

Working with Experience

Developing an Individual Learning Audit Process to assist mature age unemployed job seekers make productive learning choices

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'Marc # 1'. Shortlisted entry in the Adult Learners' Week 2002 Camera House photo competition. Photo by Aaron Perkins

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Executive Summary

Background

In May 2003 Adult Learning Australia undertook a feasibility study to explore the potential for the development and implementation of a tool, an 'Individual Learning Audit Process', that could help mature age unemployed job seekers better understand and articulate their learning needs and learning styles.

In an environment in which mature aged job seekers are to be encouraged, even compelled, to undertake more training as part of their overall job seeking strategy, it is important that this learning activity be a positive and productive experience for those who undertake it.

To ensure that this is the case, both the job seeker and the service agencies who support them need to have a sophisticated understanding of the job seeker's preferred learning styles as well as previous formal and informal learning activity. Making the right choice about learning involves more than simply taking into account the subject matter or the learning activity. It requires careful consideration of learning preferences, of barriers to formal learning activity, and the identification of the potential to develop new skills or knowledge.

To ensure that the learning activities undertaken by mature age job seekers are productive, both in terms of skilling the learner for paid employment and in terms of engendering a positive attitude towards ongoing learning activity as a strategy to help maintain employment, an Individual Learning Audit Process may be of value.

An Individual Learning Audit Process would assist in identifying the following:

1. Potential for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) processes;
2. Appropriate modes and venues of learning activity may be more productive than others;
3. Attitudes to learning that may represent barriers to particular forms of learning and help explain difficulties experienced in the past. Once identified, appropriate learning activities can be selected to help minimise potential difficulties or, in cases where learning options are limited, strategies can be developed to assist the learner overcome difficulties even in learning environments which do not directly suit the learner's preferred modes or environment;
4. Recommendations about the most productive learning pathways by taking account of local learning provision; the client's preferred learning mode, environment and attitude towards structured learning activity; and current competencies gained formally or informally;
5. Alternative training options, such as volunteer work or workplace 'shadowing'.

Project focus

The feasibility study documented in this paper, set out to achieve three things:

1. Evaluate the efficacy of developing a structured Individual Learning Audit Process for use in assisting mature age unemployed job seekers (loosely defined as people aged 45 and above, who are currently without sufficient paid employment and who are actively seeking to become more fully engaged in paid employment);
2. Explore what would be required to implement an Individual Learning Audit Process as part of the Job Network processes initiated in July 2003;
3. Recommend how to proceed, either in the development of the proposed Individual Learning Audit Process or in developing alternative strategies to encourage deeper understanding among employment brokers and mature age unemployed job seekers about the process of choosing learning pathways.

Key Findings

1.
 - a.** The feasibility study has shown there is potential for a process that allows mature age unemployed job seekers to explore their learning needs both in terms of subject matter and in terms of the learning delivery modes that best suit their personality and goals;
 - b.** The Individual Learning Audit Process developed for use in the Lithgow study provides a solid base upon which to develop the process further;
 - c.** It must be noted however that, while an Individual Learning Audit Process is necessary and could work, the extent of its effectiveness will be limited by some considerable external factors that will only be overcome through a significant change in cultural attitudes;
 - d.** These external factors include:
 - a persistent belief in the primacy of formal accredited training over all other forms of skill development, and
 - an apparent discrimination against mature age unemployed job seekers;
 - e.** Considerable work needs to be done within the wider community, and with employers, to change these inhibiting attitudes. Work also needs to be done to accurately map the available training options.
2.
 - a.** While the Individual Learning Audit Process appears to have relevance within the 'big picture' outline of the Job Network, Job Network practices focus on employment outcomes and reward speed and efficiency in achieving these. Where training is indicated as an appropriate strategy to achieving employment outcomes accredited learning activity is foregrounded. The focus on speed and on accredited learning may reduce the value of the Individual Learning Audit Process within this context;
 - b.** A process similar to the Individual Learning Audit Process may already

be used by individual Job Network members, albeit with a more overt emphasis on employment pathways. It may be possible to present the Individual Learning Audit Process to Job Network members as another tool for their use. However, adoption of the learning audit process across the Job Network system would be unlikely unless the provision of sophisticated learning advice became a key deliverable for Job Network members. Moreover, the efficacy of any Learning Audit Process will be reduced while accredited learning activity is explicitly and implicitly promoted above non-accredited learning.

3. Further work needs to be undertaken, possibly in the form of a pilot in a medium-sized community, as a way of exploring a number of, as yet, unclear challenges which will only come to the fore in a real world situation. The research has already identified several issues requiring further investigation and discussion:
 - Where the use of the Individual Learning Audit Process could be placed within the current 'system' that seeks to provide a service for the target client group;
 - Who, other than Job Network members, may provide this service to the target client group and how its development and delivery may be funded;
 - The degree to which the current Individual Learning Audit Process in structure and delivery will need to be modified and developed and the degree to which the Individual Learning Audit Process should be made to 'fit' within current training modules or awards, or be deliberately separate and different;
 - The development of a guide to help an interviewer with limited learning literacy themselves interpret and provide advice based upon the results of the Audit Process;
 - How the employer, and those in organisations responsible for employment, need to be aware of the positive features of employing mature persons, as opposed to those younger; and
 - The degree to which the current training market may be able to cope with the needs of those in the target group who have identified, as a result of the Individual Learning Audit Process, quite specific learning modes that are their preferred - and successful means - of learning.

In addition to conducting a real-world pilot of the Process, further work needs to be undertaken to:

- Demonstrate to employers, employment brokers, and policy-makers the value of informal and non-accredited learning activity as a strategy to gaining employment skills;
- Demonstrate to employment brokers and policy makers the value of competency recognition processes as an alternative pathway to demonstrating employment skill sets;
- Make the recognition of skills and prior learning processes more efficient, simple and cost effective;
- Demonstrate to employers the value of an age-diverse work force; and

- Encourage learning providers to become more proactive in promoting their programs to, and their potential to tailor solutions for, employment brokers and mature age job seekers.

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1. Project overview

1.1 Context

Changes in the nature of work and, especially, the disappearance of the 'job-for-life' concept, has meant that many mature age people of working age are unable to obtain or maintain adequate paid employment. While the existence of mature aged job seekers is not new, the economic and social pressure for people over 45 to remain in the workforce for longer means that the unemployed members of this age cohort are now experiencing the sort of attention once applied only to youth.

The world of work has changed dramatically since the present cohort of people aged 45 and over entered into it. A person now aged 55 might have entered the workforce in 1965, an era of jobs-for-life and typing pools. It was an age in which a single formal qualification gained in youth could remain, with the occasional informal on-the-job top-up, valid for an entire working life.

The contemporary world of work is very different. Not only do the work practices within fields of work change regularly and, often, dramatically, fields of work can disappear altogether. In both cases, to maintain or gain employment, workers must regularly refresh, adapt and supplement their existing skills by undertaking structured learning activity.

Many mature age workers have accepted that flux is more or less a part of contemporary work life and that regular participation in structured learning is a way of coping with this change. However, there are still significant proportions of society for whom structured learning is neither viewed as a necessary nor as a positive activity. Negative attitudes towards, or limited understanding about the nature of, learning can most often be found among older people, especially men, those from 'blue collar' environments and those who had poor or limited formal education experiences in their youth (see ANTA, chapter 6, and ACNielsen, section 1).

While undertaking a learning activity will not guarantee a job seeker employment, undertaking some form of learning activity (commonly referred to as 'training' in the context of workers and job seekers), may give the job seeker a competitive advantage.

Obviously undertaking a learning activity can furnish the job seeker with skills that are relevant to the area of work they wish to pursue (assuming the subject selection and the learning environment has been appropriate). However, the acquisition of a set of contemporary work skills is not the only reason why an unemployed job seeker might participate in structured learning. For example, in the contemporary workplace, employees who are adaptable and well-rounded are in demand.

Participation in learning activity, regardless of the subject matter, is one way of developing and providing evidence of these attributes. Participation in a structured learning activity (again, regardless of the subject matter), provides an opportunity to develop the so-called 'generic' or 'soft' skills, such as interpersonal and communication skills, that are becoming increasingly valued by employers.

The opportunity to develop or maintain self-esteem, to develop new social networks and to maintain the routines and disciplines of work life, are other important benefits that participation in structured learning activity can offer the unemployed job seeker.

In providing assistance to unemployed job seekers, the federal government has recognised the value of learning (or, rather, 'training') activities. From the perspective of government, the purpose of supporting learning activity in this context is primarily focused on helping job seekers fill demonstrated job vacancies.

Another 'strand' of learning activity for the unemployed is focused on helping them to perform well in the job seeking process - to help them develop quality job applications and to present well in job interviews.

1.2 Making informed choices about learning activity

Albert Tuijnman, speaking at the International Conference on Adult Learning Principles in December 2001, noted that:

future innovations [in learning provision] can be expected to focus on measures aimed at motivating and empowering individuals. Policy makers as well as individual adult learners, employers as well as institutional providers and their teachers, all will come to depend upon post-modern knowledge and information management systems as well as integrated education and career guidance services. (Tuijnman, p.8).

In other words, the efficient integration of work and education will depend upon systems that allow a flexible approach to unpredictable individual needs and offer individually tailored holistic advice in response.

While the Commonwealth's Job Network strategies seem to be heading in this direction, restrictive views about learning options may limit the potential to fully realise the goals of flexible and individualised support for, in this case, mature age unemployed job seekers. An environment in which solutions can be tailored to address individual needs can only work effectively if all those involved fully understand what is available and the various factors that must be taken into account when developing tailored solutions.

To prove effective, the selection of a learning activity requires a more sophisticated and comprehensive process than simply selecting a course based upon its subject matter. Moreover, whether a course is accredited or not is no indication as to whether the course is relevant for everyone, and is no guarantee that the outcomes will be any more (or less) effective than other, possibly cheaper or shorter, learning options.

Productivity, in terms of learning activities, requires careful consideration of more than the subject matter and the accreditation status. Aspects of a learning activity, such as venue, mode of delivery, pace, size and composition of the learning group, prior learning experiences and beliefs that the learner holds about learning, all play a role in determining whether the learning activity will be useful or not including in the context of developing skills to a level sufficient to obtain paid employment.

If the match between learner and the learning activity is appropriate and effective, then the outcomes will be productive, and the government funds invested will have been well spent. The learning activity need only be undertaken once. It will have delivered exactly what the learner required in terms of 'pitch', starting point and pace. The exercise will have helped to increase – not diminish – self-esteem. And, as the *Securing Success*

report notes, 'building or restoring self-esteem is integral to the learning process' (Workplace consortium, p.95).

If the learning experience has been good – something in which the careful selection of the learning activity can play an important role - it will have helped demonstrate the effectiveness of the learning activity as a valuable strategy for coping with change. This in turn, may help people maintain employment for longer periods.

If the learning activity is a poor match, there is greater chance that the participant will not develop the required skills (within the set time, or at all), will have become dispirited and will not view the learning activity as being helpful either now or in the future. This outcome would seem a poor use of public funds.

While it is tempting to suggest that it is the responsibility of the learning provider to ensure that their learning activities are tailored for each learner, in reality this does not always happen, nor is it possible within any one single learning provider. Just as it is unreasonable to expect all restaurants to be able to cater to all dining preferences and needs, so individual learning providers should not be expected to cater for everyone. Some careful pre-selection is required to ensure that the learning provider and the type of learning environment they offer, matches most closely the type of learning environment required by the learner to achieve outcomes efficiently.

For a mature age job seeker, possibly experiencing unemployment for the first time, and facing the prospect of undertaking a structured learning activity for the first time in several decades, a TAFE environment that offers lengthy courses, taught formally with an inflexible curriculum, in large classes dominated by younger students, may not achieve learning outcomes most efficiently. The problems may be exacerbated by the circumstances by which they find themselves having to enrol in a course. As the *Securing Success* report noted, many of the mature-aged learners 'coerced in to the learning situation by the necessities of mutual obligations... have a pervasive fear of failure, brought about by an inability to obtain, or retain, a job and having been rejected by employers a number of times.' (Workplace consortium, p.95.)

A neighbourhood house, library or Adult and Community Education (ACE) centre that offers short courses conducted in small groups of older people in a more casual environment, may be more appropriate, allow the learner to achieve their learning outcomes more deeply and quickly, and repair some of the 'damage' caused by the experience of being unemployed. Of course for some mature age job seekers, a formal, more structured, 'youthful' environment, may prove more productive than the softer approach offered by the ACE centre or through self-directed learning activity. The essential point is that there has to be the opportunity for learning choice.

