

**TRAINING  
TO REDUCE  
DISADVANTAGE**

**2022**



# ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION



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**Andrew Barker** joined CEDA in 2022 as a Senior Economist based in Brisbane. He was previously a Senior Economist and Head of Desk in the OECD economics department, focusing on climate, labour market, productivity and housing policy. As a Research Manager at the Productivity Commission he led quantitative work on water, gas and labour markets and contributed to public inquiries on infrastructure access, automotive manufacturing, service exports and the economic effects of migration. Andrew holds a Master of Commerce (economics) and First Class Honours degrees in economics and environmental engineering from the University of Melbourne.

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CEDA's objective in publishing this report is to encourage constructive debate and discussion on matters of national economic importance. Persons who rely upon the material published do so at their own risk.

CEDA's submission to the Employment White Paper focuses on policy reforms to deliver a more dynamic labour market – breaking down barriers to workers moving across jobs and to more people participating fully in work. Looming structural adjustments including digital transformation, the energy transition and an ageing population will require an adaptive and agile labour market to deliver labour and skills where and when they are most needed. In preparation for these transitions, Australia needs to reverse long-term trends of declining dynamism and job mobility, while addressing entrenched barriers in the labour market. To this end, the submission will comprise five individual papers on skills recognition, housing market barriers, occupational gender segregation, training for the long-term unemployed, and the structure of unemployment benefits.

Relevant themes for Employment White Paper: Achieving full employment; reducing barriers and disincentives to work.

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**About CEDA**

CEDA – the Committee for Economic Development of Australia – is an independent, membership-based think tank.

CEDA's purpose is to improve the lives of Australians by enabling a dynamic economy and vibrant society.

Through independent research and frank debate, we influence policy and collaborate to disrupt for good, and are currently focused on tackling five critical questions:

- How can Australia develop and grow a more dynamic economy?
- How can we build vibrant Australian communities?
- How can Australia develop leading workforces and workplaces?
- How can Australia leverage the benefits of technology?
- How can Australia achieve climate resilience and regain our energy advantage?

CEDA was founded in 1960 by leading economist Sir Douglas Copland. His legacy of applying economic analysis to practical problems to aid the development of Australia continues to drive our work today.

CEDA has more than 620 members representing a broad cross-section of Australian businesses, community organisations, government departments and academic institutions. Through their annual membership, CEDA members support our research both financially and by contributing their expertise, insight and experience.

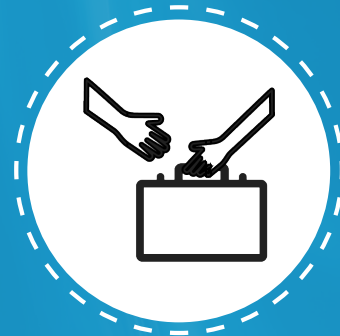
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# SUMMARY



The current tight labour market is an opportunity for employment services to focus their work on the long-term unemployed and others facing substantial barriers to working.



Compared with other developed countries, Australia spends relatively little to help people back into work after they have lost a job.



Training for hard-to-place job seekers should be further scaled up via wage subsidies and sectoral employment programs targeted at the needs of local unemployed people and employers, with a greater focus on long-term outcomes.



The shift from Jobactive to Workforce Australia in July 2022 supports more targeted and tailored servicing of disadvantaged job seekers by emphasising digital service delivery for those who are job-ready.

## Recommendations

CEDA makes three recommendations to help the long-term unemployed find suitable, long-term work:



### **BUILD ON THE SHIFT TO WORKFORCE AUSTRALIA BY:**

- Scaling up training for hard-to-place job seekers via employment programs targeted at local unemployed and employers, with a greater focus on long-term outcomes. This would entail:
  - » An industry-driven approach, with close involvement of employers and a focus on higher-wage industries and occupations;
  - » Screening applicants for basic skills and motivation;
  - » Occupational skills and career-readiness training; and
  - » Work placement supported by career coaching and case management.
- Extending the duration and generosity of wage subsidies for employment of medium- and long-term unemployed people; and
- Monitoring and evaluating new spending so that successful programs can be scaled up and less successful programs ended. Independent evaluation should be a part of program design, including through testing different programs over time and in various locations. This should be supported by regular release of employment-services caseload data, similar to that released for income-support recipients.



