LEARNING NEEDS AND PATHWAYS

Levels of literacy, numeracy and formal educational attainment are lower for adults in disadvantaged communities. While formal educational qualifications are needed to unlock opportunities, there are barriers to entry and to participating in learning that may first need to be addressed to set participants up for success. Re-engaging with education can also be very challenging for adults who had very poor experiences at school or had limited opportunities for education in their countries of origin.

There are two high level categories of learning needs that emerge through the research (Pennacchia et al., 2018; OECD, 2017; and Tanton et al., 2021):

- **Soft skills and soft entry stepping stones:** Addressing personal motivations and improving comfort with re-entering education, learning for the development of personal skills, achievement, self-esteem, confidence, and pride, with objectives of improved social and economic participation in general. This includes for example short courses, community education in areas of interest, communication, citizenship, computers, workplace culture, sewing, cooking, community leadership, understanding taxation, or health and wellbeing and participation in language, literacy or numeracy related learning.
- **Educational qualifications and certification of vocational skills:** To be confident and competitive in the labour market, vocational skills, certificates, licences, and educational qualifications are needed. This can also include achieving recognition of prior learning or acceptance of overseas qualifications. This type of learning can contribute to increasing confidence and personal achievement; increasing competitiveness in the local labour market; and widening work aspirations.



Learning is a pathway to social and economic participation and lifting communities out of disadvantage. Gaining employability skills and necessary certificates for entry-level jobs are important, as are roles that build core skills, provide familiarisation with workplaces and critical work experience — particularly for those new to the job market (including refugees and migrants who may not have experience that is recognised in Australia) and those who have been out of employment for an extended period (for example, ex-prisoners, people with significant mental health challenges, parents who have been focused on raising children).

However, unskilled, casualised and insecure jobs that do not lead to better longer-term prospects may not be sufficient to lead families out of entrenched disadvantage. Higher levels of education and upskilling are important for long-term pathways out of poverty.

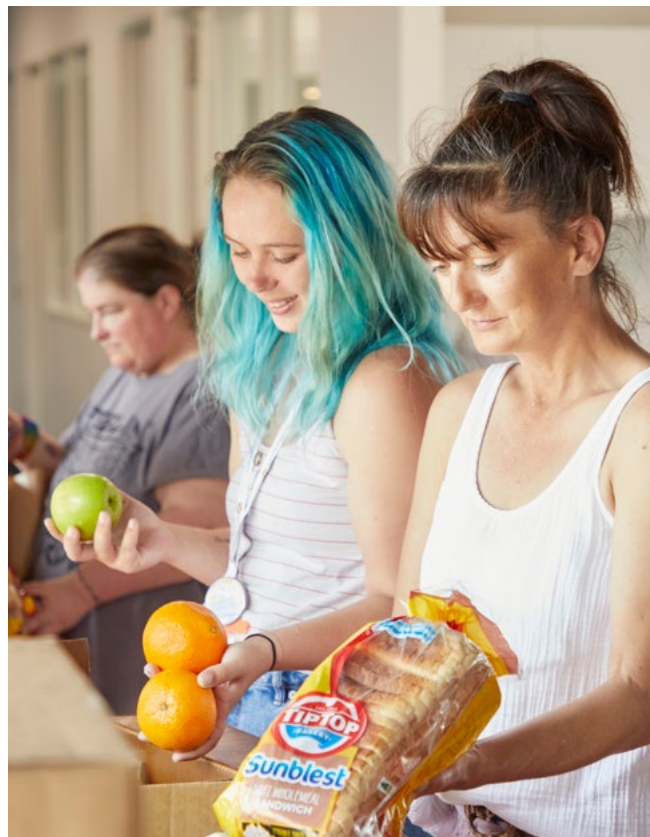
The Dropping off the Edge report (Tanton et al., 2021) measures unskilled jobs as an indicator of disadvantage. Unskilled workers are more likely to have limited financial resources with negative impacts on their physical health (Heap, Fors, & Lennartsson, 2017). Unskilled workers also earn less than skilled workers with labour market polarisation and growing gaps in wages meaning greater inequality and disadvantage in Australia (Denny, 2019; Coelli & Borland, 2016; and Tanton et al., 2021). Ultimately, learning needs to be linked to sustainable employment with a living wage (see Chapter 4).

## BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING

Adults face a wide range of barriers to participating in learning classified within the literature as being situational barriers: arising from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints; institutional barriers: arising from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions or a lack of flexibility in the provision on offer, such as inappropriate scheduling or content of provision; and dispositional barriers: relating to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults, such as believing that they are too old to learn or lacking confidence or interest (Cross, K. P., 1981 in Pennacchia et al., 2018, p.10).

Adults in disadvantaged communities often face multiple types of barriers to participation in learning, including facing issues from all three of these high-level categories simultaneously. Many experience age, gender, or race discrimination in addition to the lack of resources and material basics as a result of living in poverty, whilst also having low levels of literacy, numeracy or personal skills to confidently navigate entry into learning. Some groups will

face additional, acute barriers such as physical disability, mental illness or psychological distress, for example, from pre-migration trauma (Rioseco, & Liddy 2018).



A recent UK study (Pennacchia et al., 2018) provides a useful summary of barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups which goes beyond the high-level categorisation and illustrates the breadth and potential cumulative nature of contextual barriers, including:

- **Costs / course fees** — not having money to pay fees and when weighing up the relative value of competing priorities, education is not seen as offering value relative to other resources or activities household income needs to be spent on.
- **Family barriers** — lack of support with childcare, no free time to study, cost of childcare, no school holiday childcare and needing childcare for contact time for courses as well as for study time. Large families in smaller housing make developing good study habits difficult, hard to focus with “so much in their head already”.
- **Household duties and responsibility for household income** and reluctance to be dependent on other family and friends, increased stress with pressure to achieve if household income or family and friends are supporting them.

- **Family caring responsibilities** for family members with poor health, disability, and unpredictable health needs which do not fit with regular learning commitments.
- **Lack of accessible information** on what is available, not connected with accurate information, no guidance or advice, hard to navigate information, no central point of contact, receiving conflicting advice. Especially related to unclear information on costs and subsidies which causes anxiety, and insufficient vocational advice on routes into and possible outcomes from gaining certain qualifications, particularly when English is a second language.
- **Poor experiences or discomfort in training** – doing mandatory training as part of receipt of benefits or accessing training through uncomfortable modes (through job centres or government services) which is off-putting or adds to negative feelings about learning and learning competencies.
- **Delivery modes, structures, or nature of course** especially for those with low formal education or limited experience, unstructured adult learning, not scaffolded enough, too advanced, requires better literacy or numeracy skills or support to participate and achieve.
- **Costs of participation** – including access to and costs for transport and required materials, books, clothing, shoes and tools.
- **Low self-belief and confidence** attributed to past learning experience or a long break since last studying, particularly the case for older students.
- **People with disability and health conditions**, mainly which affected their ability to physically access learning such as inadequate facilities, impacts on organising time, unpredictable nature of health and disability and mental health conditions which impact focus, function and regularly participating or meeting deadlines.
- **Social norms, peers and the family environment**, and related pressures, assumptions and expectations about learning which negatively influences or narrows study choices to what is accepted.

## MOTIVATORS AND ENABLERS FOR SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION

The literature distinguishes between motivations, enablers (or facilitators) and triggers, for participation in learning (see Pennacchia et al., 2018 and Tuckett & Field, 2016):

- **Motivations** – the reasons why people value or want to learn which can be external such as employment opportunities or progression; offers of free learning or campaigns raising awareness of benefits of learning. Internal motivations may include personal enjoyment;

social contact, making new friends and belonging; or as part of improved wellbeing, mental health and physical health.



- **Enablers** – what makes participation easier including circumstance, resources, people and places such as supportive social networks; availability of appropriate learning; access to effective information, advice and guidance including help navigating choices and signing up; safe, culturally appropriate spaces, welcoming design, flexible access and appropriate delivery modes.
- **Triggers** – the catalyst for participating in learning at a particular point in time – the “why now?”



