

FutureWomen



Submission to voluntary parent support
service consultation

15 September 2023

Contents

Overview	3
Future Women's experience and approach	5
Reflection on the previous model	10
Support for a proposed new model	14
Parents' needs	16
Eligibility	19
Timing, features and delivery	21
Engagement	25
Funding model	28
Summary of recommendations	29
Appendix: Case studies	31
References	34

Overview

Parenting should be a joyful and rewarding experience. However social, economic and structural factors mean that single parents – especially mothers – can face overwhelming financial and personal pressures. The inequalities confronting single parents are many and varied, which means programs to support them must deliver flexibility, autonomy and choice.

First and foremost, government policy and programs need to recognise parents' role as primary carers, and the enormous value this creates, in and of itself. Parents deserve support that respects their current priorities and holds genuine ambition for their future. This is why a new program model should strictly avoid making assumptions about single parents' goals and desires, and instead offer participants autonomy and freedom to define their own future.

Parental choice should be at the centre of the Government's policy approach. A new program model needs to focus less on onerous compliance and more on connecting parents with community support and one another. While also preparing them to return to education or paid work, when ready. Parents should have access to a variety of meaningful activities that help build their independence, success and wellbeing.

Future Women ('FW') are experts in gender equity and disruptors in the pre-employment program space. We create engaging, evidence-based online programs that participants are proud to be part of. We've demonstrated that digitally delivered pre-employment services are not only possible but can be transformative – especially when codesigned alongside people with lived experience.

In regards to a new voluntary parent support service, FW supports a distinction between, and separate funding for:

- Place-based and specialist non-vocational support, designed to address structural barriers to employment, prevent social isolation and build community connection; and
- Complementary, digital pre-employment services that keep parents engaged, while they build the skills, knowledge, connections and confidence to return to education or employment.

A new procurement process that expects organisations to deliver all of these services will hamper provider diversity and make it harder for not-for-profit and social

enterprises to contribute. A new program model should prioritise parents' need for individualised support, delivered within their community. As well as reserving a portion of the funding envelope to ensure all participants have access to meaningful professional and personal development opportunities, when the time is right for them.

In 2019, the Employment Services Expert Advisory Panel made a similar distinction; specifically envisioning employment services delivered in a virtual environment. FW agrees that employment and pre-employment program design needs to modernise and digitise. This means embracing the flexibility of online delivery as a complement to the core service offering of one-to-one, place-based or specialist support.

The vast majority of single parents are women, who, as a cohort, face additional barriers to finding work and achieving economic security. A new program model cannot ignore the gendered make-up of potential participants. Program design and delivery should be consistent with women's experience of parenting and work, and account for the intersectional and structural challenges they face.

The economic benefits of strategically and respectfully supporting parents to return to work are extensive. Improving women's participation in paid work would significantly boost our national economy. In fact, closing the workforce participation gap by half would increase Australia's annual GDP by \$60 million and cumulative living standards by \$140 billion over 20 years (KPMG, 2018).

Australia is experiencing a major skills shortage for which immigration alone will not be the solution. Domestic training and education are critical to building a high-skilled, service based economy for the future. Indeed, experts have dubbed women 'the country's most untapped resource'. Government pre-employment services should be tailored to the needs of women, including single mothers, if Australia is to take advantage of this opportunity.

All parents deserve time, space and guidance to plan for their futures. For some parents this means individual support, delivered by a trusted case worker, that helps ensure their family's basic needs are met. Once this baseline is established, parents should be supported to access a breadth of additional opportunities that are tailored to their life stage, as well as pathways to education or employment.

Critically, additional opportunities should help participants build secure careers - not land the next short-term gig. A new program model ought to be structured such that providers are incentivised to invest in the individual, rather than identifying the fastest route to an additional payment. Government program design should allow parents to dream big, plan effectively, meet their family commitments and ultimately, secure their economic futures.

FW's experience and approach

About FW

FW supports Australian women to enter, progress and succeed in paid employment, and build careers that benefit them for the long term. We also train and advise employers to dismantle cultural and structural barriers to gender equity at work. For five years we have helped employers achieve their diversity and inclusion goals, and are proud to be turbocharging the next generation of women leaders. FW are experienced in government program design and delivery that boosts women's participation in paid work.

We employ more than 40 staff across five states to deliver tailored, professional development services to our program participants and members. We also reach, train and connect unemployed women with paid work, at scale, through our innovative online learning approach. FW are practical contributors to the national conversation on gender equity and maintain high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency and accountability. FW is working towards B-Corp accreditation, with positive assessment expected later in 2023.

At our core, FW are storytellers. Our team are experts in creating digital content and curriculum that is engaging and compelling. We know that the 1.7 million people nationally who interact with us, have extensive demands on their time and attention. We've developed learning opportunities that inspire as well as explain, that are challenging but not a chore. We're proud to share our experience and expertise in pursuit of improved government program design that meets parents' needs while building their self-esteem and confidence.

Professional development programs

FW has delivered online learning and development to more than 7,000 people since 2020. This includes women and gender diverse people who have personally purchased memberships with upskilling benefits, and employers who have bought professional development opportunities for their staff.

Our experience delivering professional development and upskilling programs:



Total
participants
7,106

"I was extremely surprised at how well the course was run, how easy it was to navigate, and how incredibly engaging it was. I can honestly say this was the best "online" program I have been involved in."

