DISCUSSION PAPERS

Paper Presented to the
DEET-CEPR Conference:
Unemployment: Causes, Costs and Solutions
16-17 February 1993

The Effectiveness of Labour Market Programs
and Training Strategies
Judith Sloan

DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 297
June 1993

G.P.O. Box 4, Canberra 2601, Australia
Paper Presented to the 
DEET-CEPR Conference: 

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ISBN: 0 7315 1624 9 
ISSN: 0725 430X 

* The papers from the Unemployment Conference are published as CEPR Discussion Papers Nos. 292-300.
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INTRODUCTION

By the end of 1992, the rate of unemployment in Australia stood at over 11 per cent, having risen from just under six per cent in late 1989. It is not surprising, therefore, that a wide range of solutions to unemployment are being canvassed, some old and some new. However, it is worth asking the question: is the unemployment situation of the early 1990s any different from that which existed in previous recessions? Over the past three decades or so, there has been a marked, recurring cyclical pattern to unemployment, although the peak rate in successive recessions has increased over time.

Much more alarmingly than the movements in the overall unemployment rate, and distinguishing the weak labour market of the early 1990s from previous recessions, is the change in the numbers who are long-term unemployed (LTU) — those who have been out of work for one year or more. In 1978, the number of long-term unemployment was approximately 50,000. The numbers rose rapidly during the 1982-83 recession but declined only very slowly during the period of sustained employment growth between 1984 and 1989. The long-term numbers shot up again with the recession commencing at the beginning of the 1990s. There were over 330,000 long-term unemployed in November 1992 (ABS 1992). In the late 1970s, the long-term unemployed made up only 10 per cent of the unemployment pool. It now represents one-third of the total unemployment pool. On the face of it, therefore, it would appear that the (long-term) unemployed have become less effective in filling vacancies, with the proportion of long-term unemployed rising more rapidly than the overall unemployment rate. Moreover, some estimates of future trends in long-term unemployment put the numbers as high as half a million by the middle of this decade (Chapman, Junankar, Kapuscinski, 1992).

When considering solutions to unemployment, it is appropriate, therefore, to focus on the long-term unemployed. The truth of the matter is that income support arrangements were never designed with the long-term unemployed in mind; they were always about providing short-term income relief. The existence of a ramp of long-term unemployed, particularly where there is a degree of regional clustering, can rapidly transform into a permanent underclass, imparting problems which society may find extremely unpalatable, and not just for the members of the underclass.

This paper is about the role that labour market programs and training strategies can play in providing a cure, or at least, some relief for unemployment. The following section defines what is meant by labour market programs and describes how the various types of programs operate. We then briefly outline the objectives of LMPs and describe the trends in LMP expenditure in Australia. The impact of LMPs is discussed in both theoretical and empirical
terms in the next section, and the lessons drawn from the research. A conclusion completes the paper.

DEFINING LABOUR MARKET PROGRAMS

Conceptually, there are three basic types of labour market programs (LMPs) designed to assist the unemployed. The first two essentially operate on the demand side and the third on the supply side. These are:

(i) Wage subsidy schemes (WSS): private sector employers are provided with financial incentives to take on members of a target group (e.g. the long-term unemployed) under certain conditions and for defined periods.

(ii) Direct job creation (PSJCS): this generally takes the form of creating fully subsidised jobs in the public sector. The jobs are generally temporary.

(iii) Training schemes.

For the third category, a distinction needs to be made between training schemes for the unemployed and training subsidies and public provision of training for the employed. In this latter category, for instance, is the Commonwealth Rebate for Apprentice Full-time Training (CRAFT), which takes the form of monies paid to employers of apprentices. It should be noted, however, that recent policy changes, including the introduction of the Australian Vocational Certificate (A VC), following on from the Carmichael Report (1992), involve the establishment of an integrated training system for all young people, irrespective of employment status.

In practice, there is some overlap in the three basic kinds of LMPs. Thus, for example, WSS typically carry training requirements. However, it is useful to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each separately.