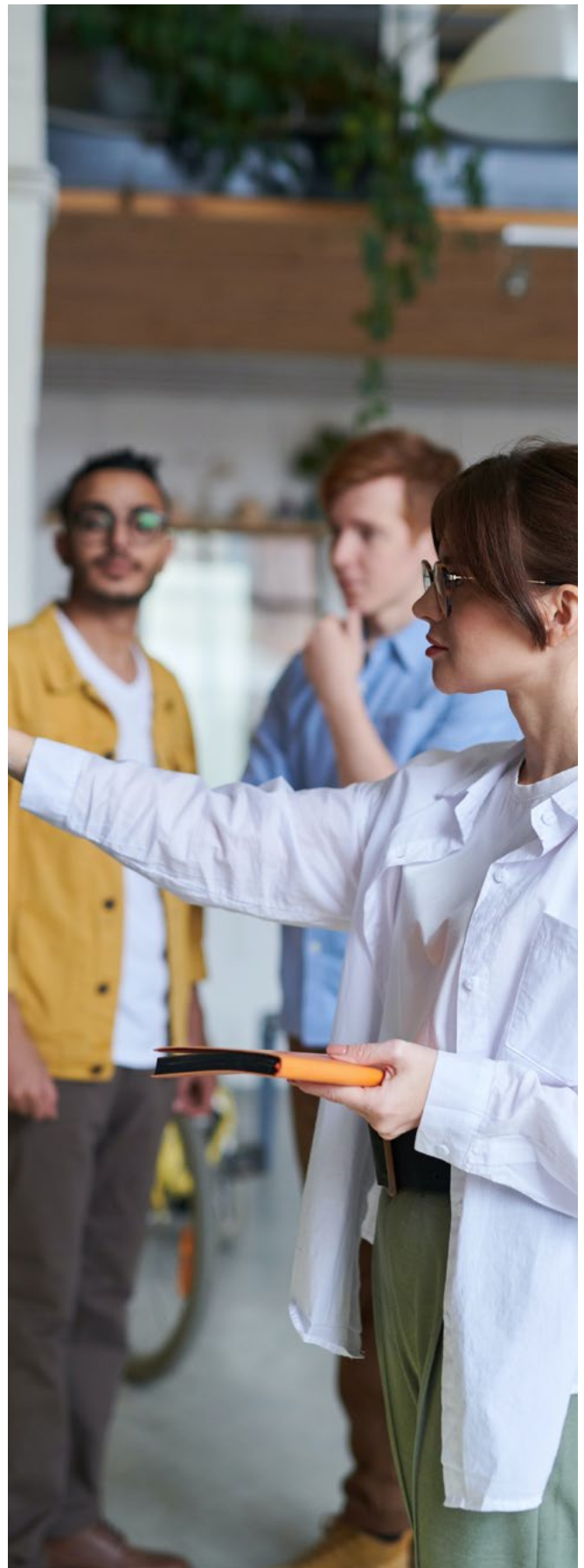
Evidence shows that participation in learning can come at different transition points in life as motivations and personal circumstances change (Tuckett & Field, 2016). Further still, even when an individual values education, and is motivated to participate in learning, it is not always accessible or feasible. Understanding the complex interplay of barriers, enablers and triggers and seeking to 'tip the balance' towards participation in those circumstances is a key undertaking for intermediary and support services (Pennacchia et al., 2018).

Building aspirations, developing confidence, creating opportunities to participate and experience success, making different types and levels of learning available, and providing support to address practical barriers like cost, transport, childcare and ill-health are all required to boost education and employment outcomes. Research shows that trusted relationships with work and learning coordinators, tailored and flexible support, programs and courses delivered in ways that anticipate and reflect the needs of the community are critical (Carpentieri 2014; Taylor et al., 2005).

Connecting with training providers who can support participants given their diverse needs and nature of their life and family circumstances is needed, including, for example, addressing negative effects of past trauma or discrimination on wellbeing or practicalities of housing, health, or settlement stresses (Rioseco & Liddy, 2018).

Studies of community education providers, who provide informal learning as well as vocational skill training, highlight their effectiveness in supporting people into further study. For example, a 2017 evaluation found that adult community education providers supported 57 per cent of participants into further training, with 78 per cent of those doing pre-accredited training transitioning into more formal / accredited courses (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017).

Effective approaches offer a range of learning activities; in family friendly, safe and appealing spaces; using social, recreational and cultural resources to engage adults in formal and informal learning opportunities (McDonald, 2011 and Moore et al., 2016). Reaching out to parents, carers and community members' to understand their values, interests, concerns and aspirations helps build more engaging programs. Dedicated and skilled staff are also a critical component for effectiveness in developing welcoming, trusted services and activities (Moore et al., 2016; Jenkin & Wilson 2009; Turney & Kao 2009; McArthur et al., 2010).



# Employment pathways

Employment has long been proven to be a pathway out of poverty, however, adults in disadvantaged communities often face significant barriers in securing and maintaining more stable, consistent, and well-paid employment.

## UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

In addition to being barriers to community participation and to learning, low levels of literacy, educational attainment or achievement, negative perceptions and experiences of school and institutions, low self-esteem and confidence, language and communication difficulties are also barriers to employment. Further to this, disadvantaged job seekers also face barriers due to a lack of work experience and references or practical requirements such as lack of or loss of driver's license or excessive fines preventing re-licensing, and criminal records or ineligible or reticence for certain types of roles given police check requirements. (Borland et al., 2016).

Community and employer barriers to inclusion such as racism, prejudice, and "neighbourhood bias" also inhibit employment success. Neighbourhood factors or place-based barriers encompass not only employer prejudice, but also the potential negative influence of social norms in the community towards work, and exhaustion and withdrawal from the labour market when issues such as a lack of local job opportunities, and poor transport and infrastructure such as childcare and health support services make participation seem impossible. Poor mental, physical health and disability, substance abuse or addiction can mean not just obtaining employment, but holding down a job, is challenging (Netto et al., 2016).

Different subgroups can face particular or multiple barriers to employment, for example, long term unemployed, migrants, women, First Nations people, people with disability. While there are nuances for difference groups, and some will have multiple barriers to employment, the evidence points to similar conclusions that interventions and programs should be tailored to context and situational family needs and employment services should involve a range of flexible, personalised supports, and there are benefits from place-based approaches to addressing neighbourhood barriers (see for example – Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019; Mission Australia, 2008; Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2007).

## WORK READINESS, JOBS PATHWAYS AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

The literature suggests two high level approaches to employment pathways:

- A "work first" approach whereby being in employment provides the experience and validation for building self-esteem, habits, work skills and accomplishments, training and work progression; or
- A developmental pathway with stepping stones to reaching employment goals after building work readiness, confidence, skills and qualifications to be more competitive in the labour market.

Work first approaches stem from the evidence on the benefits of employment to health, wellbeing, skills and financial security (see earlier discussion), meaning improved quality of life, sooner, from 'working first' over other pathways. These approaches emphasise that





getting any job and having work experience will likely lead to getting a better job rather than an alternative, and potentially longer path of developing skills and gaining qualifications as an entry point to employment (Bennett et al., 2018).

Some research however suggests that work first approaches aiming at 'any job' are not always beneficial given some employment factors can have negative impacts on health and wellbeing (Broom et al., 2006), and that quality of jobs, job-related stresses and the nature of the workplace can negatively impact retention in jobs over the longer term (Modini et al., 2016; Waddell & Burton, 2006). Further, individual choice, sense of control and self-direction in work positively impact employment outcomes pointing to greater success when there is choice over job pathways (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019).

Alternatively, development pathways address employability skills as well as pre-work-readiness such as self-belief and self-efficacy, often drawing on group connections and learning for developing social capital, self-esteem and confidence and interpersonal skills. Training and vocational skills develop through short courses and connections to training organisation and exposure to the world of work gained through work experience, community work projects or social enterprises (OECD, 2019).

Exposure to the world of work, understanding interests and building aspirations, and enabling experiential learning from a safe place is important for long-term motivation and practical understanding of labour market opportunities. Social networks, mentors, and role models also provide practical supports like child minding for interviews, access to information and guidance for job search, job brokerage and on-the-job support to retain jobs longer (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019; Moore et al., 2016; Price-Robertson, 2011; McArthur et al., 2010).

Australian government policies for public employment services and support payments encourage a work first approach, with some limited support for skills and personal development. A 2016 review of employment programs concluded "best-practice in employment program design for jobseekers with high levels of disadvantage include four main elements:

- Develop job readiness skills.
- Assist in obtaining job-specific skills necessary to obtain employment.
- Help place people in jobs.
- Provide on-going monitoring and support in the job placement" (Borland et al., 2016 p.8).

Borland et al., (2016) present a detailed recommendation on components of best practice for providing job readiness which includes an audit of the jobseeker's available skills, and associated training in a range of common areas of need – "English language training; literacy and numeracy skills; training in basic tasks required in the workplace (such as using IT); job search and job application skills; development of inter-personal skills; an introduction to the workplace and workplace cultures (for example, expectations of employers regarding behaviour and dress; working in teams; working with people from different cultures); opportunities for work experience and volunteering; facilitated access to formal training; and assistance in addressing barriers to work such as lack of transport (for example, assistance in obtaining a driver licence) or childcare." (Borland et al., 2016 p.8).