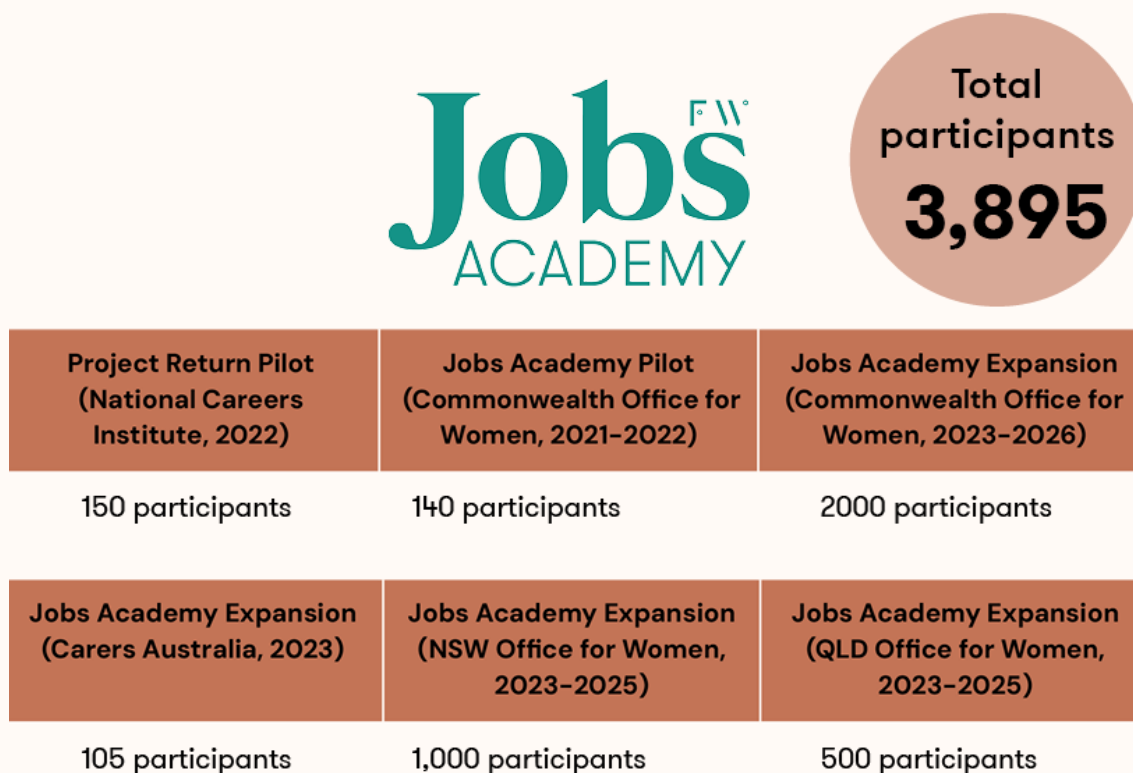
—Platinum+ Emerging Leaders Participant

Pre-employment programs

Since 2021, FW has been funded by state and federal governments to develop and deliver pre-employment programs for women. Our learning approach is fully virtual, self paced and voluntary. We curate a suite of tailored pre-employment activities designed to equip women with the skills, knowledge, connections and confidence they need to return to work and thrive. FW also partners with employers and educators that offer flexible, meaningful work and study opportunities suited to our participants' needs.

We prioritise participants who face multiple barriers to work for entry to these programs. Including migrant women, queer women, First Nations women, women with disabilities, neurodiverse women, older women, women who live with mental or chronic illness, unpaid carers and women who have escaped family violence. Many women and gender diverse people who access our programs face complex, intersecting barriers to work.

Our experience delivering government funded pre-employment programs:



A data snapshot: Our participants

Participants in FW's previous and existing pre-employment programs, have diverse identities, and lived experiences but commonality in their employment status.*

Identity and lived experience

- 100% identify as women or non-binary
- 40% are living in a regional, rural or remote locations
- 27% are from culturally diverse backgrounds
- 11% are living with disability
- 3% are First Nations people



Employment status



67%

have caring responsibilities for a child, adult or family member

51%

have been out of the paid workforce for more than one year

100%

are unemployed, underemployed or in insecure work



80%

reported low self confidence to make their next career move



*Data from the federal 2023 intake, but is similar across our pre-employment programs.

Our approach to engagement

FW's team has an intimate understanding of the demographic we service, built on decades of experience working in the women's sector, government, education, and the media. This has allowed us to consistently attract high application numbers, in excess of 6:1, for placements in our voluntary pre-employment programs.

The demand for our services from people they're created for reflects their unique strategy and design. The same positive and elevated approach FW takes to our professional development programs has been translated to our pre-employment programs. These are programs that women not only want to be a part of, but are proud to be participating in. We believe this same enthusiasm, demand and pride can be achieved with a new voluntary parent support service.

Understanding and respect for the women and gender diverse people who access our programs is fundamental to the FW approach. The FW team is deeply invested in participants' career success as well as their personal fulfilment and economic security. We don't get someone a job to tick a box, but to build their future through trust, empathy and empowerment.

Our approach to learning

FW's dedicated online learning team brings qualifications and expertise to creating impactful online learning environments. In program creation, FW pairs theories of cognitive psychology and academic research, with practical industry experience and a warm, engaging tone of voice. We cater specifically to the needs of women seeking pre-employment support.

FW works with experts in digital transformation to ensure our technology platforms prioritise user needs and the principles of human-centred design. We tailor learning content, style and tone to match the audience. This allows us to deliver a premium platform that resonates with members from a diverse range of backgrounds and personal experiences.