1.3 Non-subject based aspects of learning choice selection and the mature age job seeker

In recent years, there have been a number of reports written about the specific issues faced by mature age unemployed job seekers. Many of these reports discuss the need for the mature age unemployed job seeker to be able to access training. However, there is often little acknowledgement that aspects of the learning activity, such as venue, mode of delivery, pace, size and composition of the learning group, prior learning experience and

beliefs about learning all play a role in determining whether the learning activity will be useful or not.

In many reports on the subject, it seems to be assumed that all learning activity will be appropriate and of value to the mature age unemployed job seeker and that content and outcomes are the only aspects to take into consideration. It is as if learning (or training) is an unproblematic panacea that requires no deeper explanation. This attitude does not necessarily imply that the complexity of learning choice is unimportant. Rather, it shows that the various dimensions involved in selecting a learning activity do not enjoy as high a profile as the role that subject matter plays in the selecting a learning activity.

There are exceptions. In an 'Employment for Mature Age Workers Issues Paper' developed as part of a previous National Strategy for an Ageing Australia, there is the observation that:

Some researchers have argued that training method is crucial in influencing the effectiveness of training for older learners, and that many of the learning difficulties often ascribed to ageing are due in part to the use of training methods that are not suited to older people. Mature age workers, particularly those with limited training experience, are far less confident about their ability to learn, especially in exposure to new technology. They also prefer learning modes that enable them to learn 'in situ'. (Bishop, p.25.)

One of the clearest discussions about the impact of training activity that is poorly matched to the learner is contained in the recent Australian study, *Barriers to Training for Older Workers and Possible Policy Solutions* which makes the following observations:

The way in which training is provided may be an important moderating factor between learning ability and age. The use of inappropriate training methods may put older persons in a disadvantageous position compared with other learners, thus hampering their training outcomes. (Wooden & Curtain, p.40.)

There is little debate that compared with more traditional pedagogical approaches, methods such as the discovery method and activity learning have improved the performance of older workers in training settings. (Wooden & Curtain, p. 41.)

Differences in how training is delivered are also likely to have a marked impact on the learning capability of older persons. The differential impact on older persons of formal compared with informal training and between structured and unstructured training needs to be explored in practice. Focus group discussions suggest that greater attention should be given to how training can be delivered through informal and less structured processes. (Wooden & Curtain, p.240.)

Training as an activity, particularly in relation to older persons, needs to be understood in terms of its different forms. This refers to the need for trainers and policy makers to understand not only the differential impact on older persons of formal and informal and structured and unstructured training modes, but also the content of training [in terms of three content types:

technical skills; skills to ensure safety; and general and 'soft' skills such as interpersonal communication]. (Wooden & Curtain, p.243.)

In its conclusion, the *Barriers* report recommends that:

Self-perceptions in terms of the capacity to learn at older ages can be addressed by instituting 'user choice' arrangements for individuals wanting to undertake further education or training. Through a user choice arrangement, older individuals and groups have greater scope to specify the most appropriate learning modes in terms of format and mode of delivery. (Wooden & Curtain, p.262.)

In a similar vein, the 2003 *Securing Success* report, whose primary focus was to uncover best practice in training for disadvantaged people over 45 developed five criteria to describe best practice. Of these criteria three addressed the issues of comfort, empowerment and flexibility:

- Creating a safe, non-threatening environment;
- Negotiating the processes of learning with learners: "The environment offered by smaller organisations is specifically suited to negotiation that engenders success through small, but incremental steps";
- A different approach to learning, for example, learner-centred, smaller group sizes, similar-age peer groups. (Workplace consortium, pp.93-97).¹

While these criteria have been developed to encourage learning providers to change their practice, those making choices about – or recommending – learning activity, need to be cogniscent of how these non-subject based variables impact on the overall effectiveness of the training activity. Again, the opportunity to access a variety of learning modes and environments is emphasised as being crucial to success with mature age job seeker training. In addition, individualism and flexibility are presented as essential ingredients.

1.4 Making better learning choices

Given that no single learning provider can be expected to provide the 'right' sort of learning for everyone at all times and given that poorly selected learning activity can, at 'best' be unproductive and at worse damaging, a reasonably sophisticated decision-making process is required to ensure that the right sort of learning activity is selected to suit individual needs and preferences.

A NCVER report exploring ACE VET linkages, made the following observation about learning choice:

Numerous individuals and organisations are disadvantaged through lack of information about the range of vocational study available from ACE and the possibility of linking it with mainstream VET. Without adequate information, potential students of ACE VET may enrol with other providers in courses less appropriate to their needs or may even refrain from enrolling at all. In the latter case this represents possible lost opportunities for mainstream VET

¹ Another criteria relates to the learners being motivated and the final criteria addresses the need for organisational innovation on behalf of the learning provider.

(through individuals concerned never being in a position to move from ACE to mainstream VET). (Saunders, p.3)

Much more needs to be done within Australia to promote the value of the different forms of learning in achieving the same, in this case vocational, goals. One strategy is to use awareness raising campaigns, such as Adult Learners' Week and Learn @ Work Day, to effect change in national mainstream agendas. But more localised 'below-the-line' strategies are also required, point-of-decision 'interventions' that profile the range of learning options and highlight the key factors involved in making a selection.

The Individual Learning Audit Process examined in this present study is one such tool. While potentially having a wide application, the Audit Process is discussed here in the context of unemployed mature age job seekers, and its application is situated in or near the Job Network process, before the learner has selected a particular learning activity or venue.

The four chief reasons for considering the Job Network as the home for the proposed Individual Learning Audit Process are:

1. Job Network is a national program;
2. Job Network members have some of the earliest contacts with people who are returning to learning for, possibly, the first time since leaving compulsory education several decades before, and who may not be particularly knowledgeable about the adult learning options;
3. Job Network members are actively advising mature age job seekers on – and placing them in - learning activities;
4. Job Network members are looking at returning their clients to paid employment as efficiently as possible. An instrument that helps them match their clients with learning activity that is right for them will help ensure productive outcomes from the learning activity.

The proposed Learning Audit Process takes the form of a structured conversation through which the client has the opportunity to talk about their formal and informal learning activities, articulate their learning preferences, and highlight any barriers to learning.

Based upon this information, the person conducting the Audit Process can draw upon local knowledge to offer the mature age job seeker a range of learning activities that all achieve the same, or similar, goals in terms of skill or knowledge attainment, but achieve these goals through different means. The person conducting the Audit may also be able to identify the potential for the job seeker to undertake a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or a Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) process as alternative pathways to attaining skills accreditation if this is what is required for employment. (See Appendix 1 for an outline of the Individual Learning Audit Process developed for this study.)

1.5 The Job Network as a learning broker

With the implementation in July 2003 of the *Active Participation Model*, now, more than ever, Job Network agents will be facilitating a return to learning activity which, for many clients, will be the first structured learning activity they have participated in since leaving school.

In July 1998, the Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations introduced the Job Network to replace the former Commonwealth Employment Service. The Job Network is a national network of around 200 private, community and government organisations operating from approximately 2,000 sites Australia wide.

The Job Network members have been contracted by the Commonwealth government to find jobs for unemployed people. To do this, Job Network members tailor assistance packages for individual job seekers based upon level of need.

There are three main services offered under Job Network:

- Job Matching;
- Job Search Training – focusing on skills such as resume writing, interview techniques and presentation skills;
- Intensive Assistance – developing a package of activities and services to help individual disadvantaged job seekers (a definition that includes mature age unemployed job seekers) obtain employment.

Learning activities can be found in the latter two services.

Additionally, in July 2002, Training Accounts were introduced for Job Network members who offer Job Search Training and Intensive Assistance. Training Accounts makes money available for Job Network members to use in helping Indigenous and mature age unemployed job seekers undertake training that will help increase their chances of finding employment.

Job Network members are able to use the Training Accounts to fund a range of courses including competency based courses to help the job seeker gain skills they need to work in industries such as hospitality, security, real estate, building and construction. A job seeker can also do accredited courses such as business writing, computing packages, first aid and courses to obtain vehicle licences. Training Accounts may also be used to fund on-the-job training.

On 1 July 2003 a new aspect of the Job Network was introduced, the *Active Participation Model*. Under this model, Job Network members also now have access to a Job Seeker Account which is a quarantined pool of funds to be used to help individual job seekers get a job.

A Job Network member can draw funds from the Job Seeker Account to purchase services and products for the job seeker, including training and the books and equipment to support this training. There is no limit on the amount of money that can be spent on an individual job seeker, however, “Job Network members will want to ensure that if they are using the Job Seeker Account to fund training, the training is the best for their job seekers’ needs.” (Quoted from material prepared by DEWR for ALA members, March 2003.)

Another system by which job seekers can access funds for training is through collecting the training credits offered to participants in the Work for the Dole and Community Work programs. These training credits are worth between \$500 and \$800 and can be used to pay for accredited courses registered on the Australian Training database or other non-accredited courses in circumstances approved by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (approval must be gained in advance).

1.6 Motivation for the ALA Individual Learning Audit Process project

Adult Learning Australia is a national association whose mission is to advance a learning society. It has members in all states and territories who reflect the extraordinary diversity of adult learning. They include adult educators in universities, TAFEs, and community education providers; as well as community workers, librarians, individual tutors and trainers, volunteers and students. The national office is based in Canberra. ALA is funded by a grant from the Australian National Training Authority, membership dues, subscriptions and project revenue.

The motivation behind the development of an individual learning audit process lies in Adult Learning Australia's commitment to putting the individual learner at the centre of the learning process.

This project has also been motivated by a number of other core beliefs that:

- Learning activity should not be a 'punishment' – something inflicted upon someone – but an opportunity for personal growth and development;
- There is more to selecting a learning pathway than simply focusing on subject matter;
- Returning to structured learning as an unemployed adult and after a long period in the work force can be an intimidating proposition and so must be handled in an environment that supports the dignity of the individual;
- There is an increased chance of productive outcomes if the learner feels comfortable, in control and motivated;
- That by better matching learners to suitable learning environments, the experience of learning will be a more positive one. As a consequence it may help to overcome previously held negative attitudes towards learning, leading to an ongoing participation in learning activity and potentially reducing the chance of unemployment in the future;
- Greater return on investment can be achieved if Job Network and job seekers are aware of, and are able to use, shorter, more flexible, less formal learning options and alternative pathways towards skills certification.

2. Preliminary project discussions

A preliminary discussion about the development of a Learning Audit Tool² for use with mature age unemployed job seekers was held in Sydney in February 2003. Participants in this preliminary discussion included representatives from:

- Adult Learning Australia;
- Department of Education Science and Training (DEST);
- Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR);
- University of New England researchers;
- NSW Adult and Community Colleges;
- The Smith Family;
- Tasmanian Department of Education Equity Branch.

The purpose of this discussion was to gauge initial responses to the Learning Audit Tool idea, to bring to the fore the potential and possible pitfalls of the instrument, and to consider the value of proceeding with further exploration of the idea.

On the whole, there was support for some kind of process that helps people think about the various elements involved in selecting a learning program.

Reservations were expressed about the idea from the perspective of how the Learning Audit Tool would be implemented within the current or future Job Network system. A representative from DEST, who had been involved in establishing the original Job Network system, seemed to hold the greatest concerns about the proposal.

Her concerns focused on the issue of motivation: how do we motivate the Job Network members to use the tool when their primary concern is the swift movement of the unemployed from their books and into employment? As Job Network members are currently paid on the basis of the number of people placed in employment careful selection of training is a secondary focus. It was felt that we would need to show that the use of the tool would ensure more people get jobs, more quickly.

Another area of concern was the amount of time the process would take. Within the current Job Network structure, conducting the audit over several sessions was considered unreasonable. There was some concern that the Job Network members are already overburdened and would not take this extra role on.

Those who voiced major concerns or skepticism about the scheme did not seem to accept that helping mature age people into more carefully chosen training programs might help move their clients off their books quicker. Nor did they accept that it was the Job Network member's role to be concerned with the broader well-being of their clients.

