Maternal Employability, Conditionality and the role of Family Services in the Australian Social Security System

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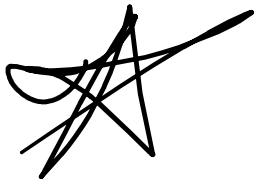
Statement

This thesis is solely the work of its author. No part of it has previously been submitted for any degree or papers or is currently being submitted for any other degree. To the best of my knowledge, all help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been duly acknowledged.



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Abstract

There has been an international shift in social security system approaches towards mothers from being one of supporting mothers during their time of raising children, to viewing mothers as adult workers who are expected to engage in the paid workforce. While traditionally directed towards the unemployed, labour market activation policies and conditions on social security payment receipt which aim to increase employability are now being targeted to parents of young children. The emphasis on employability and paid participation in the labour market is also influencing the Australian government's policy direction towards family services, such as parenting programs and playgroups. Family services are now an element of labour market activation policy for parents and participation in such services is compulsory for some mothers to receive their social security payments.

Despite the increased focus on mothers' employability, there is limited understanding of how mothers in the social security system define the concept. Nor is there sufficient insight into the potential influence of family services on mothers' employability. This study addresses these gaps in the literature by exploring the concept of employability from the perspective of mothers in the Australian social security system and considering the potential impacts of family services on mothers' employability. Empirical evidence was drawn from qualitative data collected via semi-structured interviews and focus groups with mothers (n = 33) and family service providers (n = 10) in regional New South Wales, Australia.

Mothers in the study considered confidence as vital to their employability and valued their role as a parent more than their role as a paid worker. Many mothers reported that voluntary participation in family services helped increase their confidence, built their social connections, and reaffirmed the value in their parenting role. However, growing evidence suggests the incongruence between mothers' values and government policy which enforces participation in labour market activation policies is resulting in the stigmatisation of mothers and a decrease in mothers' confidence (Baker & Tippin 2002; Brady & Cook 2015; Cooney 2006; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013; Marston & McDonald 2008). Given that confidence is considered by mothers in this study to be the most important factor in their employability, it is argued that coercive conditionality policies which focus on mothers' paid employment and compulsory service participation may be counterproductive to the governments' welfare-to-work agenda.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
ANU HREC	Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee
AWT	Australians Working Together (Package)
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects (program)
CDP	Community Development Program
CPI	consumer price index
DSS	Department of Social Services (Australian Government)
DV	domestic violence
EMTR	effective marginal tax rate
FSP	Family Support Program
FTB	Family Tax Benefit
HILDA	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (survey)
HIPPY	Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (program)
HYP	Helping Young Parents (measure)
ILO	International Labour Organization
JSCI	Job Seeker Classification Instrument
JSSE	job search self-efficacy
LGA	Local Government Area
LMAP	labour market activation policy
MNC	Mid-North Coast (region)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPL	Paid Parental Leave (scheme)
PRWORA	Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act
SEIFA	Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia
SJF	Supporting Jobless Families (measure)
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
WtW	Welfare to Work

CHAPTER ONE Introduction

In government policy, employability is generally explored in the context of labour market activation programs and policies (LMAPs), which are primarily intended to increase the readiness of social security recipients to enter paid employment (Adam et al. 2017; Crisp & Powell 2017; Lindsay & McQuaid 2005; Lindsay & Pascual 2009; Peck & Theodore 2000). The concept of employability is a central tenet of LMAPs across Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations (Lindsay & Serrano Pascual 2009; Peck & Theodore 2000), and policies to increase individuals' employability and engagement with the workforce are a dominant aspect of Western welfare states (Dwyer 2004; Humpage 2015; Saunders 2007).

It is increasingly common for Western welfare states to require welfare recipients to meet certain conditions and participate in LMAPS or other specified activities in return for welfare payments; in the literature this contract between the citizen and the state for social security receipt is referred to as welfare conditionality or mutual obligation (Carney 2007; Dwyer 2004, 2019; Rowse 2002; Saunders 2007; Taylor et al. 2016; Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018; Wright 2012). The historical purpose of many welfare payments for parents has been to support the parent financially while they are primarily responsible for the care of their children, and to reduce childhood poverty (Brady & Cook 2015; Briar & Patterson 2005). However, shifts in constructions of citizenship have seen increased emphasis on adult workers and active citizens (Briar & Patterson 2005; Humpage 2015). While traditionally directed towards the unemployed, LMAPs are increasingly being targeted to parents of young children (Brady & Cook, 2015; Fok & McVicar 2013; Kowalewska 2017).

Governments across the OECD are extending LMAPs to parents who were previously exempt from such participation requirements while caring for young children (Brady & Cook, 2015; Fok & McVicar 2013; Kowalewska 2017). Mothers are increasingly required to engage with services and programs aimed at increasing their employability as a condition of receiving social security payments (Briar & Patterson 2005; Cortis et al. 2008; Grahame & Marston 2012; Humpage 2015; Millar & Rowlingson 2001; Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018). In Australia, parents with low or no incomes may be entitled to receive a Parenting Payment or JobSeeker social security payment, depending on the age of their youngest child. For many parents, receipt of these payments is conditional upon them participating in an LMAP or other activity as dictated by government policy.

It has been widely identified in both the literature and policy evaluations, that the responsibilities associated with being a parent can have a major impact on a parent's ability to participate in the workforce and meet the requirements of LMAPs (AIFS 2016; Baxter 2013a; Briar & Patterson 2005; Cooney 2006; Kowalewska 2017; Miller & Ridge 2017). There can be a significant tension between a welfare recipient's role as a caregiver or parent, and their role as an employee/worker. Cooney (2006) argues that this tension is largely ignored by the welfare-to-work agenda. For women, the continued gendered role of caring for children, as well as the gendered division of labour, can operate as key barriers to employment (AIFS 2016; Baxter 2013; Briar & Patterson 2005; Kowalewska 2017). If working, some parents may be less able to perform a full-time caring role and must meet this need in other ways, including through an increased reliance of family and social networks (Cook 2012; Fok & McVicar 2013). Further, the design of the social security system can sometimes act as a disincentive to gain employment or increase employment income (Fok & McVicar 2013; Kowalewska 2017; Whiteford 2012).

While the evaluations of LMAPs can be difficult, there is growing evidence that many of the policies have modest, or even negative outcomes (Lindsay & Serrano Pascual 2009; Peck & Theodore 2000). Australian and international evidence suggests many of the policies which aim to increase employability often have mixed results and do not always lead to improved employment outcomes for unemployed people or parents (Brady & Cook 2015; Cook 2012; Dwyer 2019; McArthur et al. 2013; Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018;). There is much evidence to suggest that employability programs for welfare recipients, including those with young children, can result in low-paid, low-skill and unsustainable jobs for welfare recipients and can have a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of welfare recipients and that of their children (Borland & Tseng 2011; Brady & Cook 2015; Butterworth et al. 2012; Campbell et al. 2016; Cook & Noblet, 2012; Cortis et al. 2013; Escott 2012; Kiely & Butterworth 2014; Martin 2015).

Research into the conditionality of welfare payments has found the policies may have detrimental impacts on the wellbeing and confidence of welfare recipients (Baker & Tippin 2002; Brady & Cook 2015; Cooney 2006; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013; Marston & McDonald 2008; Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018; Wright 2016). Some welfare recipients feel scrutinised and stigmatised when subject to activation requirements, and this can result in a withdrawal from services and supports (Brady & Cook 2015; McArthur et al. 2013). Descriptions of these policies and a discussion of the impacts on parents are presented in Chapters Two and Three.

Given LMAPs focus on employability, the concept has received attention in the public policy literature. Of the available conceptualisations, McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) employability framework is the most comprehensive. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) present a list of variables for three overarching, interrelated components which influence a person's employability, incorporating individual, personal and external factors. The framework is the most relevant framework for analysing mothers' employability, especially due to the acknowledgement of personal circumstances, such as caring responsibilities, which have a significant influence on mothers' employability. This thesis draws heavily on, and suggests additions to, this framework to make it more relevant to the experience of disadvantaged mothers in the Australian context.

While there is a field of literature around what factors influence and are associated with an individual's employability, the concept of employability from the perspective of people in the social security system has not yet been explored and there is no research into how mothers in the social security system define employability (Guilbert et al. 2016). Subsequently, LMAPs which intend to increase employability do not factor mothers' views on the concept into their design. This thesis addresses this gap in the literature by examining the concept of employability from the perspective of mothers in the Australian social security system. The study highlights which factors the mothers consider as important to their employability and examines the extent to which the mothers' views align with existing literature and government policies aimed at increasing their employability.

The study involved semi-structured interviews and small focus groups with mothers (n = 33) and service providers (n = 10) on Dunghutti and Gumbayngirr Country in regional New South Wales, Australia. These locations experience high rates of unemployment and social security receipt. The fieldwork was completed between September 2018 and July 2019, and most of the interviews and focus groups were conducted with mothers who were attending a playgroup.

The mothers who participated in the study strongly indicated that confidence is the most important factor related to their employability. Other essential employability factors which were consistently raised by the women included childcare, mental health and psychological wellbeing, social connections and supports, suitable work available within school hours, and skills and qualifications. The findings emphasise the importance of each of the three sets of factors (individual factors; personal circumstances; and external factors) which are outlined in McQuaid and Lindsay's framework (2005). The findings of this study reiterate existing evidence that personal circumstances (such as domestic violence, homelessness) and external factors

(such as conditionality policies) are inextricably connected to the mothers' individual factors of employability, including confidence, health and wellbeing (Paradies et al. 2015; Shepherd et al. 2017; Williams & Mohammed 2013).

As McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) employability framework and the findings of this research demonstrate, many individuals may experience barriers to employment or individual circumstances that are unlikely be addressed through LMAPs alone. It has been theorised in the literature that, due to the diversity of factors which can pose a barrier to employment, supports and services can be drawn from a range of policy domains to address these barriers and to increase employability (Adam et al. 2017; Dean 2007; Dean et al. 2005; Lindsay et al. 2007; McArthur et al. 2013). The OECD Jobs Strategy addresses this when it states 'interventions targeted at specific groups should simultaneously address all barriers to employment through co-ordinated actions concerning the design of tax-and-benefits policies and the provision of employment, health and social services' (2018, p.12).

Recent public policy literature and the grey literature have looked at the impact of the integration of social services on the employability and activation of unemployed people (European Commission 2018; Lindsay et al. 2018; Minas 2014). As noted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2018b):

> *'[I]ntegrated' or 'joined-up' services refers to a sequenced organization of various types of support and measures to help clients who are not job ready or face complex barriers in the labour market – beyond job and employability skills – to secure employment'. Despite this growing field of knowledge, there remains little evidence of the impact of non-employment focused social services on parents' employability and employment outcomes and how social services and the social security system interact (Adam et al. 2017; McArthur et al. 2013).*

There are numerous services available for families and mothers in Australia. Family services, including playgroups and parenting programs, are popular and well-attended services. Family services are increasingly becoming intertwined with employability policies and attendance at such programs are a requirement of welfare receipt for some mothers in the Australian social security system. As explored in Chapters Three, Four and Eight, there are multiple benefits of participation in family services, and playgroups in particular. The research reports on the potential for the services to increase confidence, support the development and growth of social networks and sense of connection and belonging, supporting mothers to feel normal and

validated in their parenting role, and improving mental health. While the literature explores some of the ways the services are associated with employability in the way they can connect mothers to education opportunities and volunteer work experience, they do not explore the broader links between service participation and the employability of mothers in the social security system. This research seeks to explore the experiences of mothers in the social security system with family services and consider these experiences in light of the mothers' perspectives in relation to their employability.

The mothers in the study value family services for the social connections and support they provided. These findings echo the literature, and emphasise the positive impact participation in family services has on mothers' confidence, social connections, mental health, wellbeing, and positive feelings towards motherhood and childrearing. The mothers in this study identified such factors as vital to their employability, and therefore participation in the services may also have potential to have a positive influence on mothers' employability.

This thesis argues that conditionality policies which reduce the confidence of mothers in the social security system have the potential to reduce the mothers' employability. Existing evidence suggests the incongruence between mothers' values and government policy which enforces participation in labour market activation policies is resulting in the stigmatisation of mothers and a decrease in mothers' confidence (Baker & Tippin 2002; Brady & Cook 2015; Cooney 2006; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013; Marston & McDonald 2008). LMAPs which reinforce the idea that society values participation in paid work more than it values unpaid care and childrearing activities undertaken by mothers has the potential to further reduce and undermine the confidence of mothers, and therefore further reduce their employability.

Further, the compulsory nature of participation in family services can reduce the benefits of the services. Research has found that mothers who are forced to attend services are less trusting of the services and the staff (Brady & Cook 2015; McArthur et al. 2013). Further, compulsory service attendance can result in mothers feeling disempowered and stigmatised, which negatively impacts on their confidence, mental health and wellbeing (Brady & Cook 2015; Grahame & Marston 2012; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013). Voluntary participation in family services, such as playgroups, on the other hand, help mothers build confidence and emphasise the valuable role parents make in their childrearing capacity.

Significance, aims and research questions

This thesis makes an original contribution to the public policy literature by introducing mothers' perspectives and reconceptualising employability in relation to the experience of mothers in the social security system. This research provides a voice to mothers in receipt of social security payments in relation to their perceived employability skills and service needs to support their (re)engagement with the workforce and is an important addition to existing understandings of maternal employability and the potential influence of family services.

As outlined above and explored in detail in the literature review in Chapter Three, there are several gaps in evidence and theoretical understanding which are addressed by this research. There is little current understanding in the literature of how parents who receive social security payments define employability. Further, there is limited exploration of the role of family services in relation to conditionality policies or the employability of parents. This research is also timely given the national roll-out in Australia of a compulsory employability program for eligible parents with children as young as six months old, *ParentsNext*. Academic literature is only just beginning to examine this program (Gallet & Laufer 2019; Goldblatt 2021; Klein 2021).

The aims of the research are to explore the concept of employability from the perspective of mothers who are receiving social security benefits and examine the role of family services on parents' employability. Considering the gaps in the literature and the research aims, the study was guided by three overarching research questions:

1. How do mothers in the social security system define the concept of 'employability,' and to what extent does this definition align with, or diverge from, definitions of the concept in the literature and government policy?

2. What experiences do mothers in the social security system have with family services, such as playgroup and parenting programs?

3. In what ways might family services influence the employability of mothers in the social security system?

In this thesis, I argue it is vital that parents (re)entering the workforce after taking time off to care for child(ren) are included in the conversation around what their skills needs are, and how they can meet the workforce participation expectations of government and industry. This is

particularly the case for disadvantaged and vulnerable parents who may be experiencing extensive barriers to economic engagement.

The parents who participated in this research clearly expressed that both individual (supply-side) and structural (demand-side) factors were important to them being work-ready and gaining and maintaining employment. Overwhelmingly, parents identified confidence and social connections as vital to their employability. This insight builds on the findings of existing studies into the employment experiences of mothers who receive social security benefits, which primarily report that structural factors dominate women's decisions and outcomes relating to work.

This thesis also argues that in many instances employment is not a mother's key focus and instead the parenting role is of most value, which is sometimes a contradictory view to the policy emphasis and government rhetoric around the higher value placed on a mother's role in paid employment over their caring role. Further, some mothers are experiencing significant disadvantage and excruciating circumstances, and healing from severe traumas. This results in a need to prioritise self-care and safety for themselves and their children, rather than divert energy to paid employment or policy settings which prolongs or impedes their healing process.

The thesis argues that the policies and programs which governments deliver that do not have an employment focus, such as family services, should also be considered a key element of the investment and effort to increase mothers' employability. By placing value on the nurturing parental role of mothers, family services support mothers to feel validated and normalised in their parenting role. This study shows clearly how family services provide a safe environment for parents to build confidence, break isolation, build social connections and access other vital resources which builds the foundations for their current and future employability, in addition to their general wellbeing.

Information gathered from parents and service providers through this research shows the extent to which services are increasing parents' self-perceived employability and building skills which parents consider vital to gaining and maintaining employment. The research also considers how LMAPs and related welfare conditionality is interacting with family services and changing the dynamic of parents' relationships with service providers. The thesis provides evidence to show that for many disadvantaged and vulnerable parents, support to build social networks and regain confidence in themselves, both as parents and workers, is required before

more intensive employability-increasing activities are undertaken. In many instances, family services are helping address this need.

However, it is possible that the employability-increasing benefits of participation in family services are only experienced if the participation is voluntary. Reducing the voluntary nature of family service access and making accessing family services a condition of social security receipt, risks reducing the trust and engagement in the services and reducing mothers' confidence and wellbeing (Brady & Cook 2015; Baker & Tippin 2002; Cooney 2006; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013; Marston & McDonald 2008;). This research demonstrates that compulsory participation in family services may also have the flow-on effect of reducing the potential for participation in family services to impact positively on mothers' employability. Voluntary participation in such services may play a role in increasing mothers' employability by increasing mothers' confidence, social networks and wellbeing.

In addition to the academic contribution, this research provides evidence to policy makers to further inform policies which aim to meet the needs of mothers in the social security system.

Research design

To answer the three research questions, qualitative data was collected on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales, Australia, through semi-structured interviews and small focus groups with mothers who were in receipt of social security payments, and with family service provider staff. In total, 43 people participated in the study. The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with the permission of participants and then transcribed. The transcriptions and hand-written notes from the fieldwork were coded and interpreted using thematic analysis.

I worked closely with local organisations and stakeholders throughout the research design, implementation and dissemination stages. This included face-to-face meetings with over 45 organisations, plus additional conversations over the phone and via email. This engagement ensured my research met the needs of the local communities, helped build rapport with local organisations, supported the recruitment of study participants, shared research findings and addressed ethical considerations of the research.

Scope and key terms

The parenting role is undertaken by people of all genders; however, parents' employment and childcare responsibilities are gendered in Australia and globally, and most parents who take

time away from employment to 'stay at home' and care for children are women (Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) 2019; Baxter 2018; ILO 2019). Likewise, while many types of parents and carers attend family services – including but not limited to kinship carers and foster carers, step-parents and biological parents (Wright et al. 2018) – mothers make up a large portion of participants. It is for this reason that mothers are the focus of this study. This thesis refers to the term 'mother' in relation to people who chiefly identify as female/woman, and who are the primary carer of children (biological or otherwise). Grandparents also attend family services with their grandchildren; however, no participants in this research were attending playgroup with their grandchildren.

While this research touches on issues related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is not Indigenous-specific research and people who participated in the research were not asked to disclose if they identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. A brief overview of the specific issues related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is acknowledged in the literature review and other parts of the thesis, but it is noted that what is included in this thesis does not give the subject the full attention these important issues deserve – this is for other research projects. As noted in Chapter Four, considerable community consultation was undertaken in the field sites, including with many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, which helped guide the research design. However, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait context is not a primary focus of this thesis.

The focus of analysis and discussion in this thesis is focused on LMAPs in the urban and regional contexts. Therefore, analysis of the Community Development Program (previously the Remote Jobs and Communities Program which replaced the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program (Fowkes 2019)) is out of the scope of this thesis. Again, there is not enough time available to fully explore the issues surrounding remote employment and the associated complexities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment (noting the majority of those engaged with the Community Development Program (CDP) are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander), and this is for other research projects. Similarly, this project has not included exploration or analysis of the experience of parents who participate in Disability Employment Services. Furthermore, while it is possible for parents to receive social security payments other than Parenting Payment and JobSeeker payment (for example, Disability Support Pension, Carers Payment), analysis for this research project focuses on Parenting Payment and NewStart Allowance (which was replaced by the JobSeeker payment in 2020) because these are the primary social security payments for people with young children.

Childcare is another important consideration for women returning to work. Most women rely on informal day care (grandparents, partner, other family members) as their main form of childcare when returning to work after the birth of their child (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2017). This thesis examines the impact of childcare on parents' employment to the extent that the issue was raised by study participants, but notes that significant work on this issue is covered by other studies and is not examined further in this research (Baxter 2015; Brady 2016; Havnes & Mogstad 2011).

Finally, it is important to note the positive impacts of family services on children's learning and development outcomes, which has been found in the literature (Hancock et al. 2012). However, such impacts are out of the scope of this thesis, which focuses on mothers' views on the programs' influence on mothers and families.

Chapter Outline

Following this thesis introduction, **Chapter Two** provides an overview of the policy and administrative context in which this thesis sits. It commences with a discussion of labour market activation policies and conditionality. For further context, key figures on women's workforce participation in Australia are provided (while Chapter Three further explores the multiple roles of the 'mother' and tensions between parenting and work roles). The chapter then gives a brief overview of the Australian social security system before charting the shifting approach towards parents on social security payments over recent decades in Australia. The key current social security payments and LMAPs which aim to increase the employability of jobseekers and parents in Australia are then covered. The chapter goes on to examine other services available to mothers. A history of changes to family service policy approaches and administration in recent decades is then examined before a description of current key Australian Government funded family services, including playgroups, is provided.

Chapter Three situates this thesis within the public policy literature. It commences with an exploration of existing definitions of employability in the literature and a history of the concept in relation to LMAPs. The literature review outlines key theoretical debates surrounding employability and welfare reform, and outlines the findings and methods of existing studies from both academic and grey literatures. The literature review also examines employability and welfare reform with specific focus on women and parental responsibility. The chapter and clearly identifies the gaps in the literature which this thesis addresses. Firstly, there is no current understanding in the literature of how parents who receive social security payments

define employability. Secondly, there is limited exploration of the role of family services in relation to welfare reform or the employability of parents. I demonstrate the literature needs to consider the viewpoints of mothers and job seekers in conceptualising employability, and that the potential impacts of family programs on mothers' employability requires further exploration.

Chapter Four outlines the mixed-methods design for this research project. The section on the qualitative aspect of this study introduces the Mid North Coast of New South Wales as the research field site and the rationale for its selection. I also explain the ethical considerations of the study and describe the community engagement process. The recruitment methods and participant sample are explained. In this chapter I define the approach to thematic analysis, share my background as a researcher, and discuss the limitations of the project's qualitative approach. The chapter's section on the quantitative aspect of the study introduces the administrative dataset which was custom-built for this research project and where the data was sourced, the variables included in the analysis and the methods applied. The limitations of the quantitative method are also covered.

The next section of the thesis, **Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight**, presents the research findings with respect to the research questions, and discusses the implications of the findings in relation to the literature and policy practice. Chapters Five, Six and Seven address Research Question One and examine the concept of employability from the perspectives of the mothers' who participated in the study. The chapters are arranged generally in line with the typology presented in McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework (2005) – focusing on *individual factors, personal circumstances* and *external factors* of employability respectively – and examine the extent to which the mothers' conceptualisation of employability aligns with, and diverges from, existing definitions of the concept in the literature and policy practice.

Chapter Five is the first chapter which presents findings and discussion on mothers' views on employability, in relation to Research Question One, and focuses on the *individual factors* of employability. The chapter explores the key individual factors identified by the mothers: confidence; self-motivation; social skills; health and wellbeing, and specifically mental health; and skills and qualifications, including transferrable skills and work experience.

Chapter Six presents findings and discussion on the second component in McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework which relates to *personal circumstances*, focusing primarily on caring responsibilities, safety and wellbeing factors, social networks and work culture within

social spheres. While not explicitly listed in McQuaid and Lindsay's framework, personal circumstances such as domestic violence and interaction with the child protection system also fit within this component of their framework, and such additions to the framework are also considered in this thesis. The discussion includes an examination of mothers' priorities, including parenting and caring roles, home-duties and addressing immediate safety and personal concerns, such as trauma, family and domestic violence and housing security. It is evident from the findings that mothers' priorities differ according to their personal circumstances and values, and to maintain the wellbeing of the mothers and their children, paid-employment must balance with these other priorities.

Chapter Seven is the third chapter presenting findings and discussion in relation to Research Question One. The chapter explores mothers' views on *external factors* relevant to their employability. The external factors highlighted by the mothers in this study as impacting on their employability include availability of appropriate jobs, particularly those with work hours which suit family circumstances, willingness of employers to hire mothers and not discriminate against them due to their family responsibilities, the interaction between employment and the social security system, the affordability and accessibility of childcare, and access to support services. An underlying theme across these factors is the impact of high effective marginal tax rates on mothers' employability, and so this issue is also briefly explored.

Chapter Eight is the final findings and discussion chapter, and addresses Research Questions Two and Three. The chapter examines mothers' experiences with family services and the potential influence of the services on mothers' employability. It is evident through the findings and existing research that mothers are increasing their confidence, social skills and networks, and reducing emotional and social isolation through participation in family services. As expressed by the mothers in this study, these capabilities are vital to their employability. These benefits are in addition to the core aims of these programs which seek to support child development and family functioning. This chapter demonstrates how the skills and attributes developed through attending the services influence the employability of mothers in the social security system. I argue that family programs are supporting mothers to increase their employability due to their ability to increase mothers' confidence and social connections. The chapter also considers the importance of the voluntary nature of such services in relation to the services potential to build mothers' confidence and henceforth their employability.