### **REMOVE ACTIVITY REQUIREMENTS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS**

Remove the requirement for service providers to enforce activity requirements. They should focus instead on training and placement.



### **BAN SELF-REFERRAL FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS**

Ban employment-service providers from referring job seekers to their own training programs, removing the potential for conflicts of interest.

Australia's current strong labour market has helped bring the unemployment rate down to near 50-year lows. Lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic and strong fiscal support saw saving rates soar, while low interest rates and the rebound in consumer spending underpinned robust economic growth as the economy reopened. In conjunction with strong federal and state infrastructure spending, digital transformation and the energy transition, this has led to widespread labour shortages. At a national level, unemployment brings significant economic and social costs through limiting productive potential, increasing reliance on government welfare and reducing the social engagement of those out of work. At a personal level, unemployed people experience lower incomes, poorer mental health and lower life satisfaction.<sup>1,2,3</sup> The historically low unemployment rate has thus delivered substantial benefits for those newly able to find work.

There are still

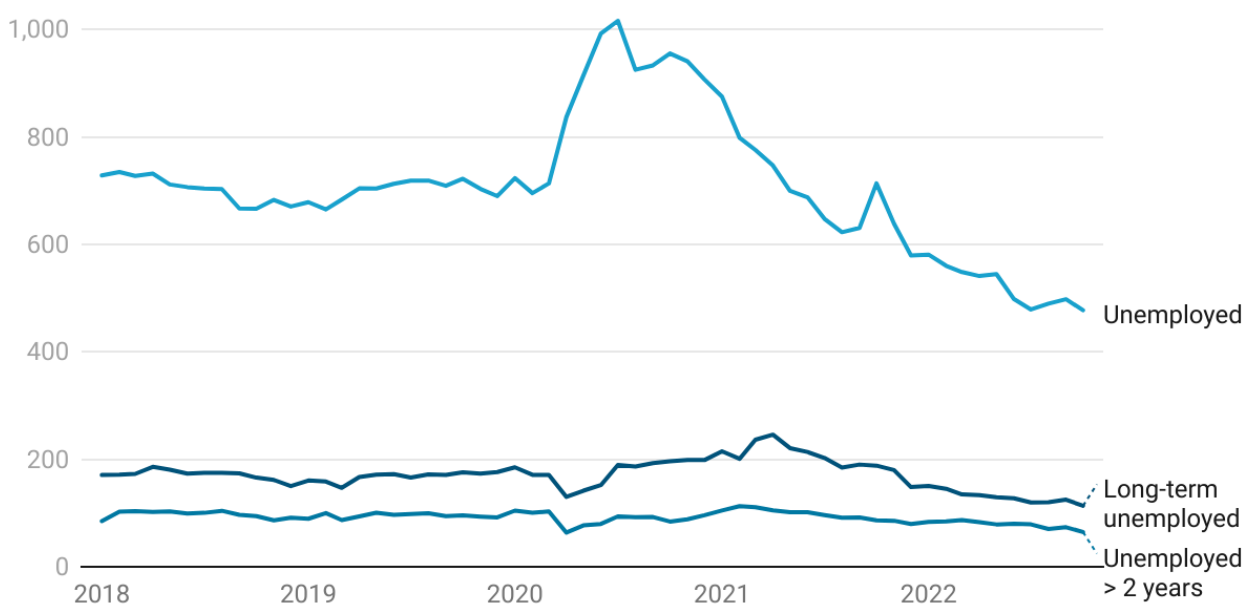
# 70% more

long-term unemployed people in Australia than before the global financial crisis in 2008.

FIGURE 1

## Long-term unemployment has fallen only gradually

Number of people, Australia, thousands



Long-term unemployed have been unemployed for 12 months or more. Data are seasonally adjusted.