WSS work on the basis of providing subsidies (generally a percentage of the wage paid) for specified periods to employers who take on workers from designated target groups. The target groups are often described in terms of duration of unemployment but other characteristics are sometimes stipulated. There are a number of advantages to this type of LMP. Compared with PSJCS, the cost per placement will almost always be lower. Moreover, the subsidy can offset screening costs of employers and thereby potentially reduce statistical discrimination against members of the target groups. In these cases, subsidised workers will often be kept on after the subsidy period has ended. Unfortunately, however, WSS are least effective during recessions as the bulk of employers are actually reducing their workforces rather than expanding them. That is, it is difficult to attract large numbers of employers to take up
subsidies at these times. There is a case for increasing the subsidy rate during recessions (Strotton and Chapman, 1990). While in theory, marginal subsidies are to be preferred over recruitment subsidies — that is, insisting that the subsidised employment is additional — this condition may be difficult to enforce during recessions.

Turning to PSICS, there are several advantages often cited, including the ability of this type of scheme to provide employment for the most disadvantaged in the labour market — 'employer of last resort'. (WSS by contrast, will 'cream' the best from the target group.) Moreover, these schemes can be implemented during severe recessionary conditions when it is difficult to attract large numbers of private sector employers to participate in WSS. They can also be regionally targeted. PSICS, however, are relatively expensive, especially where participants are paid full award wages and capital costs are taken into account. Moreover, there are often question marks over the social value of projects undertaken under PSICS — the painting of barbed wire is an example often cited.

THE OBJECTIVES OF LMPs

Three distinct objectives that expenditure on LMPs may fulfil are as follows:

(i) To improve the trade-off between the rate of unemployment and inflation, by providing a less inflationary form of government expenditure;
(ii) to improve the labour market position of the disadvantaged in the labour market;
(iii) to redistribute employment and earnings opportunities to the least advantaged in the labour market.

These three objectives can be labelled respectively, the macro-efficiency objective, the micro-efficiency objective and the equity objective. It should be noted that the scale of expenditure on LMPs in Australia has never really been sufficient for us to entertain seriously the first objective. Strotton and Chapman (1990) demonstrate that in 1988/1989, Australia’s expenditure on LMPs as a proportion of GDP was approximately 0.3 per cent, and ranked tenth out of twelve developed economies. (The highest proportionate expenditure was in Sweden with 1.7 per cent of GDP spent on LMPs.) Thus, LMP expenditure in Australia has very much been directed at the latter two objectives.

This is not to rule out necessarily the validity of the first objective, and indeed a number of prominent Australian economists have advocated that additional resources be devoted to LMPs on the grounds of ‘hysteresis’ or ‘state dependence’. The argument essentially is that the LTU for all intents and purposes cease to be part of the effective labour force — they are ineffective
in filling vacancies. As a consequence, the trade-off between unemployment and the rate of unemployment is altered, since the latter is producing different messages about labour market pressures over time as the numbers and proportion of LTU rise. The argument therefore is that the “Phillips curve can be cheated” by LMP expenditure directed at LTU.

TRENDS IN LMP EXPENDITURE IN AUSTRALIA

Interest in LMPs in Australia has been largely a post-1973-74 phenomenon. Over the late 1970s and during most of the 1980s, policy formation in the area was characterized by ad hoc decision-making, with governments reacting in knee-jerk fashion to deteriorating labour market conditions. A close relationship has existed in Australia between expenditure on LMPs and the rate of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment (Sloan and Wooden, 1984; Stretton and Chapman, 1990).

Over time, there have been large swings in the relative importance of the different types of LMPs administered through the Department of Employment, Education and Training, and its predecessors. Thus, in 1975/76, PSJCS was the largest component of LMP expenditure, mainly on the Regional Employment Development Scheme (REDS) — a community-based, direct job creation scheme involving labour intensive projects. Wage subsidy schemes became more popular in the second half of the 1970s with the introduction of the Special Youth Employment and Training Program (SYETP). In the 1980s, overall expenditure on LMPs trailed off after the 1982-83 recession, as the rate of unemployment fell and PSJCS (under the Wage Pause Program/Community Employment Program) was effectively phased out.