The thesis concludes with **Chapter Nine**, where I sum up the research findings and reiterate this thesis' original contribution to the literature. Mothers in the social security system consider

confidence to be a vital capability which impacts on their employability. This chapter demonstrates the importance of considering mothers' perspectives in defining employability and the benefits of voluntary participation family services in increasing the employability and wellbeing of mothers. In this chapter, I examine the implications of the research, including potential policy implications and recommendations. I also discuss the shortcomings of the research and make recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER TWO Policy overview

Introduction

Participation in labour market activation policies (LMAPs, sometimes also referred to as 'active labour market programs') have been compulsory for people receiving unemployment benefits from the government for many years, and people must meet a range of conditions in order to receive social security payments (Parsell et al. 2020; Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018). More recently, LMAPs are increasingly being targeted to parents of young children (Baker & Tippin 1999; Brady & Cook 2015; Campbell et al. 2016; Dwyer & Wright 2014; Fok & McVicar 2013; Holdsworth 2017; Kowalewska 2017; Lindsay et al. 2018a, 2018b; Shutes & Taylor 2014; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). In line with changes in societal constructs of the role of mothers, this is evidence of the shift in social security system approaches to mothers from being one of supporting mothers during their time of raising children, to viewing mothers as adult workers who are expected to engage in the paid workforce (Briar & Patterson 2005; Cortis et al. 2008; Craig et al. 2010; Grahame & Marston 2012; Humpage 2015; Millar & Rowlingson 2001).

The Australian Government, like many OECD countries, also funds a suite of family services, such as playgroups, parenting programs and early intervention initiatives, to support families with young children (Acquah & Thévenon 2020). Since participation in family services began growing in popularity for Australian families in the 1970s, there has also been a shift in Australian governments' approach to family services, with the aims of the services now extending into supporting mothers' engagement in the paid workforce. The introduction of ParentsNext – a pre-employment program for mothers with children as young as six months which can involve conditions to compulsorily attend family services – to all non-remote locations in Australia in 2018, has intensified the changing the relationship between mothers and the services from voluntary to enforced.

These changes to social security and family services have created conflict and tension between a mother's role as a parent/carer and their role as a paid worker (Baker & Tippin 2002; Cooney 2006; Millar & Rowlingson 2001). Many mothers value their role as a parent more so than their role as a paid worker, as evident in the findings of this research. The incongruity between mothers' values, government policy and societal expectations, in addition to the punitive nature of mutual obligation policies to enforce participation in paid employment, is viewed as leading to the stigmatisation of mothers and a decrease in mothers' self-confidence (Brady & Cook 2015; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013; Marston & McDonald 2008;).

Given that confidence is considered by mothers in this study to be the most important factor of employability, it can be argued that coercive policies focusing on mothers' paid employment are counterproductive to the welfare-to-work agenda.

This chapter provides an overview of the policy and administrative context in which this thesis sits. It commences with a discussion of LMAPs and conditionality. For further context, key statistics on women's workforce participation in Australia are provided (the following chapter further explores the multiple roles of the 'mother' and tensions between parenting and work roles). This chapter then gives a brief overview of the Australian social security system before charting the shifting approach towards parents on social security payments over recent decades in Australia. The key current social security payments and LMAPs which aim to increase the employability of jobseekers and parents in Australia are then covered. The chapter goes on to examine other services available to mothers. A history of changes to family service policy approaches and administration in recent decades is then examined before a description of current key Australian Government funded family services, including playgroups, is provided.

Labour Market Activation Policies and conditionality

> *The objective of an effective activation policy is to give more people access to the labour force and good jobs. This requires:*
>
> - *Enhancing motivation and incentives to seek employment.*
> - *Improving job readiness and help in finding suitable employment.*
> - *Expanding employment opportunities* (OECD 2021, website homepage).

LMAPs 'are targeted at individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment, with the aim of increasing their likelihood of employment by changing their [job] search behaviour or increasing their productivity or job readiness' (Borland 2015, p. 239), and are a dominant aspect of Western welfare states (Dwyer 2004; Humpage 2015; Saunders 2007).

> *Arguably, the three main immediate aims of labour market programs are to:*
>
> - *discourage reliance on welfare by attaching job search requirements and other conditions to the receipt of income support*
> - *improve the efficiency of the labour market through enhanced job search activity to reduce frictional unemployment, and education and training to reduce structural unemployment and*
> - *improve equity by ensuring disadvantaged groups are able to take advantage of job opportunities.*
>
> *To the extent that they achieve these aims, labour market programs are also likely to serve broader macroeconomic purposes such as decreasing unemployment, improving the short-term inflation–unemployment trade-off, and increasing the dynamic efficiency of the labour market* (Parliament of Australia n.d., online).

Borland (2015) argues that LMAPs don't add jobs to the labour market, and so do not address unemployment, rather they work to make the unemployed 'job ready' for when a job becomes available. In other words, 'supply-side oriented approaches are based on a premise that available jobs exist' (Froyland et al. 2019, p. 314).

More critical literatures point to LMAP aims of stigmatising the poor, enforcing labour discipline, commodifying the unemployed, and (re)activating what Marx termed the 'reserve army of low-paid workers' (Greer 2016; Grover 2003; Prendergast 2020). Greer (2016) explains that the introduction of welfare regimes provided some security and originally reduced the number of unemployed people willing to take on low-paid work. However, the introduction of LMAPs increased pressure and difficulty for the unemployed, and strengthened the state's control, discipline, and compliance over them, hence reactivating the reserve army of low-paid workers. Greer explains:

> *Mandatory participation in activation programmes and punishments for non-participation increase the loss of income, and hence the distress, associated with unemployment. These pressures are extended beyond the 'unemployed' (jobless workers in the unemployment insurance system) to young people in school-to-work transitions and parts of the 'inactive' population (e.g. the disabled and lone parents).*

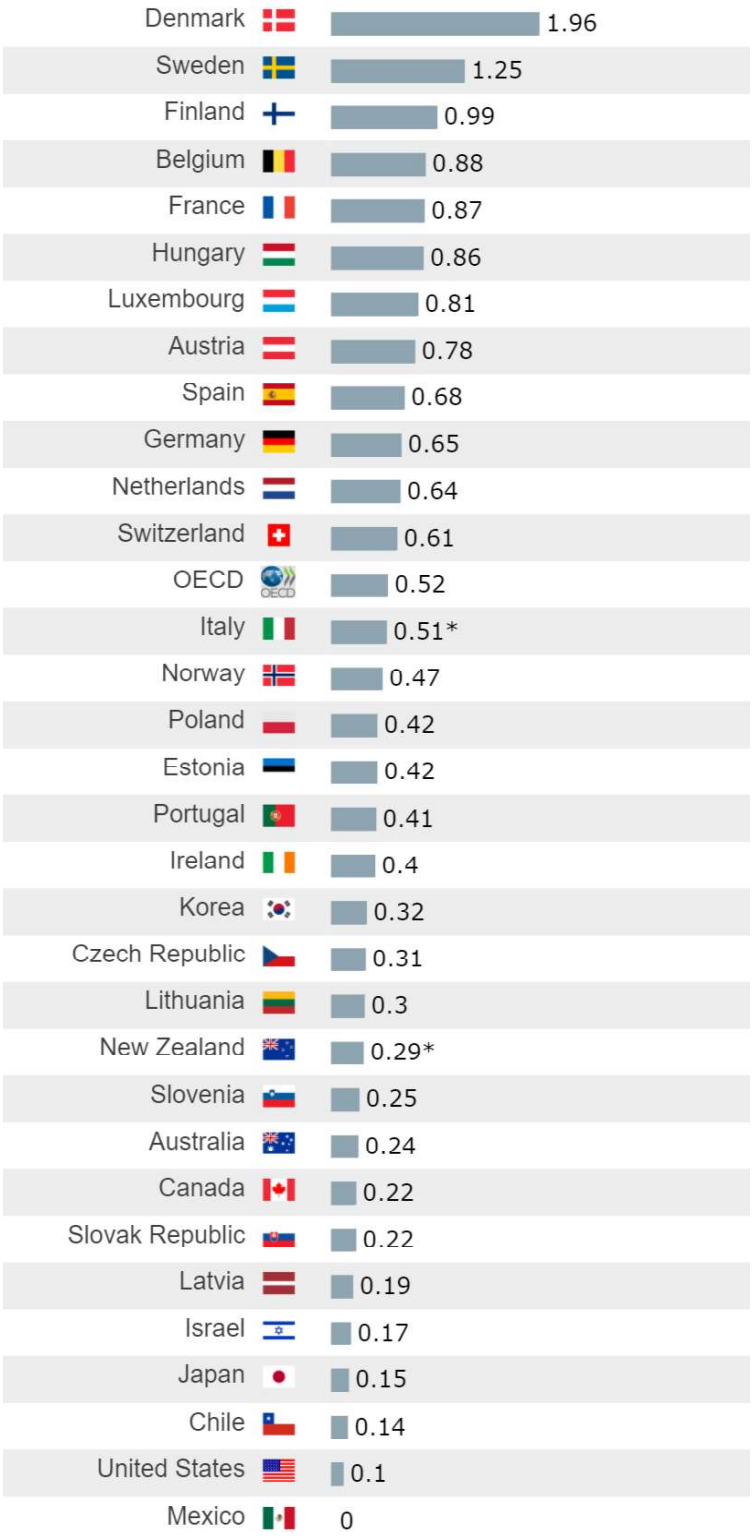
> *Any remaining comforts of unemployment are reduced by the actions of advisers (e.g. pressure to accept job offers) and changes in benefits and tax credits (e.g. 'incentives') (Greer, 2016 p. 166).*

Within the public policy literature, LMAPs are usually characterised as either a 'work-first' approach (also known as 'welfare-to-work' and 'workfare') focusing on quick job entry and labour market attachment – common in many Anglo-Saxon countries including Australia, the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK), or a 'human capital development' approach focused on education and training – an approach common in many Nordic welfare states, including Sweden and Denmark (Adam et al. 2017; Andersson & Wärvik 2012; Fuertes & Lindsay 2016; Kowalewska 2017; Ingold & Etherington 2013; Lindsay, McQuaid & Dutton 2007; Minas 2014; Wright et al. 2011; Wright 2012).

The operation of LMAPs varies significantly between countries, particularly due to the historical and localised context of policy development across welfare states (Fok & McVicar 2013; Froyland et al. 2019; Martin 2015; Wright et al. 2011). Financial expenditure on LMAPs also varies across the OECD, as Figure 2.1 illustrates.

Major welfare reforms were introduced in the USA in 1996 with the introduction of *The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* (PRWORA) (Ahn 2015; Bok & Simmons 2004; Weaver & Brookings Institution 2000; Vaughan et al. 2020). The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which was introduced under PRWORA, replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and resulted in funding for benefits being paid to the individual states for the provision of welfare services and supports, rather than paid directly to recipients as cash benefits via the federal government. The changes included the introduction of work-related conditions on welfare payments and imposed limits on the length of time a person could receive benefits to no more than 60 months during their lifetime (noting that the rules were different in each state). These reforms were extremely influential and established the thinking for later changes in other countries, including Australia.

Figure 2.1 Public expenditure on LMAPs as a percentage of GDP in 2017



Source: OECD 2021.

The term 'activation' within the phrase 'LMAP' does not have an agreed definition (Eichhorst et al. 2008; Martin 2015). It is often used to refer to policies which aim to 'activate' unemployed welfare recipients into increased job readiness and likelihood of employment (Borland 2014, 2015; Fok & McVicar 2013; Froyland et al. 2019; Peterie et al. 2019b; Wright 2012). LMAPs and the concept of activation are largely associated, and sometimes used interchangeably, with 'conditionality' or 'mutual obligation', whereby welfare recipients are required to meet certain conditions and participate in LMAPS or other specified activities in return for welfare payments (Carney 2007; Cortis et al. 2008; Curchin 2017, 2019; Dwyer 2019, 2004; Hand, Katz, Gray et al. 2015; Holdsworth 2017; Peterie et al. 2019b; Rowse 2002; Saunders 2007; Taylor, Gray et al. 2016; Wright 2012).

The Australian Government Guide to Social Security Law provides the following definition and policy rationale for mutual obligation:

> *Mutual obligation requirements refer to the general principle that it is fair and reasonable to expect unemployed people receiving activity tested income support to do their best to find work, undertake activities that will improve their skills and increase their employment prospects and, in some circumstances, contribute something to their community in return for receiving income support* (Australian Government 2018g).

The increasing role of conditionality and compulsory participation in LMAPs has been driven by ideological shifts which promote an 'active welfare state', increased individual independence and reduced dependence on social security through participation in paid employment (Holdsworth 2017; Lister 2001; Millar & Rowlingson 2001). It is argued that 'active' welfare is in response to beliefs that 'passive' welfare policies encourage unemployment and reduce work ethic (Dwyer & Wright 2014; Froyland et al. 2019; Peck & Theodore 2000; Wright 2016), and a belief that the 'moral hazard' of passive welfare receipt is undermining values of social citizenship such as responsibility and self-reliance, and the desire to work (Carney 2007; Cortis et al. 2008; Humpage 2015; Lister 2010; McKeever & Walsh 2020; Mead 1997; Peck & Theodore 2000). Proponents of conditionality, including Mead (1997) from the USA, claim that it is necessary for welfare states to take on a paternalistic role because some people are incapable of making decisions in their own best interest, and prone to becoming welfare dependent if the state removes incentives to work through providing non-conditional income. However, such views fail to contextualise individual barriers within the broader economic, social and policy environment and result in placing undue responsibility on the individual for circumstances and experience outside their control. As strongly argued in the literature, and

demonstrated in this study, there are a multitude of external elements which influence individual actions and outcomes, including in relation to employment (Marston 2008; Peterie, M., Ramia, G., Marston, G. & Patulny, R. 2019b; Wright 2012, 2016).

These ideological shifts have resulted in a re-construction of citizenship and an increased emphasis on adult workers and active citizens, including for mothers of small children (Breitkreuz 2005; Briar & Patterson 2005; Cortis et al. 2008; Dwyer & Wright 2014; Grahame & Marston 2012; Humpage 2015; Shaver 2001; Shutes & Taylor 2014). Governments have placed participation in paid employment as central to the contract between the citizen and the state (Millar & Rowlingson 2001; Breitkreuz 2005). As explored in this chapter, policies for parents in Australia have increasingly espoused this approach, viewing parents in terms of their potential for paid employment rather than valuing and investing in the important role they provide by raising the next generation.

While a policy shift toward mutual obligation in Australia and internationally has led to the increased use of welfare payment conditionality to achieve wider policy goals since the mid-1990s, there has been a bargain in place between the welfare recipient and the state since the inception of the Australian social security system (Dwyer & Wright 2014; McKeever & Walsh 2020; Wright 2016). Watts and Fitzpatrick (2018) from the UK illustrate that recent conditionality policies have intensified and reach a broader population, marking a new era in welfare conditionality. They argue that conditionality in current times is a means for states to direct the behaviour of citizens (Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018).

Taylor, Gray et al. (2016) define the recent growth of conditions on welfare receipt in Australia as the ‘new conditionality’. They argue that ‘new conditionality’ differs from conditionality (or eligibility criteria) in three ways, due to their interventionist nature, paternalistic groundings which aim to change behaviours previously considered to be out of the grasp of government in the private sphere, and the punitive nature of the measures (Taylor, Gray et al. 2016). Conditionality is often also associated with reduced government expenditure, in that announcements to increase conditionality often coincide with savings measures and forecasts for reduced welfare expenditure due to conditionality policies encouraging more people off welfare (Dwyer & Wright 2014; Lister 2001; Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018; Wright 2012).

More recently, the concepts of conditionality and mutual obligation have been extended beyond workforce participation to family expectations and individual behaviour (Cortis et al. 2008; Curchin 2019; Hand et al. 2015;). In Australia, examples include measures which have

aimed to increase immunisation rates and school attendance, and which place conditions on how people spend their welfare payments, through welfare payment quarantining measures such as Income Management and the Cashless Debit Card (Curchin 2019; Parsell et al. 2020; Taylor, Gray et al. 2016). Additional payments and policies, such as the Child Care Subsidy, require participation in certain activities by recipients and therefore, combined with the requirements of the primary social security payment, may act to move parents towards certain activities and behaviours. Taylor, Gray et al. (2016) also conclude that child welfare is a key political justification for the introduction of many new conditionality measures in Australia and internationally, with parenting behaviour the primary focus of the policies rather than only on increasing labour market participation.[1]

There is extensive critique in the literature that policies such as conditionality fail to acknowledge socio-economic, historical and structural problems and restraints, and instead demand individual responsibility for circumstances unfolding within these structural boundaries (Curchin 2019; Dwyer & Wright 2014; Parsell et al. 2020; Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018; Wright 2016). Wright (2012, 2016), who has undertaken extensive research on conditionality and activation in the UK, argues that an individual's circumstances are the result of a range of structural factors, often out of control of the individual. Wright (2016) also argues that placing responsibility for circumstances and structural issues on the individual reduces their confidence and reduces their ability to overcome barriers. We consider this critique further in Chapter Three when analysing supply-side and demand-side factors of employability.

The evaluation of LMAPs and conditionality policies can be difficult for a range of reasons, including inability to infer causation due to less-than-ideal trial conditions and lack of control groups, lack of funding available for evaluation, and political and social issues surrounding controversial policies which can skew evaluation findings. Despite this, there is growing evidence which suggests many of the policies have modest, or even negative, outcomes (Lindsay & Serrano Pascual 2009; Peck & Theodore 2000).

Available evidence on the impact of employability programs for welfare recipients, including mothers with young children, suggests that LMAPs, particularly 'work-first' policies, can result in low-paid, low-skill, unsatisfying and unsustainable jobs for welfare recipients and can have

[1] It should also be noted that conditionality as a concept has also been applied in other settings, for example conditions placed on loans provided through the International Monetary Fund, which require (usually developing) countries to implement certain fiscal policies and structural adjustment programs as a condition of the loan (Beazer & Woo 2016; Kentikelenis et al. 2016).

a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of welfare recipients and that of their children (Borland & Tseng 2011; Brady & Cook 015; Butterworth et al. 2012; Campbell et al. 2016; Cook et al. 2009; Cook & Noblet, 2012; Cortis et al. 2013; Holdsworth 2017; Escott 2012; Kiely & Butterworth 2014; Lindsay et al. 2015a, 2015b, 2018a, 2018b; Marston & McDonald 2008; Martin 2015). Carter and Whitworth (2016) argue that activation regimes which fail to ensure the well-being of unemployed people during the process of supporting them into work (such as through disempowering people, forcing them to undertake low-skilled work and demeaning activities etc) has a detrimental effect on well-being, and this in turn negates any potential improvement in well-being experienced through employment. Essentially, the means of the activation process is negating any potential positive impact of the ends.

The outcomes of LMAPs, including for parents of young children, is explored further in the literature review (Chapter Three). Before this chapter goes on to explore Australian conditionality policy, LMAPs and the history of social security payments for mothers in Australia, it is appropriate to examine some of the facts and figures on women's workforce participation.

Mothers in the Australian paid and unpaid workforce

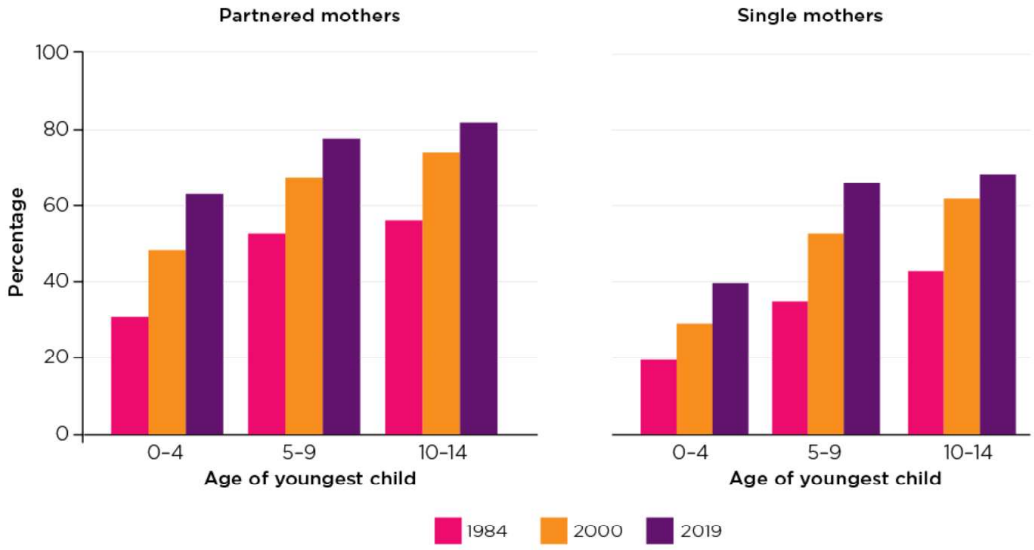
Parents' employment and childcare responsibilities are gendered in Australia and globally, and most parents who take time away from employment to 'stay at home' and care for children are women (Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) 2019; Baxter 2018; ILO 2019). Therefore, it is important to understand the experience and position of women in the Australian paid and unpaid workforce and the impact this has upon their parenting and paid-employment roles.

Traditionally, women who were in the labour force left employment when they married and then never returned to employment (Warren et al. 2020). Since the 1970s women began to return to the workforce when their children grew older (Warren et al. 2020). Women account for 46.9 per cent of all people who are employed in Australia (Australian Government Gender Workplace Equality Agency 2019). Women comprise 68.5 per cent of all part-time employees and 37.0 per cent of all full-time employees (Australian Government Gender Workplace Equality Agency 2019). The Australian trend participation rate was 65.6 per cent in February 2019; for women, the participation rate was 60.6 per cent, and for men it was 70.8 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2019). This rate is lower for women, partly because many women temporarily take time out of the workforce to raise children (Department of Parliamentary Services 2018). While Australia's gender pay gap is small in comparison to other

countries (Chamberlain et al. 2019), women continue to receive a lower rate of pay compared to their male counterparts (Department of Parliamentary Services 2018), and this gender pay-gap is evident globally (ILO 2019). This is despite the fact that women have higher rates of high school completion and university qualifications than men in Australia (Australian Government Gender Workplace Equality Agency 2019).

Mothers' rates of paid employment increased in Australia between 1991 and 2016, and the rates of stay-at-home mothers decreased over this time (AIFS 2019). Single mothers are less likely to be in paid employment than partnered mothers (Baxter 2013b; Warren et al. 2020). The differences in employment between single and partnered mothers in Australia in recent decades are shown in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2 Employment rates of partnered and single mothers with dependent children, by age of youngest child, selected years

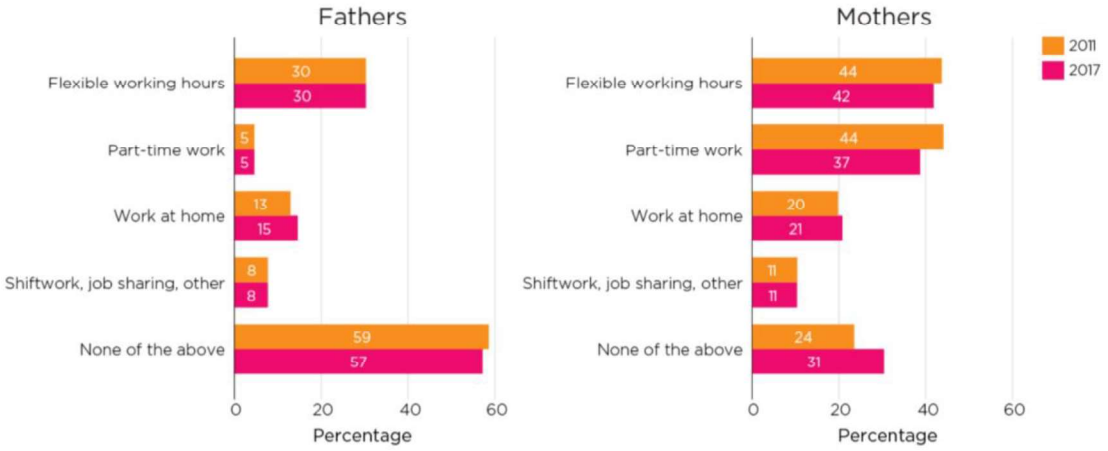


Source: Warren et al. 2020 (Credit: AIFS) on behalf of the Commonwealth of Australia, Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0) https://aifs.gov.au/copyright).