Many people in the meeting responded to these objections. There was some concern that the needs of the end-user (the older unemployed) were not being given proper consideration in a system that seemed primarily concerned with moving them off Job

² As a result of the Lithgow focus group discussions, the name of the instrument has been changed from a Tool to a Process. This has been done to acknowledge that, whilst structured, the process is delivered in a conversational situation and is not delivered through a formal questionnaire. Mature age unemployed job seekers expressed strongly negative views about forms and paperwork. The structured conversation format also allows a greater measure of flexibility and client control in shaping the activity.

Network books. Some expressed concern that Job Network members should need to be 'motivated' to use a Learning Audit Tool, when there would be clear benefits for the people they are supposed to be helping. Moreover, it was felt that better matching of learners with learning provision could, in fact, help the older unemployed back into work more quickly.

Concern was also expressed at the shortsightedness of the criticisms and that, in discussing the development of a Learning Audit Tool, we should allow ourselves to think about the broader social issues and the potential for us to change (and not just accept) the status quo.

It was suggested that the government needs to take the lead in encouraging Job Network members and other social security providers to take a holistic approach towards their clients. Moreover, the government needs to foster an approach that rewards quality of service rather than the volume of people processed. The Learning Audit Tool would have a very important role to play in ensuring quality in an holistic approach.

Members of the discussion also indicated that the idea of a Learning Audit Tool or, more broadly, of mentoring services, is an issue that has relevance across the community, not just older members of the community. The 'old' are just young people who grew old, and while there may be some age-specific issues (such as poor eye sight or physical access issues), the questions of 'who am I?', 'where do I want to go?', and 'how can I get there?', are both universal and important. The experience of 'older' workers here is not uniform, nor is it necessarily unique.

It was pointed out that there is also a need to think about both the unemployed and the aged, not in terms of 'lack' or 'burden', but in terms of a large untapped, and potentially wasted, resource. As such, a Learning Audit Tool should be conceived not as a measurement of deficiencies, but as a map of potential. And, equally important, the Learning Audit Tool could uncover and give expression to hidden skills (or needs such as literacy & numeracy) that may not come out through other client appraisal processes.

By participating in a Learning Audit Tool process, there would be potential for the unemployed person to better understand the ways in which they learn and how, in the past, learning experiences may have failed them (and not the other way round). Moreover, the process involved in the Learning Audit Tool might help the unemployed person better understand and identify - and become better equipped to cope with - the phases of transition:

1. recognition of the need to change;
2. need for encouragement and guidance to help undertake the change process;
3. success and readiness to take advantage of the change (eg. new employment).

It was acknowledged that there are, at present, training opportunities for the unemployed, however, these are often too short and made available on a once-only basis. Moreover, they do not take into account the broader dimensions of learning, but, rather, come as a standard package geared at the development of career-specific or job searching skills.

There is a need to foster better understanding of lifelong learning; to encourage, for example, universities to develop courses that meet the needs of second or third careers,

for people aged 45 and over. Equally employers need to not only accept the benefits of an age diversity in the workforce, but also the specific benefits of the older worker.

There was some discussion about the potential and opportunities for ACE to become involved in several stages of the unemployment process, with the potential for a Learning Audit Tool to facilitate this engagement. There was also discussion about the potential for an intersection of a Learning Audit Tool with a RPL process and about the potential for ACE in this.

While acknowledging that ACE-VET links are an important area for discussion, those most skeptical about the Learning Audit Tool idea reiterated the need to focus on realities and real world motivations. Who would facilitate the Tool and what was in it for them?

From the Sydney discussion (the various reservations notwithstanding) there was some specific recommendations about how the process might work:

- There are similar processes already in existence that could be used as a starting point upon which to 'bolt' the learning audit tool – for example the informal process that many ACE providers (Community Houses) go through in initial contact with new clients, conducted around a 'kitchen table', or the tools provided to the Job Network agencies via the website;
- Schools programs, such as the Tasmanian individual learning plans for children at risk could be extended for use by adults;
- The use of best practice profiling to highlight Job Networks who do operate some form of learning audit, especially those in rural areas;
- Further exploration of the proposal within a real world situation will be necessary to uncover and develop solutions for practical problems relating to the implementation of the Tool.

As a consequence of this preliminary meeting it was decided to conduct a more detailed feasibility study.

3. The Lithgow study

3.1 Project overview

To explore the practical issues involved with an Individual Learning Audit Process Adult Learning Australia conducted a number of meetings in Lithgow, a town on the western side of New South Wales' Blue Mountains with a population of around 15,000.

In meetings with the Lithgow service providers, a prototype of the Individual Learning Audit Process, developed by Barrie Brennan for this study, was introduced as a means to stimulate discussion around the issues. Focus groups with the mature age unemployed job seekers were conducted in which the prototype Audit Process was trialled.

The focus groups were conducted in Lithgow shortly after the new Job Network contracts were announced and shortly before the new contracts and new arrangements in Job Network came into play. The changes occurring within the Lithgow Job Network service agencies meant that it was not feasible to speak with the new Lithgow Job Network members about the use of the Individual Learning Audit Process.

The Lithgow feasibility study set out to achieve three things:

1. An assessment of the efficacy of developing a structured Individual Learning Audit Process for use in assisting mature age unemployed job seekers;
2. An exploration of what would be required to implement an Individual Learning Audit Process as part of the Job Network processes initiated in July 2003;
3. A recommendation about how to proceed, either in the development of the proposed Individual Learning Audit Process or in developing alternative strategies to encourage deeper understanding about the process of choosing learning pathways among employment brokers and mature age unemployed job seekers.

3.2 Lithgow

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, as at June 2002, Lithgow has a population of 20,381 with a median age of 37.3 years.

As at 30 June 2002, a total of 1355 people were registered with Lithgow Centrelink, of whom 332, or almost 25% of Lithgow Centrelink registrants, were aged 45 or over. Of the registrants on the Lithgow Centrelink books as at 30 June 2002, categorised as being 'mature age' (which in the case of Centrelink statistics is 50), the following lengths of unemployment have been recorded:

<u>Length of registration</u>	<u>Number of registrants</u>
Less than 3 months	25
3 to < 5 months	14
5 to < 6 months	8
6 to < 12 months	41
12 to < 18 months	19
18 to < 24 months	16
24 to < 30 months	17
30 to < 36 months	5
Over 36 months	76
TOTAL	221

(source DEWR, 'purple book', section 4.2)

Over the 2001-2002 financial year, the number of Lithgow Centrelink registrants eligible to access Job Network was 1,172. This figure does not take account of additional Job Network clients who do not receive unemployment allowances from Centrelink (DEWR, 'white book', pp.1-6).

In Lithgow the following learning opportunities, venues and organisations are available:

- Western Institute of TAFE, Lithgow campus;
- Central West Community College, Lithgow;
- Beehive Re-creative Centre;
- Lithgow Regional Library;
- Lithgow Learning Shop;
- Lithgow Technology Centre;
- Conservatorium of Music, Lithgow branch;
- Lithgow School of Music;
- Lithgow Community Orchestra;
- Lithgow & District Family History Society;
- State Mine Heritage Park (blacksmithing lessons) and other 'tourist' sites such as the Zig Zag railway and the small armaments factory museum;
- Distance education (through e-learning or correspondence);
- Volunteer work, internships and 'job shadowing'.

Charles Sturt University is 40 minutes away in Bathurst. Bathurst also has its own TAFE campus and another Central West Community College campus. Mount Victoria, Blackheath, Katoomba and other towns in the Blue Mountains are on the train line from Lithgow to Sydney and can be reached by car in 30-40 minutes. There is a TAFE and ACE providers in the Blue Mountains and other informal and tourist-related learning activities.

3.3 The Individual Learning Audit Process developed for this study

The instrument used in the Lithgow study was developed by Barrie Brennan especially for the project. As a result of the Lithgow meetings, the Audit Process was modified slightly and it is the modified version of the process that appears with this report (see Appendix 1).

The instrument developed for this project was based on several assumptions:

- That a person's broad life experiences, including, and probably especially, experiences outside of work, would offer valuable insights into their learning, learning style preferences, attitudes to and directions for learning, and career pathways.

To provide a basis for a fruitful discussions about learning four 'points of contact' areas were selected.

1. The first focused on what may be called 'recreational' activities including 'hobbies'.
 2. The second area focused on what Thomas called the 'passages' in adult development (Thomas, pp.60-61 & pp.74-81) and a recent Declaration on Adult Community Education referred to as 'transitions' (MCEETYA, p.3). These include marriage, divorce, the death of a child or partner as well as migration or moving to a new career. Such events are all passages or transitions associated with significant learning.
 3. The third area related to the beliefs and values of the client. Adults typically have strong views about various current issues, people and events which can provide a catalyst for learning.
 4. The fourth area was about 'community work' including community service, volunteer work and participation in local neighborhood projects and networks.
- That the instrument should be 'jargon' free. Even the term 'learning' was to be avoided or used sparingly. Phrases such as 'Where did you get the information?', 'How did you decide what to do next?', 'What did you do if there was a problem/breakdown?' or 'What do you do if you want to make a change?' are suggested in the notes contained in the instrument.
 - That the process has the potential to be able to be respond to individual client needs and preferences. As such it has the potential to be 'organic' and able to be presented in a non-linear way. To this end, the sequence of the conversation points, especially the exploration of non-work activity, not take the same form in each case, but can be guided naturally by the enthusiasm of the client.
 - That the process allows for direction to come from the client and thus topics around which the client may feel discomfort do not need to be pursued in order for the process to be effective. This differs from other audit processes, for example, 'A roadmap for your personal journey into learning' from Professor

Norman Longworth in Edinburgh, which is not only very complex but seems to be very intrusive in seeking a great deal of 'background' information and comparatively little information about the respondent's learning. For the target group in this study, many of whom are in various states of anxiety, it is important not to pose questions likely to create further anxiety rather than confidence.

- That the process should be structured in such a way that the interviewer feels confident that she or he has sufficient information to be able to report back to the interviewee about their preferred or frequently used learning techniques with perhaps some attention to techniques not used or mentioned by the client.
- That the exploration of learning experiences and learning style-preferences takes place before a detailed exploration of job training options and career pathways takes place. In other tools the job aspirations of the client are often the starting point for discussions. The argument for the alternative sequencing is that the format and focus of the Learning Audit Process creates a positive environment through which the service provider can explore several aspects of their client's experience, aspirations and attitude, all of which will help inform not just the choice of learning activity but also possible career directions, job placements and so forth.

3.4 Focus groups notes

The Individual Learning Audit Process received its first 'live' testing with the groups in Lithgow. The instrument was introduced by Barrie Brennan, with John Cross taking notes and Debbie Best, Lithgow Learning Community Coordinator present in all focus groups to offer the researchers local knowledge and interpretation.

3.4.1 Lithgow meeting 1 – Centrelink staff from Lithgow and region

The session opened with an outline of the Individual Learning Audit Process prototype. This outline stimulated a wide ranging discussion among the focus group participants.

A recent initiative at Centrelink is the introduction of personal advisors. The advisors are an extension of the customer service role but have fewer obligations to discuss with their clients the various procedures and obligations set out by Centrelink. The personal advisors conduct interviews that last an hour to an hour and a half and that use a 'participation tool' to help clients develop strategies to develop motivation and to re-engage with the community. This work is done with long-term unemployed people for whom low self-esteem, isolation and illnesses such as depression have become disabling. This initiative also includes single parents whose children are turning 13, and need to get job ready for when they are no longer eligible for a pension.

Several Centrelink staff agreed that the 'participation tool' does not always work well. Its success is directly related to the personality of the client. In many cases there are difficulties in getting clients to a stage at which they were willing and able to take stock of their lives and develop strategies for moving forwards.

A new project has been initiated by Centrecare to help develop self-confidence and self-esteem among long-term unemployed. This innovation was welcomed by the Centrelink staff who participated in the Lithgow discussion, who also noted that an understanding

of the impact of low self-esteem and the strategies for overcoming this will need to be understood by the Job Network members. The Centrelink staff could not emphasise strongly enough the importance of the client's 'frame of mind' – self-esteem and motivation – as the key to achieving productive outcomes.

A lack of time was identified as a major inhibitor to implementing processes that, while worthy, are built around a conversational format.