Source: ABS Labour Force, Australia, detailed • Created with Datawrapper

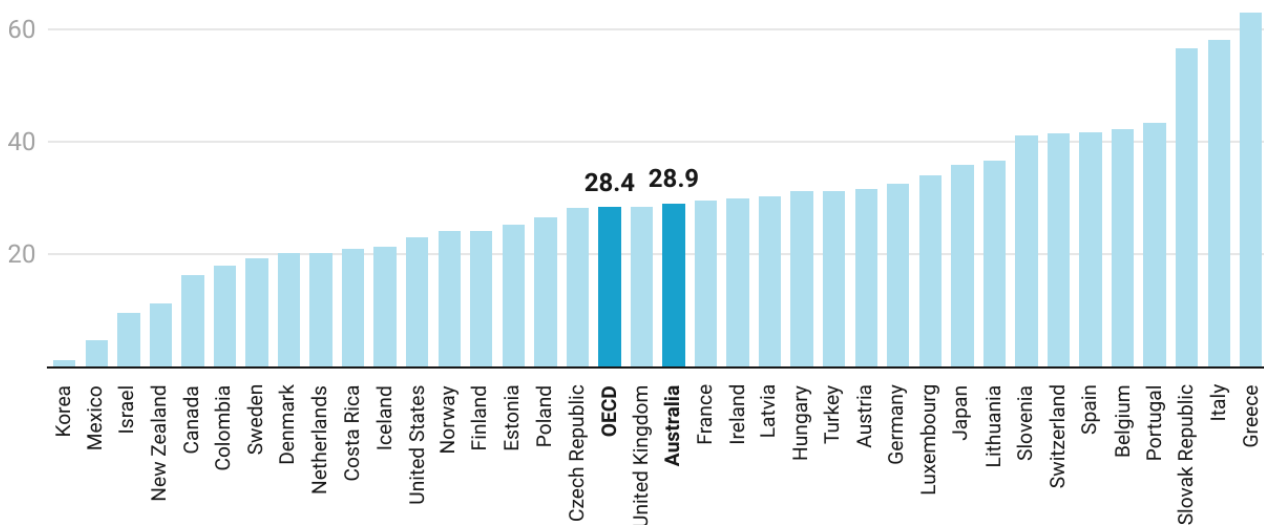
*"People who are unemployed for longer are less likely to find a job and can suffer long-term earnings penalties even after they find work."*

The strong labour market has helped to reduce the number of long-term unemployed Australians – those who have been unemployed for more than a year. But this decline has been more gradual than for those who have been unemployed for a shorter period (Figure 1). The proportion of Australians who are long-term unemployed is around the average of similar developed countries (Figure 2). There are still 70 per cent more long-term unemployed people in Australia than before the global financial crisis in 2008, with more than twice as many youth (aged 15-24) and older people (aged 55-64) unemployed for two years or more.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the pandemic, Indigenous Australians were 3.8 times more likely to be unemployed than non-Indigenous Australians, with more than one third unemployed for 12 months or more.<sup>5</sup> The strong labour market offers an opportunity to significantly reduce the number of people in long-term unemployment, with concentrated benefits for youth, older and Indigenous Australians. People who are unemployed for longer are less likely to find a job and can suffer long-term earnings penalties even after they find work.<sup>6,7</sup>

FIGURE 2

## The long-term unemployment ratio is around the OECD average

Proportion of unemployed out of work for >1 year, 2021 (%)



Source: OECD, annual labour force statistics and ABS cat no. 6291.0.55.001 • Created with Datawrapper

Spending on wage subsidies to get people back into work is particularly low:

**\$147m**

in expected expenditure in 2022-23, or less than

**0.01%**

of GDP.

### **Australia spends relatively little on getting people back into work**

One way that governments can help get people back into work is through 'active labour market' policies, which seek to give more people access to good jobs via job-search assistance, wage subsidies, public-sector jobs programs or training. Australia spends relatively little on such assistance, even in terms of spending per unemployed person (Figure 3).<sup>i</sup> Employment assistance spending has been on a declining trend since 2004.<sup>8</sup> Spending on wage subsidies to get people back into work is particularly low: \$147 million in expected expenditure in 2022-23<sup>9</sup>, or less than 0.01 per cent of GDP. These are predominantly one-off payments (of up to \$10,000) to businesses for hiring eligible individuals rather than ongoing payments that can help with longer-term skill development and poverty reduction through work.