Most mothers in paid employment work part-time rather than full-time (AIFS 2019; Baxter 2013b; Stewart 2017). While around 40 per cent of mothers work part-time, this rate is only around 5 per cent for fathers (AIFS 2019). General trends here should also be recognised, and Australia has seen an increase in the number of part-time workers, especially amongst those with low education levels, as well as an increase in the number of workers who are

underemployed (i.e. working fewer hours than they would like to be working) particularly for those in the 15–24 years age group (Borland & Coelli 2016). The types of working arrangements employed parents in Australia use in order to juggle their childcare responsibilities are shown in Figure 2.3.[2]

Figure 2.3 Employment arrangements of parents of children aged under 12 years

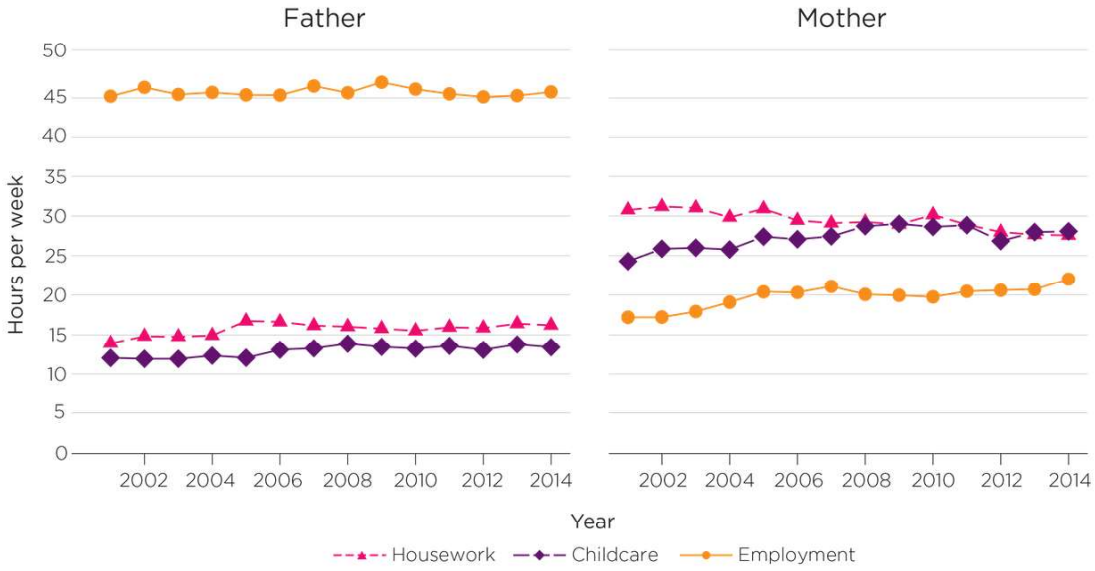


Source: AIFS 2019 (Credit: AIFS on behalf of the Commonwealth of Australia, Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0) https://aifs.gov.au/copyright).

In couple families, women take on a much larger share of childcare and housework responsibilities, while fathers spend more time in paid employment (AIFS 2019; Gjerdingen & Center 2005). While, on average, fathers work approximately two times as many hours in paid employment than mothers, the mothers spend two times as many hours as fathers on childcare and housework (AIFS 2019). Research shows that women's time spent caring increases from an average of 2 hours per week to 51 hours per week when they become a mother, and their housework increases from a weekly average of 16 hours to 25 hours per week (AIFS 2016).

[2] The source uses ABS Childhood Education and Care data as at June 2011 and 2014, 2017: Employed parents with children aged under 12 years.

Figure 2.4 Difference in time mothers and fathers spend on childcare, housework and paid work activities in Australia



Note: The source uses HILDA pooled data from 2002 to 2015 (Waves 2–15).

Source: AIFS 2019 (Credit: AIFS on behalf of the Commonwealth of Australia, Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0) https://aifs.gov.au/copyright).

The age of children when mothers (re)enter the workforce varies. The 2017 Pregnancy and Employment Transitions survey by the ABS (2018) found that of the 582,300 Australian women aged 15 years and over, who were the birth mother of a child under the age of 2 years old, an estimated 246,700 (42 per cent) had started or returned to work since the birth of their youngest child. Of these women who had returned to work, 25 per cent returned to work after 10 months or longer after the birth of their child. Women who have worked previously to having a child are more likely to return to work when their children are younger, compared to those who were not employed prior to giving birth (ABS 2018; Australian Government Gender Workplace Equality Agency 2019). The 2017 Pregnancy and Employment Transitions survey found 72 per cent of women who had a child under the age of 2 years had worked during their pregnancy (ABS 2018).

Some women in Australia who have been in employment prior to taking time away from work due to the birth of a child are entitled to a government-paid maternity leave payment, and some are also entitled to employer-paid parental leave schemes. A 2014 evaluation of the Australian Government Paid Parental Leave (PPL) scheme showed that by the time their child was 6 months old, 64 per cent of women who had accessed PPL had not returned to work, and 27

per cent of mothers had not returned to work when their child was 1 year old (Institute for Social Science Research 2014).

Social security payments and policies for Australian mothers

This chapter now turns to social security payments and LMAPs for mothers in Australia. It is important to recognise that Australia's social security system is unusual compared to other Western welfare states: social security payments in Australia are flat-rate and not linked to previous earnings; payments are means tested and eligibility is related to current or previous assets and income; and the social security system is funded from general government revenue, as opposed to contributory or insurance-based schemes (Podger et al. 2014; Whiteford 2012). The social security system in Australia is more targeted to low-income earners than the social security systems in other OECD countries (Whiteford 2014) and therefore those eligible for welfare payments in Australia can be reliably identified for research purposes as being of the lowest income and with a low asset base (Kiely & Butterworth 2013). It is important to note that, despite intentions, the design of the social security system can sometimes act as a disincentive to gain employment or increase employment income (Fok & McVicar 2013; Froyland et al. 2019; Kowalewska 2017; Whiteford 2012).

Australia's LMAPs are also atypical compared to other countries in the OECD because employment services are provided by private contractors, following the abolition of public employment services in the 1990s (Martin 2015). While there are other OECD countries which contract some of their employment services to private providers, they all still have public employment services in place (Martin 2015; Borland 2014).

As at March 2021, the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) is responsible for social security policy, and the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment is responsible for *jobactive* and ParentsNext policy. Information on these policies is provided in later in this chapter. Services Australia is an executive agency in the Social Services portfolio which delivers social security payments and services through its Centrelink program (Services Australia 2020b).

The approach to mothers in the social security system has changed over time. When first introduced in Australia in 1942, income support for single mothers was only available to widows and mothers 'deserted through no fault of their own' (Whiteford 2001). The scope of the payment was gradually widened until 1973 when financial assistance through the social

security system became available to unmarried mothers and mothers choosing to leave their partner, following a six-month waiting period (Whiteford 2001). Fathers became eligible for this payment in 1977 (Whiteford 2001). In 1980, the six-month waiting period was abolished and single parents in Australia have since been eligible for financial assistance through the social security system regardless of the reason why they are a single parent (Whiteford 2001). Parents with a youngest child who was a full-time dependent student up to the age of 24 years old was eligible for the payment until 1987, when the age was reduced to 16 years (Whiteford 2001).

The historical purpose of many welfare payments for parents was to support the parent financially while they are primarily responsible for the care of their children, and to reduce childhood poverty (Brady & Cook 2015; Briar & Patterson 2005; Stockey-Bridge 2015; Grahame & Marston 2012). Brady and Cook (2015) note that payments were made to mothers without a requirement to work, as maternal employment was considered to be detrimental to children. Whiteford (2001) explains that the early policy changes to social security payments for single parents in the 1970s and 1980s was to provide assistance to all single parents regardless of the reason for their single parenthood, and to 'emphasise the parenting role provided by lone parents, and to equate this to the parenting role of mothers with partners' (p. 65). He notes that Australian lone parents were 'paid to be parents' (Whiteford 2001, p. 84).

More recently, changes to payments for mothers and the introduction of conditions for single parents are reflective of the changing governmental and societal views on the role of mothers and the increasing expectation for mothers to participate in paid employment (Cortis et al. 2008; Grahame & Marston 2012; Humpage 2015; Millar & Rowlingson 2001; Stewart 2017). More on the mothers' role as parent versus role of worker is explored in Chapter Three. The ideological shifts and subsequent welfare reforms which encourage mothers 'off' social security payments and into employment are not unique to Australia. During the late 1990s, Western welfare states witnessed changes such as those introduced under New Labour in the UK (Lister 2001) and the earlier introduction of TANF, a time-limited cash assistance program administered by individual states in the USA (Waldfogel et al. 2001). In the UK, such changes were complemented by additional cash and in-kind support for families and children, such as policies to end child poverty, support maternal leave, improved childcare funding and other policies to support maternal employment; however, often resulted in a reduced cash payment for the single parent (Lister 2001; Millar & Rowlingson 2001). Indeed, conditionality is often

associated with government savings (Dwyer & Wright 2014; Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018; Wright 2012).

In 1998, the key payments for parents in Australia (Sole Parent Pension and Parenting Allowance) were merged and re-branded as Parenting Payment (Parliament of Australia 2009; Whiteford 2001). The name of the payment remains the same until today, with Parenting Payment (Single) for single parents, and Parenting Payment (Partnered) for parents with a partner who is on income support and/or low income. There were no work requirements on parents receiving Parenting Payment (or the previous payments for parents) at the time, however mutual obligation requirements for people on unemployment benefits had been expanded the previous year with the introduction of 'Work for the Dole' and Activity Agreements (Parliament of Australia 2012b).

In July 2000, the final report of the government commissioned Reference Group on Welfare Reform recommended the implementation of 'a participation model of income support for parents' (McClure Report 2000, p. 43). The recommendation was partly addressed through the Australians Working Together Package (AWT) announced in the 2001–02 Budget, with changes phased in over 2002 and 2003 which required parents with school-aged children to attend a compulsory annual job-focused interview, and parents with children aged between 12 and 15 to participate in an approved activity for approximately 6 hours per week (Parliament of Australia 2005). The McClure report had recommended the changes to help prepare parents for work re-entry, given the difficulties faced by parents who had reduced skills and networks when transitioning back to work when their youngest child turned 16 years old.

Significant changes were then implemented as part of the Welfare to Work reforms in 2006 which reduced the eligibility for new claimants of Parenting Payment from when the recipient's youngest child was 16, to the youngest child turning 8 years old for single parents receiving Parenting Payment (Single) and to 6 years old for partnered parents receiving Parenting Payment (Partnered) (Brady & Cook 2015; Cortis et al. 2008; Grahame & Marston 2012; Parliament of Australia 2012a). The then Coalition Government's rationale for these changes were to in relation to workforce participation and to address the disadvantage children experienced due to growing up in jobless families, including intergenerational transmission of welfare receipt. A ministerial press release regarding the changes to Parenting Payment under the Welfare to Work measures in the 2005–06 Budget stated that the changes were 'designed to increase the workforce participation of parents and reduce their dependency on welfare' (Parliament of Australia 2005).

Further changes by the Gillard Government in January 2013 removed 'grandfathering' arrangements for the existing Parenting Payment recipients who were exempted from the eligibility changes in 2006, resulting in approximately 65,000 people transitioning from Parenting Payment to the general benefit for unemployed people, then called NewStart Allowance, in a short amount of time (Brady & Cook 2015; Parliament of Australia 2013a, 2013b). When announced in the 2012–13 Budget as part of a suite of measures aimed at 'getting Australians job ready and into work', the then Labor Government stated '[T]he Government believes the best thing it can do for Australians looking for work is to help them get a job in order to achieve greater financial security for their families' (Australian Government 2012). The government also claimed the changes made payments for parents 'fairer and more equitable' because 'all parents in the same circumstances, irrespective of when they first applied for income support, will be treated the same' (Australian Government 2012). It was estimated that the policy change would result in estimated savings of AU$685.8 million over four years, due to many parents moving from Parenting Payment to NewStart Allowance, 'and also through the increased workforce participation of some recipients who have had to meet increased participation requirements' (Parliament of Australia 2012a)[3].

Single mothers who transitioned from Parenting Payment to NewStart Allowance in 2006 and 2013 received a large reduction in their income from social security due to the difference between the rates of the two payments (Leigh et al. 2008; Parliament of Australia 2013a; Wilkins & Leigh 2012). While NewStart Allowance recipients with dependent children receive a higher rate of payment than recipients without dependent children and are also eligible for a range of child-related supplementary payments, the rate of payment for NewStart Allowance is not as high as for Parenting Payment Single (Parliament of Australia 2013b). On NewStart Allowance, mothers had to meet the participation requirements and conditions as a jobseeker. These changes created difficulties for many of the parents who transitioned between the payments, as many experienced intensified financial hardship due to the reduction in payment and struggled to meet the new requirements placed upon them due to conflicting priorities in relation to their parenting and other responsibilities (Brady & Cook 2015; Bodsworth 2010; McKenzie et al. 2019).

[3] This savings measure is one of many budget measures since 2010 which have focused on savings and reduced expenditure in effort to reduce the fiscal effects of the Global Economic Crisis in 2007–08.

Further information about Parenting Payment and JobSeeker Payment as they currently operate is provided in the following section. A chronological overview of the key changes to social security payments and family services for parents in Australia is provided in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Key developments in social security payments and family services for parents in Australia since 1998

Year	Key development
1998	From March, Sole Parent Pension was merged with Parenting Allowance to create Parenting Payment. The rates and eligibility conditions for the two payments were largely unchanged resulting in separate rate and eligibility structures for Parenting Payment Single and Parenting Payment Partnered.
2002	From September, annual interviews were introduced for parents whose youngest child was aged 12 years or more to prepare for their re-entry to the workforce
2003	From September, annual interviews were introduced for parents whose youngest child was aged 6 years or more to prepare for their re-entry to the workforce Those whose youngest child was aged 13–15 were required to undertake 150 hours of activities each 6 months designed to help them to prepare for return to work. The activities were set out in a participation agreement. Exemptions from the participation requirements were given if a person was caring for a disabled child or going through certain critical events such as recent separation from a partner or domestic violence. If reasonable steps were not taken by a person to comply with the terms of their participation agreement, they could be subject to a rate reduction for a period of 26 weeks or suspension of their payment. Suspension of payment could only occur for the third breach in a 2-year period.
2006	From July eligibility for PP was changed in the following ways, as part of a major reform of welfare to work arrangements: • single people claiming PPS after 1 July could receive PPS while their youngest child was aged less than 8 years. They would have participation requirements once that child turned 6 years • partnered people claiming PPP after 1 July could receive PPP while their youngest child was aged less than 6 years • people receiving PP before 1 July were 'grandfathered' and could continue to receive PP until their youngest child reached 16 years of age, provided they did not change their relationship status or have their payment cancelled. They would have participation requirements once their youngest child reached the age of 7 years but not before 1 July 2007 • the participation requirements could include a requirement to look for suitable work of at least 15 hours per week. Unsuitable work included work where appropriate childcare could not be arranged. Failure to comply could result in payment suspension for a period of time, and • participation exemptions were expanded to include exemptions for those foster carers and home or distance educators.

2009	Family Support Program (FSP) announced in February which streamlined nine existing family services and activities, including Communities for Children and the Family Relationship Services Program, under the FSP program structure over a two-year transition period
2011	The new FSP commenced 1 July 2011, which further streamlined over 20 activities into four
2012	Helping Young Parents (HYP) and Supporting Jobless Families (announced in the 2011–12 Budget as part of the Building Australia's Future Workforce initiative) commenced on 1 January 2012 and 1 July 2012 respectively in 10 Local Government Areas (LGAs). The measures require parents of children as young as 6 months to participate in pre-employment activities in preparation for work Discussion paper on the future of FSP released, including rhetoric around economic participation and employment of mothers
2013	On 1 January, 'grandfathering' arrangements removed for the existing Parenting Payment recipients who were exempt from the eligibility changes in 2006 (announced in the 2012–13 Budget), resulting in approximately 65,000 people transitioning from Parenting Payment to the general benefit for unemployed people, then called NewStart Allowance
2014	New Way of Working for Grants (announced in the 2014–15 Budget) consolidated the existing 18 grants programs into seven new grants programs. Under the changes, grants for family services, including the FSP, were mainly encompassed by the new Families and Communities Program
2016	HYP and SJF were amalgamated to become ParentsNext, which commenced in April (announced in the 2015–16 Budget as part of the Growing Jobs and Small Business Package)
2018	In July, ParentsNext was expanded nationally (excluding remote locations)
2020	In March, Newstart Allowance was replaced by the new JobSeeker payment

Sources: Australian Government 2017d, 2017e, 2018e; Australian Government Department of Employment 2017a, 2017b; Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2009; Australian Government Department of Human Services 2018a; Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018a; Australian Government DSS 2013; Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) 2013; Brady & Cook 2015; Parliament of Australia 2009, 2012a.

Parenting Payment and JobSeeker Payment

Parenting Payment is a social security payment available to eligible low-income welfare recipients who are the principal carers of children under six years old for recipients who have a partner and under eight years old for single parents (Australian Government 2017a). The Australian *Social Security Act 1991* defines the Principal Carer as the person legally responsible for a dependent child who is under 16 years of age and specifies that only one person at a time can be the principal carer of a particular child (Australian Government 2018a, 2018b). This definition for principal carer is used to determine eligibility for payments,

supplementary payments and exemptions from participation requirements for Parenting Payment and JobSeeker Payment (in addition to other payments not covered in this thesis).

As at 25 September 2020, the base rate of payment per fortnight for Parenting Payment (Single) was AU$793.19 and Parenting Payment (Partnered) was AU$510.80 (Services Australia 2020a, p. 14). Recipients of Parenting Payment (Single) can earn up to AU$192.60 (plus AU$24.60 for each additional child) per fortnight before their payments are reduced by AU$0.40 per dollar earned (Services Australia 2020a, p. 14). This income limit for single parents is more generous than any other working-age payment income limit in the Australian social security system (DSS 2020, p. 36). Parenting Payment (Partnered) recipients can earn up to AU$106 before their payments are reduced (Services Australia 2020a, p. 14). The rate of payment for people on Parenting Payment (Partnered) is also dependent on their partners' income and the type of social security payment they receive (if any).

In the 2019–20 financial year, 10.5 per cent of people receiving Parenting Payment (Partnered) and 25.5 per cent of people receiving Parenting Payment (Single) reported earnings from employment (DSS 2020, p. 37). As Whiteford (2001) rightly pointed out, the rate of single parents in employment fluctuates throughout the year. Point in time data may show a smaller number of single parents participating in the workforce than longitudinal data which shows that over the course of the year most single parents spend time in employment (Whiteford 2001). This makes sense given what mothers in this study have shared regarding the difficulty in finding or keeping a job at certain times of the year, particularly around school holidays, and the continuously changing circumstances of the families impacting on their ability to work.

The DSS 2019–20 Annual Report states that Parenting Payment recipients 'are less likely to have employment income as these recipients are not subject to mutual obligation requirements' (DSS 2020, p. 36). It is important to note that these people may be less likely to work due to their parenting responsibilities, and the report recognises the reduced capacity of people on this payment to do paid work (DSS 2020, p. 36). However, there are some activation requirements linked to Parenting Payment, which are discussed in the following section.

JobSeeker Payment is a social security payment made to eligible people aged over 22 years and below pension age who are unemployed or on a very low income. JobSeeker Payment is 'the main payment for working age Australians' (DSS 2020). Prior to 20 March 2020, the primary payment for unemployed people was named NewStart Allowance, which was very similar to the JobSeeker payment which replaced it. JobSeeker Payment is paid at a lower rate

than Parenting Payment (Single). As at 25 September 2020, the base rate of payment for JobSeeker Payment per fortnight for a person with dependent children was AU$516.00 (Services Australia 2020a, p. 29). Again, recipients may also be eligible for other supplementary payments and benefits. The adequacy of JobSeeker Payment, including its effectiveness in reducing inequality and its ability to provide jobseekers with enough financial resources to be able to search for work, is the subject of much public discussion and parliamentary debate (Commonwealth of Australia 2012a; Parliament of Australia 2020; Whiteford 2012).[4] The rate of payment for JobSeeker Payment is indexed to the consumer price index (CPI). Since 1997, NewStart Allowance/JobSeeker Payment has grown little in comparison to other payments, such as age pensions and disability pension, which are indexed in line with wage increases plus the higher of CPI and movement in the Pensioner and Beneficiary Living Cost Index (designed to reflect prices impacting on pensioners) (Klapdor 2013; Parliament of Australia 2020; Whiteford 2014).

Recipients of Parenting Payment and JobSeeker Payment may also be eligible for other payments and benefits, for example Family Tax Benefit (FTB), Child Care Subsidy, and Commonwealth Rent Assistance. It is also possible for parents to be receiving welfare payments other than Parenting Payment and JobSeeker Payment (e.g. Youth Allowance, Disability Support Pension, Carer Payment). However, analysis related to these payments is outside the scope of this thesis.

There are participation/activation requirements for people receiving JobSeeker Payment, including requirements to compulsorily participate in the *jobactive* program. There are increasing conditions in place for job seekers to look for work and participate in labour market activation plans (Job Plans) the longer they stay on payment (Australian Government 2017f) and depending on their assessed readiness to work. Information on these requirements, including the *jobactive* program, and the ParentsNext program is provided in the next section.

Other financial support

Parents who receive JobSeeker Payment or Parenting Payment usually also receive FTB, a two-part payment available to eligible families with low incomes (not only those receiving social security payments) to help them with the cost of raising children (Australian Government 2020e). FTB can comprise a large component of social security payment recipients' overall

[4] It is noted that for part of 2020 people receiving JobSeeker Payment were eligible for a AU$550 supplement payment per fortnight as part of the Australian Government's response to the Coronavirus Covid19 pandemic.

income when received at the maximum rate (as an example, eligible families may receive AU$182 per eligible child aged 0–12 per fortnight for FTB Part A and AU$158 per family with a youngest child aged under 5 years for FTB Part B (current rate as at January 2020)) (Australian Government Department of Human Services 2019b, 2019c).

Families using childcare may be eligible for a range of payments and subsidies, including the Child Care Subsidy. Eligibility for the Child Care Subsidy and the amount of subsidy received depends on a number of things such as the age of the child (primary school aged children only, with exemptions for older children with a disability), the family's income, and type of care accessed, the child's immunisation status and the amount of time the parent/s spend in approved activities (activity test) (Australian Government Department of Education 2019a). The activity test requires parents to participate in an approved activity, such as work, training, study, volunteering and/or looking for work and the greater amount of time in such activities results in an increase in the hours of subsidised childcare the parent is eligible for (Australian Government Department of Education 2019b).

Exemptions from the Child Care Subsidy activity test are available to some people, for example, some people with a disability, in a caring role, or who receive a social security payment and are exempt from other mutual obligation requirements (Australian Government Department of Education 2019b). The families of pre-school aged children are also exempt from the activity test in the year before the child starts school (Australian Government Department of Education 2019b). Generally, people on social security payments who have a low household income can receive a subsidy of up to 85 per cent of the total childcare fee (Australian Government Department of Education 2019a). This subsidy is paid directly to the childcare provider by the government and the family pays the provider the remaining amount (Australian Government Department of Education 2019a).

Table 2.2 Numbers of payment recipients and administered outlays for Parenting Payment and NewStart Allowance/JobSeeker Payment

	Financial Year		
	2019–20[5]	**2018–19**	**2017–18**
Number of recipients			
NewStart Allowance/JobSeeker Payment	1,441,287	686,785	727,533
Parenting Payment (Single)	243,433	230,164	244,296
Parenting Payment (Partnered)	92,022	73,138	82,541
Administered outlays			
NewStart Allowance/JobSeeker Payment	$18,528.09m	$9,684.89m	$10,014.20m
Parenting Payment (Single)	$5,183.56m	$4,305.24m	$4,676.79m
Parenting Payment (Partnered)	$1,113.98m	$806.00m	$916.23m

Source: DSS 2020, pp. 50, 53.

Supporting Jobless Families and Helping Young Parents

The ParentsNext program (outlined below) was an amalgamation of two previous measures, Helping Young Parents (HYP) and Supporting Jobless Families (SJF) (Australian Government Department of Employment 2017b). HYP and SJF were announced in the 2011–12 Budget as part of the Building Australia's Future Workforce initiative and commenced on 1 January 2012 and 1 July 2012 respectively. The measures operated in the 10 LGAs where ParentsNext subsequently operated until the national expansion on 1 July 2018 (Bankstown, Shellharbour

[5] Note that the higher expenditure in 2019–20 can be explained by increased numbers of recipients due to employment changes resulting from the Coronavirus Covid19 pandemic and the temporary increase in benefit levels.

and Wyong in NSW; Logan and Rockhampton in Queensland; Playford in South Australia; Burnie in Tasmania; Hume and Greater Shepparton in Victoria; Kwinana in Western Australia).

The HYP measure aimed to support teen parents who received Parenting Payment to re-engage with education and emphasised the completion of Year 12 or equivalent qualifications. HYP participants met regularly with Department of Human Services when their child was as young as 12 months and agreed to a participation plan with one compulsory training requirement and one compulsory childhood or parenting related activity. HYP participants were also provided greater access to childcare services, but use of these services was not compulsory.

The SJF measure supported Parenting Payment recipients who were young (under 23 years) or in long-term receipt of welfare (greater than two years) to prepare to work once their child reached school age and focused on addressing the pre-vocational barriers of parents, school readiness for the child/ren and referrals to relevant local services. SJF participants had compulsory meetings with Department of Human Services and if their youngest child was aged 4 or 5 years there was also compulsory requirements to participate in employment-focused workshop/s; however, engagement in any other employment, education, child or parenting activities was voluntary.

In April 2016, HYP and SJF programs were amalgamated to become the ParentsNext program (Australian Government Department of Employment 2017b).

ParentsNext

ParentsNext is an activation policy which places conditions on eligible Parenting Payment recipients. Also known as the *Supporting Parents to Plan and Prepare for Employment* initiative, ParentsNext was announced in the 2015–16 Budget as part of the Growing Jobs and Small Business Package (Australian Government 2018e). It is a 'pre-employment program' which has the aim of:

> *…assisting disadvantaged parents, particularly early school leavers and those assessed to have high barriers to employment, to plan and prepare for future study or work before their youngest child commences school* (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019, p. 1).