FW's online format allows for flexible and self-paced learning, so that participants can engage and expand their knowledge, at their own pace. For women with high demands on their time, this means ease of access, improved and ongoing rates of engagement, and simplified re-entry for those who experience unexpected, intervening life events.

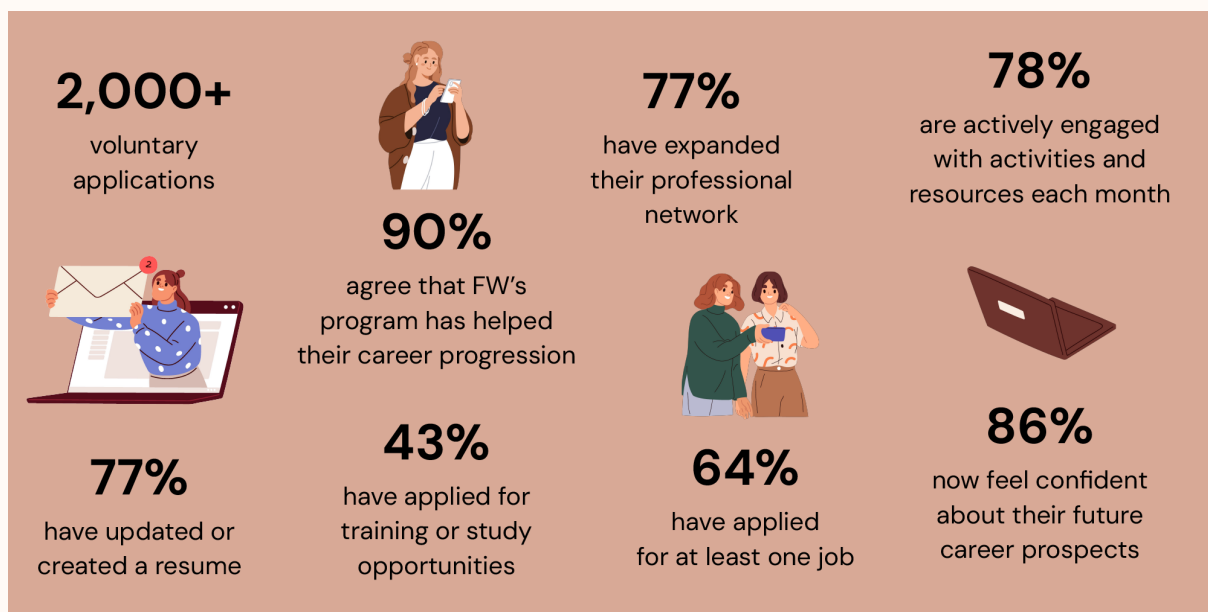
Our approach to outcomes

FW has a track record of providing program participants with the right balance of support and empowerment to achieve results. We invest in building genuine community and camaraderie amongst cohorts, so that participants feel personally invested in the program and one another. This is essential for growing confidence, maintaining engagement and ultimately, delivering positive outcomes, including job or study success.

FW's programs are evidence-based and data-driven. We monitor engagement through attendance tracking and site analytics. We assess ongoing impact on participants' job readiness and employment outcomes through surveys and focus groups, as well as independent evaluation. Our dedicated research and reporting team uses data in real-time to inform continuous improvement of content and delivery.

A data snapshot: Program results

FW has achieved consistently excellent results in our pre-employment programs. Below are the mid-program results for the 2023 Jobs Academy cohort, funded by the Australian Government's Office for Women (n=638).



Specialists in supporting women

There are one million single parent families in Australia, 79.9% of whom are mothers (ABS, 2022). Further, of the 57,000 single parents and carers currently receiving support from the Australian Government's Parenting Payment (Single), 91.1% are women (Women's Budget Statement, 2023).

These women face overlapping and intersecting barriers to finding work and securing their economic futures. Given that women will make up the overwhelming majority of those accessing a pre-employment program for single parents, a gender lens on program design and delivery is essential.

FW's expertise is in supporting women and gender diverse people, including parents, to return to work and thrive. Our submission and recommendations reflect our experience working with this cohort and assume the provision of specialised services to meet their particular needs.

Reflections on the previous model

Unclear and confusing program goals

FW supports the overarching goals of the new service to help parents plan for their future education and employment goals, build their capabilities and skills and work toward the type of paid work they want, when they're ready. We further reflect that:

- Providers of the new service should demonstrate that their pre-employment programs respect participants' individual circumstances and timetable for returning to work. Parenting is of fundamental importance to our communities and families. Providers should not risk undervaluing parenting by pushing participants into paid work before they, and their families, are ready.
- Co-location of new service providers with existing employment programs should be approached with caution. Especially where those programs involve compulsory job search, attendance and compliance activities. Co-location risks undue pressure on participants to return to work before they are ready by providers most familiar with administering compulsory employment programs. It may also create confusion amongst participants.

Insufficient specialist expertise

FW supports the principles guiding this consultation for a new service. Specifically, their focus on meeting individual needs, valuing unpaid care, taking a strengths-based approach and focusing on job quality and security. We further reflect that:

- People with lived experience should not just be consulted but actively involved in new program design and service delivery. Otherwise new service providers risk disengagement, compounding isolation and potentially perpetrating further harm amongst participants.
- The new service should be administered by organisations with experience and expertise supporting vulnerable people, including family violence survivors and gender diverse people. This necessitates providers being well-networked to organisations that can provide specialist support at a local level, and ensuring frontline staff are appropriately trained in trauma-informed care.