More recently, expenditure on labour market programs has increased. New LMP initiatives and extensions of existing ones were announced in the Industry Statement of March 1991, marking a regeneration in interest in LMPs and how this expenditure might achieve reductions in unemployment. Between 1991-92 and 1992-93, expenditure on “assistance to jobseekers and industry” increased by 86 per cent, to $1150 million. The main components of LMP expenditure in the 1992/93 budget were as follows:

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1 This is consistent with Gregory's (1990) historical analysis of the ratio of changes in unemployment to changes in employment (full-time and part-time) in Australia which points to a dramatic fall in the ratio, particularly over the 1980s.
**JOBSTART**, a WSS to private sector employers  
**JOBTRAIN**, which involves the provision of short-term vocational training  
**SkillShare**, which provides grants to non-profit community organisations for structure skills training, particularly for long-term unemployed and disadvantaged workers  
**JOBSKILLS**, a combination of work experience primarily in local government and community groups and training for long-term unemployed

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<td>JOBSTART</td>
<td>$239 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>JOBTRAIN</td>
<td>$207 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>SkillShare</td>
<td>$176 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>JOBSKILLS</td>
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The significant aspects of these recent trends are first, the very large increases in total expenditure; secondly, the increase in the subsidy rate and duration under the WSS; and thirdly, the slant of expenditure towards WSS and training. This second facet is consistent with the advice proffered by Stretton and Chapman (1990). Moreover, these trends contrast with previous policy directions during and immediately after recessions where PSJCS have been expanded both absolutely and relatively. Certainly, elsewhere in the 1992-93 Budget, additional monies have been directed to local governments, particularly those covering regions with above average unemployment, but there has been no prescription as to the types of workers employed as a result of these monies. In other words, this expenditure cannot be described as PSJCS since the unemployed have not been specifically targeted.

**THE IMPACT OF LMPs**

It should be initially pointed out that it is a far from simple task to assess the impact of LMPs: there are both conceptual and empirical difficulties facing the researcher. Moreover, evaluation is often impossible where schemes have been developed on the run, which is often the case given the *ad hoc* nature of policy formation in this area and there is an absence of adequate information systems to allow *ex post* rigorous evaluation.

Let us take the case of WSS. How can the impact on net job creation be assessed? Clearly, it is not simply the number of placements created under the scheme. There are the possibilities of substitution, where members of the target group are employed in preference to other individuals, and deadweight loss, where members of the target group would have been employed in any case. Displacement can also occur wherein workers in non-subsidised firms lose their job. This latter phenomenon may occur either through the competitive advantage secured by the subsidised firm, or via the impact of the means by which LMP expenditure is financed. To assess this latter impact, full-blown general equilibrium models are required (see Layard, Nickell and Jackman 1991).
Layard, Nickell and Jackman (1991) argue that one way of dealing with these inflows and outflows is to use an aggregative approach to estimate the net impact on the unemployment stock, by measuring the effect of LMPs on the outflow rate from unemployment and the inflow rate, \textit{ceteris paribus}. The analysis of Disney (1991) is cited, which indicates that the (UK) Restart Programme, which was directed at the long-term unemployed appeared to increase significantly the outflow rate of the LTU in the second half of the 1980s. They do however note that in Northern Ireland, where the Restart Programme did not operate, the number of LTU also fell, but not as sharply as the short-term unemployment numbers.

The alternative approach is to micro level studies. A number of these have been undertaken in Australia. The studies on WSS have estimated that only between 15 and 20 per cent of funded placements have represented net additional jobs. These estimates apply to SYETP (Special Youth Employment Training Scheme) and JOBSTART. (SYETP, in particular, acted as a recruitment subsidy because marginality — that subsidized workers be additional to the existing workforce — was not a strict condition.)