Further, the program aims 'to reduce reliance and intergenerational dependency on social security; increase female labour force participation; and close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' employment' (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019). The Australian Government Social Security Guide notes:

> *…the 3 broad objectives of ParentsNext are to:*
>
> - *target early intervention assistance to parents at risk of long-term welfare dependency*
> - *help parents identify their education and employment related goals and participate in activities that help them achieve their goals, and*
> - *connect parents to local services that can help them address any barriers to employment* (Australian Government 2020b).

Between April 2016 and June 2018, ParentsNext operated in the same 10 LGAs where HYP and SJF operated, and in July 2018 the program was expanded to all non-remote locations nationally (Australian Government 2017d, 2017e; Australian Government Department of Employment 2017a; Australian Government Department of Human Services 2018a; Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018a). The program does not operate in remote locations where the CDP operates. As at June 2017, there were an estimated 13,500 ParentsNext participants (Australian Government Department of Employment 2017). When expanded in 2018, it was estimated that 68,000 people would participate in the ParentsNext program every year, 96 per cent of whom would be female, including approximately 10,000 Indigenous women (Australian Government Department of Employment 2017; Ministers' Media Centre 2018). As at 31 December 2018, with the program operational on a national level for six months, there were 75,259 ParentsNext participants nationally, of which approximately 95 per cent were women, 68 per cent were single parents, and 19 per cent identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander[6] (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019).

ParentsNext requires eligible Parenting Payment recipients to have a meeting with a ParentsNext provider at least once every six months to discuss employment and education

[6] At December 2018, 15.5 per cent of Parenting Payment Single recipients and 10.8 per cent of Parenting Payment Partnered recipients identified as Indigenous (DSS Payment Demographic Data December 2018, Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia).

plans and help them prepare for employment, including addressing non-vocational barriers to employment and education (Australian Government 2017b, 2017c). Participants must develop a 'participation plan' (also known as an Employment Pathway Plan) which outlines at least one compulsory activity related to their education or employment goals. The *Guide to Social Security Law* states that:

> *Participation plans will be individually tailored and take into account the parents individual circumstances and capacity to comply with the activities; they cannot include unsuitable or unreasonable requirements. Parents cannot be required to participate in a job search activity but they can choose to do so* (Australian Government 2018f).

In line with this, activities which can be included in ParentsNext participation plans are intended to be quite flexible to meet the circumstances of the participant and their family. Suitable activities which can be included in the plan are listed in Table 2.3. Participants are also required to report on a fortnightly basis to confirm they are meeting their obligations under the program.

Table 2.3 Suitable activities for compulsory ParentsNext participants

Suitable pre-vocational activities may include:
Parenting courses[7]
Confidence building courses
Personal development or presentation skills
Financial management
Attendance at medical or health related appointments or activities (however this can only be an optional term in the participation plan)
Suitable vocational preparation activities may include:
Training or education activities, e.g. Technical and Further Education (TAFE), secondary school, adult education courses
Part-time work – providers will not place parents in employment, however parents may source employment and it can then be included as an activity in their participation plan
Voluntary work
Part-time Green Army
Skills for Education and Employment programme
Adult Migrant English Program
Defence Force Reserves
From mid-September 2016 jobactive, New Enterprise Incentive Scheme and Transition to Work

Source: Australian Government 2018f, 2020g.

There are two streams of ParentsNext: an Intensive Stream and a Targeted Stream. The Intensive Stream of ParentsNext operates in the 10 original ParentsNext locations, plus 20 additional locations with high Indigenous populations and/or high disadvantage (Ministers' Media Centre 2018). The eligibility and participation requirements in the Intensive Stream sites are stricter than in the other locations, with some participants required to meet with a ParentsNext Provider when their child is as young as 6 months old. Participants in the Intensive Stream may also be eligible for additional supports, including wage subsidies, mentoring, relocation assistance and funds to pay for work or education related expenses (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018a). Eligibility requirements for both streams of the program are outlined in Table 2.4. The Mid Coast region of NSW is one of the new Intensive Stream sites, which covers the field-site area of the Mid-North Coast where the qualitative data for this thesis has been collected.

[7] Note – parenting courses were included in the guide in the 2018 source reference, but not in the updated 2020 source reference.

Table 1.4 Eligibility requirements for ParentsNext

Intensive Stream	**Targeted Stream**
Have received Parenting Payment continuously for more than six months	
Have not reported employment earnings to the Department of Human Services (Centrelink) for the past six months	
Have a child under six years old	
Not taking part in Disability Employment Services, Australian Disability Enterprises or jobactive Stream C servicing	
Live in an intensive stream location	Live in a targeted stream location
Early school leavers aged under 22 without year 12 and have a youngest child at least **six months** of age **or** Are assessed as being highly disadvantaged and have a youngest child at least **six months** of age **or** Have a youngest child aged five	Early school leavers aged under 22 without year 12 and have a youngest child at least **one year** of age **or** Are assessed as being highly disadvantaged and have a youngest child at least **three years** of age **or** Have a youngest child aged five and be in a jobless family (no reported employment earnings in the previous six months, for partnered recipients this include partner's earnings).

Source: Australian Government 2019a, 2020g.

Consistent with other conditionality measures, participation in ParentsNext is compulsory for eligible participants, and welfare payments may be sanctioned due to failure to meet conditions of the program, such as not attending appointments, not signing a participation plan or not following activities agreed to in the participation plan (Australian Government 2018c). It is estimated 20 per cent of ParentsNext participants have had their payments suspended under the program (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019). Exemptions from compulsory participation may be granted in certain circumstances (e.g. due to domestic violence, pregnancy/birth of a child etc); however, the application of such exemptions is not consistent (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019).

People receiving Parenting Payment who do not meet the eligibility requirements for compulsory participation in ParentsNext can choose to volunteer to participate in the program if they live in an Intensive Stream location (prior to the expansion people could volunteer in all 10 of the program's trial locations). Volunteers in the program do not have ParentsNext

program conditions attached to their welfare receipt and will not have sanctions applied to their payments. Volunteers are not permitted in the Targeted Stream locations (Australian Government 2018d).

ParentsNext providers are similar to *jobactive* employment service providers in that they are contracted by the government to provide the services (as opposed to being publicly owned enterprises). Many of the organisations contracted to deliver ParentsNext also deliver *jobactive* employment services (Ministers' Media Centre 2018). ParentsNext providers receive outcome payments when participants meet education or employment related targets, such as gaining employment or completing an education course (Australian Government 2018d).

jobactive employment services and Job Plans

jobactive is the current employment service program offered by the Australian Government to job seekers receiving JobSeeker Payment. Some unemployed job seekers who are not receiving social security payments and meet certain requirements may also be able to access some of the services offered by *jobactive* providers. *jobactive* is administered by the Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business and was introduced in July 2015, replacing *Job Services Australia* (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018b). There have been various iterations of employment services since the abolition of public employment services in Australia in 1990s (Martin 2015); the history of these changes is not in scope for this thesis (but see Borland 2014; Parliament of Australia 2019, n.d.).

jobactive providers assist job seekers in over 1700 locations across Australia to find and maintain employment (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018b). The providers work closely with local employers to identify work opportunities and connect job seekers with available jobs. As noted, one of the key roles of *jobactive* providers is to develop Job Plans with job seekers and monitor adherence to the plans. Job seekers can receive assistance from *jobactive* providers to write a resume, look for work and prepare for interviews. Funding is available through the providers (from the Employment Fund) for job seekers to access training and work-related items, and providers can also help with other services such as relocation allowance and employer wage subsidies (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2015, 2018c).

jobactive providers receive an outcome payment when a job seeker they are helping gains employment, completes a course, or stays in the same job for a certain amount of time (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018e). There is some evidence on the impact of outcome payments which shows such arrangements can create incentives for organisations to meet benchmarks for payment which may take a focus away from the best interests of the client (Shutes & Taylor 2014). These findings may also be relevant to the ParentsNext outcome payment system; however, there is little literature on this, possibly due to the recent nature of the program.

One of the mutual obligation requirements for JobSeeker Payment recipients includes entering into and complying with a Job Plan (called an Employment Pathway Plan in the legislation) which sets out the activities the person must do to meet their compulsory mutual obligation requirements (Australian Government 2018g, 2018h). Parenting Payment recipients who are single parents and have a child aged 6 or 7 years old are also required to enter into a Job Plan (Australian Government 2020b). Job Plans were originally introduced in the form of 'NewStart Allowance Activity Agreements' as part of a suite of changes to unemployment benefits in July 1991 (Parliament of Australia 2012b, Appendix B). The NewStart Allowance Activity Agreements covered 'activities NSA recipient could be required to undertake, such as job search, vocational training, labour market program participation, paid work experience, job search training or training to reduce labour market disadvantage' (Parliament of Australia 2012b, Appendix B).

Job Plans are developed between the payment recipient and an employment service provider (currently named a *jobactive* provider) or the government body which delivers government payments and services (currently Services Australia, formerly the Department of Human Services). For Principal Carers, participation requirements outlined in a Job Plan may include job search activities, paid work, study or volunteer work (or a combination of these activities). JobSeeker Payment recipients with children and Parenting Payment recipients who are single and have a youngest child over 6 years have reduced job search requirements due to their caring responsibilities and are only required to seek 30 hours work per fortnight, or undertake activities totalling 30 hours per fortnight (however, people may work more than the 30 hours if they choose). Principal Carers are not required to undertake additional job search activities if their paid work and/or study and/or volunteer work equates to 30 hours per fortnight. People may have their mutual obligation hours reduced to less than 30 hours if they are assessed as having limited capacity to work or are meeting other requirements. Exemptions from mutual obligation requirements may also be granted under certain conditions (including if a parent has

a large family with four or more children under the age of 18) (Australian Government 2020f). If a participant fails to meet the activities set out in their Job Plan, sanctions may be applied under the job seeker compliance framework which can include suspension or cancellation of payment (Australian Government 2018g, 2018i, 2020b).

Job Seeker Classification Instrument

The level of support, funding allowance, and requirements for people in the *jobactive* and ParentsNext program is based on an assessment of their needs and readiness for work using the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI). The JSCI also 'looks at a job seeker's likelihood of becoming or remaining long term unemployed' (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018g). Essentially, the JSCI is an assessment of the job seekers' employability.

The JSCI is conducted by Services Australia, the *jobactive* provider or ParentsNext provider (or provider of other programs out of scope for this thesis, including Transition to Work, Time to Work Employment Services, CDP and Disability Employment Services) (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018i). Job seekers are asked a series of JSCI questions when first accessing a relevant payment, or after a change in circumstances that may impact on their JSCI score (the number of questions ranges between 18 and 49 depending on the person's individual circumstances, with more questions for those with greater barriers to employment) (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018h, 2018i). The questions are asked based on 18 factors which have been identified to reflect a person's relative level of disadvantage in the labour market and which are associated with a person's likelihood of being unemployed for another year (the factors are listed in Table 2.5) (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018h). Each answer is given a weighting for each factor, and the total score for a person's JSCI will result in the person being placed in one of three 'streams'. Job seekers in Stream A are considered to be the most job ready and receive services to help them quickly enter/re-enter employment, such as resume writing and interview preparation (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2015). Those in Stream B receive additional support, such as case management (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2015). People with the most complex barriers to employment may also need to undertake an Employment Services Assessment, which is an additional assessment to determine if a person should receive Stream C services or be referred to Disability Employment Services (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018g).

Table 2.5 Factors assessed using the Job Seeker Classification Instrument

Factors assessed using the Job Seeker Classification Instrument:	
Age and gender	Disability/medical conditions
Geographic location	English proficiency
Recency of work experience	Stability of residence
Proximity to a labour market	Country of birth
Job seeker history	Living circumstances
Access to transport	Indigenous status
Educational attainment	Criminal convictions
Phone contactability	Indigenous location
Vocational qualifications	Personal factors

Source: Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018h.

Other key services available to parents

There are other services and supports available to job seekers which are outside of the scope of this thesis. However, for completeness a quick overview of some of these are provided in this section.

Job seekers with reduced capacity to work or search for jobs due to having a disability may not be compulsorily required to participate in *jobactive*. Some people with a disability may be eligible for Disability Support Pension and may be eligible to volunteer for support through an employment service (including through *jobactive*) or may be required to participate in Disability Employment Services, depending on their circumstances (Australian Government 2020c, 2020d). In remote locations of Australia (covering up to three-quarters of Australia's land mass and including more than 1000 communities) job seekers are required to participate in the CDP remote-specific employment program (Australian Government National Indigenous Australians Agency n.d.). Under the CDP, all job seekers, including those who would be eligible for Disability Employment Services in non-remote Australia, are assigned to a CDP provider and activation requirements and possible penalties/sanctions for non-compliance apply (Australian Government Department of Human Services 2019p; Australian Government National Indigenous Australians Agency n.d.).

There are also a number of LMAPs which parents may access. *Transition to Work* is a service for young people aged 15–21, particularly early school leavers, to support them to transition to

employment (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2016). The *Youth Jobs PaTH* provides opportunities for young people (aged 15–24 years) to do an internship or trial employment with an employer, provides subsidies for the employer to employee young people and offers additional job skills training to young people (Australian Government 2018j; Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018d). Work for the Dole is another government initiative which requires certain long-term unemployed people to undertake (unpaid) work-like activities with a not-for-profit organisation or government agency to meet their mutual obligation requirements (Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018f).

While the importance of childcare programs and policies in relation to parents' employability and their employment decisions and choices is recognised, such policies and their outcomes are not examined in detail in this thesis. However, it is possible some of the findings presented in this thesis would also be relevant to mothers participating in these out-of-scope programs.

Family Services in Australia

In addition to the significant amount spent on the social security system's direct cash transfers, governments across the OECD also invest substantial funds toward 'in-kind' social services to support individuals and families. Social services can include services such as family services, housing and homelessness services, disability services, employability services and types of health and education services. While governments generally fund a broad suite of social services which can help people to address barriers to employment and build a wide range of employment-related skills and attributes, social security systems and LMAPs have traditionally operated in isolation from broader social services.

Participation in social services is generally voluntary in Australia, but sometimes welfare conditions can require compulsory participation in these services (Taylor, Gray et al. 2016) either as a condition of payment receipt or to gain exemption from other welfare conditions, such as welfare payment quarantining. In some instances, families are required to participate in services in order to meet their requirements under child protection orders in their respective state or territory (e.g. as part of a reunification or preservation plan) (Higgins & Kaspiew 2011).

Much like the concept of employability, family services can be difficult to define. 'Family support services are like families themselves – a concept everyone understands, but one in which there are many types and many definitions' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001,

p. 35). With regard to family support services across the OECD, Acquah and Thévenon (2020, p. 7) report that the services are:

> *…provided to help parents improve their child rearing capabilities and make parenting behaviour and family functioning more conducive to raising child outcomes. These services encompass a wide range of interventions that focus on such things as strengthening parents' knowledge on good nutrition and health practices during pregnancy and thereafter to promote good childcare and educational practices for infants and toddlers; or, helping parents and/or children develop practices that benefit their physical and mental wellbeing, and that support children's learning and cognitive, emotional and social development; or helping vulnerable families, in particular those who have children with disabilities, families exposed to domestic conflict or violence, and families in precarious family situations who have special and often multiple needs.*

Family services in Australia are generally delivered by service providers which are contracted by the government and include services and programs such as parenting classes and education, facilitated playgroups, case management, home-visits, mentoring, counselling, mediation and crisis care (Freiberg et al. 2014). As such, family services can either be generic and cater to a diverse range of families, or intensive supports tailored to the individual needs of the family (Freiberg et al. 2014). These services may be funded in a variety of ways and the organisations providing the service may receive funds from one or more sources such as Commonwealth Government, state/territory and local governments and/or philanthropic funds. Most of these organisations are not-for-profit non-governmental organisations (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2012).

Recent history of family service administration

The recent history of Commonwealth Government family program administration and grants processes and the changing aims of these programs over time shows the shifting emphasis of government policy towards parents from one of supporting parents in their parenting role to an increased focus on participation in the labour market.

In 2008, the then Labor Government commenced a strategy to reform its existing community, family and children grants programs (ANAO 2013). According to the ANAO (2013, p. 35), the:

> *…rationalisation and restructuring of community support programs into a better-targeted and more-integrated strategy, aimed to improve the focus on government priorities, increase flexibility in the application of government funds at a local level, and reduce program duplication and administrative costs.*

The creation of the Family Support Program (FSP) was then announced in February 2009, which streamlined nine existing family services and activities, including Communities for Children and the Family Relationship Services Program, under the FSP program structure over a two-year transition period (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2009; ANAO 2013). The announcement also included the commencement of a consultation process with the sector and stakeholders regarding the new FSP structure (DSS 2013). Funding for the FSP commenced on 1 July 2009 and included machinery of government changes whereby the administration of Family Relationship Services moved to the then Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs while the responsibility for family law policy was retained by the Attorney-General's Department (DSS 2013).

The Government then announced changes to the FSP which further streamlined over 20 activities into four (Media Release by The Hon Jenny Macklin MP – 3 November 2010). The changes introduced 'the requirement for providers to ensure vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children are prioritised' and maintained a focus on 'helping reduce the number of children entering the child protection system' (Media Release by The Hon Jenny Macklin MP – 3 November 2010). The changes also streamlined funding arrangements for the program (Media Release by The Hon Jenny Macklin MP – 3 November 2010). The new FSP was launched on 15 April 2011 (Media Release by The Hon Jenny Macklin MP – 15 April 2011). The aim of the new FSP was 'to support families, improve children's wellbeing and safety, and build more resilient communities' (Media Release by The Hon Jenny Macklin MP – 15 April 2011). Funding for the new FSP commenced on 1 July 2011 and included funding of over AU$1 billion for the 2011–2014 period (Commonwealth of Australia 2012b).

In November 2012, a discussion paper was released on the future of the FSP, and consultations took place between late 2012 and early 2013 (Commonwealth of Australia 2012b; Australian Government DSS 2016a). The discussion paper noted the FSP 'makes an important contribution' of the Australian Government's welfare reform agenda, which is shaped by three imperatives:

1. *Every child should have the best start in life through being safe and nurtured.*
2. *All children and young people should be engaged with education or training.*
3. *Every available option should be used to support more Australians into work.*

(Commonwealth of Australia 2012b, p. iii)

According to the discussion paper, FSP services 'strengthen family wellbeing and community cohesion, protect the best interests of children, close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage, and build parents' capacity to participate in work' (Commonwealth of Australia 2012b). Among other objectives, it noted the FSP services 'promote the job-readiness of families, stabilising the home environment and improving their engagement with school, training and work' (Commonwealth of Australia 2012b). While the aims of the FSP changed since its formation, it is around this time (and the Commonwealth 2011–12 Budget) that family services introduced economic participation and work-readiness as part of their broader focus in line with the then-government's welfare reform agenda.

Following the 2013 election and change of government, structural and administrative changes in the Australian Government (Machinery of Government changes), saw the creation of a new Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS). This led to minor changes to the underlying aims of family services, but a significant restructure in the administration and funding frameworks. The changes saw the new DSS responsible for 18 discretionary grants programs previously administered by five former departments, totalling 120 grant activities and over AU$3 billion annual funding (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2015a). Many programs for families and children were included under DSS' new administrative arrangements, including the FSP and many services administered by the former Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

In the 2014–15 Budget, the then Coalition Government announced new program arrangements under the *New Way of Working for Grants*, which consolidated the existing 18 grants programs into seven new grants programs. The changes intended to reduce duplication across the grants and between Commonwealth funded and state/territory funded programs, improve reporting processes and reduce 'red tape', and introduce innovation through open selection and a competitive grants application process (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2015a). These intentions are similar to the those of the 2008 reform agenda by the Labor Government. The changes announced in the 2014–15 Budget also reduced the

Department's total grant funding by AU$240 million over four years, noting that approximately AU$41 million in additional funding was subsequently provided to meet immediate service gaps (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2015a). There was no formal community consultation prior to the announcement of the *New Way of Working for Grants* and the changes resulted in criticism from the sector and a Senate Inquiry: *Impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community service tendering processes by the Department of Social Services*.

Under the changes, grants for family services, including the FSP, were mainly encompassed by the Families and Communities Program, which is the current administrative arrangement at the submission of this thesis. As noted above and presented in Figure 2.5, the aim of the current Families and Communities Program includes an emphasis on economic participation, with program priorities including 'activities to improve financial wellbeing and capability, strengthen communities, support migrants' transition to life in Australia, and ensure the lifetime wellbeing of families and children' (DSS 2019).

Increased collaboration between services was another aim of the 2014 grant reforms, and the new *Families and Children Performance Framework* included collaboration as a service quality outcome, including networking, joint planning, referrals, service co-ordination and integration (e.g. shared service delivery). The Department noted:

> *[T]his counters the assumption that a single service provider can solve all of the problems of a family. When a family presents with multiple needs, collaboration enables a service provider to refer them to other appropriate services, ensuring the family gets the help they need in the most straightforward way* (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2015b, p. 9).

Such collaboration and service integration were also a focus in the Labor Government's 2012 *Family Support Program Future Directions Discussion Paper* (Commonwealth of Australia 2012b).

The aims of each individual family service which sit underneath the overarching Families and Communities Program vary and have also changed over time. For example, when funding commenced in 2004, the original aim of Communities for Children was 'to address the risk factors for child abuse and neglect before they escalate, and help parents of children at risk to provide a safe, happy and healthy life for their children' (ANAO 2013). Now the Communities

for Children Facilitating Partners (which work with the local community to develop and deliver evidence-based services based on local need; also a key feature in the original program design) 'take an early intervention approach that supports families to improve the way they relate to each other; improve parenting skills; and to ensure the health and wellbeing of children' and the emphasis on child protection has been reduced (ACIL Allen Consulting Australia 2016; DSS 2014a; ANAO 2013; Muir et al. 2010).

As the aims and administration of family services have changed over time, there has been an increasing focus on improving the economic participation and employability of parents. Service providers have needed to adapt their approach in line with new funding models, program guidelines and government agendas. Existing evidence on the impacts of family services is explored in Chapter Three, and then revisited in Chapter Six where this thesis theorises on the impact of family services on employability and delves into the views of family service providers and parents on the issue.

Family services funded by the Commonwealth Government

To provide examples of the types of family services available to families in Australia, this section provides a brief overview of four Commonwealth Government funded family services:

1. Communities for Children Support Services
2. Children and Parenting Support Services
3. Family and Relationship Services, and
4. Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY).

A short description of these services is provided in Table 2.6. The services are all sub-activities under the *Families and Communities Program*, currently administered by the DSS. In 2019–20, administered outlay for the *Families and Children* component of the *Families and Communities Program* was AU$290.99 million (DSS, p. 80). The broad suite of supports provided by family services as part of the *Families and Communities Program* 'aims to support families, improve children's wellbeing and increase participation of vulnerable people in community life to enhance family and community functioning' (DSS 2017). The program logic for the program, as developed by the DSS, is at Figure 2.6. This program logic shows the intended flow-on effects from family services to the economic participation of families and individuals, but program guidelines (with the exception of HIPPY) do not include employment

outcomes or increases in employability as performance indicators. Most family service providers who participated in this study were funded to deliver one or more of these four services, often in addition to other services with funding from other sources.

Table 2.6 Overview of family services in this study's administrative dataset

Aims	Areas of operation	Target population
Communities for Children Support Services		
Develop and facilitate a place-based whole of community approach to support and enhance early childhood development and wellbeing for children Increasing child safety and wellbeing, by addressing known risk factors that impact on the parenting capacity of families, parents, grandparent carers and other carers.	52 communities	The services are broad in nature and are aimed at parents of children aged from 0–12 years, but can also support children aged up to 18
Children and Parenting Support Services		
Improving children's development and wellbeing and supporting the capacity of those in a parenting role Provide support to children and families based on an early intervention and prevention approach. Services actively seek to identify issues that are or could impact on child or family outcomes and provide interventions or appropriate referral before these issues escalate Services could include community playgroups, supported playgroups, parenting courses, home visiting and peer support groups	139 locations across Australia	Children and Parenting Support Services are also aimed at children aged 0–12 (but also cater for up to 18 years)
Family and Relationship Services		
Supports vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children by assisting with adult relationships, counselling for children, education and broader parenting support Assists people with relationship difficulties to better manage the personal or interpersonal issues to do with children and family during marriage, separation and divorce	Locations across Australia	Targeted to families at critical family transition points including formation, extension and separation
Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)		
HIPPY is a home-based parenting and early childhood learning program that empowers parents and carers to be their child's first teacher. Families participate in the program over a two-year period which includes the year before a child school and the first year of school. The program builds the confidence and skills of	100 locations, including 50 with high Indigenous populations	Parents and carers of children the year before entry to school, through to the

parents and carers to create a positive learning environment to prepare their child for school. The program also offers some parents and carers a supported pathway to employment by employing one or more parents in a 'tutoring' capacity to help deliver the program.		year following school entry

Sources: Australian Government Department of Social Services 2014b, 2014c, 2015, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e, 2017.