The employment services system is currently undergoing further reform with changes not yet fully implemented. Past research has found previous services to be insufficient for Australians experiencing severe and/or multiple barriers to employment (Bennett et al., 2018; Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, 2015; Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018, in Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019), and that some jobseekers have reported fear and anxiety interacting with services (Australian Council of Social Service, 2018).

Research suggests employment-focused social enterprises may be better placed to assist people with multiple and/or severe barriers to employment. Costs of delivery are high, however, and solutions are generally small scale, focused on locational needs, and not immediately transferable or easily scalable (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019). Lessons from these practices however are useful considerations for any employment service or support in disadvantaged communities.



These community-based models have emerged over the last two decades incorporating transitional labour market programs into place-based collaborations and / or social enterprise employment programs for neighbourhood renewal and greater labour market participation for marginalised unemployed (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019, Mission Australia, 2008, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2007). These use a combination of a more person-centric developmental pathway and employment (i.e. supported work placements) with flexibility to meet needs of individuals and communities. Practice features and concepts are discussed below.

## CAREER GUIDANCE

Effective career guidance is critical in both shaping and harnessing career aspirations. Career guidance is recognised as important for skill development, building self-confidence and self-efficacy, identifying relevant 'soft skills', knowledges and capabilities that are in demand, and helping align individual aspirations with local opportunities and pathways. For example, the OECD (2021) highlights that "career guidance is a fundamental policy lever to help adults successfully navigate a constantly evolving labour market through advice and information on job and training opportunities".

The OECD's evidence review highlighted the value of support to navigate regional job markets, where the availability of jobs is often strongly shaped by the dynamics and structures of local economies. The OECD particularly pointed to the importance of career education for more vulnerable job seekers, who may have less access to the social capital that helps people find and keep good jobs (OECD, 2022).

## FLEXIBLE, PERSON-CENTRIC APPROACHES

A person-centred approach ensures individual needs are considered alongside family strengths and stressors, seeking to understand and connect to individuals and their families. Building relationships and creating safe places for people to be themselves, to understand their strengths, to develop their interests, skills and confidence, and to find their voice, are important components of fostering positive, intrinsic, and long-term change (Moore et al., 2016; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Earlier research, including a highly detailed review into the personal support program (PSP) for high support need job seekers in government employment programs (Perkins & Nelms, 2004), found limitations in the effectiveness of these services due to participant discomfort or reticence to disclose barriers; inadequate assessment tools to identify full-service needs; and insufficient staff training to manage

the complexities of multiple layers of disadvantage. While reforms to services have since been made, including the advent of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS); the issues remain that services need to build trust and confidence and be tailored to the lived experience and the strengths and interests of participants.

More successful approaches consider the whole person and provide personal support services that factor in the needs, barriers, strengths and interests of individuals. Perkins and Nelms' review of evidence concluded that successful delivery of programs to this client group include, for example:

- Flexibility to respond to the varied and complex needs of clients facing barriers.
- Strong partnerships with community agencies that can provide necessary support services.
- Specific and ongoing staff training to allow better understanding and support of clients needs.
- Use of employment or community participation activities to increase work related skills and self esteem.
- Ongoing support to clients after employment is obtained.
- Creating a positive context and using a strengths-based approach (Perkins & Nelms, 2004, p.10).

Similarly, the Brotherhood of St Lawrence's work on effective employment programs for disadvantaged jobseekers and humanitarian migrants highlights the importance of community responses to employment – including tailored pathways into employment that reflect community strengths and needs, person-centred approaches that tailor supports to individual needs, and the ability to tap into informal community networks. They write that "Practitioners acknowledged that such an approach requires more time investment than a standard approach to placing unemployed people in a training course or 'any' available job" and point to the importance of local collaborations to sustain this way of working (Boese et al., 2018).

For those facing more complex life circumstances such as experience of violence, substance abuse or addiction or permanent injury or disability the pathway to jobs and work readiness may need more personal development support. Helping participants identify strengths and barriers can aid action as it helps people better manage and address challenges, forming a path towards improved outcomes (Butterworth, 2003).



Empowering individuals requires understanding and helping the whole person in the context of their life and may include first addressing accommodation, health, finance management, and other skills such as social skills, communication, confidence, motivation, self-identity, initiative taking (Perkins & Nelms, 2004). Some community members may need help accessing specialised services or counselling services.