Another issue raised was that most of the social security recipients are primarily concerned with accessing financial allowances and those who are seeking employment are most often focused on securing employment as quickly as possible.³

Age discrimination was raised as being a serious and significant issue facing job seekers aged over 40, or even 35. Perceptions that older people are not a good investment – especially in terms of retraining – or that older people should step aside to give younger people a go, were felt to be still very strong in the Lithgow community and surrounding regions. The Centrelink staff were doing all they could to promote the understanding that older staff members can be a valuable resource, owing to their life experiences and strong work ethic. However, Centrelink staff felt that they had not made much headway towards changing opinions.

Associated with discrimination against older job seekers in terms of employment was the potential for 'over-training' and the resulting damage this could cause. The Centrelink staff expressed their concern that if there are no jobs available, compelling job seekers to undertake more and more training can become a demoralising experience that damages both the job seeker and their perception of learning.

With regards to helping clients make decision about learning activities, TAFE was the only learning provider mentioned by the Centrelink staff in their conversations about this topic. Other learning opportunities, such as those offered through community volunteer programs, libraries, ACE centres, or neighbourhood houses, were not mentioned by any of the Centrelink staff. When asked about ACE, one Centrelink staff member mentioned a scheme in NSW that offers a free annual enrolment to TAFE for certain Centrelink clients. In this situation, TAFE was seen as the obvious learning choice because it was free while ACE courses involved a fee, albeit often a small one.

There was also a sense that, because undertaking learning often required a considerable investment in terms of time, money and faith, people were more likely to opt for TAFE because it offered a greater 'guarantee' of a valuable outcome – TAFE offered qualifications and had greater recognition among employers than ACE.

With regards to the issue of selecting the learning opportunities that had the most appropriate learning delivery modes, the Centrelink staff agreed that sending possibly 'fragile' people into learning environments that may damage them further was not a good outcome.

³ While obtaining employment was a clear priority for the mature age job seekers spoken to as part of this study, none of the mature age job seekers we met held negative attitudes toward undertaking further structured learning activity. Indeed many were invigorated by the possibility of using learning activity as a 'second chance'.

Several of the Centrelink staff said they felt there was a need for their clients to learn how to learn. However, the requirement that jobseekers only undertake approved learning activities, which by definition were more formal training activities, limited the potential for sending jobseekers to more user-friendly learning activities.

With regards to the experience of manual workers, the point was made that often manual workers aged 40 and over may never have had any formal training but instead had learned on the job. When they are required to undertake training in new skills, they want to undertake this in a hands-on environment that replicates their earlier on-the-job training. It had been observed that, generally, trades people were the social group with the strongest negative feelings around returning to schooling or training. (Wooden & Curtain also found this, p.241.)

While the potential for job shadowing and volunteer work was supported in principle as a useful tool for many job seekers to gain new skills, liability insurance issues were raised as a stumbling block for this option.

3.4.2 Lithgow Meeting 2 – Registered Training Organisations (RTO)

This meeting involved staff from:

- Mature Aged Workers Program, Greater Lithgow Employment Agency
- Western Institute of TAFE, Lithgow campus
- Central West Community College

The session opened with an outline of the Individual Learning Audit Process prototype. This outline stimulated discussion among the focus group participants.

There was a generally positive response to the Individual Learning Audit Process, however there were some reservations concerning how the process might be implemented. It was generally agreed that, if nothing else, the process would make people more aware of the many aspects involved in making decisions about learning, and why some learning experiences were better or worse than others.

It was also agreed that few unemployed job seekers or their support workers would have thought about learning activity in such a way before and that many of the areas for discussion embedded in the Individual Learning Audit Process were valuable for this reason. Members of the group said that the Individual Learning Audit Process would give people greater capacity to talk about an area of choice-making that is often overlooked.

There were concerns raised that the Individual Learning Audit Process would need to be embedded within the 'system' and for the findings uncovered by the process to be supported by the range of training options made available to the clients. In other words, without having the results of the process sanctioned by the 'powers that be', the Process may be a waste of time or, worse, simply serve to raise expectations which could not be supported by the official definitions of legitimate training activity.

Many of the RTO staff suggested that the strength of the process may be more in creating awareness about learning, than actually determining which specific course an unemployed job seeker should do. In other words, it was suggested that the Individual

Learning Audit Process would be less a tool for moving unemployed job seekers through the system, and more a tool to help people help themselves now and further down the track. The RTO group thought that the greatest benefits from the Individual Learning Audit Process would be long term, rather than short term.⁴

With regards to the new Job Network arrangements, there was sharp criticism from the group about the Job Search Training programs which were to be delivered by Job Network members. The RTOs felt that the mixed-aged groupings and the lack of tailoring Job Search Training for specific client groups represented a significant problem.

There were also concerns expressed that many of the unemployed job seekers who would be compelled to participate in the Job Search Training were not yet job ready and that they had to improve their self-esteem as well as undergo specific work skills development before they would be ready for active job searching.

Concern was also expressed that under the new system, unemployed job seekers would have to undertake the Job Search Training every 12 months regardless of how many times they had undertaken the course before and regardless of whether there were jobs available in the market or not. Overall the new Job Search Training program was viewed as something that could do more harm than good not only to the unemployed job seekers themselves, but also to overall perceptions about learning.

There were also strong negative views expressed about the new Job Network system overall. There were concerns that the immense workload would create stressed and aggressive Job Network staff. There was concern that the focus on moving people through the system as quickly as possible, so as to gain more money, was going to create poor service for clients. There were also concerns (in addition to the comments recorded above), that some of the Job Network members were not sufficiently trained to conduct the Job Search Training courses.

Overall, the RTO group felt that the Job Network system was going to do more damage than good, potentially creating unemployed job seekers who would be stressed, bitter and disillusioned. Many of the RTOs said that they were disappointed with, and frustrated by, the new system as it was set up for failure and would crush the people involved in it. The RTOs said that it was hard for them when clients came in with problems with the system and the RTOs had to try to help the job seekers to feel motivated again.

But overall, it was acknowledged that although there are many good people working with Job Network members their focus was not sufficiently on helping clients achieve what works best for the client, for example, by giving them opportunities to articulate or shape their own future. Concern was also expressed that many unemployed job seekers were confused by the new system and the transition to it.

A key consequence of the flawed Job Network system was that many people were ending up in the TAFE system even when this was inappropriate. This created resentment and

⁴ The experience of using the Individual Learning Audit Process with mature age unemployed job seekers may suggest that there are also short term benefits to be had. In helping the job seekers to recognise that they have already undertake a range of learning activities many of the job seekers participating in this study seemed to experience an immediate difference in confidence and a change of attitude towards what might be considered legitimate learning activity.

anti-social behaviour among the incorrectly placed students which, in turn, had a disruptive effect on staff and other students.

A representative from TAFE said that, recently, there had been fewer and fewer opportunities to meet with the Job Network staff to discuss concerns and forge solutions. The TAFE representative expressed the view that it seemed vitally important that TAFE and, possibly, by implication, other learning providers, meet with the Job Network members on a regular basis.⁵

With regards to training that TAFE offers there was also discussion that many of TAFE's courses were too long and that they were not offering bite-sized courses to allow former students to update or complement prior learning.

The view was also expressed that TAFE was too focused on training packages and on a semester-based timetable that, for example, did not cater for those wishing to learn over the summer holiday period. The view was also expressed that, often, courses were pitched too high or conducted at the wrong speed, and that there was not a process in place through which the learners' needs and existing level of knowledge could be gauged and responded to.

The RTO group discussed the need for an easier, faster, cheaper and more well publicised Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) processes to be made available within the Lithgow community.

The TAFE in Lithgow currently offers, as part of its Foundation Studies program an 'Education Options Tool', a one-hour interview for people who are wanting to enrol in TAFE. The tool is used to assess literacy, numeracy and oral skills and touches a bit upon learning strategies. The TAFE also offers a RPL process to its students.

There was some discussion about the potential for TAFE to extend both of these services to non-students, possibly as part of its community work and also as a recruitment strategy. Also, as a result of the focus group, a TAFE representative in the focus group said that she was keen to adopt some of the Learning Audit Process principles into the TAFE Assessment Interview that the TAFE currently conducts with their mature age learners.

On the issue of where the RTO group saw the Individual Learning Audit Process being situated, they suggested that it should be put wherever it could go and with whomever would look after it.

The group also suggested that the Individual Learning Audit Process could also be used as an in-house training tool for all staff in the Job Network system, to encourage them to think about learning with greater sophistication, using their own experiences as the catalyst for this understanding.

These ideas could be explored through piloting the Individual Learning Audit Process over a period of time within a region or community.

⁵ However, subsequent to the Lithgow meeting, an opportunity for closer contact between TAFE, community groups and the Job Network has taken place with a lunch being held for these groups.

3.4.3 Lithgow meetings 3-6: Unemployed job seekers aged 45 and above

Four focus groups were conducted with different participants in each. For the first three groups, Barrie Brennan conducted the Individual Learning Audit Process with the whole group. Each focus group took an hour and the Learning Audit Process was conducted in a group setting. Ideally, the Learning Audit Process would be conducted in a one-on-one situation or else with couples. Moreover, the Learning Audit Process would be most beneficially conducted over two separate sessions, so as to allow time for reflection.

While not modelling exactly how the process may work in practice, offering the group a chance to participate in the Individual Learning Audit Process collectively did allow for several productive and more or less spontaneous conversations to occur among group members which has been of benefit to this study.

In the fourth group a different approach was taken. Rather than run through the Individual Learning Audit Process in its entirety, this group was conducted more as a wide ranging conversation about the experiences people had had as mature age unemployed job seekers, and how they would like to be treated by employment brokers and employers. To stimulate discussion around this, the participants were invited to suggest what they might ask if they were an employer interviewing prospective employees.

Across the four groups we spoke to 25 mature aged unemployed job seekers. Twelve of the unemployed job seekers were men. Three of the total group explicitly and without prompting admitted to having low literacy skills, with some others alluding to having difficulties in this area. It should be noted that all of the unemployed job seekers came through the Lithgow Mature Aged Workers' program and had come voluntarily. They had been told that the meeting would be an opportunity for them to contribute to a study about mature age job seekers. Everybody seemed highly motivated to find work – although some were disillusioned with the process.

The notes that follow have been drawn from all four group discussions. They have been divided into two areas of observation. The first documents discussions about the mature age unemployed job seeker experience and how a Individual Learning Audit Process may fit within this. The second documents what we learned from the group about the construction of the Individual Learning Audit Process itself. Many of the findings from the Lithgow client group meetings support the findings made in the 2002 *Barriers* study.

3.4.3.1 The experience of mature age unemployed job seekers:

Overall, most of the unemployed job seekers held positive attitudes towards learning in the abstract, saying that it was a necessary activity to gain a certificate.

The need to obtain a 'piece of paper' was universally seen as the most important outcome of learning activity as having a piece of paper was believed to be the secret to obtaining employment. Conversely not having a 'piece of paper' was widely seen as a key reason why members of the group had not be able to obtain employment. TAFE certificates were felt to carry greatest weight with employers.⁶

⁶ This finding was also noted in the *Barriers* study, see Wooden & Curtain, p.177. However, the *Barriers* study also found that "Not one focus group participant mentioned that an employer had told them they were unsuitable to employer because they did not possess the formal skills" p.201. Unfortunately our

With regards to obtaining jobs, while it seemed to be accepted that [TAFE] certificates were the key to employment, there was an equally universal view that being older itself was a barrier and that, as a consequence, it did not matter how many certificates, life experiences or skills one had.⁷

The discussions about perceived discrimination against older job seekers swiftly turned, in most cases, to a discussion about how older people make better employees than the young. There were also views expressed that things had been better in the past and that the modern world was at times a lonely and impersonal place.

The unemployed job seekers felt that employers needed to be educated about both the benefits of older employees and about the value of skills gained through hobbies, life and previous work experiences.

The fourth group were asked about what they would like to be asked in a job interview but never were. Unprompted, members of the group said that they would like to be given an opportunity to talk about their volunteer community work, saying that the experiences gained through these hands-on activities were more valuable than a certificate. Life experience was seen, by many in the groups, as being “better than books”.

People who had gained skills and knowledge through developing their own small business expressed frustration that these skills and experience were dismissed because they were not made real through a piece of paper.

Throughout the discussions several members of the groups revealed that they had developed skills (for example, computing skills) under their own steam, at home, through trial and error. However they seemed dismissive of this learning activity, suggesting that because it hadn't been taught by a teacher in classroom, and because they had no certificate to show for it, they could not legitimately consider that they had these skills. Skills gained through previous life or work experiences were similarly devalued by members of the group because they had not been acquired through a formal learning process and had not been recognised through a ‘piece of paper’.