Figure 2.5 Families and Children Activity – Program Logic

Families and Children Activity – Programme Logic

Aim: To improve child, individual, family and community wellbeing

Service activities[1]	Inputs	Outputs	Service Quality Outcomes	Outcomes for individuals, families and communities		
				Immediate	Intermediate	Long-Term
Intake / Assessment Information / Advice / Education and Skills Child-focused groups Counselling Dispute resolution Supervised changeover/contact Support / Advocacy Outreach Records search Community capacity building	**Department:** Funding Policy Grant administration Performance measurement **Service Providers:** To be identified at the service level	Provide data in accordance with DSS Data Exchange Protocols.	• Increased use of evidence-based practice • Increased use of early intervention and prevention approaches • Increased service integration and collaboration • Improved access for vulnerable or disadvantaged individuals and families	• Increased personal agency • Stronger family relationships • Increased parental capacity • More cooperative post-separation arrangements • Increased positive community connectedness	• Improved individual functioning • Improved family functioning • Improved child wellbeing • Improved community functioning	• Improved individual and family wellbeing • Increased economic engagement • More cohesive communities

Source: Australian Government 2014.

Playgroups

Playgroups are one of the family services which receives most attention in this thesis, and so deserves a detailed description.

Playgroups have been operating in Australia for many decades and became popular in the 1970s (McLean et al. 2020; Playgroup Australia 2013; Townley 2018). It is claimed to be 'one of Australia's largest civil society movements' (Playgroup Australia 2020), and approximately one-half of Australian families with a child aged 2–3 years participate in playgroup (Keam et al. 2018).

Playgroups are regular activity for many parents and carers of children under school age. They usually run for 2 hours per week during the school term at a variety of venues, from local parks, to community and school halls, or member's homes. Parents and carers stay at playgroup for the duration of the activity and participate in the activities with their children and engage with other parents, unlike a childcare or creche where the parents/carers may not be present (Hancock et al. 2015).

There are two broad types of playgroup: community playgroups, and supported playgroups. Community playgroups are run by parents/carers. Playgroup Australia, the national representative body for community playgroups in Australia, commenced operation in 1984 and reports there are currently over 7500 registered playgroups in Australia (Playgroup Australia 2020). On average, each community playgroup's membership comprises 14 adults and 17 children, but some have up to 230 children attending across multiple sessions, and others have as few as four families (Playgroup Australia 2019).

Supported playgroups are usually run by non-governmental organisations which employ a facilitator (with qualifications in early childhood education, social work, health or similar field) to manage the playgroup and activities, and are funded by the state or Commonwealth government (Hancock et al. 2015). A recent literature review by Commerford and Robinson (2016) listed some common aspects of supported playgroups, presented in Box 2.1.

Hancock et al. (2015) explain that supported playgroups aim to improve parent and child wellbeing, improve family functioning and parenting skills, and develop stronger communities. Playgroup Australia (2019) notes that supported playgroups often operate for a specific purpose and/or evolve to meet the needs of its members, such as children with disabilities,

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The intention for some supported playgroups is for the group to transition to being a community playgroup, run by parents instead of a paid facilitator; however, research shows there are often difficulties in the transition phase, particularly where the supported playgroup is being run in a highly disadvantaged area where parents have less capacity to run the groups themselves because they have other considerations and priorities (Berthelsen et al. 2012; Commerford & Robinson 2016).

Williams et al. (2018, p. 2367) provide the following description of the service:

> *They are a localized, low-cost, light-touch model of intervention designed for families with young children who are at risk of poor early development. The supported playgroup model seeks to provide a non-stigmatizing program that engages families in enjoyable parent-child activities and creates opportunities to build social support through connections with other parents.*

Box 2.1 Common aspects of supported playgroups

Common aspects of supported playgroups include:

- a facilitator (usually a paid position held by someone with qualifications in early childhood education or similar field) leads the playgroup;
- play-based activities (such as art and craft, music, dress-ups and role play etc) are conducted for preschool-aged (not yet in primary school) children;
- parents/carers attend and engage with their children in the activities;
- guest speakers are invited to address topics of interest to the group;
- groups meet regularly (usually for two hours per week during school term);
- opportunities are provided for parents to socialise with each other.

(Adapted from Commerford & Robinson 2016)

Conclusion

This chapter has situated this thesis within the current social security and family service policy and administrative context for parents in Australia and traced the changes to these policies over time. Social security for parents was initially provided to support the role of the parent. Progressively, Australia has shifted ideologically towards policies which promote active participation in the economy and place conditions on welfare payments to encourage and/or coerce people to behave in ways which uphold the ideals of adults as workers. This has led to Australia providing social security to parents during their time out of the workforce in order to maintain the parents' attachment to the workforce, promoting the parents' role as worker. Recent years have also witnessed increasing conditionality targeted to parents, both in relation to their parenting behaviours and workforce participation.

As this chapter has outlined, the focus on parents' active participation in the paid labour market is also influencing governments' approach to family service policy, as the policy aims align more closely with a participation agenda and compulsory participation in the services are included in employability-focused conditionality and LMAPs for parents. Historically there has been limited interaction between family services and employability services. Current Commonwealth Government family service program logic illustrates the governments' intention behind linking family services to employment outcomes and economic participation. Most recently, the introduction of ParentsNext has seen a more substantial shift towards employability services and family service interaction.

Increasing individuals' employability to increase chances of paid employment is a central aim of governments' approach to social security recipients. The following chapter (Chapter Three) delves into the literature on employability and work-readiness and its relationship to LMAPs and conditionality for mothers in the Australian social security system. The chapter explores mothers' experience in the paid labour market and the often-conflicting demands of parenting and caring roles. Given the increasing role of family services in governments' efforts to increase mothers' employability, the chapter also examines the existing evidence base on family service and the outcomes of the services in relation to mothers' employability.

CHAPTER THREE Literature review

Introduction

The previous chapter (Chapter Two) demonstrated the shifting approach to mothers in the social security system by examining social security payments, employability-related policies and family services for mothers in the Australian context and the evolving aims and administration of these policies and services over time. The chapter explored the increasing role of labour LMAPs and mutual obligation for mothers with young children, as government policy for parents shifts focus from supporting the parenting role to promoting active participation in the paid labour market.

The concept of employability is important to explore in the context of policy for mothers in the social security system because it is one of the underlying principles of LMAPs across OECD nations (Adam et al. 2017; Crisp & Powell 2017; Lindsay & Serrano Pascual 2009; McQuaid et al. 2005; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005; Peck & Theodore 2000). Lindsay & Serrano Pascual (2009, p. 951) argue that the concept of 'activation' within LMAPs is 'rooted' in the concept of employability. Despite its central role in governments' employment activation policy, the concept is contested (Forrier & Sels 2003; Guilbert et al. 2016; Kovalenko & Mortelmans 2016; Lindsay & Serrano Pascual 2009; McQuaid et al. 2005).

While the focus of public policy practice tends to remain on individual-level, supply-side factors of employability, much of the public policy literature argues that broader socio-economic and structural demand-side factors also need to be considered (Bowman et al. 2017; Cooney 2006; Crisp & Powell 2017; Froyland et al. 2019; McDonald et al. 2020; McQuaid, Green & Danson 2005; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005; Peck & Theodore 2000; Purser & Hennigan 2017).

This chapter explores the concept of employability and how this has changed over time. The concept of employability has been studied in the literature in three broad fields: graduate employability in the education literature; institutional/organisational employability in the career literature; and in relation to LMAPs in the public policy literature, the context in which this thesis is situated (Guilbert et al. 2016; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). The education and career literature generally focus on supply-side factors relating to an individual's personal skills and attributes, while the public policy literature has increasingly begun to extend the definition of employability to include demand-side factors. In this chapter, the 'supply-side, demand-side orthodoxy'

(McQuaid & Lindsay 2005) surrounding the concept, across the literatures and over time, is discussed in relation to debate over the role of the individual regarding LMAPs and conditionality.

The chapter then examines the factors and circumstances which contribute to employability, including confidence and social support. McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) employability framework is introduced to provide a foundation for further analysis in this thesis of the individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors which apply to mothers' employability.

The chapter identifies that there is limited understanding in the literature of how employability is defined by unemployed people themselves, including mothers of young children (Guilbert et al. 2016). This thesis addresses this gap in the literature and makes a unique contribution to the academic dialogue by exploring how mothers in the Australian social security system define the concept.

The chapter then considers the personal and societal values and norms in relation to the role of the mother as a carer/parent versus paid worker, and the tensions faced by mothers required to participate in LMAPs, including compulsory participation in family services. These tensions are resulting in stigmatisation of mothers and reduced confidence (Brady & Cook 2015; Grahame & Marston 2012; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013), and hence reducing mothers' employability and counterproductive to the welfare-to-work agenda. There is considerable literature on the barriers which mothers face in relation to employment and the impacts of LMAPs on mothers' employment outcomes, and we can gain some insight into mothers' possible views on employability through studies such as those by Millar and Ridge (2017) and Lindsay et al. (2018a, 2018b). This evidence base is explored in this chapter.

This thesis also explores mothers' views on the impacts of family services and considers this in relation to mothers' perspectives on employability. There is a range of grey literature and some academic literature assessing the impacts of family services, particularly on mothers' wellbeing and children's outcomes. However, there is little research which directly relates to the potential influence of family services on mothers' employability. This chapter explores the literature on family services and examines the available evidence of how participation in these services can influence mothers' employability, confidence and social networks. This thesis helps fill this gap in the literature and provides further empirical evidence of the perceived impacts of family services on these issues.

The chapter now begins by exploring definitions of employability and the various constructs of the concept since its inception.

The concept of employability

The definition, understanding, and operationalisation of employability is contested in the literature and in policy practice (Guilbert et al. 2016; Kovalenko & Mortelmans 2016; Lindsay & Serrano Pascual 2009; McQuaid et al. 2005). Guilbert et al. (2016) refer to the 'multiple concepts of employability' in recognition of the various ways the concept is defined and operationalised. 'Employability is an indicator of the chance of work' (Forrier & Sels 2003, p. 104), and generally relates to one's potential to gain, change and sustain employment in the labour market (Forrier & Sels 2003; McQuaid et al. 2005). Thijssen, Van der Heijden & Rocco, researchers based in the Netherlands and USA, define employability as 'the possibility to survive in the internal or external labor market,' recognising that the concept applies to those both within and out of current employment (Thijssen et al. 2008, p. 167; see also Forrier & Sels 2003; McQuaid et al. 2005; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). The term is sometimes used interchangeably with 'work-readiness' and a range of other synonyms (Lambert & Herbert 2017; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005; Purser & Hennigan 2017; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden 2006).

The concept of employability can be traced back to the early twentieth century, where a 'dichotomic' distinction between 'employable' and 'unemployable' individuals was made in order to differentiate between who was deserving of support, or not, due to their ability and willingness to work, or not (Gazier 1998, 2001; Guilbert et al. 2016; Kovalenko & Mortelmans 2016; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). Employability was then used in relation to government labour market programs promoting full employment (Forrier & Sels 2003; Guilbert et al. 2016), and in relation to an individual's ability to work if they were socially, mentally or physically disadvantaged (McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). Attitudes to work, self-image and the work abilities of socially disadvantaged groups were the primary focus regarding employability in the 1950s and 1960s (Forrier & Sels 2003; Guilbert et al. 2016; McDonald et al. 2020; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). This was followed by an emphasis on ability and knowledge in the 1970s (Forrier & Sels 2003; Guilbert et al. 2016), along with a focus on the outcomes of employment-related policy interventions (McQuaid & Lindsay 2005).

The 1980s saw an emergence of the concept in the career/human resource development literature as transferable skills and flexibility increased in importance with employees beginning

to move between roles and employers more often (Forrier & Sels 2003; Guilbert et al. 2016; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). The career literature focuses on institutional/organisational employability for those who are currently employed and looking to upskill and further enhance their employability to increase their competitiveness in a changing employment market and protect them from potential future employment shocks, such as redundancy (Kim et al. 2015).

The career literature considers a person's employability to be the individual's responsibility as they navigate their way through the 'new career' of changing employment roles many times in one's working life, compared to traditionally where the career growth, employability and upskilling of a person was the responsibility of the organisation where they worked, usually for an extended length of time (De Vos et al. 2011; Forrier & Sels 2003; Fugate et al. 2004; Kim et al. 2015; Kovalenko & Mortelmans 2016; McDonald et al. 2020; Thijssen et al. 2008; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden 2006). Guilbert et al. (2016) point out that this shift away from linear career trajectories has meant a person's employability, rather than just their employment, became of greater importance. Forrier and Sels (2003), researchers based in Belgium, argue that 'lifetime employability' rather than 'lifetime employment' provides job security in this new labour market (p. 103).

While there was a previous commitment to full employment, as noted above, Finn (2000) argues that governments can now only commit to 'full employability' given the volatile labour market. Although we see greater emphasis on individuals' employability since the 1980s and the shift towards the 'protean career' (Forrier & Sels 2003; Forrier et al. 2009; Kovalenko & Mortelmans 2016), McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) argue that an individualistic, supply-side focus has been evident throughout the history of the concept.

In the 1990s use of the term evolved in line with expansion of the active welfare state and efforts to increase workforce participation and reduce unemployment (Guilbert et al. 2016; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). Since this time the concept has been integral to active labour market policies and supranational employment policies addressing unemployment (McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). Gazier (2001) explains that, although there remained a focus on individual responsibility concerning one's employability, the notion he coins 'interactive employability' also emerged during this time which recognised demand-side factors such as barriers to employment and the interaction with labour market conditions. The literature has since placed greater influence on external factors to employment. This shift in the literature is in line with policy changes in countries like Australia, the USA and UK, where unemployment policy moved

from a focus on employability to LMAPs which focus on quick labour market entry through a 'work-first' approach.

> *In the past, employment assistance in Australia had a stronger focus on employability than under the current system. For example, many of the labour market programs delivered under the Working Nation initiative of the 1990s had a strong emphasis on education and vocational training. However, since the 2000s policymakers have placed a greater emphasis on low-cost, standardised job search measures and on managing the risk that the income support system reduces participation in paid work* (Parliament of Australia n.d., online).

There is also a vast body of education literature which focuses on university graduates' and high school leavers' employability (Cavanagh et al. 2015; Greenacre 2017; Lambert & Herbert 2017; Matsouka & Mihail 2016; Platow 2012; Tomlinson 2012). This literature builds an evidence base around key attributes associated with employability, and whether and how educational institutions can foster these skills in graduates and school leavers (Antonio & Tuffley 2017; Boden & Nedeva 2010; Brown et al. 2003; Cavanagh et al. 2015; Cumming 2010; Greenacre 2017; Lambert & Herbert 2017; Matsouka & Mihail 2016; McDonald et al. 2020; Tomlinson 2012). This literature is also highly supply-side driven, focusing on the individual's skills without major consideration of the demand-side factors at play.

The supply-side and demand-side division of employability is important to consider, and is essentially an extension of the welfare reform debate on whether or not responsibility for a person's employability lies with the individual.

The supply-side/ demand-side debate

Much of the literature argues that definitions of employability focus on 'supply-side' factors and place responsibility for outcomes on the individual, and do not place enough emphasis on demand-side factors of employability, such as employment rates and socio-historical influences (Bowman et al. 2017; Crisp & Powell 2017; Cooney 2006; Froyland et al. 2019; Lindsay & McQuaid 2005; McDonald et al.2020; McQuaid et al. 2005; Peck and Theodore 2000; Purser & Hennigan 2017). Lindsay and McQuaid (2005) coin this the 'supply-side, demand-side orthodoxy'. Kovalenko & Mortelmans (2016) differentiate between supply-side and demand-side factors of employability using the terms individual (agency-side) and

contextual (structure-side) factors. Forrier et al. (2009) also consider agency and structure in relation to employability.

The narrow definitions of employability and associated LMAPs place the emphasis, and lay the 'blame', on the individual (Carney 2007; Cortis et al. 2008; Humpage 2015; Lister 2010; McQuaid et al. 2005; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005; Peck & Theodore 2000). Crisp & Powell (2017, p. 1800) highlight that that the supply-side focused, narrow definition of employability has 'served to legitimate welfare reforms and increasing conditionality'.

In exploring welfare-to-work policies in the UK, Peck and Theodore (2000) point to the historical context of employability in the public policy context to argue that a focus on supply-side is not adequate to address unemployment and addressing demand-side factors is also necessary. They state that demand-side labour market policies have been considered by governments to be counter-productive and ineffective since the 1980s, resulting in the move towards activation and individualised supply-side approaches. Peck and Theodore show this has had negative at worst, and modest at best, outcomes particularly in areas with the highest levels of unemployment and 'structural economic decline'. They argue that short-term labour market attachment promoted by current LMAPs is counterproductive and policy must go beyond the employability agenda to support job development and social redistribution in order to have sustainable outcomes (Peck & Theodore 2000).

In assessing supported employment for people with disabilities in Western states, Norwegian researchers Froyland et al. (2019) introduce the term 'combined approaches' to explain an approach which does not adhere to only supply or demand-side approaches to employment. Supported employment, which has a combined approach, supports the individual to increase their employability while simultaneously working to address structural, organisational and other demand-side factors (Froyland et al. 2019). Froyland et al. (2019, p. 320) express that:

> *[T]he support system in such approaches is characterised by simultaneous synchronous interventions from several agencies, depending on the challenges of the individual. These interventions target the employee, their co-workers and employer, and aim to facilitate productive and sustainable jobs.*

Examining two social service programs in the UK which potentially blur the lines between work-first and human capital development labour market approaches, Lindsay et al. (2007) noted the importance of services which promote 'coping and enabling' skills to improve employability

for those facing complex and multiple barriers to employment. Because there are many barriers which can prevent employment it is recognised that '[B]y resolving indebtedness, poor housing, family breakdown, addiction, etc., such agencies can support the efforts of public employment services to activate hard-to-place jobseekers' (Budapest Institute 2014, p. 8). Acknowledging the many factors which influence employability, Froyland et al. (2019, p. 324) argue that:

> *[A]chieving labour market participation for disadvantaged jobless individuals requires high quality support systems, and comprehensive effort is necessary to avoid the work-first component resulting in labour market integration for only a limited period.*

Some policies are being implemented in the UK and elsewhere which involve 'personalisation' and co-production of services, with caseworkers working with clients to access support based on their individual needs, usually in relation to employability skills, job search and healthcare needs (Batty et al. 2017; Fuertes & Lindsay 2016; Lindsay et al. 2018a, 2018b).

Recognising the impact of both supply-side and demand-side policies and the range of factors which influence a person's employability, McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) offer a framework which defines the concept of employability with regard to both demand-side *and* supply-side factors. This framework is very relevant when considering the employability of mothers in the social security system because it highlights middle ground between supply-side and demand-side factors by considering a person's personal circumstances, such as caring responsibilities. Before exploring McQuaid and Lindsay's framework in more detail, it is necessary to consider some of the many factors associated with employability which have been identified across the education, career and public policy literatures, including confidence and social support.

Factors associated with employability and employment

Across the career, education and public policy literatures, attempts have been made to isolate key demographic characteristics and social factors which are associated with employability (Andersson & Wärvik 2012; Baxter 2013a; Borland & Coelli 2016; Chetty et al. 2016; Denkenberger et al. 2015; Escott 2012; Feeny et al. 2012; Fok & McVicar 2013; Kim 2009; Mallon 2007; Schofield & Butterworth 2017; Vu 2014; Zabel 2013). This section briefly considers some (not all) of these characteristics, and then explores in detail the impact of confidence and social supports on employability.

The literature largely agrees on several key variables which impact on employability and employment outcomes. Key external, structural variables include labour market conditions (commonly measured by the employment rate) (Fok & McVicar 2013; Vu 2014); remoteness (Denkenberger et al. 2015); relocating to areas of higher socio-economic standing (McQuaid et al. 2005) and access to reliable transport and childcare (Cook 2012; McDonald et al. 2020; Mallon 2007). Key individual-level variables associated with employment include levels of education and training, being in a single parent household, caring responsibilities, age, number of children, having a non-English speaking background, previous experience of welfare receipt, physical and mental health, and Indigenous status (Andersson & Wärvik 2012; Baxter 2013; Borland & Coelli 2016; Denkenberger et al. 2015; Escott 2012; Feeny et al. 2012; Kiely & Butterworth 2013; Kim 2009; Mallon 2007; Marsh 2001; Schofield & Butterworth 2017; Zabel 2013). Individual and community attitudes towards welfare receipt have also been associated with employment entry for welfare recipients (Schofield & Butterworth 2017).

The career and education literatures agree that transferrable 'soft skills', such as teamwork, communication skills, resilience, social skills, confidence, entrepreneurial skills, digital proficiency, creativity, etc., are considered to be more important than specialised knowledge in the workplace (Anderson et al. 2017; Loveder 2017; McQuaid et al. 2005; Siekman & Fowler 2017; Tymon 2013). The changing views on what makes a person employable and the growing emphasis on soft skills is influenced by factors such as automation, digitalisation and the digital revolution (ILO 2019; OECD 2018; World Bank 2019).

In this new labour environment, specific skills are increasingly becoming defunct/obsolete and employees are often sought for their non-technical, transferrable skills and attributes (Anderson et al. 2017; Loveder 2017; Siekman & Fowler 2017; Tymon 2013; World Bank 2019). However, jobseekers do not place enough emphasis on these soft skills when applying for jobs, even though it is what employers are seeking (Snell et al. 2016). These soft skills are often acquired though informal avenues, such as social settings and family interactions (McDonald et al. 2020).

Reliability – 'including time-keeping, meeting deadlines, taking responsibility, and attendance' – has also been associated with gaining employment (Batty et al. 2017, p. 36). In this study, such factors are considered under the theme 'routine', with many mothers and service providers reporting that mothers benefited from the routine they built within the family by attending playgroups and other family services, and this supported their employability.

Marsh also argues that a sense of wellbeing is essential in order for single parents to consider employment (Marsh 2001, p. 32).

Locus of control (that is, the belief one has about the level of control they have over a situation and the role played by outside circumstances and people) has also been associated with employment (Caliendo et al. 2015). However, it should be noted that the findings in the study by Caliendo et al. (2015) showed that this association was significant for males but not significant for females, and females' employment was shown *not* to be impacted by their locus of control. Therefore, while it should still be considered, it is possible that locus of control is less likely to be a factor which influences mothers' employability.

Where some characteristics have been shown to increase employability, many characteristics have been identified as creating barriers to employment and reduce employability, and often these factors are compounded and co-morbid. Disadvantaged families are often experiencing more than one (and often multiple) disadvantages and barriers associated with employment, such as poor school attendance by their children, criminal behaviour, housing insecurity, physical and mental health issues, drug and alcohol problems, contact with child protection systems, unemployment and welfare receipt (Bailey et al. 2018; Cobb-Clark & Zhu 2017; Dennis & Vigod 2013; Greger et al. 2015; Higgins & Kaspiew 2011; Krammer et al. 2018; Tirado-Muñoz et al. 2017; Tsantefski et al. 2015). Women who are vulnerable, such as those experiencing trauma from current or previous domestic violence, who are recovering from drug use, have no previous employment history and/or who are socially excluded are at particular disadvantage when it comes to employment (Bailey et al. 2018; Llinares-Insa et al. 2018; Wall et al. 2016).

Confidence

Confidence is a factor associated with employability which receives emphasis in this thesis. Confidence is the attribute most commonly identified by the mothers in this study as being important to one's employability. This section provides an overview of what confidence is and its association with employability.

The terms confidence and self-confidence are often used interchangeably (Perry 2011). Perry, who undertook a thorough analysis of the concept of confidence by drawing on resources across a wide range of disciplines, defines confidence as 'a person's belief that he or she can succeed' and notes that 'confidence is context-specific to particular tasks and some people

seem to display this characteristic through a wide range of activities' (2015, p. 219). Confidence is subjective and highly individualised, and much like employability, is a contested and hard-to-define concept (Perry 2015; Persson et al. 2012).

Perry (2015) notes that confidence is related to self-efficacy theory. Self-efficacy is a key concept within the psychology discipline and is a core element of social cognitive theory, developed by Albert Bandura (Bandura 1977, 1986, 2012). Self-efficacy is defined as a person's beliefs about their ability to perform a certain task, reach goals and solve problems (Bandura 1977, 1986, 2012). Some definitions and measures of self-efficacy place emphasis on people's perceptions of the level of control they have over a certain situation (Callander & Schofield 2016; McGee & McGee 2016). However, this appears to be merging the understanding of self-efficacy with another related concept defined in the literature as locus of control. Self-efficacy is a concept which can be used to measure the related concepts of wellbeing, self-esteem and self-belief in the labour market participation context (Berntson & Marklund 2007; Creed et al. 2017; Ellis & Taylor 1983; Fugate et al. 2004; Godier-McBard et al. 2020; McArdle et al. 2007; Nesdale & Pinter 2000;).