- The new service should take a strengths-based approach. This is best achieved through carefully designed, evidence based personal development programs. For example, FW pre-employment programs support participants to identify intersections between their strengths, values, passions and skills before undertaking a goal setting and strategic planning process.

Lack of respect for participants

FW's team were concerned by evidence provided to the Senate Inquiry from participants who felt disrespected and undervalued by program providers. We have heard similar distressing and disappointing stories from former ParentsNext participants, who are now voluntarily enrolled in our pre-employment programs. We advise that:

- A new program model should include a breadth of self-paced activity and development options. FW's experience is that participants thrive when they are given the right balance of support, empathy and autonomy, noting that this balance is dependent on the individual and their circumstances, and should be led by them.
- Trust will be fundamental to a person's voluntary participation in and engagement with a new pre-employment service. Compliance-based activity can create distrust between participants and providers. Participants, understandably, can find it difficult to believe that the person reporting on whether they've met their obligations, also has their best interests at heart.

Support for a proposed new model

Rethinking pre-employment services

It's time to rethink the Australian model for delivering pre-employment services. Providers have previously been expected to offer place-based, individualised support, alongside job-readiness training and connection with work and study opportunities. The result is that smaller community organisations have been unable to compete against large corporate providers.

FW's experience is that even when faced with extensive inequalities, the commitment of single mothers securing the best possible future for their families, is enormous. As the Council of Single Mothers explains "single mothers are determined and resilient... they find a way despite often overcoming physical, emotional and financial challenges". A new program model should recognise the enormous strength and fortitude of single parents.

The Senate Inquiry into ParentsNext revealed that a conveyor-belt-style approach does not work for this cohort. Parents need to be embraced by their communities and embedded in a culture of support and connection. Organisations that understand the social and cultural fabric of Australia's individual neighbourhoods, are best placed to do this work. They have trusted, established relationships with other local services and play a critical role delivering individualised support.

In 2018 the Turnbull Government initiated a review of employment services led by an expert panel (Employment Services Expert Advisory Panel, 2019). This panel advocated for more provider diversity in employment and pre-employment services, in order to drive innovation and personalisation of support. They recommended investment in locally based and specialist providers. FW agrees that changes to the commissioning model for a new service are unlikely to make a lasting difference, unless the provider network is diversified.

A new pre-employment service distinction

The specialised contribution of community and not-for-profit organisations should be central to any new program model. However, by their very nature, these organisations are not equipped to design and deliver a sufficient range of personal and professional development activities. Especially when single parents have such diverse needs, and engage with services at different starting points on their job-readiness journey.

This is why FW supports a distinction between, and separate funding for:

- Place-based and specialist non-vocational support, designed to address structural barriers to employment, prevent social isolation and build community connection; and
- Complementary, digital pre-employment services that keep parents engaged, while they build the skills, knowledge, connections and confidence to return to education or employment.

A new program model should prioritise parents' needs for both individualised, place-based support, and meaningful professional and personal development. To expect that organisations deliver on both aims simultaneously, will hamper provider diversity and make it harder for locally-based, specialist providers to contribute.

As leaders and experts in online-first delivery and participant engagement, FW submits that aspects of employment and pre-employment program design urgently needs to modernise and digitise. This view has previously been supported by the Employment Services Expert Advisory Panel in 2019. That supplementary programs support place-based providers was also recommended in the 2023 Inquiry Report.

A new commissioning model should embrace the flexibility of online delivery, while still delivering primary funding to in-person, place-based services that are integrated with the community. The remainder of FW's submission will focus exclusively on digital service provision for women parents, in respect to the key consultation questions.

Parents' needs

Economic insecurity

Despite record low unemployment, there continues to be a significant gap in women and men's workforce participation rates; currently at 62.3% and 71.4% respectively (ABS, 2023). Women are also overrepresented in part-time and casual employment. Indeed, analysis by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency in 2022 found that women are twice as likely as men to be working part-time and casually from age 35 (WGEA, 2022).

This gap in full-time workforce participation is largely due to the disproportionate share of unpaid caring and domestic responsibilities. Latest data shows that on average, Australian women do 48.7 hours of unpaid labour each week – that's 21 hours more than men (Wilkins, 2023) – and that they made up 95% of primary carer* paid parental leave recipients (ABS, 2018).

This time spent out of the workforce has a direct impact on women's career progression and development. Leadership opportunities are foregone, skills become out-of-date, superannuation goes unearned and the gender pay gap widens. Economic inequality compounds over a lifetime, with women retiring with median superannuation balances 23.4% lower than men (ATO, 2021), and older women increasingly becoming homeless (ABS, 2021).

Women make up 91.1% of Single Parenting Payment recipients (Women's Budget Statement, 2023). This group faces significant economic insecurity, with half of all households receiving Parenting Payments living in poverty. Addressing this inequity requires a multi-pronged policy approach that recognises the structural barriers to workforce participation faced by single mothers, specifically.

Note: the primary carer distinction no longer applies.

Non-vocational support needs

Parents who are out of work, require a range of support services to prevent poverty and ensure their long-term economic security. FW advises that any new program be delivered via place-based or specialist services to ensure that parents' have access to a range of support options that meet their specific needs.

Non-vocational support should be cognisant of structural barriers to employment, including:

- intergenerational trauma
- domestic and family violence
- relationship breakdowns and child custody negotiations
- homelessness or unstable accommodation
- cultural and language barriers, and racial discrimination
- disability and chronic illness
- the costs of undertaking training, education or employment
- lack of affordable, accessible child care.