There was some discussion about the value of certification that documented life experiences rather than participation in a formal course of study, in other words certificates that recognise prior workplace on-the-job learning experiences and competencies. However, there was a view that such certificates would not be widely valued or recognised by other employers. Moreover, it was a widely expressed view that prospective employers and employment brokers did not value non-accredited learning, nor did they provide the unemployed job seeker an opportunity to prove their competencies through a practical demonstration. Many in the group felt frustrated by the lack of opportunity to demonstrate their skills to prospective employees.

None of the mature age job seekers were familiar with the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC) processes, but when explained to

records do not show whether or not any of the Lithgow participants actual cited a specific instance in which they had been prevented employment for lack of formal qualification

⁷ Age discrimination was also identified as an issue in the *Barriers* study, see Wooden & Curtain, p.178

them they felt the processes would be valuable, especially in mapping skills gained through self-employment or home duties.⁸

3.4.3.2 About the Individual Learning Audit Process

There were several members of the group who offered unprompted praise for the session, saying that they found the opportunity to talk about their hobbies, passions and volunteer work stimulating and enjoyable. They also said that they had never really thought about their learning styles, or given any thought to the different ways in which learning could be undertaken whilst still being 'real'.

For others, the process revealed things about themselves that they already knew but which they had not realised were important or for which they had not had the language to express. Some said that the process had given them the confidence to think about themselves and their future activities differently. Thus there were immediate results from participating in the Process.

Some thought that the Individual Learning Audit Process had merit simply because it would make at least part of the unemployed job seeker process 'more human'. Many in the group seemed mistrustful of rule-following officials and 'systems'. Many expressed the view that they felt that the 'system' doesn't help people or that they felt like a number. They did not feel they were often given an opportunity to steer the processes that were set up apparently for them and did not feel empowered to take the initiative themselves. Many in the group indicated that there were some good people in the system, and that the personality of the agency staff who dealt with them could make for a good or bad experience.⁹ Many in the groups expressed appreciation for the opportunity to talk frankly about their experiences as mature age unemployed job seekers.

The informal, conversation-based format for the Individual Learning Audit Process was appreciated, especially as many in the groups admitted to having poor literacy or else an extreme dislike of form-filling and bureaucratic processes.

There was an unprompted recognition among some in the groups that they all had different learning styles. After some discussion, a few of the members of the group could confidently identify their own preferred learning style.

Some in the group believed that their last structured learning experience had been at school. A couple of men volunteered the fact that they had never enjoyed school and had 'messed up' while there. They seemed to appreciate the need now for more learning

⁸ The *Barriers* report found similar support for the RPL process among mature age job seekers, Wooden & Curtain, p. 186. Under the conditions in which Training Account money can be used, "obtaining recognition of prior learning by an appropriate authority" is listed, although there is no indication of how, in this case, the 'appropriate authority' is to be defined. (DEWR, 'red book', draft contract, p.94). Unlike RPL, RCC is not specifically mentioned in the tender documentation. However, as it is similar in nature and outcome to the RPL process, it is likely that a Job Network would be able to seek reimbursement for money spent on this in the same way as they could seek reimbursement for money spent on an RPL process.

⁹ The perception of disempowerment experienced by mature age job seekers in the government's support systems is discussed in the *Barriers* report. It quotes a participant in their focus groups as claiming her or his case manager "knows nothing about me". This report also notes that "the absences of information about the range of options open to the older job seeker tended to place her in a dependent position and this made it difficult to discuss options from a position of weakness. Wooden and Curtain, pp.198-200

activity but were wary of another school-like experience. Moreover, the view was offered without prompting that men whose working life had been in manual work preferred to learn on-the-job or in an environment that offered the opportunity to figure things out by trial and error, by pulling things apart and putting them back together.

When the conversation turned to discussing structured learning options and experiences, TAFE and university were mentioned exclusively. When asked where would members of the group go to undertake learning other than TAFE, many of the group said that they didn't really know much about non-TAFE learning options or where they would go to find out more. The ACE college was not mentioned by any in the group.¹⁰

Whilst some of the unemployed job seekers had had positive experiences at TAFE, others did not hold positive views about TAFE (and, possibly, by extension, formal learning), stating that "you can get things wrong" or that "you learn a whole lot of stuff you don't need".

One member of the group recounted how hard she had found it to find a learning environment in which she had felt comfortable. She had wanted to undertake study in an area of work for which the training courses were dominated by younger people. She found trying to learn alongside younger people had been "very frustrating". The *Securing Success* study also highlighted this issue when suggesting that learning among people of similar age was an important factor for successful learning among older people (Workplace consortium, p.97).

None of the mature age job seekers we met expressed any negative attitudes toward learning as an activity in the abstract and none seemed to believe that, as the *Barrier's* study had found, they were too old to learn (Wooden & Curtain, p.182). This may have been due the fact that all had come to the group voluntarily and so were, presumably, motivated and positive about the subject matter.

Through the Individual Learning Audit Process it was found that all participants had hobbies. These included:

- Saw-making
- Painting model soldiers
- Stamp collecting
- Reconditioning cars
- Gardening
- House renovations
- Cooking
- Dancing
- Transferring records to CD
- Photography
- Ham radio operation
- Craft

¹⁰ This lack of knowledge about learning options was also highlighted in the *Barriers* report, especially among people who did not have high levels of formal education, Wooden & Curtain, p. 183-184.

The methods used to find out new information relating to their hobbies (that is, preferred methods for learning) included:

- Radio programs (informal self-directed learning)
- TV programs (informal self-directed learning)
- Reading (informal self-directed learning)
- Internet (informal self-directed learning)
- The Lithgow Library (informal self-directed learning with expert assistance)
- Trial and error, pulling things apart, experimenting (Informal self-directed learning)
- Hobby clubs (informal peer education)
- Other people including friends, family & neighbours (informal peer education)

4. Supplementary Information: the potential for the Individual Learning Audit Process as part of the Job Network procedures

The material in this section has been drawn from official DEWR documentation supplied to all prospective Job Network members as part of the tender process concluded in 2003. Drawing upon some of the issues raised by the Lithgow meetings, this section considers the 'places' within the conception of Job Network in which the Individual Learning Audit Process may have a natural avenue, and aspects of Job Network which may represent barriers.

4.1 Possibilities

In the official documentation, the objective of the Job Network services is described as being "to help job seekers into sustainable employment by providing personalised assistance that involves on-going job search and employment-focused activities" (DEWR, 'yellow book', section 3.1, p.8). Elsewhere in the documentation, the objectives of Job Network are described as being:

- To help eligible job seekers find work as quickly as possible;
- To maximise outcomes for eligible job seekers – particularly long-term unemployed and those highly disadvantaged;
- To maximise the delivery of high-quality ethical employment services. (DEWR, 'Yellow book', section 3.14.3, p.30 and also 'red book', p.148.)

While the focus here is on placing people in paid employment quickly and efficiently, the references to personalised assistance and to maximising outcomes may offer a natural connection point for the Learning Audit Process.

The *Employment Services Code of Practice* offers further potential points of connection when it states the following commitments to clients:

- Being supportive and helpful to clients in their pursuit of employment;
- Focusing our assistance to help clients to achieve the best outcomes;
- Treating clients fairly and with respect;
- Considering clients' individual circumstances and backgrounds.

There are also commitments within the *Code* to "tailoring assistance to clients with consideration of their individual job search needs and Mutual Obligations" and also "demonstrating flexibility in service delivery as clients' circumstances change." (DEWR, 'Red Book', p.152.)

In addition to the three specified performance indicators, "DEWR will monitor Job Seeker Account expenditure, particularly for job seekers with different durations of unemployment and those from special groups, and the effectiveness of that expenditure in maximising outcomes for job seekers." (DEWR, 'yellow book', section 3.14.3, p.30.) The emphasis here on 'effectiveness' and on maximising outcomes may further the case for the Individual Learning Audit Process having a role within the work of Job Network members.

With regards to the Intensive Support Customised Assistance, which is delivered to job seekers who have been unemployed for at least 12 months or immediately to clients identified by Centrelink as being highly disadvantaged and requiring early intervention, the following points, among others, are made:

- [The Job Network members will] deliver more one-on-one services to address the individual job seeker's barriers to employment and to tailor the job seeker's efforts in looking for work;
- Undertake an initial, detailed assessment of the job seeker's capabilities against potential opportunities available within the local labour market;
- Based on this assessment, upgrade the Job Search Plan and involve the job seeker in a variety of work preparation activities that are most likely to maximise job prospects, including, but not limited to:
 - specific vocational training tailored to job opportunities
 - work experience...
 - career counselling
 - other activities determined by the Job Network member and job seeker to best meet identified employment needs;
- Access the Job Seeker Account to purchase assistance relevant to job seekers' employment needs;
- Arrange and fund, through the Training Account, accredited work-related training for mature age and Indigenous participants. (DEWR, 'Yellow book', pp.48-49.)

The emphasis here on increased one-on-one services and on the identification of barriers, whilst overtly focused on job seeking skills and employability, may also offer a place for the use of the Learning Audit Process.

With regards to Job Network members using the Training Account, there is a requirement that the money be spent on assisting the Job Seeker to "develop their vocational skills and improve their employment prospects in the local labour market". As such the training must be "directed at the achievement of an employment outcome" and "is relevant to the TA Job Seeker's¹¹ skills and abilities and the needs of the TA Job Seeker's local labour market." Here, again, there is potential for presenting the case for the use of the Individual Learning Audit Process as a tool to ensure training relevancy and effectiveness.

While the official DEWR guidelines for Job Network offers some 'official' openings for the implementation of the Individual Learning Audit Process, the daily practice of Job Network members may present a different scenario. While it has not been possible, as part of this study, to speak with Job Network members in Lithgow. However the recent *Securing Success* report contains some statements from Job Network members that, while not presented in the context of an Individual Learning Audit Process discussion, were offered in response to a study into training for mature age job seekers and so are relevant here. They describe how Job Network members see their work:

¹¹ Described as a "fully Job Network Eligible job Seeker who is also...a mature aged person who is aged 50 years or over at the time of commencing a period of Intensive Support Job Search Training or Intensive Support Customised Assistance" (DEWR, 'Red book', draft contract, p.94)

[Job Network providers and related policy setting agencies] confirm that for good practice in training delivery there is a need for:

- Two way communication between the training provider and the job network provider;
- A sound working arrangement in regard to funding and timing of courses;
- Mutual support to the client to help them meet both the training requirement and also the wider job network contract requirements.

Job Network providers confirmed the findings in relation to the core elements of the initial education for the target group, indicating that they look for the following outcomes:

- Building self-confidence;
- Vocational skills;
- Job search and resume skills;
- Recognition of barriers to employment (self-awareness of what is realistic).

In commenting about the clients, they reported that:

- Most mature age job seekers recognise the need for training to get back into the work force. While they may lack self-confidence they are motivated to learn;
- Clients seek a series of short training steps, so Job Network providers do not necessarily expect the initial courses to lead directly to employment, but rather build self-confidence, and skills needed to handle more formal learning;
- That training has to accommodate each individual's needs;
- Training must be purposeful for the client, not just training for its own sake." (Working party, p.115.)

Of course, it is impossible to present statements that express the way that all Job Network members across Australia conceptualise their work. However, if these observations from the *Securing Success* study are typical, it offers further potential for the adoption of the Learning Audit Process by Job Network members as its mode and intention fits well with the Job network members' work as it is reported here.

Both officially and in practice, therefore, there appears to be, within the 'big picture' conception of the role and work of Job Network members, the opportunity to introduce the Individual Learning Audit Process as a tool for helping mature age job seekers select the most productive learning (training) activity as part of a strategy to achieving employment faster.

4.2 Potential barriers

4.2.1 Promotion of accredited training

To be effective, the Learning Audit Process must be used in an environment that allows access to a range of learning options. Technically, a Job Network member can purchase

any form of learning activity for their client. However, in seeking reimbursement for these expenses through DEWR some restrictions apply to what is and what is not reimbursed and so, in effect, choice is limited.

In the DEWR documentation there is a clear preference for accredited training. For example, in the definition of 'TA Training' (the training activity which is available to many in the Job Network clients aged 50 and over), the following specifications are given:

TA training means an accredited course that is appropriate for the skills and abilities of the TA Job Seeker and will meet the needs of the TA Job Seekers' local labour market... [its definition] does not include non-accredited training other than training *approved in writing* by DEWR (DEWR, 'red book', p.94) [italics added].