Self-efficacy can be considered at the general level (referred to as *general self-efficacy*), in relation to individuals' 'tendency to view themselves as capable of meeting task demands in a broad array of contexts' (Chen et al. 2001, p. 63). Self-efficacy can also be understood and measured in relation to the specific task to be completed (Chen et al. 2001; Pierce & Gardner 2004; Stajkovic & Luthans 1998). For example, parenting self-efficacy (commonly referred to as *parenting efficacy*) relates to a person's self-efficacy regarding their ability to perform parenting-related activates (Branch et al. 2015; Freiberg et al. 2014). General self-efficacy is predictive of training proficiency (Martocchio & Judge 1997), job attitudes (Saks 1995), and job performance (Stajkovic & Luthans 1998). The literature also shows *job search self-efficacy* to be a predictive factor in increasing job offers, gaining employment, and being unemployed for shorter amounts of time (Regenold et al. 1999; Tisch & Wolff 2015). Lower levels of self-efficacy have been reported to be associated with low-income (Callander & Schofield 2016).[8] There is also a body of work which explores self-esteem within the organisational context, and how the work-place influences one's levels of confidence (Pierce & Gardner 2004; Pierce et al. 1989).

[8] However, it is noted that this study used a measure of self-efficacy which was related to the measurement of locus of control, rather than general self-efficacy or specifically JSSE.

Confidence and self-efficacy are also related to the construct of self-concept (Marsh et al. 2018, 2019; Shavelson et al. 1976). Self-concept is common in the field of developmental and educational psychology (Marsh et al. 2018) and has been shown to be a key factor associated with success in academic, social and emotional domains (Marsh et al. 2018). Shavelson et al. (1976) considered 17 pre-existing definitions, and defined self-concept as a person's perception of themselves, which is formed through their experience and interaction with their environment and reinforced through their interactions and relationship with others (p. 411).

There are various interrelated, similar and at times identical, terms and constructs used to define, describe, explain, and measure positive self-belief across the literature, including confidence, self-efficacy, self-construct, agency, locus of control, competency, self-esteem, outcome expectancy (Marsh et al. 2019). In this thesis, the term 'confidence' is used because this is the more commonly known and verbatim language used by the mothers in this study.

The literature demonstrates that confidence is associated with a person's employability and workplace outcomes (Adam et al. 2017; Batty et al. 2017; Baumeister et al. 2003; Guilbert et al. 2016; Judge & Bono 2001; Kuster et al. 2013; McArdle et al. 2007; Persson et al. 2012; Pierce & Gardner 2004; Pierce et al. 1989). There is evidence that when single parents feel ready to work and have children at preschool age then they are quicker at becoming employed than single parents who do not feel prepared to work (Marsh 2001). Kuster et al. (2013) support the causal argument that confidence increases better work outcomes and show insignificant findings for the inverse, i.e. of work outcomes' effects on confidence.

Batty et al. (2017) evaluated a voluntary employment service for mothers, *Making It Work*, across five sites in Scotland, in the UK. The service provided intensive support to mothers to increase their employability through a range of key worker support and peer group work, as well as linking to other services and supports, such as housing, health, childcare and financial inclusion. The research found that:

> *reporting high levels of confidence was the employment capability with the strongest association with finding work and also the measure with the greatest amount of improvement after six and 12 months, with more than a third of lone parents making progress at each time point* (Batty et al. 2017, p. 42).

'Confidence in one's abilities generally enhances motivation' (Benabou & Tirole 2002, p. 871; see also Pierce & Gardner 2004), and in the case of mothers with young children, can enhance

their motivation in relation to employment. However, evidence shows LMAPs can further reduce the self-esteem and confidence of mothers (Bodsworth 2010; Brady & Cook 2015; Grahame & Marston 2012; McArthur et al. 2013; Marston & McDonald 2008).

Mothers who receive income support have been shown to express increased levels of demoralisation, including hopelessness, worthlessness, and no life satisfaction (Butterworth et al. 2006; Campbell et al. 2016). Australian research has found that interaction with the social security system and stress related to meeting welfare conditions has resulted in parents feeling disempowered, alienated and unsupported, resulting negative emotional wellbeing, reduced trust in government supports, and reduced confidence and self-esteem, and this was particularly exacerbated following the introduction of Welfare to Work changes in 2006 (Bodsworth 2010; Brady & Cook 2015; Campbell et al. 2016; Grahame & Marston 2012; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013). Given that mothers consider confidence to be the most important element of their employability, it appears to be potentially counterproductive for governments to apply compulsory participation requirements which reduce mothers' confidence.

Research by Marston and McDonald (2008) also supports this argument. They explain that mutual obligation and LMAPs are built on the assumption that jobseekers are unemployed because they lack motivation and self-efficacy, as posited by thinkers such as Mead (1986) and Murray (1990, 1994). Drawing on 75 in-depth interviews undertaken for an Australian study, Marston and McDonald evaluate whether LMAPs improve the self-efficacy of unemployed people. They found that LMAPs do not improve the motivation or self-efficacy of jobseekers and may even be undermining these qualities. Marston and McDonald (2008, p. 266) point out that 'there can be little self-efficacy cultivated in a system where the unemployed have limited voice, control and autonomy over how they engage with training, education and the labour market'.

Feelings of autonomy are related to confidence (Marston & McDonald 2008). Feeling capable of achieving outcomes and having control over one's life builds confidence in a person. However, as we have seen through numerous studies, mothers find that the sometimes invasive and controlling aspects of LMAPs and conditionality reduce mothers' independence and feelings of autonomy and results in disempowerment and reduced confidence (Campbell et al. 2016; Grahame & Marston 2012; Holdsworth 2017; Marston & McDonald 2008).

Evidence suggests that unemployed people can also increase their confidence through education and training, such as numeracy and literacy classes and learning basic computer skills (Campbell et al. 2016). However, once attendance at these classes becomes compulsory and people attend against their will through threat of losing welfare payments, the confidence-building benefits of such training may be reduced.

Another way in which a person builds confidence is through positive interactions with 'meaningful and significant others' (Baumeister 1999; Pierce & Gardner 2004). In other words, belonging to a social network increases a person's confidence (Graham & McDermott 2006; Haslam & Loughnan 2014; Keam et al. 2018). Referencing the work of Korman (1970, 1976 cited in Pierce & Gardner 2004, p. 594), Pierce & Gardner explain that

> *to the extent that others think that an individual is able, competent, and need-satisfying, and over time communicates that perception through their words and behaviours, an individual will come to hold similar self-beliefs.*

In this way, building strong, positive friendships with other mothers, and receiving confirmation of self-worth from these friendships, can support a mother to increase her confidence. The importance of social support in increasing employability is now explored.

Social support

'Social support is particularly recognised as an important resource for parents of young children' (Hancock et al. 2015). The importance of social connections for new parents during their children's early years has been highlighted in the literature, with social connections being shown to improve health, mental health and wellbeing, trust, increase feelings of parenting self-efficacy, and reduce social isolation and feelings of loneliness (Berkman et al. 2000; Hancock et al. 2015; Kawachi & Berkman 2001; Leininger et al. 2009; Manuel et al. 2012; Putnam 1995; Sander & Putnam 2009; Shulver 2011). Lack of social connection has a devastating effect on a person's confidence (Haslam & Loughnan 2014). Social support for mothers is most common in the form of friendships, as we discuss in detail in this section, and family support. As Putnam's seminal works asserted, 'the most fundamental form of social capital is the family' (1995, p. 73).

Social support can be considered in terms of *instrumental support*, including material and tangible support such as financial assistance, cooking, cleaning and informal childcare; *informational support*, involving sharing and receiving information and advice about parenting

skills and practice; and *emotional support*, through close interpersonal relationships and social bonds which provide love, care and esteem; and *appraisal support*, which 'relates to help in decision-making, giving appropriate feedback, or help deciding which course of action to take' (Berkman et al. 2000, p. 848; see also Commerford & Robinson 2016; Hancock et al. 2015, p. 2; Leahy Warren 2005; Leininger et al. 2009; Manuel et al. 2012). Different relationships can provide different types of these supports, with some providing all types, some specialising in one type, and some ties providing no supports at all (Berkman et al. 2000).

The transition to parenthood can be a difficult time, and social isolation and loneliness are particularly common for new mothers (Hancock et al. 2015; Graham & McDermott 2006; Shulver 2011). Compared to other mothers, young mothers experience additional increases in isolation, change of friendship groups and reduced levels of confidence due to social stigmatisation associated with being a young mother (Ellis-Sloan & Tamplin 2019; Graham & McDermott 2006).

A study by Cronin (2015) which examined mothers' friendship patterns showed that having a baby usually results in changes to friendship circles, with some friendships dissipating once a woman becomes a mother. Often this is due to new mothers having very limited resources, including time, money and energy, to invest in their existing or new friendships (Cronin 2015) and, as also demonstrated in this thesis, many mothers found it difficult to leave their house. Cronin found that new friendships which were created after having children were often formed with other mothers (Cronin 2015).

In a qualitative study with a small sample of teenage parents in England, Ellis-Sloan and Tamplin (2019) found most of the mothers experienced a sudden isolation and loss of friendship networks during their pregnancy. This meant they had reduced social support when their children were born and experienced social isolation, at a time when friendships and social connections have been shown to support mothers' wellbeing. Ellis-Sloan and Tamplin (2019) point out that isolation and loneliness are common for new mothers of any age, and it is even more prevalent for young mothers, who also experience increased chances of other intense challenges such as homelessness, financial hardship and being a single parent.

Evidence also shows children benefit from improvements in their mother's social support (Leininger et al. 2009) and in this way, the strengthened social supports obtained through family services can support the health and wellbeing of the children whose parents attend the services.

As outlined in the previous section, social networks can increase a person's confidence, which can lead to increased employability. Having close friendships and social supports has also been associated with employability in a study by Patulny et al., who found that 'emotional support and confidence from a close friend is a positive predictor of reduced chance of being unemployed/discouraged' and an increased chance of being in 'meaningful' work (2019, pp. 388–389). The study was conducted using data from the 2015–2016 Australian Social Attitudes Survey. In this study, it was shown that close friends are more likely to be a source of emotional support and positive reinforcement during job search efforts, rather than a means of finding the vacancy or employer contact, and that having this emotional support was predictive of being less likely to be unemployed or discouraged in job search efforts (Patulny et al. 2019).

The study by Patulny et al. (2019) study shows mothers also identify social networks as contributing to their employability through providing avenues to find out through 'word-of-mouth' about available jobs and suitable employers. Single parents often receive information and advice from friends and networks (March 2001, p. 31). Social networks have also been shown to support people in their job search ventures (Bonoli 2014; Patulny et al. 2019). However, many unemployed people have limited social networks and do not access them for job search purposes (McDonald et al. 2020; Peterie et al. 2019a; Patulny et al. 2019). Peterie et al. (2019a) argue that this is a socio-emotional related occurrence stemming from the stigma and shame attached to a person's unemployment status, rather than a personal trait or lack of understanding on behalf of the unemployed person – which the literature generally claims as the reason for the failure to network. The focus in this thesis is on how social networks and friendships support mothers' levels of confidence and wellbeing, rather than as a job search mechanism in itself.

As we can see from the above discussion, there are many factors associated with a person's employability. The following section introduces McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) framework for analysing employability with consideration of individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors.

A holistic framework of employability

In their influential paper, *The Concept of Employability,* McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) point to employability policies at the national and international levels and draw heavily on the work of Gazier (1998, 2001) to trace the many ways employability has been defined in bureaucracy

and academia over history, arguing that an individualistic, supply-side focus to employability has dominated discussion. To address the supply/demand-side orthodoxy which dominates policy discussions they propose a 'holistic' definition of the concept which espouses both supply-side and demand-side factors. Importantly, their framework includes personal circumstances which have a huge influence of employability, such as caring responsibilities and household circumstances, which are outside the immediate personal characteristics and skills of the individual (supply-side), but not quite in the broader societal sphere of influence (demand-side).

The broad definition proposed in McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) framework includes a comprehensive list of variables for three overarching, interrelated components which influence a person's employability:

- *individual factors*, including essential attributes, personal competencies, transferable skills, qualifications, labour market attachment, demographic characteristics, health and wellbeing, job search skills, adaptability and mobility

- *personal circumstances*, such as household circumstances, caring responsibilities, social and family networks and work culture, and access to resources including transport, financial capital, and social capital, and

- *external factors*, including labour market factors, macroeconomic factors, employment conditions, recruitment factors, employment policy factors and other enabling policy factors such as childcare and transport policies.

Table 3.1 sets out the full framework outlined by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005). Although the framework is now more than 15 years old, it remains extremely useful in understanding the concept of employability in current times. The framework persists as the most relevant framework for analysing mothers' employability, particularly due to the acknowledgement of personal circumstances, such as caring responsibilities, which impact so heavily on mothers' employability. However, the framework requires further nuance in order to be fully applicable to mothers in the Australian social security system. This thesis draws heavily on, and suggests additions to, the McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) framework to make it more relevant to the experience of disadvantaged mothers in the Australian context.

Table 3.1 McQuaid and Lindsay 2005: An Employability Framework (with examples)

Individual factors	Personal circumstances	External factors
• **Employability skills and attributes** *Essential attributes* Basic social skills; honesty and integrity; basic personal presentation; reliability; willingness to work; understanding of actions and consequences; positive attitude to work; responsibility; self-discipline *Personal competencies* Proactivity; diligence; self-motivation; judgement; initiative; assertiveness; confidence; act autonomously *Basic transferable skills* Prose and document literacy; writing; numeracy; verbal presentation *Key transferable skills* Reasoning; problem-solving; adaptability; work-process management; team working; personal task and time management; functional mobility; basic ICT skills; basic interpersonal and communication skills; emotional and aesthetic customer service skills *High level transferable skills* Team working; business thinking; commercial awareness; continuous learning; vision; job-specific skills; enterprise skills *Qualifications* Formal academic and vocational qualifications; job-specific qualifications *Work knowledge base* Work experience; general work skills and personal aptitudes; commonly valued transferable skills (such as driving); occupational specific skills *Labour market attachment* Current unemployment/ employment duration;	• **Household circumstances** *Direct caring responsibilities* Caring for children, elderly relatives, etc. *Other family and caring responsibilities* Financial commitments to children or other family members outside the individual's household; emotional and/or time commitments to family members or others *Other household circumstances* The ability to access safe, secure, affordable and appropriate housing • **Work culture** The existence of a culture in which work is encouraged and supported within the family, among peers or other personal relationships and the wider community • **Access to resources** *Access to transport* Access to own or readily available private transport; ability to walk appropriate distances *Access to financial capital* Level of household income; extent and duration of any financial hardship; access to formal and informal sources of financial support; management of income and debt *Access to social capital* Access to personal and family support networks; access to formal and informal community support networks; number, range and status of informal social network contacts	• **Demand factors** *Labour market factors* Level of local and regional or other demand; nature and changes of local and regional demand (required skill levels; occupational structure of vacancies; sectors where demand is concentrated); location, centrality/remoteness of local labour markets in relation to centres of industry/employment; level of competition for jobs; actions of employers' competitors; changing customer preferences, etc. *Macroeconomic factors* Macroeconomic stability; medium- to long-term business confidence; level and nature of labour demand within the national economy *Vacancy characteristics* Remuneration; conditions of work; working hours and prevalence of shift work; opportunities for progression; extent of part-time, temporary and casual work; availability of 'entry-level' positions *Recruitment factors* Employers' formal recruitment and selection procedures; employers' general selection preferences (for example, for recent experience); employers' search channels (methods of searching for staff when recruiting); discrimination (for example, on the basis of age, gender, race, area of residence, disability, unemployment duration); form and extent of employers' use of informal networks; demanding only appropriate qualifications or credentials

Table 3.1 McQuaid and Lindsay 2005: An Employability Framework (with examples) *(continued)*

Individual factors	Personal circumstances	External factors
number and length of spells of unemployment/inactivity; 'balance' of work history • **Demographic characteristics** Age, gender, etc. • **Health and well-being** *Health* Current physical health; current mental health; medical history; psychological well-being *Disability* Nature and extent of: physical disability; mental disability; learning disability • **Job seeking** Effective use of formal search services/information resources (including ICT); awareness and effective use of informal social networks; ability to complete CVs/application forms; interview skills/ presentation; access to references; awareness of strengths and weaknesses; awareness of location and type of opportunities in the labour market; realistic approach to job targeting • **Adaptability and mobility** Geographical mobility; wage flexibility and reservation wage; occupational flexibility (working hours, occupations, sectors)		• **Enabling support factors** *Employment policy factors* Accessibility of public services and job-matching technology (such as job search/counselling); penetration of public services (for example, use and credibility among employers/job seekers); incentives within tax-benefits system; existence of 'welfare to work'/activation and pressure to accept jobs; accessibility and limitations on training; extent of local/ regional development policies; measures to ease the school–work transition and address employability issues at school and university *Other enabling policy factors* Accessibility and affordability of public transport, child care and other support services

Individual perceptions of employability

In a recent literature review on the concept of employability, Guilbert et al. (2016) categorise current debates on employability into three dominant themes: educational and governmental; organisational; and individual. The third theme, individual employability, focuses on the individual's perceived employability, such as self-belief and perceptions of their skills, abilities and chances of gaining employment.

Across the career and education literatures there is discussion of individual perceptions of one's employability, for example from the perspective of graduates and current employees (De Vos et al. 2011; Guilbert et al. 2016; Tomlinson 2008; Tymon 2013; Van der Heijde & Van

der Heijden 2006). However, in the public policy literature in which this thesis is situated, there is limited understanding of how social security recipients themselves define employability and how they interact with the notion in their engagement with the workforce (Cortis & Meagher 2009; Guilbert et al. 2016; Marston 2008; Wright 2012).

Researchers from France and Switzerland, Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet and Rossier (2016) undertook a recent literature review and analysis of the concept of employability across the international literature. Recognising the gaps in the literature, they outline a suite of research which is required to expand the field of knowledge on employability in Western welfare states. Guilbert et al. (2016) highlight the need for future research to explore the concept of employability from the job seekers' point of view, including identifying core and outlying determinants of employability by seeking to understand job seekers' views of constraints and factors increasing their employment. They also note a specific focus on the employability of vulnerable groups would be a beneficial avenue of future research, in order to ensure the diverse and unique needs of such groups are considered in policy and practice. Without giving reference to specific timeframes or regions/countries of interest, Guilbert et al. (2016, p. 81) state:

> *It would be interesting to study jobseekers in an exploratory research, given the small number of studies with this population and the current labor market.*
>
> *The objective of this qualitative study would be to compare the richness and profusion of scientific work on the theme of employability with the experience and context of jobseekers. Consequently, this would be asking them what they perceive as constraints and what they perceive as factors increasing their employability.*

This thesis contributes to addressing this research agenda and makes a theoretical contribution to the public policy literature through a qualitative exploration of how mothers in the social security system define and interact with the concept of employability. This involves an analysis of the ways in which these understandings align with, or diverge from, the definitions of employability in the literature and policy domain.

In exploring the discourse of welfare and conditionality, Marston (2008) argues that those who such policies apply to have not been part of the construction of the concepts. By including

mothers' voices in the construction of employability, which this thesis does, there is potential for future policies to better meet the needs of mothers and their children.

The role(s) of the 'mother'

As pointed out by Froyland et al. (2019, p. 321), both demand- and supply-side approaches to employability 'share a perception of employment as the normal state of participation in society'. Whether employment is seen as a way for an individual to provide for themselves, or as an avenue for greater social participation and wellbeing, the premise is that employment is the intended outcome. Holdsworth (2017, p. 613) explains that '[W]ithin existing rhetoric, to be seen to be fulfilling one's obligation one must be involved in paid work'. As presented in the previous chapter, over time these views of adults as workers have also extended to people who are caring for young children, and the role of the mother in the social security system has shifted from being a carer/parent to being a worker who must engage with the paid workforce (Briar & Patterson 2005; Campbell et al. 2016; Cortis et al. 2008; Humpage 2015; Millar & Rowlingson 2001).

This current policy approach undervalues the essential role that mothers are already undertaking by raising children, in addition to the numerous other unpaid roles vital to the functioning of society, including caring for the aged and disabled and volunteer work. Further, as expressed by the mothers in this study, usually mothers' primary focus is on the often-times difficult and time-consuming job of caring for their children and their role as a mother – employability is not a priority. This conflict in priorities can make it difficult for mothers to balance their competing roles, and this impacts mothers' experience as a mother and in the paid-workforce (Cooney 2006; Millar & Rowlingson 2001).

Most parents who take time out of employment to 'stay-at-home' and care for children are female (Baxter 2018; Craig et al. 2010). For women, the continued gendered role of caring for children, as well as the gendered division of labour within the household, can operate as a key barrier to employment (AIFS 2016; Baxter 2013; Briar & Patterson 2005; Craig et al. 2010; Kowalewska 2017; Stanwick et al. 2017; Stockey-Bridge 2015). In addition to caring for children, women are also impacted by caring for others, such as ageing parents (Millar & Ridge 2017). Many of these responsibilities not only impose a barrier to gaining employment but can make it difficult to maintain employment. If working, some parents may be less able to perform a full-time caring role and must meet this need in other ways, including through an increased reliance of family and social networks (Cook 2012; Fok & McVicar 2013). Since the introduction

of increased conditions for parents and the shifting focus from parenting to work, there have been increasing concerns that these changes are taking away people's ability to participate in volunteer work, communities and caring roles (Holdsworth 2017; Lister 2010 p. xvii).

As expressed by Cook and Noblet (2012, p. 215), 'the importance of 'motherhood' does not diminish with the transition from welfare to work'. As previously noted, there can be a significant tension between a welfare recipient's role as a caregiver or parent, and their role as an employee/worker (Baker & Tippin 2002; Millar & Rowlingson 2001). Cooney (2006) argues that this tension is largely ignored by the welfare-to-work agenda, and activation policies aimed at parents often prioritise employment over the immediate and long-term wellbeing of the mother, children, and family. Sometimes a parent considers it the best choice to be home caring for their young children rather than in work, particularly for single parents in the time following a difficult separation or life change (Marsh 2001). As the findings of this study suggest, many mothers who would prefer to focus on their parenting role and raising their children are overly stressed and taxed by the demands of LMAPs and the push to employment, which detracts from their wellbeing and their ability to parent as well as they choose. It appears that, due to this tension, both the parenting efforts and employment efforts are diminished.

Cooper (2021) argues that low-income mothers have faced a long history of additional discrimination and 'demonisation' through government policy, mainstream media and social attitudes which portray their parenting practices to be below standard and inferior to mothers with higher incomes. This may influence the relationship between mothers in the social security system and their work and parenting practices. However, while there are significant challenges in defining what a 'good parent' is, there is much evidence to show that mothers experiencing poverty provide the same levels of care to their children as other mothers, and that a lack of resources only leads to parenting 'is different rather than deficient' (Cooper 2021, p. 14). In many instances poor mothers show higher levels of 'ideal' parenting skills and devotion to their children, such as more children doing academic, art and musical activities with their parents at home on a daily basis, or mothers 'going without' to ensure their children's needs are met, for example going without meals to ensure their children are fed (Cooper 2021).

Despite government claims otherwise (Parliament of Australia 2005), when the 2006 changes were introduced, research using Australian survey results showed general societal expectations did not concur with a necessity to require increased maternal employment when children were young (Brady & Cook 2015). However, following the introduction of participation requirements for parents, qualitative research found that mothers had begun to internalise the

narrative that being on welfare is undesirable and mothers' role as a worker is more valuable than their role as a parent (Brady & Cook 2015; Grahame & Marston 2012; see also Peterie et al. 2019b for more on the internalisation of derogatory narratives of being unemployed).

Government rhetoric on the value of paid work and policies which have become progressively more punishing for non-compliance with work-related requirements is leading to increased stigma and shame for mothers who are caring for children either through choice or necessity (Brady & Cook 2015; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013). In an exploration of mothers' experiences on welfare, Holdsworth explains that '[S]tigma calls into question an individual's moral character and behavioural "choices", and robs them of their autonomy and sense of control, dignity and right to full citizenship' (2017, p. 617). Being a single parent, receiving social security and accessing certain services can give rise to feelings of failure to meet societal expectations of motherhood and citizenship – that is, that a mother meet her familial obligations through self-sufficiency by means of paid work (either hers or her husband's) without reliance on the state (Ellis-Sloan 2014; Holdsworth 2017; Reid & Herbert 2005). This stigmatisation can have severe negative impacts on mothers' wellbeing, mental health, motivation, and engagement with community, family and paid employment (Brady & Cook 2015; Ellis-Sloan 2014; Grahame & Marston 2012; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013). It appears that mutual obligation is leading to the stigmatisation of mothers, reduced self-worth, and motivation, which is counterproductive to the underlying aims of the policy agenda to reduce welfare dependency and encourage mothers' engagement with the paid workforce (Holdsworth 2017).

Mothers' experiences of employment and welfare

While there are no other studies which specifically explore mothers' views on the concept of employability, there are many related studies which provide insight into mothers' experiences of combining parenting and employment which have findings relevant to this thesis. One such study led by Jane Millar and Tess Ridge highlights many of the issues faced by mothers in relation to employment. The major longitudinal UK-based study tracked the experiences of single mothers who had left benefits and moved into work (Millar & Ridge 2017, 2020). The research involved in-depth interviews with mothers and children from single-mother families over a period of 14 to 15 years. The study also examined the impact of mothers' work in relation to the children's experience and wellbeing over the longer term. Based on the study, Millar and Ridge coined the concept 'family-work project', as single mothers' engagement in the paid work-force involves and impacts on the whole family, not just the mother with the job.