A new program model should support specialist and local providers with the relevant expertise to help address these challenges through individualised and flexible support. This may require investment to build the capacity of existing community services, and grow their connections to specialist services and to one another. The provision of a complementary service to meet participants' pre-employment needs should be part of that investment.

Pre-employment support needs

When preparing to return to work, women face additional structural challenges. These include bias and discrimination in hiring and pay decisions and a lack of flexible working arrangements offered by many employers. This has a cumulative impact over time on women's confidence, sense of choice, agency and direction. Single mothers' capacity to return to work can be further constrained by caring obligations, and ongoing navigation of relationship breakdown and custody arrangements.

Participants in FW's pre-employment services tell us they feel alone navigating their return to work. They report being unsure of their career goals, and that overwhelm can delay their intended timetable for return. They have further indicated that an extended period outside of paid work means they lack knowledge of the job market, what employers are looking for, and modern hiring practices, as well as networks and relationships.

A new pre-employment service, designed to complement the work of place-based providers, should help participants:

- Find confidence in their ability to work again and secure their economic future
- Articulate their strengths, values, passions and transferable skills
- Develop clarity and direction, including career planning advice
- Tell their career story, valuing what they have achieved outside of paid work
- Gain exposure to the job market, including emerging, high-demand industries
- Recognise the skills and experience that employers are looking for
- Identify, explore and access training opportunities, including through subsidies
- Write effective resume and cover letters, which can be tailored for specific jobs
- Build the skills and confidence to perform effectively in a job interview process
- Understand modern workplaces and grow knowledge of their rights at work
- Negotiate entitlements with an employer, including flexible work options
- Expand their professional networks, and develop their interpersonal skills.

Eligibility

Voluntary participation, when ready

With its roots in the early Job Network model of employment services, the previous ParentsNext model assumed unemployed single parents would likely become reliant on social welfare for the long-term. ParentsNext was premised on the assumption that in the absence of mutual obligation requirements, parents would not take positive action to plan for their futures and upskill of their own accord.

Mutual obligations aside, this premise is false. Recent HILDA data reveals that most women who receive welfare payments remain on those payments for four years or less, typically during prime child rearing years (Wilkins, 2017). ABS data similarly shows that compared to the 1960s, when women's employment decreased significantly between the ages of 25-40, in 2020, women's employment typically dips later in life and for a shorter period of time (ABS, 2021).

A new model should bring a strengths-based lens to women's capacity, preference and, often, need to return to paid employment. The Government's focus should be on enabling women to improve their job readiness at their own pace, and not assume they will deliberately avoid work in favour of income support payments. If the services delivered under a new model are genuinely engaging, informative and effective, then a significant proportion of parents will voluntarily engage.

Minimum first contact expectations may be a useful tool to ensure initial engagement with services. However a punitive approach is likely to be disruptive and detrimental to the family unit and cause undue stress to the single parent. Government should be aiming to create a service model that values relationship building and celebrates learning and development at whatever point and to whatever extent, single parents are ready for.

Under the new distinction proposed by FW, the complementary service could be offered to a broader cohort. While higher-cost, individualised support should be reserved for those accessing government support payments, all single parents who are looking for work could be granted access to digital pre-employment support. This represents a low cost, high value investment for a Government seeking to reduce welfare dependency and boost workforce participation.

Meeting diverse needs for job readiness

A new model should enable parents to engage at the point of curiosity – wherever they are at in their journey to job-readiness. This approach would mirror successful workplace support programs for employees on parental leave, which have been proven to increase staff retention (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2023). Parents should not be considered as a homogenous group. Services need to cater to the varying needs and goals of parents who are considering or navigating their return to work.

In FW's experience, this could mean supporting women who have taken longer than average career breaks, lost connection with the world of work and their sense of self as contributors. This group needs support to develop their clarity and confidence before embarking on job search activities. In other cases, it might mean supporting women to capture and positively frame a brief career break on their resume, or prepare to negotiate flexible work that suits their family circumstances.

An online learning environment would facilitate sufficient breadth, depth and variety in the pre-employment services that the Government offers. This would allow participants to access appropriately-targeted, flexible learning in the form of resources, workshops and personal development. Importantly, this approach would give parents autonomy and control, allowing them to self-select from an extensive suite of personal and professional development opportunities.

By offering an extensive suite of activities online, programs of engagement can be tailored to meet the needs of women who face multiple, intersecting barriers to returning to work. Specific pre-employment activities could be designed for parents from culturally and racially marginalised backgrounds, older and younger parents, parents in regional communities, First Nations parents, parents with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ parents. These online activities would complement high-demand specialist and place-based support.

Timing, features and delivery

Effective cross-referrals

Were the Government to pursue a distinction, as advised by FW, between place-based support and digital pre-employment services, an effective referral process should be developed between the two. Barriers to meaningful cross-referrals under the previous approach were significant. As the Senate Inquiry heard, some providers behaved possessively about 'clients', while others were too quick to 'offload' complex cases.

A new program model should foster a sector-wide shift from competition to collaboration between providers with complementary approaches and goals. For participants who face intersecting barriers to work and wellbeing, there will be benefits to them in accessing multiple services simultaneously. Government should not be afraid of additional investment for parents who are actively engaging and seeking support.

In designing a new model, the Government should support potential providers to play to their strengths, rather than expecting them to meet the needs of every participant who seeks their help. Providers of non-vocational support should be actively linking participants in their programs to pre-employment services, when considered ready. Likewise, pre-employment services should be aware of and actively promote the suite of community services and resources available.