In the description of what each Job Network kiosk must contain (the computer terminals accessible to job seekers), access to the Australian Training database is the only learning portal resource that is specified (DEWR, 'red book', section 5.3, p.104, 'yellow book', p.3). It must be assumed therefore that the Australian Training database is promoted within Job Network as the 'official' resource for selecting appropriate training providers and courses. This resource only promotes accredited learning courses offered by higher education and VET providers.

In email correspondence with DEWR the following point was made with regards to accredited versus non-accredited training:

Where possible, the training should be accredited and conducted by a registered training organisation. However, it is recognised that there may be occasions when the Job Network member funds non-accredited training when they believe that this training will meet the needs of the job seeker and the local labour market and suitable accredited training is not available. It is not a requirement that training lead to a certificate. (email correspondence from DEWR, 8 June)

While Job Network members may be able to recommend and be reimbursed for money spent on non-accredited learning activity, the current Job Network operating structures would seem to work against this happening easily.

4.2.2 Motivation

In both the Sydney and Lithgow meetings concern was raised about the motivation of Job Network Members to adopt the Individual Learning Audit Process. As indicated above, there is certainly scope for arguing that the Learning Audit Process fits within the broad objectives of the Job Network service and within the *Code of Practice*. However, the fee structure for Job Network member payments, coupled with the processes involved in seeking approval for expenditure on non-accredited learning, may represent a disincentive to the adoption of the Learning Audit Process.

The fee structure for Job Network members is based upon three categories:

- A Job Placement fee (ranging from \$165 to \$385 per client);
- A service fee (fees for each registered eligible job seekers attached to it, based on specified contacts and activities);

- Intensive Support Outcome payments. Payment is made to the Job Network member when an eligible client gains – through the Job Network’s assistance – paid employment and maintains it for at least 13 consecutive weeks. Alternatively, a successful outcome is a client’s participation in “qualifying education or training” for at least 13 weeks.¹² Ranging from \$550 to \$4,400. (DEWR, ‘Yellow book’, section 3.12.1, p.23, DEWR, ‘Yellow Book’, pp.52-55, & ‘red book’, p.92.)

As indicated above, there are three key performance indicators for Job Network members:

- The rate at which job placements are achieved for eligible job seekers;
- The proportions of Intensive Support participants for whom outcome payments are paid;
- DEWR satisfaction with the delivery of services in compliance with the *Employment Service Code of Practice* and *Service Guarantee*. (DEWR, ‘Yellow book’, section 3.14.3, p.30 and also ‘red book’, p.148.)

While the third of these performance criteria may offer an argument for the use of the Individual Learning Audit Process, the first two, which prioritise speed and quantity, may work against the adoption of an Audit Process that takes, at minimum, an hour to complete, and the findings of which may create the need for greater complexity in service provision.

4.2.3 Time

Another issue raised by both the Sydney and Lithgow meetings was the perceived lack of time that the Job Network member’s have for their current work, let alone additional processes.

While DEWR does not prescribe specific times for specific Job Network activities, there are a number of different activity categories outlined in the DEWR Job Network support material, for which times allowances are recommended. For example, a new referral interview will take, on average, 45 minutes, during which time lodgement of a vocational profile, registration of the job seeker and introduction to the range of services is covered.

At the Intensive Support customised assistance stage (for clients who have been continuously unemployed for more than 12 months or who are considered to be particularly disadvantaged), it is suggested that contacts are conducted fortnightly, averaging 10.5 hours in total over a 12 month period.

Overall, the longest average single meeting time recommended in the contacts schedule is 45 minutes (the new referral interview), with most other contacts recommended to last, on average, 30 minutes (DEWR, ‘Yellow book’, pp.50-51).

While it is possible that a Job Network member might spend an hour or more with a client, a meeting of this length would appear longer than most of the indicative times

¹² In terms of an Intensive Support outcome, “qualifying education or training activity” is described as being:

- Currently approved for Austudy/ Abstudy/Youth Allowance purposes;
- A single qualification award course, for example a Certificate IV, a diploma or a degree; and
- Normally of two or more semesters of full times study, that is, at least a full calendar year in duration.

offered by DEWR, and resources may prevent a Job Network member setting aside such a long period of time for all of their mature age clients.

4.3 Possible ways around the barriers

Further work would be required to ascertain the actual impact of the barriers identified here, and to develop detailed responses to them. Highlighted here are some possible ways around these barriers:

Promotion of non-accredited training:

- Use promotional campaigns, targeted at employers and employment brokers to demonstrate the validity of non-accredited learning activity in achieving employment skills;
- Lobby DEWR to actively promote the value of non-accredited learning to Job Network members;
- Seek to have non-accredited learning opportunities included on the Australian Training database.

Motivation:

- Develop and promote case studies that demonstrate how more sophisticated learning choices can lead to more productive outcomes, including quicker placement of clients in paid employment;
- Lobby DEWR to promote the use of the Individual Learning Audit Process as an appropriate instrument to use with clients.

Time:

- Explore the potential for the optional presentation of the Individual Learning Audit Process so that it may achieve the same outcomes more quickly with a particular client;
- Explore the potential for marrying the key aspects of the Individual Learning Audit Process with other audit processes currently carried out by Job Network agencies with their mature age job seekers.

5. Conclusions

In addressing the three core issues of this feasibility study the Lithgow field research, supplemented by Job Network documentation, suggests the following:

1. The feasibility study has shown there is potential for a process that allows mature age unemployed job seekers explore their learning needs both in terms of subject matter and in terms of the learning delivery modes that best suit their personality and goals.

The Individual Learning Audit Process developed for use in the Lithgow study provides a solid base upon which to develop the process further.

It must be noted however that, while an Individual Learning Audit Process is necessary and could work, the extent of its effectiveness will be limited by some considerable external factors that will only be overcome through a significant change in cultural attitudes.

These external factors include a persistent belief in the primacy of formal accredited training over all other forms of skill development and an apparent discrimination against mature age unemployed job seekers. Considerable work needs to be done within the wider community, and with employers, to change these inhibiting attitudes. Work also needs to be done to accurately map the available training options.

2. It is not clear whether the Learning Audit has a 'natural' home within the work of Job Network as the careful selection of learning activity seems a lesser priority than other issues. Moving clients as quickly as possible from unemployment into paid work appears to be the primary focus of Job Network system, especially at an operational level. Job Network members are rewarded for employment outcomes and their achievements are evaluated in terms of the speed and efficiency by which they have achieved these employment outcomes. The lack of focus on the holistic development of individuals may work against the inclusion of the Individual Learning Audit Process within Job Network.

Where training is indicated as an appropriate strategy to achieving employment outcomes accredited learning activity is foregrounded. The focus on accredited learning may reduce the value of the Individual Learning Audit Process within this context.

Undoubtedly many Job Network staff members take a more holistic approach to their clients and are concerned about the quality and sustainability of the outcomes as well as the appropriateness of the steps taken to achieve them. A process similar to the Individual Learning Audit Process may already be used by individual Job Network members, albeit with a more overt emphasis on employment pathways. It may be possible to present the Individual Learning Audit Process to Job Network members as another tool for their use. However, adoption of the process across the Job Network system would be unlikely unless the provision of sophisticated learning advice becomes a key deliverable for Job Network members. Moreover, the efficacy of any Learning Audit Process will be reduced while accredited learning activity is explicitly and implicitly promoted

above non-accredited learning.

3. Further work needs to be undertaken, possibly in the form of a pilot in a medium sized community, as a way of exploring a number of, as yet, unclear challenges which will only come to the fore in a real world situation. The research has already identified several issues requiring further investigation and discussion:
 - where the use of the Individual Learning Audit Process will be placed within the current 'system' that seeks to provide a service for the target client group;
 - who, other than Job Network members, may provide this service to the target client group and how its development and delivery may be funded;
 - the degree to which the current Individual Learning Audit Process in structure and delivery will need to be modified and developed and the degree to which the Individual Learning Audit Process should be made to 'fit' within current training modules or awards, or be deliberately separate and different;
 - the development of a guide to help an interviewer with limited learning literacy themselves interpret and provide advice based upon the results of the Audit Process;
 - how the employer, and those in organisations responsible for employment, need to be aware of the positive features of employing mature persons, as opposed to those younger; and
 - the degree to which the current training market may be able to cope with the needs of those in the target group who have identified, as a result of the Individual Learning Audit Process, quite specific learning modes that are their preferred - and successful means - of learning.

These conclusions are discussed in greater detail below.

5.1 An assessment of the efficacy of developing a structured Individual Learning Audit Process for use in assisting mature age unemployed job seekers

The various groups to whom the Individual Learning Audit Process was presented in Lithgow - from Centrelink management and staff, training providers and the mature age job seekers - all indicated that the job seeking experience for mature age adults differs from that of younger cohorts.

The need for an instrument like the Individual Learning Audit Process was acknowledged with degrees of enthusiasm by the three groups interviewed in Lithgow. It was agreed by the groups that the use of the Individual Learning Audit Process would make the clients more likely to be successful in their training and job seeking because they would be more aware of themselves, their learning styles and their training needs.

The agencies that provide services to the mature age job seekers, including Centrelink, Mature Age workers' program staff, and TAFE staff felt that the Learning Audit Process would play an important role in ensuring that mature age unemployed job seekers were better matched to the learning environments in which they were placed, and hence

obtain better learning outcomes as a result.

However, the service providers expressed reservations about the ability of the Job Network taking ownership of the Process, saying that owing to a lack of time, staff resources and motivation the Job Network agencies (and, possibly, other agencies having a similar relationship with the mature age unemployed job seekers) would dismiss the Audit Process as an unattractive burden.

There were four major concerns expressed by service providers:

- who will administer the implementation of the Individual Learning Audit Process?
- at what stage in the job search process this would fit?
- how effectively would the information gathered through the process be acted upon?
- and how would the process be resourced? (This latter point was linked to the time and personnel required to administer the instrument.)

The prototype audit, tested at the Lithgow meetings and modified in response to feedback, seems to accommodate the needs of the mature age unemployed job seekers. Those in this study responded positively to the experience of participating in the Individual Learning Audit Process, finding it a useful way to think about an aspect of themselves – their learning – that they may not have previously explored.

The Individual Learning Audit Process uses as a strategy to uncover learning experiences and preferences the opportunity for mature age unemployed job seekers to talk freely about themselves, about their passions and about their positive life experiences. This in itself seemed a valuable exercise as it inserted a much appreciated element of humanity in an, at times, impersonal and demoralising process.

Some of the areas covered by the Individual Learning Audit Process are already addressed in the work of some agencies. For example, in the process by which Centrelink deals with its mature aged customers some attention is given, but only for long term clients. 'Social participation' is explored, for example, by gauging participation in community affairs and groups. The Western Institute of TAFE, through its interviews with some of its potential students, seeks information about hobbies and so forth. The latter agency indicated that aspects of the Individual Learning Audit Process developed by Barrie Brennan for this present study, would now be incorporated in their interview schedule. However, these two activities differ from the Individual Learning Audit Process in terms of breadth and outcomes.

Among the mature age unemployed job seekers and the service provider staff too there was a low recognition of the range of learning activity and venues available to the Lithgow community. TAFE was the only learning provider mentioned consistently and without prompting in all the focus groups.

Many of the mature age unemployed job seekers who had undertaken learning activities through TAFE had found the experience enjoyable and rewarding. However, other unemployed job seekers had found TAFE-based learning less than satisfactory. The key problems cited included the fast pace of the curriculum, the use of technical language in the tuition and having un-motivated (and hence disruptive) younger students in the class.

Tutors from TAFE agreed that some of their students were not suited to the formal learning environment and that these students' lack of commitment often had significant negative impact on teaching staff and other students.

The idea that there is more than one legitimate way to learn was a welcome and exciting concept for many of the unemployed job seekers, but was curtailed by a perception that formal certification was essential to validate the learning. Skills developed through self-directed activity or less formal learning venues were dismissed by some participants as being somehow invalid.

The mature age unemployed job seekers expressed very strongly a belief that in order to obtain employment they needed certification, 'bits of paper', to provide evidence of their skills and/or learning activity.