Rao and Jones (1986), using a quasi-control group, estimated that 73 per cent of SYETP ‘least disadvantaged’ participants experienced continuous full-time employment for 18 months after completing the program, compared with 19 per cent of the control group. The respective figures for the ‘most disadvantaged group’ were twelve and one per cent. The ‘least disadvantaged’ generally appear to fare better from WSS as employers select the cream from the target group. Stretton (1984) found that a large measure of the success of SYETP was due to retention by the subsidised employer, in which case SYETP could be partly interpreted as a screening device.

The Auditor-General’s appraisal of SYETP noted that in 1980/81, the following was the case: there was an over-representation of firms in manufacturing and retailing; 40 per cent of placements were in occupations judged to be in low demand; 60 per cent of placements had a training content of less than 8 weeks (the minimum subsidy period was 17 weeks); 30 per cent of placements had a training content of less than 4 weeks; and half the jobs were assessed as requiring no training other than normal induction. On this basis, the prospects for securing significant advantages for the participants was seen to be marginal.

Recently, the Department of Employment, Education and Training has released \textit{The Job Report} which contains some basic evaluations of labour market programs, including the WSS, JOBSTART (DEET 1992). Taking as a control group all Newstart Allowance recipients, it is estimated that in December 1992, approximately 25 per cent of former JOBSTART participants who had been unemployed for more than one year were in full-time or part-time unsubsidised employment three months later, compared with only 5 per cent of non-participants. An
advantage was also apparent for the short-term unemployed who had participated in the scheme over those who had not. Certainly, there are some question marks over the methodology: the control group for instance is in fact dominated by participants. Moreover, there would appear to have been no consideration given to the differing characteristics of the participants and the non-participants, which may explain the outcome (the ‘creaming process’ mentioned above) rather than the program per se. A three month time horizon would also seem excessively short.

What of the impact of PSJCS? Burgess (1992) has argued that there should be an immediate introduction of a large-scale public sector job creation scheme in Australia to alleviate the unemployment situation. He claims that on “both efficiency and equity grounds there is a strong case for public sector job creation schemes (PSJCS)” (p. 116). Unfortunately, the evidence indicates that it is unlikely that PSJCS can promote any substantial net job creation which will be sustained beyond the short-term. Moreover, such schemes typically promote inefficient outcomes.

Burgess (1992, p. 125) states that one of the supposed advantages of PSJCS is that they do not have the substitution problems associated with WSS. This view is untrue. Many projects undertaken as part of the PSJCS would have been undertaken in the absence of the program — the phenomenon referred to as ‘fiscal substitution’ — the main difference being that the project sponsors are compelled to use labour which meets the scheme’s requirements rather than labour of their own choosing. That is, non-subsidised labour is displaced by subsidised labour.

The extent of such fiscal substitution is likely to be large, especially if the scheme is permanent as Burgess advocates. Evaluations of the Wage Pause Program (WPP), an initiative of the Fraser Government, indicate that over half of the projects (53 per cent) were brought forward because of the program (Creigh 1986, p.39), but would have been undertaken in the absence of the program. More sobering are the estimates for the US reported in Johnson and Tomola (1977), which indicate that the fiscal substitution effects of public sector job creation programs are relatively small in the first six months, but thereafter rise sharply, reaching 100 per cent five quarters after commencement. Thus, in contrast to the claims made by Burgess, any employment creation effects of PSCJS are likely to be confined to the short-term.

There is also the wider issue of the financing of PSJCS and what may be termed ‘general equilibrium’ effects. Even taking into account the income support foregone, PSJCS are relatively expensive, particularly where capital as well as labour costs are involved. Clearly,

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2 This figure is considerably higher than the figure cited by Stretton and Chapman (1990, p. 37) in their analysis of job creation schemes. Stretton and Chapman, however, drew their figure from the earlier interim report published two years prior to the paper by Creigh.
these costs have to be financed in some way, raising the spectre of ‘crowding out’ and the
choking off of job creation in the private sector. For instance, if PSJCS are financed by higher
taxes, the latter is likely to dampen the expansion of employment opportunities. Alternatively,
the public sector deficit could be enlarged, but this will ultimately impact on employment via
financial market effects. There is no ‘magic pudding’.