An effective cross-referral structure will allow for more individualised, meaningful support and deter the cut-and-paste approach many parents criticised during the Senate Inquiry. It would also reduce unnecessary duplication, allow for greater service specialisation, foster meaningful connection between providers and maintain provider focus on the participant's individual needs.

Note: FW's expertise and experience is in delivering pre-employment services. Accordingly, we are reflecting only on the timing, features and delivery of similar services. We are not commenting on the design of the non-vocational support component, as others are better placed to contribute on this question.

Flexible, self-paced learning and development

A parent's contribution, particularly in the first five years of a child's life, is critical to that child's development and future wellbeing. A new program model should prioritise and celebrate the contribution of parents outside of paid work. At the same time, it should give parents access to flexible, self-paced learning opportunities.

Parents – particularly single mothers – are time poor. National data shows that on average, women do 48.7 hours of unpaid labour each week (Wilkins, 2021). Exclusive breastfeeding in the early months equates to roughly the time commitment of a full-time job. An absence of social support can further exacerbate mothers' time-based challenges in engaging with pre-employment services.

We have consistently seen this demonstrated in FW's professional development and pre-employment programs. Our engagement and participation data shows that parents of young children find it harder to attend live events, both in person and online. Overwhelmingly, this cohort tells us that caring and domestic responsibilities have significantly limited their capacity to invest in their careers, even when their personal commitment level is high.

FW's always-on, virtual model has enabled time-poor women and gender diverse people to access programs in their own time and at their own pace. We design our online learning curriculum mobile-first, so that women without access to a computer can still participate. Virtual delivery has also ensured our services are accessible to anyone with an internet connection, including those living in regional and remote communities.

Impactful online learning

FW advises that a new program model should include provision of an online pre-employment program. Delivery using the latest technology and learning techniques would improve engagement and outcomes.

An online pre-employment program should include:

- Synchronous and asynchronous activities; balances the motivation and community created by group learning, with the cohort's requirements of flexible and self-paced participation

- Multimedia formats; high quality and attention-grabbing audio, video and graphics, delivered in an easy-to-use, professional format
- Interactivity and social learning; tools such as quizzes and polls promote participant engagement, and online discussion forums will foster collaborative learning
- Engaging and empathetic, plain English text; clear and concise communication that creates a supportive, empowering learning environment.

There is increasing evidence supporting the effectiveness of short courses and modular learning (Price and Dunagan, 2019). Nimble program design can offer learners targeted, responsive information and skill building, with minimal bureaucracy and at a lower price point. Such programs build motivation through manageable program dosage to ensure participants aren't overwhelmed. .

FW's experience is that high-quality learning management systems should be accessible on tablet and mobile devices to deliver best-practice user experience for time-poor participants. Furthermore, content should be designed by expert communicators and learning specialists to maximise participant engagement, retention and outcomes.

Valuing expert knowledge and lived experience

FW's success lies in the co-design of our pre-employment programs. Our programs are designed by women, to work with women. We recognise that women are experts in their own lives and their voices should inform the services they access. By actively listening to participants – through ongoing consultation and evaluation – our services are tailored to meet each cohort's needs.

A new service should deliver meaningful professional and personal development, tailored to the specific requirements of parents. There should be significant choice in online learning modules to meet the varying needs of women, at different stages of life and job readiness. It is essential that participants are empowered to self-select content that is most relevant or timely, rather than have their pre-employment journey dictated to them.

A new program model should be informed by the latest research on best practice – from effective learning pedagogies to evidence-based career advice. FW's pre-employment program participants have told us of occasions they've sought help from generalist providers on how to improve their resumes. In these instances, they have struggled to

get satisfactory advice on, for example, how to communicate their career break in a way that highlights their strengths and mitigates potential bias.

Providers should be using inclusive and trauma-informed language, recognising intersectional barriers to employment and varying structural disadvantages likely to be faced by many participants. Simultaneously, the activities and opportunities that providers offer should be strengths-based, speaking to the talent and value parents bring to the workforce. As opposed to treating parents as lesser for being unemployed, as was reported to the Senate Inquiry.

Building a meaningful career for the long term

A new program model should aspire to engage parents with complementary online pre-employment services, well in advance of their intended return to the paid workforce. This will ensure parents can access non-vocational support designed to connect them with the community and enhance their wellbeing. It will also extend parents the opportunity for long term career planning, rather than being forced to take the next job that comes along out of necessity.

FW's experience is that women who have been out of the workforce due to caring responsibilities, have benefited enormously from undertaking a process of clarity seeking. Our process supports participants to strategically reflect on their strengths, values, interests and aspirations. That work is followed by practical learning about labour market conditions, areas of demand and emerging industries. This combination of self-paced personal development and learning means participants are empowered to make realistic and meaningful plans for their futures.

Pre-employment services should not be designed to place parents in short-term, insecure work. Rather, parents should be supported to build a career that means they have access to stable and sustained employment over many years. FW's experience is that when people are engaged in work that resonates with their values and interests, they tend to be more satisfied, motivated and remain in those jobs for longer.

To this end, a new service should include providers that can demonstrate connections with employers. While not every parent will want or be ready to return to work, those who do will benefit from the confidence boost that comes from engaging with employers directly. For example, FW's experience is that participants who attend our virtual Jobs Fairs gain new confidence about their ability to find work in the future, even if that's not something they're immediately seeking.

Engagement

Attracting applications and interest

Tone and branding are key to engaging participants in a voluntary program. FW has consistently attracted thousands of voluntary participants for our professional development and pre-employment programs. Our Jobs Academy and Project Return pilot programs both attracted around six times the number of applications than there were places available.