While the effectiveness of individual measures varies (discussed below), spending to get people back into work is associated with positive macroeconomic outcomes. Across a sample of 25 OECD countries, higher spending on active labour market policies per unemployed person is associated with significantly higher employment and productivity (though this relationship does not imply causation).<sup>10</sup> A country's overall spending on active labour market policies is also a key factor in predicting earnings losses from job displacement<sup>11</sup> (an indicator on which Australia performs poorly<sup>12</sup>). From a government-spending perspective, the social return on employment services can be threefold, through reduced spending on benefits and services and increased tax revenue.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Countries that spend a lot on active labour market programs are typically those with higher taxation as a share of GDP, particularly northern European countries. However, there are also examples of countries with similar or lower tax-to-GDP ratios but higher active labour market spending per unemployed person, such as Korea, Ireland and Switzerland.



In addition to low levels of spending on active labour market programs, Australia is also unusual in outsourcing a large proportion of its job-services system to non-government providers. Most OECD countries deliver job services through their public employment service. Outsourcing and focusing on outcomes rather than inputs provides a number of benefits through greater efficiency, incentives to minimise costs while maintaining quality as assessed via 'star ratings' and encouraging private-sector innovation in service delivery.<sup>14</sup> Effectiveness in helping job seekers gain work has improved over time, with an average cost-per-employment outcome of around \$2500 in recent years.<sup>15,16</sup> Hundreds of thousands of people find jobs through the system each year. However, some aspects have not worked well:

- Incentives have not been strong enough for those who are relatively hard to place in work, with around one in five job seekers remaining in the system for more than five years.<sup>17</sup> This contributes to the low cost-per-employment outcome mentioned above, as effort is directed towards job seekers who are relatively easier to place;
- Caseloads for job-service consultants are high, with 148 job seekers per consultant;<sup>18</sup>
- Payments do not reward long-term outcomes, as they end once a participant has remained in employment for 26 weeks;
- Job service providers can claim payments for referring jobseekers into courses run by the same company or a related entity, a conflict of interest that has supported unhelpful courses;<sup>19</sup>
- Job service providers have a role enforcing obligations for job seekers. Historically this has involved error rates of up to 50 per cent<sup>20</sup> and it can undermine the service provider/client relationship<sup>21</sup>; and
- Public access to employment services data is limited. It is released irregularly and selectively.<sup>22</sup>



**Caseloads** for job-service consultants are **high**, with **148 job seekers** per consultant



**Payments do not** reward **long-term** outcomes, as they **end** once a participant has remained in employment for **26 weeks**

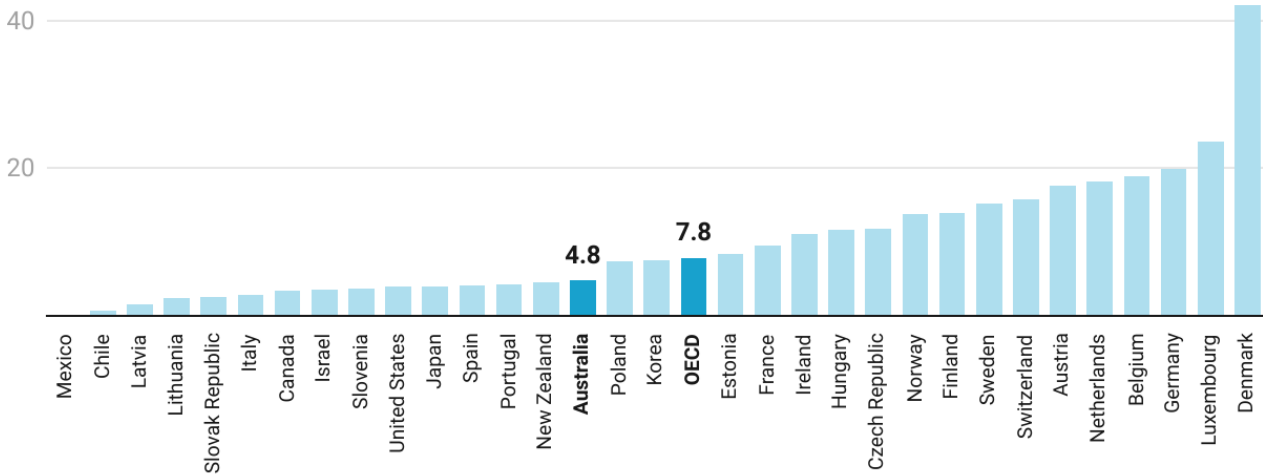


As **job service providers** have a role **enforcing obligations** for job seekers, historically this has involved **error rates** of up to **50 per cent**

FIGURE 3

## Spending on active labour market measures is low

Spending per unemployed person (USD PPP, thousands, 2019)



Includes spending on the public employment service, training, employment incentives, integration of the disabled, direct job creation and start-up incentives. Excludes employment maintenance incentives such as jobkeeper. Spending is in US dollars, converted from local currency using purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates.