PSJCS are not only likely to lead to little net job creation in the long-run, they also promote
inefficient outcomes as the LTU are generally less skilled (or their skills have atrophied) than
the average worker. Thus PSJCS often leads to the relatively more skilled and experienced
labour being displaced by unskilled labour with little work experience. Inefficiencies also arise
if projects that would not otherwise have occurred take place under PSJCS but their rates of
return are low or negative. In general, projects which do not involve fiscal substitution are
likely to be less profitable and/or more wasteful of community resources. This is the ‘make
work’ charge frequently levied at the Regional Employment Development Scheme (REDS)
and Community Employment Program (CEP) projects of the past.

Burgess (1992) argues that on equity grounds alone, there is a strong case for PSJCS.
Unfortunately, there are a number of examples from overseas where employment prospects
have actually made been made worse by participation in PSJCS because persons are
stigmatized by their participation (Schmid 1982). Even in cases where participants’
employment prospects appear to be enhanced by employment in PSJCS, the size of the effect is
generally found to be small (Sloan and Wooden, 1987). Moreover, one survey of the WPP
established that 53 per cent of participants had been in very low to low skilled jobs, while only
26 per cent were in jobs described as medium to highly skilled (BLMR 1985, p. 101).
Similarly, information for the first year of operation of the CEP program indicated that nearly
60 per cent of placements were in unskilled positions (DEIR 1984, Table 3.10). In other
words, it is not clear whether these PSJCS conferred valuable training and skill acquisition on
the participants, apart from general work experience.

Finally, let us consider training schemes. These can take a variety of forms including job
search training, preparatory/bridging training, vocational skills training and skills upgrading.
They also differ in terms of the length of the training, the mode of delivery, the combination
with work and forms of accreditation. It was noted above that one of the main foci of current
LMP policy is training, including an attempt to integrate training arrangements for the
unemployed and the employed.

There is very little evidence one way or the other as to the effectiveness of these supply-side
policies. The argument often runs that unemployment is much more prevalent among the low-
skilled (which is factually true). Hence, improving the skill profile of the unemployed should
improve their chances of gaining employment. Of course, this will only be so if there is an expansion of demand, but it is often implicitly assumed that a larger pool of skilled (potential) workers will lead to more jobs as bottlenecks of certain activities are removed. An alternative but related view has been expressed by Nelson (1981, p. 1055):

Just as a high rate of capital formation and a well educated work force stimulate and facilitate technological advance, so technological advance stimulates a high rate of capital formation and motivates young people to acquire formal education. If technological advance were slower, diminishing returns to capital deepening would have less of an offset and the returns to investment or the investment rate or both would be lower. If technological advance were slower, there would be less demand for scientists and engineers to enable firms to stay competitive with their technological rivals. There would be less need for managers and workers to deal with new situations and to learn new skills.

From this perspective, it would be surprising if one observed many countries where technological advance was rapid, but where investment rates and educational attainments were low. Nor would one expect to find many instances where capital formation maintained a rapid rate, but new technologies were not being introduced and spread through the economy. Societies might find it hard to sustain high educational attainments on the part of young people entering the work force, and not at the same time be moderately progressive scientifically and technologically. In short, there are not neatly separable sources of growth, but rather a package of elements all of which need to be there.

This quote indicates that the supply (of a skilled workforce) will not necessarily lead to demand — the two appear to go hand-in-hand. This also accords with the commonsense view that providing training courses to the unemployed will not of itself lead to job creation, and indeed participants may experience high levels of frustration if a related job cannot be secured on completion of a training program. There is also a question mark over whether very short courses (say 13 weeks duration) are effective in imparting valuable skills to the unemployed — longer, more broadly-based training leading to widely-accepted credentials may be preferable.