Across the country, there are hundreds of thousands of women who find themselves unemployed or underemployed, despite their obvious talent, skills and sometimes, qualifications. Upon acceptance to an FW program, women frequently tell us, 'I never thought I'd be here'. Those who accessed income support from the Government have variously reported that the process was 'demeaning', 'upsetting' and 'stole my self esteem'.

FW uses intentionally elevated and aspirational branding. We want our communications to be exciting and empowering, so that women not only want to be a part of, but are proud to participate in our programs. The FW tone is warm and conversational, ensuring participants feel supported and respected. Our communications are designed to foster a sense of belonging and motivation. The look and feel is distinct from what you'd expect of a 'typical' government program.

We advise that a new program model should similarly prioritise the development of elevated, engaging branding for or by providers, particularly of voluntary pre-employment services. While not opposed to engagement incentives, FW believes that strong participation rates can be achieved without them. Especially if providers are funded to develop comprehensive and responsive communications strategies for engagement and re-engagement.

Reducing obstacles to engagement

A new service should leverage a range of communication channels, carefully curating language and imagery to secure wide ranging interest from parents. Traditional communication channels will be insufficient to reach an audience whose consumption patterns are diverse. From television and radio to social media and podcasts, from celebrity ambassadors to real life case studies, from peer to peer sharing and word of mouth recommendation, a new service should seek to reach and engage participants in innovative ways.

Reducing administrative burden and creating a seamless application process should be a priority for providers. This will ensure that a time-poor cohort is not deterred from ongoing engagement by an initial bureaucratic hurdle. As previously advised, participation in an online pre-employment program should be made possible on mobile devices as well as computers. Technology should not create new barriers to engagement but rather make access possible for everyone.

The goals and expectations of the new program model must be clearly stated. This includes program length and dosage, options for accessing the program flexibly, and the potential benefits of participating. Further, communications should not be wholly focused on job outcomes as the only measure of success. Parents need to be empowered and know that they are welcome to access the new service regardless of what point they are at in their return to work or study journey.

Maintaining engagement and enthusiasm

Engaging participants in pre-employment and place-based activities is an achievement in itself, but engaging them to continue participating is a different and distinct challenge. Provoking new interest in something is, after all, often simpler than holding interest for the long term. That is because there is natural human curiosity in new opportunities and activities, when competing priorities haven't yet had the chance to intervene.

Inevitably some parents will lose optimism and enthusiasm over time, as commitment fatigue sets in and the novelty of an experience wanes. That's why it's essential both the Government and providers incorporate strategies to mitigate risk of disengagement in service design. In an online environment this becomes even more important because there is always a quick dopamine alternative available to the intended pre-employment activities.

FW has maintained an engagement rate of 78 percent at the six month mark, amongst our 2023 Jobs Academy cohort. We're also proud that 98 percent of participants agree that Jobs Academy staff listen to and respect them; an essential component of trust. This success has been built through multiple cohorts of pre-employment program participants. We've taken the time to test and adapt, and highly recommend that a new service takes advantage of this prior learning.

We believe our high participant engagement rate has been maintained thanks to thoughtfully designed user experience and effective online learning strategies. Neither

are static achievements, as these are fields of practice that are rapidly evolving. Re-engagement strategies require continuous improvement. FW has variously rolled out motivating and inspirational welcome webinars, employed celebrity speakers and implemented comprehensive re-engagement communications.

At the application stage, FW also asks potential members if they're ready to make a change and how much time they have to dedicate to the program. This opt-in process ensures members know what to expect, what is expected of them, and that FW can deliver for their needs. We also monitor member engagement closely through our lead scoring methodology, attendance tracking and member surveys. This information has proved invaluable as we continue to adapt and evolve our programs.

Funding model

Benefits of a fee-for-service model

FW recommends that funding for a new program model should support the essential nature and value of parenting. Inherent to achieving this, is a model that assumes, and indeed trusts that, participants will return to paid employment when ready, with the right ongoing support and touchpoints. This requires that funding be distributed amongst providers best placed to support achieve job readiness, rather than deliver employment outcomes only.

A model that rewards employment outcomes alone risks creating perverse incentives for providers, as was made clear during the Senate Inquiry. Similarly, the 2019 Commonwealth Inquiry into JobActive explained that:

'The current funding model incentivises JobActive providers to churn people through short term work, rather than helping them to secure sustainable longer-term employment ... Providers are rewarded financially for churning people through jobs that don't last'.

Government should abandon this failing approach once and for all. In FW's experience, fee-for-service models, with payments based on activity milestones, appropriately incentivise providers to focus on the needs of individual participants. This approach recognises the significant overhead investment required to develop a high-quality learning curriculum, utilising effective technology platforms and delivering highly tailored content and communications.

A fee-for-service model would necessitate rigorous monitoring, evaluation and reporting requirements focused on outcomes as well as outputs. For example, when evaluating our programs FW relies substantially on self reporting; trusting participants to tell us what is and isn't working for them. For example, rather than measuring the number of learning modules delivered, we use survey data to assess learning module impact on participants' confidence or work readiness. This approach is informed by program logic and theories of change and has proved meaningful and useful for us.

FW has recommended a distinction between place-based, individualised support and digital pre-employment services. We further recommend that a funding distribution model recognises the high cost of delivering place-based services in an effective, supportive way. The majority of available funds should be directed towards these services, with a smaller number of specialised organisations engaged to provide digital pre-employment services, focused on professional development.