Source: OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics • Created with Datawrapper

### Help for jobseekers should focus on building skills

Developing human capital is the key to improving long-term outcomes for jobseekers. The rich international literature on what works in getting people back into work shows that job-search assistance and public-sector job-creation programs do not provide significant long-term benefits for employment.<sup>23</sup> Job-search assistance can help people find jobs in the short term, but it displaces other job seekers rather than creating additional jobs (particularly in weak labour markets<sup>24</sup>) and fails to achieve long-term employment benefits. Public-sector jobs programs often fail to develop skills that are needed in the labour market. And participation in Australia’s ‘Work for the Dole’ scheme has been found to significantly reduce the likelihood of coming off unemployment payments, as it causes participants to spend less time looking for a job.<sup>25</sup>

Programs aimed at building human capital include work-relevant training and wage subsidies for private-sector employment. The positive effects of these programs have been found to accumulate over time, with the greatest benefits accruing in the long run.<sup>26</sup> Programs targeting long-term unemployment have the largest benefits.<sup>27</sup> Training is particularly important given the big structural transitions that the Australian economy is facing: Australians may need

*"Participation in Australia's 'Work for the Dole' scheme has been found to significantly reduce the likelihood of coming off unemployment payments, as it causes participants to spend less time looking for a job."*

*"The Government should also make enforcement squarely a responsibility of government rather than employment-service providers."*

to undertake a third more education and training by 2040 to adapt to the future of work.<sup>28</sup> Strong foundational skills in literacy and numeracy are critical to enable lifelong learning, which can be a barrier for older workers as on average these skills are lower for Australians aged over 45.<sup>29</sup>

### **Workforce Australia offers several benefits**

The Federal Government replaced its Jobactive employment service with Workforce Australia in July 2022. The new model responds to a number of problems with Jobactive as recognised by the Employment Services Expert Advisory Panel. Key changes include:

- An emphasis on digital service delivery (via Workforce Australia Online) for jobseekers who are job-ready and digitally literate, increasing efficiency of services for those with fewer barriers to work. This can free job-service consultants to provide intensive case management to those who need it most;
- Enhanced services to support better targeted and tailored programs for disadvantaged job seekers;
- Broadening of mutual obligations for jobseekers based on a points system for engaging in activities including training. The previous test focused on the number of job applications submitted. Jobseekers must now accumulate 100 points per month to meet mutual obligations, which can include up to 20 points per week for education and training, migrant English training, employment programs or employability skills training.

The Government should also make enforcement squarely a responsibility of government rather than employment-service providers. Providers would still need to share information with government, but making government responsible for enforcement of mutual obligations would enable a more cooperative and productive relationship between job-service providers and jobseekers. As ACOSS has recognised, placing too much emphasis on compliance and enforcement "...means that interviews with employment services are mainly about compliance rather than job referrals, training, wage subsidies, or other things that would actually help people land a job".<sup>30</sup> Mutual obligation is an important part of the Australian welfare system, but people can only get a job when they have the appropriate skills for the jobs that are available. Shifting the responsibility of service providers from enforcement to service provision would help develop those skills.

## SECTORAL EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

Target industries and occupations with higher wages and growth prospects, based on local needs and employer engagement. Successful examples internationally in:

- Healthcare
- Information technology
- Manufacturing

### Screening of applicants for basic skills and motivation



### Occupational skills and career-readiness training



### Work placement supported by career coaching and case management



More than:  
**100K**

Australians remain in long-term unemployment.