Nonetheless, Streton and Chapman (1990) note that short courses providing skills in local demand appear to have been relatively effective if a job can be secured immediately. Job clubs also appear to perform strongly, bearing out Carson’s (1989) conclusion about the importance of extended internal labour markets and the role of information and advocacy in job search strategies. Finally, it should be recalled that training schemes are often implemented through a training component attached to employment in a WSS or PSICS, in which cases the evaluation of these schemes outlined above is relevant.
CONCLUSION

Clearly, unemployment is a major problem confronting Australian society. Unfortunately, the predictions of the unemployment rate over the next few years are not very optimistic. If GDP grows at three per cent per annum and assuming 1.5 per cent per annum productivity growth (which is conservative given typical movements coming out of a recession), then the rate of unemployment will stay more or less where it is, given labour force growth of approximately 1.5 per cent per annum. If, however, GDP grows at four per cent per annum or more, the rate of unemployment may decline by one percentage point per annum. Thus is is possible that the rate of unemployment may reach eight per cent of the end of 1995. Given the vagaries of the international economy, an optimistic forecast for unemployment by the end of the decade is six per cent.

What then, can be done to alleviate unemployment? The most permanent solution is to create an environment in which there is strong growth in the number of jobs, particularly in the private sector. This is, however, easier said than done. If consider the situation in 1983 coming out of that recession, there were a number of factors favourable to strong employment growth. These included: the ending of the drought, favourable terms of trade, a booming world economy and falling real wages effected through the Accord. None of these conditions now applies. In fact, the reverse is the case in a number of ways. The world economy is weak and real wages are, in fact, steady rather than falling. Moreover, the government is constrained in the extent to which it can stimulate the economy for fear of setting off another external crisis. With our net foreign debt now in excess of $160 billion, there is a fear that a major devaluation would have a nasty valuation effect on the foreign debt (it being denominated in foreign currencies) and would be inflationary. Cuts in interest rates in the immediate future seem unlikely.

At the same time, it is also difficult to be particularly optimistic about the potential efficacy of LMPs, particularly in terms of fulfilling a micro-efficiency objective of improving the labour market status of participants. Expenditure on LMPs in Australia has been closely related to fluctuations in unemployment and policy initiatives have often been knee-jerk reactions to deteriorating labour markets. As a consequence, some of the design features of the schemes have not always been well thought-out in the rush to have something up and running and demonstrate that something is being done. There has, however, been a greater degree of coherence in the recent policy stance in this area: for example, the greater emphasis on WSS and training, the staying away from PSICS and the increase in the subsidy rate and duration of subsidies payable under WSS — are all policy directions informed by research findings.
While the WSS option is generally considerably cheaper than PSJCS, the former appears to assist the 'least disadvantaged' the most and then often by providing a cheap screening device for prospective employers. This latter aspect is not bad thing; if hysteretic is the main problem rather than heterogeneity of the unemployed, WSS can provide a means whereby the LTU in particular can signal to employers that they are reliable and useful employers. The alternative is that employers will continue to discriminate statistically against the LTU, and members of the pool cannot escape.\(^3\) This of course does not rule out the existence of substantial substitution and displacement effects, in which case net job creation arising from WSS may be quite low. However, the equity objective of WSS will be fulfilled by a shuffling of the unemployment queue.

PSJCS may provide temporary employment for the most disadvantaged, although whether participants are significantly better off as a consequence of their participation in these schemes is unclear. There is also the potential inefficiency of these schemes aid the issue of fiscal substitution. Training schemes can take a variety of forms and are often linked to WSS and PSJCS. As a supply-side policy, the effects are more likely to be felt in the medium-term. It is unclear whether improving the skill profile of the unemployed \textit{per se} will expand the number of jobs in the short-term.

\(^3\) A more consistent policy position is to allow the wages payable to the LTU to decline to market clearing levels, rather than foisting a burden on taxpayers which involves the complications of financing. WSS work because the wage elasticity of employment is not zero. This similarly applies to a cut in real wages for the target group.
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