Summary of recommendations

The Senate Inquiry described ParentsNext as ‘a program with a confused focus’. Co-located with large, generalist providers that are geared towards achieving quick employment goals, while also encouraging non-vocational activities such as parenting support, ParentsNext did not meet participants’ needs. Participants were unclear on the aims of the program, and many felt they were not heard or prioritised.

Provision of support to single parents should be built on principles of trust, empathy and excellence. Service providers should be allowed to foster meaningful relationships with the people they support, rather than simultaneously exercising compliance functions that undermine trust and confuse purpose.

FW has recommended that a new program model distinguish between, and separately fund:

- Place-based and specialist non-vocational support, designed to address structural barriers to employment, prevent social isolation and build community connection; and
- Complementary, digital pre-employment services that keep parents engaged, while they build the skills, knowledge, connections and confidence to return to education or employment.

This distinction would allow the Government to invest in the sustainability and continuous improvement of community based services. By not expecting that these, often small, organisations offer the full suite of personal and professional development services participants might need.

A digital pre-employment service is scalable. Access could be extended to other parents who are looking for work, including those not receiving government support payments. This strategic investment could help mitigate risk of increased numbers of parents relying on the public safety net, while also boosting workforce participation, especially amongst women.

FW currently delivers voluntary pre-employment programs for women, in a fully-virtual environment. We are proud to have achieved consistently excellent results and have provided additional recommendations for a digital pre-employment service for parents, based on our experience and learning.

FW has further advised that a new program model should:

1. Foster a sector-wide shift from a competitive approach to a collaborative network of providers with common goals.
2. Involve parents with lived experience in program design and delivery, and be administered by organisations with experience and expertise supporting vulnerable people.
3. Take a strengths-based lens to parent's capacity and preference to return to paid employment by offering self-paced activities and development options.
4. Embrace the breadth, flexibility and quality made possible by online delivery, including the development of specialised activity options for parents who face multiple barriers to work.
5. Facilitate investment in best-practice digital accessibility, user-experience and engagement and outcomes focused communications.
6. Aspire to engage parents well in advance of their intended return to the paid workforce, to create opportunities for meaningful, long term career planning.
7. Prioritise development of an elevated branding approach, and engagement and re-engagements strategies, to encourage voluntary participation and maintain parents' ongoing involvement.
8. Adopt a fee-for-service approach, with payments based on activity milestones, incentivise providers to focus on the needs of individual participants.



FW sees enormous potential in a new program model that embraces the boundless possibilities of virtual delivery, coupled with place-based, non-vocational services. This would ensure parents are able to engage in personal and professional development, in advance of their return to work, while building important community connection and stability for their families.

Our experience proves that parents can and will engage with appropriate, flexible and meaningful pre-employment programs on a voluntary basis. We look forward to the announcement of a new program model that values parenting, while simultaneously supporting parents to plan and secure their economic future.

Appendix: Case studies

Jayne (35–39) Lockyer Valley, Queensland

- Jayne needed help finding a job after nine years out of the workforce caring for children.
- Jayne had previously been applying for jobs for more than four years without success.
- She was open to trying something new, including a career change. Her priority was returning to the workforce.

Through Jobs Academy, Jayne learned about a local industrial manufacturer that were committed to recruiting more women and supporting their transition into male-dominated industries. Jayne credits Jobs Academy for helping motivate her job search, and secure work with a supportive, flexible employer.

Vanessa (35–39) Melbourne, VIC

- Vanessa wanted support in her search for work after an eight year career break
- She is a single parent of two children and victim-survivor of family violence
- Vanessa had 15 years experience in management and strategy prior to her career break
- She had completed numerous short courses and micro-credentials but these were not translating to job success. She had been applying for 2–3 jobs per week for 12 months

Vanessa credits the Jobs Academy with providing a support framework for her during an isolated period in her life. Importantly, she says that the access to mentoring and valuable connections and networks continues to help her during the job search process.

Maira Metelo (40–44) Rod Point, NSW

- Maira had taken a 2+ year break from paid employment due to caring responsibilities. She had been self employed but struggled to progress her career due to caring responsibilities.
- Maria found it hard to articulate and substantiate her leadership skills and soft skills.
- Maira wanted to gain confidence, understand and highlight her leadership skills, connect with people and learn about possible career pathways.

Maira says that FW's Project Return Masterclass was particularly valuable for her professional development goals. She experienced considerable uplift in her understanding of how to leverage her networks, as well as a significant improvement to her knowledge of strategies for effective leadership.

Nina (45-49) Melbourne, Victoria

- Nisha spent the last five years out of the workforce caring for her children. She experienced perinatal depression and anxiety after the birth of her second child.
- Now ready to return to work part-time, she wanted advice on how to secure a job that could accommodate her caring commitments.
- Nisha has experience and education but could not find employment that was flexible.

Nisha reported an improvement in her self-belief and confidence after participating in Jobs Academy. She has successfully secured a flexible part-time role working for a defence company. Nisha credits Jobs Academy for helping her negotiate a flexible work arrangement.

Susan (45–49) Sydney, NSW

- Susan is a single mother of three with 20 years' experience in marketing. She is a victim-survivor of long-term family violence, which significantly disrupted her career.
- Susan was determined to return to work after an eight year career break.
- She had been applying for jobs and training for more than three years without success.

Susan actively engaged with Jobs Academy mentoring sessions and professional development opportunities, and was able to better define her goals and skills, and increase her confidence. Susan credits Jobs Academy for her acceptance to a sought-after course that will equip her with the digital and social media marketing techniques she needs to secure work in her field.

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