Rehabilitation, practicing independence skills, such as self-care, self-advocacy and navigating public transportation, and the development of extracurricular activities and social networking or volunteering to build employability skills can be stepping stones for ultimately making contacts for finding and negotiating suitable employment (Lindsay et al., 2015). Partnerships between employment service providers and community services is a key strategy for providing the wrap-around support needed, with most innovative employment pathway models emphasising the importance of place-based, collaborative approaches (for example, Community Investment Committees and Local Learning and Employment Networks).

Qian et al's recent review of employment-focused social enterprises suggests that these enterprises 'are most effective where they help individuals develop a range of hard and soft employability skills through their work experience' and that this is realised through 'real world employment experience' in a 'safe and accepting environment' (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019, p.37).

The review summarises the key benefits derived from participation:

- Increased incomes.
- Increase in relevant and meaningful work experience.
- Increase in vocational and generalised skills.
- Enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy.
- Changes to identity.
- Increased sense of belonging (p.36).



The review identifies that social enterprise employment programs use highly trained staff for intense and personalised support. They also have strong relationships and are flexible and understanding of the realities of the life situations for disadvantaged job seekers – they know the needs of local participants, have strong local networks and partnerships, and can integrate and link support services and work, frequently and for long periods of time.

Evaluation evidence shows that high employment outcomes can come from these kinds of community programs – see for example the evaluation of Mission Australia’s Urban Renewal Employment Enterprise Program (UREEP) (Mission Australia, 2008). UREEP was found to be a ‘high value’ program with over 70 per cent of participants transferring to employment and over 85 per cent experiencing positive personal development. The effectiveness is derived from a focus on participant needs, in the context of the communities in which they live. The evaluation report summarises and recommends the key strengths of the program:

- Consistent and personalised social support, including life-skills development and a coordinated approach to individual client needs.
- Patient support for personal and vocational skills development.
- A social context for training and development.
- A partnership approach to training and development.
- Holistic support for transitions from exclusion to participation.
- Dynamic training in a live industry context (Mission Australia, 2008, p.7).

## BALANCING DEMAND AND SUPPLY ISSUES

Successful employment approaches work from both a supply and demand perspective, marrying the needs and nuances of individual job seeker strengths and interests, with local labour market opportunities and supportive, engaged employers. There is a need for local solutions and relationships and service providers as well as employer alliances and understanding demand side issues (OECD, 2017).

Place-based solutions can achieve higher employer and industry engagement, but require dedicated time to consult with communities, community organisations, businesses and other services (Moore et al., 2016). At a minimum, local connections and working with employers is needed to understand local job opportunities and manage needs and expectations. Job matching services which provide only basic information and referral services do not meet these needs or lead to increased hiring (Ingold & Valizade, 2017).

A 2015 study from Social Ventures Australia pointed to the challenge of too many job seekers undertaking ‘training for training’s sake’ and cycling in and out of job providers and training offerings, without sufficient support and ‘work readiness’ training to secure and sustain jobs.

Partnerships with local employers, combined with sufficient wrap-around support, is a key strategy for disrupting this cycle – with the OECD suggesting that engagement with employers is critical (OECD, 2013). In particular, they highlight the value of localised employment initiatives that can “be ‘tailored to the specific needs of jobseekers, available employment opportunities, and the support systems in that region” (Borland et al., cited in OECD, 2022).

Not all work options are good for families and tailored job search and personal support for job brokerage may be required for parents to find jobs that do not undermine families and child development. For example, finding flexible, family-friendly work and achieving progression from low-paid, low-skilled work over time (Bajorek & Lucy, 2020). The European Commission’s recommendations on investing in children for breaking cycles of disadvantage emphasises the need to support adults’ participation in the labour market to be able to access the resources children need.

While they recommend measures to support inclusion of vulnerable household members, particularly women and sole parents, to be competitive and have job search support to connect to jobs, the Commission also stresses the need to consider the types of work and care arrangements available. They recommend brokering or establishing practical job design, working conditions and work environments to ensure children still receive quality care and that family relationships are supported, for example, through receiving a living wage, experiencing flexible work arrangements, and accessing quality childcare options (EC, 2013).

Fostering motivations and pathways for lifelong learning, and, providing guidance and mentors, facilitating access to bridging courses and flexible options through educational support programs to obtain higher levels of qualifications are also needed given the poverty that remains from low-skilled, low-paid work, where higher levels of education can provide labour market mobility (Pennacchia et al., 2018; Tanton et al., 2021; Davidson et al., 2020). Participation in supported employment or social enterprise employment programs can provide valuable opportunities for building these foundations.

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# Our Place Elements



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