## Well-targeted subsidies can deliver economic and equity benefits

The tight Australian labour market offers a wealth of opportunities for jobseekers. However, the employment-services model has not delivered good outcomes for workers affected by structural adjustments whereby some industries and firms grow while others shrink. For example, after automotive manufacturing closures, roughly one-third of workers maintained their careers, one-third dropped back to less skilled jobs and one-third did not return to the labour force, with these outcomes little changed between the Mitsubishi Lonsdale plant closure in 2005 and the closure of remaining passenger vehicle manufacturing in 2017.<sup>31</sup>

More broadly, more than 100,000 Australians remain in long-term unemployment, split fairly evenly between men and women. While older people are more likely to be unemployed for two years or more, more than half of people in long-term unemployment are aged under 45,<sup>32</sup> which increases the potential lifetime benefits of connecting these people with the labour market. There is an urgent need to do better given the prevalence of skill shortages and looming structural adjustments associated with digital transformation, the energy transition and an ageing population.

One approach that has worked internationally is sectoral employment programs, which train job seekers in industries and occupations expected to have strong local labour demand and opportunities for long-term career advancement. Targeted sectors have typically included healthcare, information technology and manufacturing. Key features of effective sectoral employment training programs in the United States have included:<sup>33</sup>

- Upfront screening of applicants for basic skills and motivation;
- Occupational skills training targeted to high-wage sectors and leading to an industry-recognised certificate;
- Career-readiness training (sometimes referred to as soft skills);
- Wraparound support services for participants such as career coaching and case management; and
- Strong connections to employers.

Sectoral programs have been found to generate substantial and ongoing earnings gains of 11 to 40 per cent, with long-term benefits driven by access to higher-wage and higher-quality jobs.<sup>34</sup> Transferable and certified skills are a key element in the durability of earnings benefits and in helping minority workers gain opportunities in high-wage sectors.<sup>35</sup> Such training can be underprovided in the private market where it is transferable, as part of the gain will accrue to future employers. The focus on sectors with current and projected strong labour demand and close interaction with employers helps to reduce labour market misalignment that can hinder some publicly sponsored training programs.<sup>36</sup> Focusing efforts on positions in high demand in rapidly expanding parts of the labour market can also help avoid displacing other jobseekers.

Successful Australian programs that could be built upon or scaled up include effective projects under the federal 'Try Test and Learn' Fund, which provided funding for 52 projects seeking to reduce long-term welfare dependence by supporting at-risk groups. An evaluation concluded that while evidence is still incomplete, some projects showed early signs of having positive effects on workforce participation and there was suggestive evidence in support of an employer demand-led approach.<sup>37</sup>

Another example is Jigsaw, a social enterprise that seeks to transition people with disabilities into regular employment. Participants receive training and IT work experience (in documentation data management) before being placed in award-wage employment. This aligns with lessons from US sectoral employment programs, where providers found that a two-step path with training then work placement had better results than immediate placement.<sup>38</sup> Along similar lines, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) has recommended making the youth PaTH training program more vocational and linked to work experience.<sup>39</sup>

Key to learning from successful (and not so successful) programs is setting up rigorous independent evaluation from the outset. Program design needs to include variation across locations and/or time that can be used in conjunction with administrative data to test for causal effects. Data should be publicly available and independent experts should be involved in designing and implementing the evaluation strategy. Generating new insights into what works was a key objective of the Try Test and Learn Fund, but in practice evaluation has been incomplete. Evaluation can help programs target populations for whom the benefits are greatest, for example women, youth, Indigenous or remote communities. When assessing social returns on investments that reduce future welfare spending it is important to develop data and evidence to capture long-term fiscal savings, as in New Zealand's Investment Approach, which can quantify the large potential benefits from breaking cycles of disadvantage.<sup>40</sup>

Wage subsidies can also achieve good outcomes. An example is the Tasmanian Jobs Programme pilot, which had positive sustained employment outcomes for participants, although take-up was low due to low program awareness and relatively small incentive payments.<sup>41</sup> Medium and long-term unemployed people appear to benefit the most from wage-subsidy programs.<sup>42</sup>

Wage subsidies are particularly pertinent given the high effective tax rates faced by people receiving jobseeker benefits, with people losing 50 per cent or more of any increases in their income as benefits are phased out.<sup>43</sup> Returning some of this taxation through wage subsidies can play a valuable poverty reduction role through increasing employment where wages are fixed (for example at Award rates) or increasing low take-home wages where employers pass some of the wage subsidy on via higher wages. The downside of wage subsidies is that they can carry large deadweight costs from subsidising jobs that would have existed anyway, which can be reduced through tight targeting of eligible jobseekers and monitoring employer behaviour.<sup>44</sup>

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