There was a high degree of frustration among the job seekers that their informal learning and skills developed through practical experience, coupled with their potential to continue to learn, were ignored throughout the job seeking processes.

Moreover, they did not feel they had the skills or confidence to introduce information about their 'informal' skills and capabilities into the job seeking processes. None of the job seekers seemed to be aware of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC) processes and that these may help certify skills developed outside of formal learning environments.

This perception that certification was the key to employment meant that, regardless of suitability, the learning activities that led to a certificate, such as those offered by TAFE, were favoured over the less formal, non-accredited, but possibly more suitable, learning activity.

However, many felt that by having a better understanding of their learning preferences, they would be better able to negotiate their learning activities with tutors within more formal learning (for example TAFE) environments. They also felt that after participating in the Learning Audit Process, they may be better able to 'value' and 'sell' their non-accredited skills in interview situations.

There was a strongly expressed view among the mature age unemployed job seekers that age discrimination was another reason why they had been unsuccessful in securing employment and, as such, skill levels or formal training attainment – even certificates – ultimately carried little impact. This view was independently expressed by many of the service provider staff.

What became evident in the comments of the members of the target client group - and these observations were supported by the service providers in their comments - was that there is a need to encourage employers to recognise that older job applicants can be valuable assets to an organisation. Positive reinforcement in the media of the possible advantages of employing mature persons, as opposed to the young, was noted as being an important corrective to what seems to be the universal view among those who decide who will be employed. This observation can also be found in the numerous recent reports about the needs of mature age workers and job seekers.

Two important recent studies examining the issues pertaining to mature age people and training activity - *Securing Success* and *Barriers to Training for Older Workers* – both highlight the importance of ‘flexibility’ in the training offered. The ability of those advising mature aged job seekers to talk about the range of training options in a sophisticated way would clearly be made more effective if the job seekers had been exposed to some sort of learning audit process.

5.1.1 The appropriateness of the Individual Learning Audit Process developed for this study

Initially, the process consisted of a series of seven 'decision points' and related questions and comments, but this was modified slightly as a result of the Lithgow meetings (see Appendix 1). The instrument was designed to be used by an 'interviewer' with a client, an individual from the target group.

While the Individual Learning Audit Process had been developed primarily as a tool for use in a one-on-one situation, it was not possible to present the audit process in this format in Lithgow. Instead, the Lithgow situation required the trialing of the audit process in a small group situation. The fact that the instrument worked well in this situation indicates that it was not seen as threatening or invasive. There was little reluctance from members of the client groups to participate.

As a result of the Lithgow study, there is evidence that the administration of the Individual Learning Audit Process to couples, as well as individuals, might be a worthwhile process, provided the couple was supportive of one another.

The small group situation meant that the reporting back of learning styles was not able to be individualised. Instead a generalised summation of the individual responses was given to the participants. Sufficient information had been offered during the process to allow for a composite picture of the participants' preferred learning modes to be given.

Generally the mature age job seekers appreciated the opportunity to discuss their past learning experiences, their learning preferences and the obstacles they face when undertaking formal learning activity. It was very clear from the responses in the four client groups that the ‘decision points’ included in the Individual Learning Audit Process were understood by those in the target group, that they identified with them and were prepared to talk about them. The fact that they were prepared with very little encouragement to talk suggests the appropriateness of hobbies, life transitions, issues and community or neighbourhood involvement as a strategy to uncover learning experience and preferences. Exploring these topics and then moving on to report back on the learning associated with the topics (though avoiding the term) was not difficult.

The ease with which these developments occurred made the reporting back to them about their preferred learning styles (and unused techniques) was an easier task than originally anticipated. The mature age unemployed job seekers commented that they enjoyed the experience.

5.1.2 Practical issues that require further investigation and discussion

5.1.2.1 The degree to which the Individual Learning Audit Process structure may be modified

The strength of the Individual Learning Audit Process prototype was its format which lay a conversational interface onto a strategically structured framework. In that context, incorporating the Learning Audit into a more formalised Recognition of Current Competencies process, or text-based career pathway tools, may diminish the effectiveness of the Learning Audit Process.

On the other hand linking a re-designed Learning Audit to a competency accreditation process or careers tool may provide additional value and legitimacy to the Process and lead to a more widespread adoption.

This dilemma poses a question for which the authors of this report have no easy answer: to what extent is it preferable to have the Individual Learning Audit Process a 'deliberately different' instrument or to what extent is it preferable to have it as a part of the dominant structured system? How far should the Process be re-shaped so that it fits easily with dominant systems? At what point does its re-shaping reduce its identity and usefulness.

5.1.2.2 The resources needed by the interviewer to interpret and provide advice based upon the findings of the Learning Audit Process

The Individual Learning Audit Process is intended to be used by employment brokers, many of who will not have a sophisticated understanding of adult learning principles or the aspects of successful learning choice. Any process that is developed, therefore, will also need to come with a guide that will help the interviewer identify and interpret the findings.

There is also a need to develop material that enables the interviewer match the audit process findings with specific learning opportunities within the local community. As these will be different for each locality, any guidance prepared to assist in this process will have to be written in broad terms to equip the interviewer to undertake their own localised learning opportunities and map this regularly.

To help with this process local learning providers will need to be pro-active in the promotion of their learning activities and flexible in the range of learning activities they provide.

5.1.2.3 The need to overcome the issue of discrimination against employing older people

All of the Lithgow groups suggested that employers - or those responsible for employing new persons for an organisation - seem to prefer younger persons over mature age workers. It was felt that employers were unaware of the advantages that some mature persons may offer.

Further exploration of this issue was not included in the scope of the Lithgow study. Employers were not a group consulted in the study as they lay outside the narrow

objectives of the Audit Process feasibility study. In any case, it is difficult to uncover clear evidence of age discrimination in employment practices as discrimination based upon age is illegal. It is unlikely therefore that talking to a group of employers would have been able to establish the extent to which age discrimination is overtly, covertly or inadvertently practiced in Lithgow.

The implications for the target client group of apparent age discrimination are very significant. While the Learning Audit Process may be very effectively used in helping mature unemployed job seekers become aware of their own experiences and learning styles the Process will be of little real 'employment' value if those making decisions about those to be hired have decided that the young are more valuable than the mature.

There is a very real potential that participation in training will simply serve to create expectations that participation in learning activity will inevitably lead to employment. In communities in which discrimination against employing mature age staff is practised – or in which there are simply few jobs – learning activity, no matter how well matched to individual learning preferences, will be tarnished by the feeling of 'broken promises' when the job seeker still won't be able to gain a job or even an interview at the end of it.¹³

The problem of creating false expectations, or of using participation in training as an exercise to fill in time, was raised by many of the Lithgow group participants. While these issues fall beyond the narrow focus of the feasibility study, the efficacy of the Learning Audit Process will be limited by the potential for employment at the end of the training journey.

It is important that appropriate authorities promote the concept of diverse workforces and cite examples of the valued contribution of mature age workers.

5.1.2.4 The degree to which the current training market may be able to cope with the Individual Learning Audit Process outcomes

While the requirement to undertake training for work in a community in which there are few job opportunities may be seen as setting up false hopes, the same charge might be leveled at the Learning Audit Process itself. Implementing a Learning Audit Process in a situation in which the outcomes can not, or will not, be acted upon, may lead to similar ill-feeling and negative outcomes.

The concern is that the training provision available may not have the flexibility demanded of the target group. Alternatively, those who advise their clients in this group may not be aware of the range of possibilities that are actually available.

In the Lithgow environment, for example, many of the mature age job seekers had been encouraged to undertake formal training in computers through the TAFE college. The question may be asked why a course at a large learning institution is recommended to everyone in a cohort who appeared – from our limited contact with a number of them - to be a highly heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous, group. Clearly this situation lends weight to the need for an Learning Audit Process to highlight the variety of learning needs, but it also suggests a lack of local knowledge among the advisors about

¹³ The possibility of 'false hopes' and the damage this may cause was identified in the *Barriers* report with respect to having older job seekers undertake learning activity simply for the sake of it (Wooden, p. 176).

the range of learning activity on offer. Or, worse, it may suggest that while the advisors are aware of the range of learning options, they are not given 'permission' to take full advantage of this diversity.

Some of the mature-age job seekers we met had had bad experiences in the TAFE courses. It was clear from talking with them that they had be badly matched with the courses to which they had been 'directed'. The need for advisors and brokerage agencies to be more informed about the full range of programs - and the details of their content and approach - was clearly demonstrated, even in a small city that has been seeking to develop as a 'learning city'.

Something appears to be missing in information that is shared between the clients and their advisers. For example, there was a lack of knowledge among the client group about the range of computing courses, in terms of goals, content, size and structure as well as approach, that were available. Even those mature age learners who expressed dissatisfaction with their TAFE experiences had not been made aware of alternative learning avenues.

To have the greatest benefit, the Learning Audit Process must be employed in an environment that supports a range of learning options and be used by people who have knowledge of all the different learning activities that are available. There is still some value in conducting the Learning Audit Process in an environment of limited learning opportunities as it helps learners who find the learning activity difficult to understand that it may be the learning environment and not them that has 'failed'. However the primary value of the individual Learning Audit Process is in matching individuals to different learning environments and this implies that there must be a number of learning options available to the job seeker.

5.2 An exploration of what would be required to implement an Individual Learning Audit Process as part of the Job Network processes initiated in July 2003

As indicated above, the Individual Learning Audit Process was generally seen by service providers as a useful and necessary activity. However, none of the service providers who contributed to this study could offer any clear guidance as to where the Individual Learning Audit Process might fit logically or practically within the job seeker support 'system'.

Nobody we spoke to in Lithgow suggested that the Job Network members would be the right group to take ownership of the Individual Learning Audit Process. There was a strongly expressed perception that the Job Network members were too over-worked and under-resourced to incorporate the Individual Learning Audit Process into their work.

A lack of time was identified by many service providers as a key reason for not supporting the Individual Learning Audit Process initiative more enthusiastically. Indeed, the times recommended for various Job Network contacts seldom exceeds 45 minutes. The Individual Learning Audit Process developed for this study took an hour to conduct in a group setting. There is potential to re-work the Individual Learning Audit Process so that it could fit within two 45 minute meetings. On a national scale the time issue has a considerable financial impact potentially running into millions of dollars.

It was a commonly held view that in order for the Job Network members to embrace the Individual Learning Audit Process resources would have to be made available to the Job Network agencies for additional staff and for staff training. Moreover, it was felt that the only way that the Job Network would embrace the Individual Learning Audit Process would be if it were presented as one of the key deliverables upon which they receive payment.

In achieving the core goals of Job Network, it is reasonable to assume that some Job Network members have already developed questionnaires and discussion tools to uncover skills gained through hobbies and also broad attitudinal issues. However, given the outcomes sought and rewarded by DEWR, it is likely that these ad hoc tools are focused on making decisions about pathways to work, not pathways to and through learning.

Moreover, the promotion of accredited and registered training organisations in the Job Network tender material, and on the Australian Training database, coupled with the absence of discussion about generic skills or the use of learning as a way of boosting self-esteem, would suggest that DEWR's focus on training is restricted to development of certified vocational skill sets.

It is clear from the Job Network tender documentation that it is focused on getting people into employment as quickly as possible. The task of ensuring that learners are well matched to their learning environments does not, on the surface at least, appear to fall within the Job Network's focus. However, there does appear, within some sections of the Job Network guides, some avenues for the legitimate incorporation of the Individual Learning Audit Process as a way of maximising outcomes, of tailoring individualised job seeking strategies, as a way to identify and remove barriers and as a means of achieving efficiencies. If there were better recognition of, and support for, the value of diverse learning environments, the Individual Learning Audit Process would have a clear and more central role to play in the work of Job Network members.

5.2.1 Alternatives to Job Network

No clear indication as to the appropriate agency to take ownership of the Individual Learning Audit Process was evident from the Lithgow research. In Lithgow, as in the earlier meeting in Sydney, time, heavy workloads and lack of motivation were advanced as being the reasons why the Job Network members were unlikely to adopt the Learning Audit Process.

Two possible solutions may be worth further exploration. One is system-wide: the other localised.

On a system-wide basis, the Individual Learning Audit Process could be included as acceptable processes for use of Training Accounts or Job Seeker Account funds. This would mean that the Job Network members would not have to conduct the process, but could legitimately pay someone else in the community to conduct it on their behalf. This would provide the Learning Audit Process the necessary imprimatur, helping it to be seen as a core tool, and not simply an add-on, but would avoid the issues of Job Network overwork and under-resourcing that have been identified.