The focus in Millar and Ridge's research is different to that of this thesis in many ways (i.e. it focuses on mothers who had left benefits and moved into work, while this thesis focuses on parents currently receiving a social security benefit; it focuses on single mothers and initial intake did not include partnered mothers; and it focuses on factors which helped women stay in work, rather than considering mothers' views on factors which support women to enter or return to work). However, there are many findings from the study which are highly relevant to this thesis, and the experiences of the women in the study shine a light on many of the issues faced by those balancing their carer and employee roles. This section explores some of the findings from the study.

Millar and Ridge's study shows employment was important for the mothers in the study because of the self-respect and identity it afforded them, in addition to the income and living standards it provided. Millar and Ridge (2017, 2020) found that pathways to employment are often complex, unconventional, and take time, with many women in the study moving between employment, unemployment, and employment-related activities such as volunteer work, rather than making one move into sustainable employment. Over time, most of the women in the study had stable employment, however most had remained in low-paid work and similar positions. Only a few had climbed the 'career ladder'. The study found that commencing work impacts on the whole family, as many changes occur and a new balance needs to be established. Getting the right life/work/care balance within families is dependent on the individual circumstances of the family and can be difficult to achieve. The study also looked at the role of children in supporting families to manage work-life transitions and support mothers in work and found many children in the study took on greater responsibilities when their mothers returned to work (e.g. making school lunches, cleaning, caring for younger siblings).

The Millar and Ridge study identified several factors which supported or hindered the single mothers' employment. Family support for childcare, financial support from the state, and employer flexibility are key factors influencing a women's ability to stay in employment. The relationship single mothers have with their former partner can have a massive impact on women's lives, including employment and childcare support. As echoed by the findings in this thesis, mothers and children who had experienced family and domestic violence were also impacted in the long term and experienced trust and confidence issues and were cautious regarding their relationships. Women's employment is also impacted by gendered disadvantage in the workplace and government policies.

Millar and Ridge (2017, 2020) note that the need for mothers to cope with day-to-day life had meant they had not been able to focus on long term planning and security, such as retirement savings and secure housing, and therefore did not have the foundations available to support their children into adulthood, or themselves into retirement. The women in the study often had feelings of insecurity when considering future retirement, housing in retirement, and health, often due to previous and current low incomes and inability to save for the future and security in retirement. Millar and Ridge refer to the work of Watts and Fitzpatrick (2018), noting that conditionality had increased for the mothers over the time of the study.

Transitioning to adulthood was difficult for the children of the single parents followed in the UK longitudinal study (Millar & Ridge 2017, 2020), in part due to the employment market for young people, the availability of support (including financial support) from their family, and the lack of support available from the state. While all children who had transitioned to adulthood during the study had been employed since finishing school, most were in low paid and insecure employment, in line with the employment experiences of many young people. Many children from these families also experienced other disadvantages, such as insecure housing or homelessness, lack of financial and social resources. The transition to adulthood for the children in the study was often difficult due to having a low financial-base and lack of financial security net through their family, as challenges and life events are harder to overcome and recover from when one is in poverty and has a lack of resources to draw on.

Evidence of LMAPs for mothers

In a systematic review of qualitative studies on single parent's experiences of welfare to work programs, Campbell et al. (2016) identified a range of common findings across the literature. The studies included in the review covered a wide variety of welfare regimes across five high-income countries. The systematic review found some reports of positive results from LMAPs, including mothers who gained employment under the programs reporting increased self-worth and confidence, increased income and feeling like a good role model for children when working (Campbell et al. 2016). Some parents also reported increased confidence when completing basic education and computer skills courses as part of an LMAP (Campbell et al. 2016). However, most studies included in the analysis found the programs had a detrimental impact on single mothers and their children across a range of domains (Campbell et al. 2016).

Due to mothers' prioritisation of their caring role, many were financially penalised or experienced reduced wages when childcare was unavailable (Campbell et al. 2016). Mothers

also reported lack of time available for their parenting role due to working, which lead to harsher parenting practices and reduced ability to supervise children due to exhaustion or leaving children unsupervised due to lack of childcare (Campbell et al. 2016).

Many studies included in the systematic review by Campbell et al. (2016) reported that single parents felt poorly treated by the LMAP service providers and were pushed into unsuitable work or employment that did not fit their skill sets, caring responsibilities and interests. The review found:

> *the employment opportunities available to respondents were typically: at or near the minimum wage; physically demanding; lacking autonomy; and had limited potential for career development. Many jobs involved working atypical hours outside those of regular formal childcare, inconsistent shift patterns, and long hours. Jobs were often short term, resulting in frequent repetition of WtW [Welfare to Work] procedures including benefit applications, job searching and the upheaval of reorganising domestic arrangements to accommodate a new job* (Campbell et al. 2016, p. 6).

Peck and Theodore also argue that LMAPs which involve temporary reattachment to the labour force, such as short-term work placements, result in increased insecurity in employment and create churn and redistribution of unemployment in the labour market rather than increasing sustainable jobs and employment. Being pushed into unsuitable jobs can also result in poor job satisfaction. In an Australian study exploring single mothers' job satisfaction when moving from welfare to work, Cook and Noblet (2012, p. 215) conclude that LMAPs may have multiple detrimental impacts:

> *The job satisfaction of these single mothers was significantly lower than the general population, and lower job satisfaction was associated with higher parental distress. Previous research has found that job satisfaction is an important antecedent of a range of health and attitudinal variables, including psychological wellbeing, commitment to the organisation and intention to quit. Therefore, if the disproportionate levels of dissatisfaction evident in the current investigation were an accurate reflection of sole parents' experiences of compulsory employment programs, the human and economic consequences of these programs may be very costly (Wright & Cropanzano 2007; Fischer et al. 2009).*

The detrimental impact of LMAPs on mothers' mental health is also a significant finding reported across the literature. In their systematic review, Campbell et al. (2016, p. 7) found numerous reports of the impact of LMAPS on mental health:

> *Many respondents reported that participation in WtW [Welfare to Work] increased stress. The combined pressures of domestic obligations, involvement in WtW, employment requirements and financial insecurity were linked to poor mental health (stress, anxiety, panic attacks), depression, and fatigue…Participation in WtW could contribute to low self-esteem and low self-efficacy, the attributes respondents often required to improve their chances of gaining employment and independently supporting themselves and their families. For many, WtW was experienced as stigmatising, and questions could be perceived as humiliating and intrusive.*

Stigmatisation due to social security receipt and LMAPs is a common finding across the literature, and is explored further below and in the following chapters. It is also important to note that feeling scrutinised and stigmatised can result in a withdrawal from services and supports (Brady & Cook 2015; McArthur et al. 2013).

These findings are important to note. If LMAPs are leading to reduced confidence, then the policies may also have the adverse unintended consequence of reducing a mother's employability.

Evidence of ParentsNext outcomes

Recent reports into the effectiveness of the ParentsNext program and its implementation have found the policy has had mixed results.

The Department of Jobs and Small Business undertook an evaluation of the ParentsNext program for the operational period of 4 April 2016 to 30 June 2017 in the 10 LGAs where it operated during this time. Using administrative data from the Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business and Department of Human Services, the 2018 ParentsNext evaluation showed 5 per cent of total participants participated in part or full-time work for their ParentsNext activity placement (Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018, p. 40). Most participants (56 per cent) took part in a ParentsNext specific activity (such as playgroup attendance, physical and mental health-related activities, work-readiness activities), followed by 21 per cent in education or training, and 15 per cent in non-vocational assistance (Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018, p. 40). Compared to comparison groups,

ParentsNext participants had a higher likelihood of reporting employment from earnings (by between 2.3 and 5.7 percentage points, depending on participant subcategory) and being in education or training (by between 2.9 and 4.3 percentage points) (Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018, p. 43–44). Surveyed participants also reported higher levels of self-reported wellbeing and community connection compared to non-participant survey respondents (Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018, p. 46).

The Senate Community Affairs References Committee undertook an Inquiry into ParentsNext and delivered its final report, titled 'ParentsNext, including its trial and subsequent broader rollout' in March 2019 (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019). Submissions to the Inquiry from organisations contracted by the government to deliver ParentsNext showed that some women were benefiting from the program, particularly those who were socially isolated and not connected to broader supports (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019; Mission Australia 2019). However, the Inquiry also had many less-than-favourable findings, including that the program potentially violated human rights and discriminated against women and vulnerable groups, and the final report recommended that the program not continue in its current form (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019).

The Inquiry found the compulsory nature of ParentsNext created extreme financial difficulties for many participants and resulted in significant psychological distress and hardship, including risk of poverty and homelessness, due to actual, or threat of, suspended payments because of non-compliance with the policy requirements (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019; Mission Australia 2019). In the first seven months of the program operating nationally, over 30 per cent of the participants had their payment suspended under the program (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019, p. 52). Many parents reported having their payments suspended under the compliance framework due to no fault of their own, including ParentsNext providers making mistakes, online reporting system outages and other administrative errors (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019).

The Senate Inquiry found many ParentsNext participants were unaware of the program, why they had been referred to participate, and their rights under the program. The eligibility of many participants had not been communicated correctly to participants and many participants were wrongly informed of their eligibility, resulting in many people being referred to a provider and subsequently being told they did not have to compulsorily participate and vice versa. The

Committee received many reports of parents being wrongly referred to the program and ParentsNext provider and government mismanagement of exemptions from the program.

Parents reported to the Senate Inquiry that their ParentsNext participation plans included participation in services, including family services, which they were already accessing or which they felt did not contribute to their work readiness (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019). There were many instances where parents' participation plans did not account for their families' personal circumstances and individual needs, and parents reported being coerced by providers to agree to the participation plans and sign privacy waivers at the risk of having payments suspended. Some parents who were already studying reported that participation plans interrupted their existing study and added additional administrative tasks. Further, the costs associated with study or other participation requirements, such as course fees and travel costs, were often not covered by the program and this placed additional financial burden on participants.

The Senate Inquiry found that issues related to domestic violence were often not dealt with appropriately or sensitively, with many parents not being eligible for an exemption and being re-traumatised through the service, for example by being made to recount their experience several times to various provider staff (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019). Many of the ParentsNext provider staff did not have specialist training in supporting people in domestic violence or other traumatic experiences and therefore were ill-equipped to provide the necessary support the participants required (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019). While some submissions to the Inquiry noted that ParentsNext providers were able to refer some women to specialist domestic violence services and help women in difficult circumstances, the committee also noted that the program could be improved to better support women in current and former domestic violence situations and also acknowledge the structural barriers to employment, education and training which domestic violence created (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019; Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand 2019; Mission Australia 2019).

Where previously participation in family services such as playgroups had been largely voluntary, ParentsNext required some parents to partake in services as part of their compulsory participation agreement under the policy. This changed the dynamics and makeup of many of the services. Submissions to the Inquiry noted that most services did not receive any additional funding to accommodate for the additional participants referred to the services through ParentsNext (Mission Australia 2019), and in many instances ParentsNext providers

were referring parents to family services without making any contact with the family service in advance (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019). Services were also required to report to the ParentsNext providers about attendance and participation by the ParentsNext participants, which created some tension for the service providers as well as requiring additional time for already busy and underfunded services.

The Senate Inquiry Final Report references Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (2019) in claiming that participation in parenting services such as playgroup has 'no bearing on labour market outcomes or work readiness' (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019, p. 42). Submissions to the Inquiry reported that compulsory attendance at these programs were counterproductive to the aims of the services and disempowering parents and argued that voluntary participation in these services would result in better outcomes (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2019; Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand 2019). The Committee concluded that the goals of ParentsNext are not clear, and that if it is a pre-employment program then it should not require compulsory attendance at parenting services (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019).

The Government's response to the Inquiry included some minor changes, such as reducing parents' reporting requirements to once per fortnight, improving communication on the aims of the program and parents' rights, sending reminders to parents to report prior to automatic payment suspension, and allowing some new categories for participation exemptions (Australian Government 2019b). However, ParentsNext remains compulsory, eligibility requirements did not change, and the Targeted Compliance Framework still largely applies, resulting in payment suspensions for some parents. The Government referred to the ParentsNext Evaluation Report (2018) and evidence from prior pilot programs in its response (Australian Government 2019b); these prior programs are briefly explained below.

The former Australian Government Department of Employment also conducted an evaluation in 2015 of the HYP and SJF measures which operated prior to ParentsNext. A difference-in-differences approach was used to estimate the impact of the measures on trial participants, using administrative data to assess criteria against those for comparison groups which were selected from LGAs where the measures were not operating. The evaluation found HYP participants' chance of participating in education was 30 percentage points higher compared to the comparison group. Chance of attaining Year 12 or equivalent qualification was 14 percentage points higher and use of approved childcare was also 14 percentage points higher compared to young parents in the comparison group. These findings were positive

across all 10 locations, noting that other measures were also introduced in the locations when HYP and SJF were implemented. The estimated impact of SJF was not as high as that of HYP, potentially because of the voluntary nature of participation in this program. SJF participants were found to have a 2.3 percentage point higher chance of engaging in education and 2.4 percentage point higher chance of using childcare compared to the comparison group, with no change in employment engagement (Australian Government Department of Education 2017b).

Outcomes from participation in family services

Many family services and programs have not been thoroughly evaluated and causal links between participation in the services and social and employment and related outcomes have not been strongly established (Acquah & Thévenon 2020; Berthelsen et al. 2012; Commerford & Robinson 2016; Fox et al. 2015; Hancock et al. 2015; Homel et al. 2006; Nicholson et al. 2010; Shulver 2011; Williams et al. 2018). Williams et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review of evidence on supported playgroups and found the initiative is an intervention primarily found in Australia, with limited research on supported playgroups available from the USA, UK and Canada. They note the quality of the research to be low, with very few of the studies using experimental and quasi-experimental methods higher in the evidential hierarchy, and most studies using qualitative evidence or low-quality quantitative pre-post designs which do not allow for causal claims to be made on the outcomes of the services (Williams et al. 2018).

However, there is a growing body of evidence which indicates that family services may have a range of benefits to children and families, from improved educational, developmental and behavioural outcomes for children, to improved parent-child relationships (Commerford & Robinson 2016; Fox et al. 2015; Homel et al. 2006; Moran & Ghate 2005; Manning et al. 2006; Hancock et al. 2015; Oke et al. 2007; Williams et al. 2018; Wise et al. 2005; Wright et al. 2018). Acquah and Thévenon (2020, p. 8) draw on studies from countries across the OECD to argue that:

> *[F]amily support services are particularly important for parents with limited access to material resources, with limited support from extended family and those who are socially isolated. Family services can also help families cope with personal or family circumstances that affect parental engagement and the quality of time they spent with their children.*

The majority of research into family services focuses on children's outcomes, with some studies considering the parents social and parenting outcomes (Keam et al. 2018). Further, a review of a selected number of early childhood intervention programs by Wise et al. (2005) showed that most reported impacts on parent outcomes were statistically negligible to small, and most significant impacts were for short-term outcomes rather than long-term.

This chapter will now explore the limited evidence in the literature on the influence of participation family services in relation to mothers' employment, confidence, and social outcomes.

Family services, employment and skills

There is some Australian research which demonstrates the flow-on effects of family and early intervention programs have been shown to reduce welfare receipt, increase employment rates, improve work skills and increase income (Edwards et al. 2009; Homel et al. 2006; Manning et al. 2006).

A study by Pezzullo et al. (2010) explored how Communities for Children, and the Positive Parenting Program (which is similar to many programs delivered under Communities for Children, Children and Parenting Support Services and Intensive Family Support Services) worked to increase family functioning, and drew on the literature to theorise about how increased family functioning could increase the economic productivity of participants. While their findings showed an increase in family functioning due to the services, quantitative analysis of economic productivity in the study focused on education levels rather than employment. Edwards et al. (2009) used longitudinal data and difference-in-differences statistical models to evaluate the implementation of Communities for Children services and found that the program resulted in fewer children growing up in jobless families, including for the most disadvantaged families.

A study by Keam et al. (2018) into community playgroups showed how many mothers increased their confidence through attending playgroup, and subsequently volunteered to take on a leadership position within the playgroups setting which further supported their confidence, leadership, communication, administration, social and other employability skills. These mothers then often went on to further community leadership roles such as membership on preschool and school councils. However, it should be noted that this study focused on community playgroups and the levels of disadvantage reported among the research

participants was low (according to reported income and education levels) compared to those who receive social security payments, or typically attend supported playgroups and family services.

Family services, confidence and wellbeing

Participation in family services can also contribute to improved confidence, which the mothers in this study consider as being vital to their employability.

Levels of self-respect and confidence (self-efficacy) have been shown to be positively affected by participation in family services (Bohr et al. 2010; Commerford & Robinson 2016; Graham & McDermott 2006; Guest & Keatinge 2009; Hackworth et al. 2013; Homel et al. 2015; Jackson 2011; McShane et al. 2016; Williams et al. 2018). There is also a range of evidence demonstrating that family and parenting services increase parental self-efficacy which can have a flow-on effect to general levels of self-efficacy/confidence (Branch et al., 2015; Commerford & Robinson 2016; Edwards et al. 2009; Guest & Keatinge 2009; Hackworth et al. 2013; Katsikitis et al. 2013; Kendall et al. 2013; Jackson 2011; Oke et al. 2007; Wittkowski et al. 2016). However, it should be noted that there are also studies into the impacts of playgroups which show no significant effects on parenting self-efficacy (Nicholson et al. 2010; Williams et al. 2018).

Some of the mothers who participated in this doctoral study spoke about how poor mental health and post-natal depression were a barrier to employment. Some of the mothers also highlighted how their own mental health concerns and post-natal depression were in part alleviated through their attendance at the services. These findings echo other research which points to the positive impact social supports and family services can have on mental health (Berkman et al. 2000; Ellis-Sloan 2015; Ellis-Sloan & Tamplin 2019; Guest & Keatinge 2009; Homel et al. 2015; Manuel et al. 2012; Mills et al. 2013; Strange et al. 2014; Nicholson et al. 2010; Oke et al. 2007; Shulver 2011; Williams et al. 2018). Research by Berthelsen et al. (2012) into playgroup attendance found a high proportion of parents attending playgroup reported a history of depression. It should be noted that one quantitative study found mental health issues of mothers with education levels of Year 10 or below to statistically worsen with the implementation of a family service in the area; however, the authors note this could be due to mothers having better understanding of mental health through the service and having better access to supports to address and report the condition (Edwards et al. 2009).

Existing research indicates that playgroups and other family services can act like a 'soft entry' point where families are able to receive access and referrals to a broader range of services, and more intensive supports if required (Commerford & Robinson 2016; Cortis et al. 2009; Jackson 2013; Stratigos & Fenech 2018; Williams et al. 2018; Wright et al. 2018). This is a key benefit of the services, as mothers who may have other needs, such as those experiencing mental health conditions, domestic violence, homelessness, child behavioural issues, etc., receive access and referrals to further support services and help, which in turn supports the wellbeing of the mother and children.

As well as receiving referrals to other services, the literature demonstrates that family services are also an important source of information and guidance on a range of things, such as parenting skills, childcare, and child health and development, particularly for disadvantaged mothers (Berthelsen et al. 2012; McLean et al. 2017; Oke et al. 2007; Shulver 2011; Stratigos & Fenech 2018).

Family services, social networks and friendship

Friendship and community have positive impacts on the wellbeing of parents and families (Edwards et al. 2009; Guest & Keatinge 2009; Keam et al. 2018; Jackson 2011; Shulver 2011). Many parents attend playgroup and family services in order to access support and build friendships and connections with other parents, and the services have been shown to have positive social impacts such as reducing social isolation, improving social support networks and friendships (Berthelsen et al. 2012; Commerford & Robinson 2016; Fuller et al. 2019; Gibson et al. 2015; Hancock et al. 2015; Harman et al. 2014; Homel et al. 2006; Jackson 2011; Keam et al. 2018; McArthur & Winkworth 2016; McShane et al. 2016; McLean et al. 2017, 2020; Oke et al. 2007; Shulver 2011; Stockey-Bridge 2015; Williams et al. 2018; Wright et al. 2018). McShane et al. (2016) showed how participation in playgroups can increase social networks for parents and are helpful for parents previously in employment to maintain social connections with other adults after leaving the workforce to care for a child.

Playgroup Australia (2013, p. 3) highlights the claimed benefits of playgroups, which have been reiterated by the mothers who participated in this research:

> *Community Playgroups have been significant in mitigating the sense of isolation so common amongst those caring alone for young children. For the adults this has happened through the interaction and information exchange with each other. For many*

> *parents and carers long-term friendships are formed. For children this benefit has also come through play and interaction with other children, but most importantly through the sense of belonging that comes with being part of a community.*

The literature suggests that 'programs or services that promote the development of social networks for parents, particularly parents who are socially isolated, can [therefore] be a valuable tool for new parents' (Hancock et al. 2015, p. 2). A previous study by Ellis-Sloan (2015) showed that facilitated support groups, such as playgroups, provided an environment for the young mothers in the study mothers to make new friendships and social connections. Playgroups provided the mothers with an opportunity to 'vent' and share their experiences with other mothers in similar situations, and through this the groups supported mothers to feel normal in their role as a mother (Ellis-Sloan 2015, p. 543). Many of the young mothers in Ellis-Sloan's study did not have established friendship networks outside of the facilitated group setting, and so the groups provided an important and safe space to meet other parents.

Ellis-Sloan's (2015) research demonstrated new friendships were especially supported by group facilitators who connected mothers with similar interests. This finding is reflected across the literature, which highlights the importance of the role of facilitators in fostering friendships, creating supportive social environments for service participants to meet, and referring families on to other support services as relevant (Commerford & Robinson 2016; Ellis-Sloan 2015; Flaxman et al. 2009; Graham & McDermott 2006; Moran & Ghate 2005; Oke et al. 2007; Shulver 2011; Williams et al. 2018).

Having strong friendships and social supports can increase mothers' confidence (Graham & McDermott 2006). A study by Jackson (2011) examined three supported playgroups in Queensland, Australia. Jackson (2011) found the social supports and friendships built through playgroup reduced feelings of social isolation experienced by families and also contributed to increased parental wellbeing and confidence. Studies by Mills et al. (2013) and Berthelsen et al. (2012) also found mothers appreciated sharing experiences with other mothers in a group setting and looked forward to 'getting out of the house' to meet other parents in an environment where their children were occupied playing with other children. When their children were busy playing, the mothers had the chance to have a break and enjoy adult conversation with other mothers – an opportunity they rarely had outside the playgroup setting.

The study by Ellis-Sloan and Tamplin highlighted that social connections and 'friendships cannot be formed in a vacuum' (2019, p. 212) and an important role is played by mothers'

access to institutional settings where new friendships can be made. For many of the young mothers in the study who were not engaged in education or employment, settings such as playgroups were the primary opportunity to meet other mothers. Ellis-Sloan and Tamplin argue that because of this there remains a role for the state in providing supported environments where mothers can build social connections and friendships, rather than focusing on purely economic or educational policies for mothers' social inclusion (Ellis-Sloan & Tamplin 2019). Hancock et al. (2015) note that formal childcare can also offer a venue for mothers to meet other friends and build social connections, but note that this is not always the case, and because childcare is not accessed by all mothers, particularly those not working or studying, then other venues outside of formal childcare are important.

Another qualitative Australian study, undertaken by Hancock et al. (2015), used data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children to see the relationship between participation in playgroups and social connections and friendships. In the study, Hancock et al. (2015) found that parents who did not participate in a playgroup were twice as likely to report having no friends or social connections in subsequent reporting periods compared with those who did regularly attend, even after controlling for initial friendship connections and other socio-demographic factors. Hancock et al. (2015, p. 1) conclude that:

> *[T]hese results provide evidence that persistent playgroup participation may acts [sic] as a protective factor against poor social support outcomes. Socially isolated parents may find playgroups a useful resource to build their social support networks.*

The downsides of attending family services

While there are many benefits to participation in family services, it is common that many people who may benefit most from the services do not attend (Berthelsen et al. 2012; Cortis et al. 2009; Hancock et al. 2012; Moran & Ghate 2005; Moore 2012; Nicholson et al. 2010; Shulver 2011). McArthur and Winkworth (2016) point out that many parents who may benefit most from family services are sometimes the least likely to access the services and seek help and support.

Research by McArthur et al. (2010), which explored the service needs of families receiving welfare, noted the difficulties faced by parents on their return to work, particularly regarding childcare, the need to balance welfare activation requirements with the needs of children, and the unique issues being experienced by the family which made return to work difficult. The

research showed that often the most disadvantaged families were least likely to engage with services and supports and tended to rely more on social networks or cope on their own without seeking support externally. Other research has shown that fathers are also less likely to participate in family services than mothers (Berlyn et al. 2008; Moran & Ghate 2005). This was also an observation made in this research, where approximately five of the approximate 200 service participants attending the services where interviews or focus groups took place were in a father role.