On a local basis, an agency within the community, such as a local library or ACE provider, might be prepared to conduct the Learning Audit Process as part of its community service (with perhaps some funding support from DEWR, DEST or State or Territory government).

The local implementation potential was explored in broad terms through subsidiary meetings in Lithgow. At the moment the Learning City organisation is not able to fulfil this role, but may be able once their learning shopfront is established and the library is relocated within a centrally located learning centre complex.

Two other agencies may be possibilities. The Beehive, an educational agency of the Uniting Church, which currently offers lifelong learning activities, may view Individual Learning Audit Process provision as a means of widening its range of services. Lithgow Information and Neighbourhood Centre (LINK) has focused on services to handicapped and disabled persons but also may be able to extend its service range in terms of the Individual Learning Audit Process.

Depending on the range of organisations and services within individual communities, there may be any number of organisations willing to broaden their range of activities to include an Individual Learning Audit Process service.

5.3 Recommendations about how to proceed

About the nature of the Individual Learning Audit Process:

1. The focus on non-work learning and life experiences as a way uncovering previous learning activity and preferred learning styles should be maintained. It is an effective strategy for encouraging people to talk about an aspect of themselves that they may not have previously considered and also offers a positive, empowering and uplifting experience.
2. The flexible, informal and conversational nature of the Individual Learning Audit Process prototype used in this study should be maintained. It allows those with low levels of literacy, a distaste for forms and formal procedures, or a distrust of service agencies to participate fully and gain some control over the process.
3. The revised version of the Individual Learning Audit Process as a whole needs to be tested further, particularly in terms of the time needed to cover the five stages and also how well an interviewer with little prior knowledge about adult learning principles can conduct the process.
4. A 'users-manual', professional development and support resources for the Individual Learning Audit Process need to be developed as a resource to help service providers and interviewers (possibly with limited learning literacy themselves) to identify and interpret significant outcomes of the Audit Process needs to be developed.

About the introduction of the Individual Learning Audit Process into the mature age unemployed job seeker process:

5. Further exploratory work needs to be carried out to identify exactly where the Individual Learning Audit Process can and should fit within the mature age unemployed job seeker experience. This may include exploration of the potential of DEWR's Transition to Work program or Career Counselling programs.
6. A mapping exercise should be undertaken to identify the tools similar to the Individual Learning Audit Process that are already used in Australia. As part of this mapping exercise consideration should be given to the possibility of modifying an existing process for use, or else 'bolting' the Individual Learning Audit Process prototype developed for this study onto other existing processes.
7. Further exploration is needed to examine how the Learning Audit Process might lead more overtly to a competency accreditation process as a strategy to ensure more widespread adoption.
8. A pilot of the Individual Learning Audit Process in a small to medium sized community over a number of months should be conducted in order to help clarify, and develop solutions for, some of the operational problems that many in the focus study suspected would arise.

The pilot could be used to explore issues such as:

- Who, within a community, should take ownership of the tool?
 - What are the resourcing implications for taking on the implementation of the Process, including an examination of staffing needs and the information required in order to make the findings effective?
 - What mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that unemployed job seekers know about the service and could have easy access to it?
 - What mechanisms will ensure that the findings of the Individual Learning Audit Process would impact on the decisions that the unemployed job seeker and service agencies made about their future learning activities?
 - How closely aligned to other, more formal, aspects of the job seeker support services can the Audit Process be without losing its appeal and effectiveness for mature age job seekers? How dissimilar to existing job seeker support processes can the Audit Process be without being dismissed out of hand by service providers as being too 'alien' to their work?
 - For which particular demographics is the tool most, or least, useful?
9. Awareness campaigns, such as Adult Learners' Week, should be expanded and new campaigns developed that demonstrate to employers, employment brokers, and policy-makers:
 - The value of informal and non-accredited learning activity as a strategy to gaining employment skills;
 - The value of competency and recognition processes as an alternative pathway to demonstrating employment skill sets; and
 - The value of an age-diverse work force.
 10. There should be renewed effort to develop a comprehensive national database of *all* learning activity – similar to the LearnDirect database in operation in the

United Kingdom – so that the information gathered during the Audit Process can be acted upon effectively.

11. Learning providers should be given encouragement to become more pro-active in terms of promoting their programs and potential to Job Network members, and in the development of programs to meet mature age job seeker needs.

APPENDIX 1

The Individual Learning Audit Process developed by Barrie Brennan (with modifications developed from the Lithgow meetings)

The Individual Learning Audit Process does not seek to proscribe a linear progression through a series of set questions. Rather it is a structured conversation, conducted by an 'interviewer' who can use the stages outlined here to help stimulate and steer dialogue that will help uncover learning information about the interviewees learning attitudes and experiences.

In summary the conversation Stages are:

1. Negotiation;
2. Exploring non-work experiences;
3. Creating a learning map for the client;
4. Exploring learning options in broad terms;
5. Exploring learning options specific to employment pathways.

As a result of the discussion the interviewer will be able to:

1. Potential for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) processes;
2. Identify particular modes and venues of learning activity may be more productive than others;
3. Identify any attitudes to learning that may represent barriers to particular forms of learning and help explain difficulties experienced in the past. Once identified, appropriate learning activities can be selected to help minimise potential difficulties or in cases where learning options are limited, strategies can be developed to assist the learner overcome difficulties even in learning environments which do not directly suit the learner's preferred modes or environment;
4. Make recommendations about the most productive learning pathways by taking account of local providers, the client's preferred learning mode, preferred learning environment, attitude towards structured learning activity, and current competencies gained formally or informally.
5. Explore alternative training options, such as volunteer work or workplace 'shadowing'.

There follows a description of the points around which the conversation may be structured.

1. Negotiation

In this stage the point is made by the interviewer that the plan is to concentrate on non-work aspects of the client's life, and that the client has the opportunity to decide what they wish to talk about. The non-work aspects are chosen because these can help start

the conversation off on a positive note. Non-work activities also often greater measure of direction by the participant and so can offer a truer indication of preferred learning experiences, although the term 'learning' is probably not introduced at this stage.

The interview will rely heavily on what the client has to say. The Individual Learning Audit Process may take some time and may spread over more than one session. The interviewer will report back to the client on what he/she says as a means of furthering the job seeking process.

2. Exploring non-work experiences

This part of the conversation is all about finding out 'What turns you on?' 'What makes you feel good?'

It is important to try to identify an activity, event, transition, or issue in which the client feels some pride, sense of achievement, satisfaction or acceptance that it is a turning point. A role or situation about which he or she feels 'good', 'done well', 'got some satisfaction', 'was admired by my peers'.

There are four areas of non-work activity or events which may be explored in turn. The use of the four areas, and certainly more than one, is to provide the opportunity for the client to reveal - if that is in fact the case - that their modes of learning may be different across different areas of their life.

This Stage is the one at which patterns of 'use' are identified in terms of what they do use and what they seem to avoid. Without necessarily mentioning the term *learning* it is central to this part of the audit to help the client identify their learning - of how they planned to do things, especially new things, of how to solve new or old problems, of how to use new technology or techniques, how to get on with others, to be successful, to handle failure and so on. It is not necessary to cover all four areas and the way the client responds will determine the way this Stage develops.

If the client has chosen to discuss work experience, then each of the following can be adapted to be applicable to a workplace context.

- *Recreational:* hobbies, sports - football, golf, bowls or fishing, gardening, pets and animals, repairing &/or collecting things (but what 'things'), messing around with mates. Key questions include exploration of how the client obtains information about their hobby activities, how they go about developing new skills or knowledge to help them develop this area of interest.
- *Life transitions/passages* Marriage, divorce, moving to a new location, becoming a grandparent, losing a partner, parent or child through death or accident all provide useful insights into a client's coping skills and the sorts of learning activities they instinctively undertake in a pressured situation.
- *Strong views:* Ask the client to think of something they hold a strong view about, but do not ask them to share their particular opinions with you. The key questions here are - what was the origin of the strong view? How and why has it changed? What may make you change your opinion now, or in the future? How did the client reach that conclusion about the issue that is important to the client?

How was learning part of reaching that conclusion? Has this always been their point of view? What would be likely to make the change their mind on this issue?

- *Community engagement:* Involvement neighbourhood or community activities, as a volunteer or office-bearer or just a helper in groups or organisations or just neighbourly activity on a regular or irregular basis. The key questions may relate to what contribution is made and what personal rewards the individual has gained. The length of involvement may indicate perseverance.

3. Creating a learning 'map' for the client.

This stage involves the interviewer reporting back to the client about their learning, in a jargon-free way, preferably using the terms in which the client has expressed during the discussion. Things to consider in this stage are aspects such as whether the client prefers to learn independently or with a group; whether they like to learn through trial and error or through observation; whether they prefer or have an aversion to text-based material and so on. Experiences about and perceptions of formal class-based courses conducted by institutions such as TAFE might also be explored at this point.

The important point at this stage is not to mention methods *not* used by the client. Rather, it is important to focus on the methods they have used for each area, then generalise and help the client to generalise across areas, if there are differences. If the client tends to use similar methods across areas, that should also be pointed out. The range - limited or diverse - of methods used by the client are an important focus for discussion. Why do they use the methods they choose?

At the close of this stage the interviewer may wish to explain to the client that a map of the client's current and favoured learning methods has been developed from the discussion. Being aware of one's own learning map can be an important part of preparing for new employment.

The desired outcome is for the client to start talking about their learning - hopefully with some confidence. The picture may be a surprise to the clients: they may easily (or with difficulty/reluctance) identify with it.

4. Exploring learning options in broad terms

Having established - very much in the terms that the client has used to describe their learning in the various areas in stage 2 - a simple, general map of the client's preferred/existing learning methods, two possibly related questions need to be addressed as an opening to this stage.

The first is to explore with the client methods that have not appeared on their map. It may be the use of technology and the Net or of formal courses or the use of the Library. There is no list provided that indicates areas to be checked here. It is likely that the methods will become clear in stages 2 & 3. The client's reasons for not using these methods are important here. The reasons may be that they lack a skill or do not have access to a technology. They may also have had negative experiences with the method. Do they need to add this or that method to their repertoire?

Answers to the second question may emerge in the discussion of the first. The second question relates to any barriers the client feels may prevent them from using a certain method. It may be cost or location or that the client feels that he/she does not have sufficient background knowledge or that the particular method is for 'young people' or 'those with good educations'. Is it important to seek to remove any of their perceived barriers or just be aware of them?

Now may be the appropriate time to introduce the term 'learning' - if it has not emerged naturally in the conversation to this point. Setting definitions are not important, what is important is to help the client realise that they have been learners, with varying degrees of success, using a variety of methods with which they are comfortable.

The point has been reached at which the interviewer can seek to develop with the client a broad, general picture of their learning, taking the map developed in Stage 3 and adding to it the possibilities of additional methods and the removal of barriers to other methods.

5. Exploring learning options specific to employment pathways

The stage has been reached when the focus can move to employment possibilities and pathways. Rather than the first question, in the process being described here, it is the last question. In the light of the process through which the client has worked with the interviewer, how now does the client answer the questions:

- Why do I want to work?
- What sort of work do I want to do?
- What sort of work do I seem to be best prepared for?
- What sorts of training/learning may be necessary to help me obtain the sort of work I would prefer?

Having shared the first four stages of the Individual Learning Audit Process, it is expected that the answers to the questions may be different from those that may have been given before the process was conducted. The interviewer may test this point of view out on the client.

In the inter-personal relations between the client and the interviewer in this stage, the content will be, as with the other stages, very client-specific. While the interviewer will clearly need to be careful to note the details of the client's responses about employment hopes and fears, the following learning related matters will need to be observed and responses/solutions proposed:

- Is the need for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or of Current Competence (RCC) evident in the client's responses. If so, where, how?
- How are the client's noted barriers to learning/training relevant in his/her proposals/plans. How may they be addressed/overcome?
- In the light of the client's learning map, what forms of training, in method as well as content, appear to be most relevant?
- In the light of the client's learning map, what additional methods of learning may be needed to allow the client to complete his/her training. How may the client be best prepared for these new methods?

These four sets of questions require, in their answering, that the interviewer has, or has easy access to, up-to-date information on a very wide range of learning provision as well as training.

APPENDIX 2

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