In research by Oke et al. (2007), parents were interviewed about reasons for attending or not attending playgroups. One of the reasons for non-attendance at family services include lack of knowledge about the services; however, once they became aware of the service through participation in the study, most of the parents interviewed were interested in attending a playgroup with their child/ren. Language also served as a barrier to attendance for those from non-English speaking backgrounds, even though acquiring improved English language skills was reported by the parents as a benefit of participating in the service (Oke et al. 2007). Transport is also identified as a barrier to attending the services, and many parents are unable to attend services if they do not have public transport options or car-pooling available to them (Berthelsen et al. 2012; Oke et al. 2007).

There is also evidence that a lack of friendships and social networks at a family service can stop families from attending family services. Some studies show that mothers feel marginalised or unwelcome at a service and do not easily build friendships there, and therefore are unlikely to attend (Berthelsen et al. 2012; Harman et al. 2014; McLean et al. 2020; Oke et al. 2007). These studies highlight the importance of a paid facilitator who can help parents who are new to a service to feel welcome and be introduced to other parents (Oke et al. 2007). Research by Gibson et al. (2015) also shows that some parents feel socially excluded by other parents attending playgroups. The behaviour of other children and concerns around sharing germs are other identified reasons why parents may not attend a playgroup (Berthelsen et al. 2012).

Given what we know about family services in relation to factors which contribute to a mothers' employability, it is pertinent to make the link between such services and employability. This thesis contributes to this task.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored definitions of the concept of employability in the public policy literature through an examination of the supply-demand side orthodoxy. It has been argued that approaching employability from either end of the supply-demand spectrum, without consideration for the full suite of factors that can influence a person's employability, has led to LMAPs which are unlikely to result in the desired outcomes (Cooney 2006; Crisp & Powell 2017; Lindsay & McQuaid 2005; Peck and Theodore 2000). Conceptualising employability in a broader, more holistic fashion allows for LMAPs and services which can support people to increase their employability based on their own individual needs, circumstances while also considering the broader socio-historical and institutional context.

McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) employability framework clearly demonstrates the multitude of individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors which can influence a person's employability, and is highly relevant to mothers in the Australian context. While individual perceptions on employability have been considered in the career and education literatures, the views of unemployed people, including mothers in the social security system, have not been explored in the public policy literature (Guilbert et al. 2016). This thesis addresses this gap in the literature by examining the concept of employability from the perspective of mothers in the social security system and relates the findings back to McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework to make the framework more applicable to this cohort. Discussion in this chapter has also included the conflicting roles of motherhood and considered how the tension between work and parenting may influence mothers' employability. Parenting and conflicting roles are key elements which must be considered in relation to mothers' employability.

This chapter has also examined the existing evidence of family services' potential to influence mothers' employability. Existing evidence shows mothers' confidence, social networks and wellbeing can be positively affected by family services, and this thesis builds on this knowledge and makes further contribution to the literature by demonstrating the pathways through which participation in such services can influence these factors of a mothers' employability.

Chapter Four will outline the method and research design of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR Research design

Introduction

The previous chapter situated this thesis within the literature on the concept of employability and the evidence base and debates around labour market activation policies and family services. This chapter outlines the methods this research project used to explore the concept of employability from the perspective of mothers in the Australian social security system and the potential impact of family services on mothers' employability. The chapter provides an overview of the field site where participants were recruited, describes the community engagement, recruitment methods and participant sample, defines the approach to thematic analysis, shares my background as a researcher, and discusses limitations of the project's qualitative approach. The chapter concludes with an outline of the ethical considerations of the research.

The research questions for this doctoral study called for a qualitative research design. As set out in Chapter One, the research questions are:

1. How do mothers in the social security system define the concept of 'employability,' and to what extent does this definition align with, or diverge from, definitions of the concept in the literature and government policy?

2. What experiences do mothers in the social security system have with family services, such as playgroup and parenting programs?

3. In what ways might family services influence the employability of mothers in the social security system?

Gaining an in-depth understanding of the views and perspectives of mothers and service providers on the concept of employability and their perceptions of the impacts of family services called for the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The qualitative components of this study gave a voice to otherwise unheard-from mothers and service providers and provided new information not already available (Miles et al. 2014; Patton 2015; Tracy 2020).

The community consultation, fieldwork, secondary data analysis and dissemination of findings to the community were undertaken between February 2018 and June 2020.

Qualitative approach

Qualitative research methods, often used for research with an exploratory and descriptive focus, can provide us with deeper subjective insight and understanding into the meanings and meaning-making process which people experience and give to their lives (Leavy 2017).

There are many methods which can be used in qualitative studies (Creswell et al. 2007; Leavy 2017). This research predominantly followed a phenomenological approach, which 'can be defined as an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it' (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio 2019, p. 91). In addition to providing 'detailed examination of the lived experience of a phenomenon through participant's personal experiences and personal perception of objects and events' (Neubauer et al 2019, p. 91), a hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenological approach to the research allowed for an acknowledgement of the interactive role I played as a researcher, and the 'lifeworlds' of both the study participants and myself (McConnell-Henry, Chapman & Francis 2009; Neubauer et al 2019).

Interviews and focus groups are a common genres of qualitative data collection across disciplines and use a conversation-style of approach to gain information from participants (Bourgeault et al. 2010; Leavy 2017; Rubin & Rubin 2005). These methods were selected for this study because they lent themselves best to the research questions and provided the best avenue to gain deep understanding of participants' views and experiences (Bourgeault et al. 2010; Creswell et al. 2007; Leavy 2017; Rubin & Rubin 2005; Tracy 2020).

Focus groups were added to this research because they allowed participants to hear from others and further formulate their responses. As expressed by Bourgeault et al. (2010, Chapter 17, p. 5):

> *[T]he group situation allows them to step back from their taken-for-granted behaviours and assumptions and provides space to 'problematize' concepts and ideas to which they may previously have paid scant attention.*

Given the vulnerable nature of many of the participants in this study, focus groups and joint interviews were also a good choice of method for this research project. As Bourgeault et al. (2010, Chapter 17, p. 8) explain,

> *[F]ocus groups are frequently recommended when researchers wish to engage with groups that are notoriously hard-to-reach, since the informal nature of group discussions is generally considered to be less threatening to those who may have an antipathy towards authority, for example.*

In this study, qualitative data was collected to build an understanding of how mothers in the social security system define and interact with the concept of 'employability', or 'work readiness', how they believe the concept applies to them and their employment goals, their views on how mothers with young children can increase their employability, the perceived impact of support received through family services and the role family services play, and could play, in supporting mothers to increase their employability and work towards their employment goals.

To collect the qualitative data, small focus groups (n = 7), joint interviews (n = 3) and one-on-one, in-depth interviews (n = 4) were conducted with mothers (n = 33) in a coastal region of NSW. One-on-one interviews (n = 5), a joint interview (n = 1) and a small focus group (n = 1) with family service providers (n = 10) were also conducted to capture service provider views on employment and service provision for mothers, and their views on client experiences and service needs. The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and informal in nature. The focus groups had a very small number of participants (between three and five participants) due to the nature of the study, with most mothers who participated having young children on site who required their care.

Site selection

The qualitative data for this study were collected in several towns located in the Mid-North Coast (MNC) region of NSW, Australia. The MNC sits between the Central Coast and North Coast regions. The fieldwork for this research took place across the Coffs Harbour, Bellingen, Nambucca and Kempsey LGAs, on Gumbaynggirr and Dunghutti Traditional Lands. The map shown in Figure 4.1 indicates the location of the four LGAs and some of the local towns in the MNC where community consultations and research were conducted. As noted previously, while the research was conducted in selected towns within the MNC region, throughout this thesis the term MNC is used to refer to the combined fieldwork sites. To maintain the anonymity of all participants, no town names are included in the thesis where it may allow for the identification of participants or others.

Population demographics vary between localities in the region. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the key demographics for the study's field sites and a comparison with state and Australia-wide averages. As can be seen in the table, the region experiences exaggerated levels of disadvantage compared to the NSW and Australian averages. There are also varying degrees of disadvantage between the LGAs in the field site. Coffs Harbour and Bellingen LGAs have higher levels of unemployment but experience lower levels of socio-economic disadvantage compared with Nambucca and Kempsey LGAs. The area has a higher percentage of people born in Australia compared to the NSW and Australian averages. The population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is also comparatively higher in the region, particularly in Kempsey and Nambucca where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise 11.6 per cent and 7.6 per cent of the population respectively, compared to a national average of 2.8 per cent. The median weekly household income in the region is significantly lower than the NSW and Australian average. The percentage of households with a weekly income of less than AU$650 is between 5 (Coffs Harbour LGA) and 13.8 (Nambucca LGA) percentage points higher than the national average of 20 per cent. Across the four LGAs, part-time work is more common and full-time work is less common than the national and state averages. The region has lower education levels compared to the state and national average, with only 8.2 per cent of people in Kempsey LGA with a highest level of education of Bachelor Degree level or higher compared to the state average of 23.4 per cent. In Kempsey LGA, 14.1 per cent of people aged 15 years and older report their highest level of educational attainment as Year 9 and below, compared to only 8 per cent nationally. Family compositions are also different compared to the state and national averages, with a lower rate of couple families with children and higher rates of sole parent families. It is interesting to note that less than 1 per cent of employed people aged 15 years and over travel to work by public transport in the region compared to the state average of 16 per cent and national average of 11.5 per cent. This suggests availability of public transport in the region is low compared to other areas.

While the MNC is not representative of all locations across Australia, it was a good selection for this study for several reasons, particularly:

- all Commonwealth Government funded family services included in the administrative dataset used in this study operate in the region, with high numbers of participants, allowing for good coverage across services

- the region experiences high levels of social security receipt, disadvantage and unemployment, allowing for the stories of vulnerable and disadvantaged mothers to be captured

- multiplicity of sites and services in the region increased the levels of anonymity afforded to study participants.

Field site accessibility and logistical arrangements were also considered in the site selection.

Figure 4.1 Map of the Mid-North Coast

Table 4.1 Mid-North Coast demographics and statistics

	Coffs Harbour LGA	Bellingen LGA	Nambucca LGA	Kempsey LGA	New South Wales	Australia
Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia (SEIFA)* (Source: ABS 2018a)						
Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage – Decile	5	5	2	2	–	–
Index of Economic Resources – Decile	5	5	2	2	–	–
Index of Education and Occupation – Decile	6	8	3	1	–	–
Unemployment Rate (Source: Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018j, 2019)						
Smoothed unemployment rate (%) (Small Area Labour Market estimates for September quarter 2018)	8.1	8.8	6.1	5.7	–	–
Seasonally adjusted estimated unemployment rate (%) for month of September 2018	–	–	–	–	4.4	5.0
ABS 2016 Census statistics (Source: ABS 2018b)						
Population	72,944	12,668	19,212	28,885	7,480,228	23,401,892
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population as a percentage of the total population (%)	5	3.5	7.6	11.6	2.9	2.8
Percentage of people who were born in Australia (%)	78.4	80.5	81.5	83	65.5	66.7
Median weekly household income	$1,107	$997	$835	$894	$1,486	$1,438
Percentage of households with a weekly household income of less than AU$650 (%)	25	28.9	33.8	31.1	19.7	20
Percentage of households with a weekly household income of more than AU$3000 (%)	8.2	5.8	4.4	4.4	18.7	16.4

	Coffs Harbour LGA	Bellingen LGA	Nambucca LGA	Kempsey LGA	New South Wales	Australia
Percentage of people who reported being in the labour force, aged 15 years and older, who worked full-time (%)	51	45.3	45.5	47.1	59.2	57.7
Percentage of people who reported being in the labour force, aged 15 years and older, who worked part-time (%)	36.7	41.9	38.8	36.9	29.7	30.4
Percentage of people aged 15 years and older who report their highest level of educational attainment as Year 9 and below (%)	9.9	10	12.8	14.1	8.4	8
Percentage of people aged 15 years and older who report their highest level of educational attainment as Year 12 (%)	11.6	10.6	9.5	9.4	15.3	15.7
Percentage of people aged 15 years and older who report their highest level of educational attainment as a Bachelor Degree level and above (%)	14.81	18.6	10.4	8.2	23.4	22
Percentage of families which were couples with children (%)	37.1	33.9	30.2	30.9	45.7	44.7
Percentage of families which were one parent families (%)	19.2	19.2	19.6	22.4	16	15.8
Percentage of employed people aged 15 years and over who travel to work by public transport (%)	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.6	16	11.5

*SEIFA is a product of the ABS, which uses data from the five-yearly Australian Census of Population and Housing to rank areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. All areas are given a score and then ordered from lowest to highest score. Decile 1 is the most disadvantaged relative to other deciles, and Decile 10 is the least disadvantaged.

Community consultation

Significant consultation was undertaken with community organisations in the field sites during the design phase of the research, which heavily influenced the research design, approach, scope and methods. This active consultation provided a community-based participatory aspect to the research, due to the emphasis placed ‘on a "bottom-up" approach with a focus on locally defined priorities and local perspectives’ (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995, p. 1667). A participatory approach was evident due to the community being actively involved in informing multiple aspects of the research, such as what the research would examine, who would be involved in the research and how the research was conducted (Aldridge 2015; Bergold & Thomas 2012).

The consultation gained feedback and input from community groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, on the research aims, design and methodology. The consultation also fulfilled ethical requirements set by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (ANU HREC), as discussed below.

I engaged with over 45 organisations as part of the consultation process, and all provided positive feedback noting that the work was appropriate and relevant to the community. No negative feedback was received, and limited changes were made to the original design of the project developed prior to community consultations. Suggested changes included analysing and reporting data at the LGA level, where initially I had planned to only report at the regional level (not LGA level) to reduce likelihood of singling out ‘poor performing’ LGAs. Another key change was in terminology used: at conception of the research project, documentation referred to ‘welfare recipients with young children’. This was changed to ‘parents’ following much welcomed feedback from a local government official, who was concerned around the dehumanising and stigmatising nature of the term ‘welfare recipients’. As the research evolved and mothers became the primary focus of the research, the term ‘mothers’ was used.

This consultation process also paved the way for site access and participant recruitment. Gaining access to participants and organisations can be a difficult process (Devers et al. 2000; Rubin & Rubin 2005), but the initial consultation process allowed me to build relationships and networks with community organisations in the region, many of which then also participated in the research or provided access to mothers for interviews and focus groups.

Sampling framework and recruitment

The aim of the study was to explore the experience of mothers who receive Parenting Payment and NewStart Allowance and who have children aged 0–12 years. A purposive sampling framework was used to capture the views of this target cohort (Devers et al. 2000; Leavy 2017; Patton 2015). Purposive sampling is common in qualitative research (Devers et al. 2000). The varying age range of children highlighted how different ages of children can impact mothers' employment and job readiness, helped identify both short and longer-term impacts of family services, and showed how relationships with employment and services can change in relation to children's age.

Recruitment methods for the mothers who participated were largely determined in close consultation with the service providers who were involved in the project. Most participants accessed family services, and most were interviewed during a session facilitated by a service provider, such as during a playgroup. Several participants were told about the study by a service provider and contacted me to express their interest in participating in the study. These interviews were then conducted over the phone for logistical reasons. The study also attempted snowball sampling (Leavy 2017; Patton 2015) to recruit participants who did not participate in family services, however only a limited number of mothers who did not participate in services were recruited in this manner.

The study was also interested in the views of service providers regarding their clients' employability, the experiences of clients using the service and the perceived secondary-impacts of the services. Most service providers were recruited through continued engagement following the interest they expressed during the initial community consultations. Other service providers were identified using internet search mechanisms and were 'cold-called' with an invitation to participate in the study. A number of service providers who were contacted in this manner declined the invitation to participate, citing high workloads as the primary reason for this decision.

The study was advertised at other venues to increase recruitment of mothers with young children who did not participate in family services. Over 50 posters (approved by the ANU HREC) were displayed in various locations across the field site, including at preschools, childcare centres, shopping centres, libraries, community centres, Centrelink offices and local notice boards. A project Facebook page was also approved by the ANU HREC and reached a modest audience of under 80 people. There was limited interest in the study via the posters

and the Facebook page and those who contacted me via these advertisements were not eligible for interview. The Facebook page has been archived for future reference and includes a link to the study's Drop Box account which made project updates available to participants and community organisations during the research project, and which now contains findings from the research.

A voucher incentive was offered to the mothers participating in the study. The voucher was a AU$20 Woolworths Wish Gift Card, Coles Gift Card, or Big W Gift Card, depending on which shop outlets were available in the given location. This small incentive compensated participants for their time, at a reasonable payment rate, but without providing people with potentially coercive incentives or a bribe (e.g. not a large payment amount in case those on low incomes considered the payment necessary, which would effectively reduce the voluntary nature of the participation). Service provider staff were not compensated by financial or in-kind incentives for their time participating in the study, with the exception of some homemade banana bread and/or other baked treats.

Study sample

The qualitative data was collected via semi-structured informal interviews and group interviews/small focus groups with 33 mothers and 10 service providers. The participating mothers were in receipt of Parenting Payment Single, Parenting Payment Partnered or NewStart Allowance. All participants were women. For service providers, this gender ratio is largely representative of the gender share in the social work profession, where 84 per cent of workers identify as women (Australian Government National Skills Commission 2020).

Interviews were also held with a small number of mothers who were not in receipt of social security and with a small number of fathers, however this data was subsequently removed from the research database and not included in the analysis. Allowing people to participate who were not in the social security system reduced any sense of 'othering' within group situations, reduced the optics of identifying those who were receiving social security benefits and those who were not, and allowed for a smoother recruitment process. Two fathers were also present at the playgroups and participated in a joint interview or a focus group; however, it was clear from their contributions that they were working fathers who were not in receipt of social security benefits as their primary income and therefore their contributions were excluded from analysis. All parents who participated in the study received a voucher as compensation

for their time regardless of whether the information they shared was included in the analysis or not.

The service providers who were interviewed were staff from organisations which delivered family services funded by the Australian Government. In all instances, the organisations also delivered programs funded by other levels of government. In recruiting

While key demographic data was not systematically collected on the participants, such data can be inferred from the information provided during the interviews. Mothers had children aged between 0–24 years old and all those interviewed had a youngest child aged under 8 years old. Mothers had at least one child in their care, and up to nine children. Some mothers also cared for fostered or adopted children in addition to their biological child/ren. The ages of the mothers varied considerably, with some mothers noting they had finished school over 20 years ago, while other mothers who spoke of having their children as teenagers and whose children were still very young. Approximately one-half of the mothers appeared to be younger than 25 years old. All the mothers who chose to participate in the study were over 18 years of age.

Most mothers had experience participating in the workforce, both in professional and non-professional roles, and several were currently in employment at the time of interview. Several of the mothers had limited work experience. Some mothers were looking for work, and others did not have intention to work in the immediate future. Most of the mothers who were interviewed were currently participating in a family service, several were not.

Many of the mothers who participated were long term residents of the MNC, while some had recently moved to the area (often from another regional area rather than a major city). Some of the mothers noted they had support from family living in the region while others had no family supports. Several women mentioned their Indigenous heritage and familial connection with the local Indigenous community during the interview and/or related discussions, and these women were represented in both the mother and service provider cohorts.

A very small number of mothers and service providers stated that they were born overseas and that English was not their first language. Many of the women who were interviewed mentioned issues regarding domestic and family violence, homelessness, poverty and financial insecurity, mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, limited educational attainment and discrimination, either in their current experience or during their past, highlighting the vulnerable circumstances of many of the women in the study.

Data collection

The interviews and focus groups varied in length between 30 and 80 minutes. Most interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, with the permission of participants, to enable in-depth analysis of the interview and focus group discussions. Some of the focus groups and interviews were not recorded at the request of participants and handwritten notes were used to record responses.

The questions were kept general, rather than personal; however, many participants chose to provide personal examples and disclose personal information. Semi-structured interviews can follow a question guide to help steer the conversation (Devers et al. 2000; Leavy 2017; Rubin & Rubin 2005). Bourgeault et al. (2010) argue that question/topic guides are one of the keys to a successful focus group. The focus groups and interviews for this study followed the same question guide. The question guide changed little throughout the project with the exception of introducing some new questions during the final interviews with mothers to further build on the themes already identified. However, the question guide was flexible and used as a guide only – remaining flexible allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' views and allow the conversation to flow naturally (Rubin & Rubin 2005). The following are examples of the types of questions which were asked; however, the exact wording of the questions changed in line with the circumstances and dynamics of the individual interview/focus group:

- What do you think a person needs to have or do to be work-ready, or employable?
- What makes a parent ready for work? What skills and supports do they need?
- How do career goals change once a person has children?
- How can parents work towards their employment goals while their children are young?
- In what ways could programs and services support parents to build skills and achieve their employment goals?
- Can you tell me about your experience with family services such as [name of local service]?
- How could family services, such as [name of local service], help people become work ready? In what ways are they already doing this? What could change or improve?

The guiding questions for service providers followed a similar guide, with a focus on the staff member's views of their service participants (e.g. 'Can you tell me about the employment and career aspirations of your clients?').

Prompts and probing questions were also used, such as: 'can you tell me more about that?', 'do you have an example you can share?', 'what would change that?', 'what sorts of things?', 'what was it like?', etc. Along with the probing questions, active listening techniques and body language was consciously used to help build rapport with the participants and show my empathy and interest in their responses (Devers et al. 2000; Leavy 2017; Rubin & Rubin 2005).

While there is not a set number of interviews or focus groups which must be reached in order for research to be considered 'enough', complete or acceptable as sound research, much of the literature on qualitative data collection notes the need to collect data until the point of data saturation and when no new themes are being raised (Leavy 2017; Tracy 2020). Towards the end of the interview process, limited new themes were being introduced by participants and key themes continued to dominate. While I could not confirm thematic saturation had been reached and additional interviews may indeed have uncovered new themes, I was unable to undertake additional interviews due to timeframes and logistical constraints.

Approach to qualitative data analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected during the field work. Reflexive thematic analysis can best describe the process of the analysis, as my engagement with the data and analysis was iterative, reflexive and flexible (Braun & Clarke 2019). The thematic analysis was also heavily influenced by the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the research (Braun & Clarke 2019; Neubauer et al 2019). Thematic analysis allowed me to explore the concept of employability from the perspective of mothers, so I could then assess how this understanding aligned with, or diverged from, understandings of the concept in the literature and policy practice. It also allowed me to explore the thematical patterns and relationships in the information that mothers and service providers shared with me about their experiences with accessing family services. Using themes to code and analyse qualitative data is a common practice in qualitative research (Leavy 2017; Rubin & Rubin 2005; Taylor, Bogdan et al. 2016). The reflexive thematic analysis was deductive in nature, in that the themes were largely based on the key themes from McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework (2005), rather than being inductive in nature with the themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke 2019).

I personally transcribed all the audio-recordings. This process in itself was a beneficial part of the data collection and analysis process. Listening over the interviews during the transcription process allowed me to reflect on my interview and focus group facilitation approach and demeanour, increased my self-awareness and provided me with the opportunity to improve on subsequent interviews (Rubin & Rubin 2005). This also increased the reflexivity of my research, as explored below.

I used NVivo software as a tool to code the data and analyse the transcriptions of the audio-recordings and the written notes. Themes were determined through both deductive and inductive interpretation and coding process (Remler & Van Ryzin 2011; Rubin & Rubin 2005). Prior to commencing coding in NVivo, a coding scheme was developed using themes originating in the existing literature (deductive coding process) with McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) employability framework kept in mind as a primary guide in relation to possible theme typology. The research questions were considered in developing the original coding scheme. During the interview and transcription process I made hand-written notes and mind-maps to determine emerging theses from the data (inductive interpretation). Additional themes were also identified during the coding process and added to the coding scheme (inductive interpretation and coding).

Position of the researcher

It is important to consider who I am as a researcher and what I have brought to the research, particularly given the reflexive and hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the research (Braun & Clarke 2019; Neubauer et al 2019). I am of Anglo-Saxon and European descent and acknowledge the privileges I have been provided, both consciously and unconsciously, by individuals, institutions and society because of this. I was raised on the east coast of Australia and benefited from access to fresh water and food, health care, sanitation and the many comforts that might be expected in a developed country. I am especially grateful for my free public-system education, the privilege of receiving a university education and the indulgent luxury of undertaking a PhD. I was a teenage-mother and have spent time in receipt of social security payments, have received support from domestic violence and homelessness services, and have had various other life experiences which enabled me to identified strongly with many of the stories shared by the women who participated in this study. I have also participated in supported and community playgroups and parenting programs in various locations. I am currently a single parent juggling the demands of parenting, family life, caring responsibilities for disabled family members, full-time work/study and community volunteer work. I lived in

various towns across the field site for an accumulative period of 17 years, and have an in-depth understanding of many of the local issues and cultural protocol (not to mention could share many inside jokes with participants, which certainly helped with building rapport!).

In line with the qualitative nature of this research, and an hermeneutic phenomenological approach, throughout the study and reflexive thematic analysis I considered how I was situating myself in the context of the research and investigated what I was bringing to the study (Braun & Clarke 2019; Neubauer et al 2019). 'Reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome' (Berger 2015, p. 220). Throughout the research design, implementation and analysis, I continuously reflected on how my life experience, social position and beliefs (such as culture, values, education, discipline, gender, age etc) may have been influencing both the research processes and outcomes.

I made 'conscious and deliberate effort to be attuned to one's own reactions to respondents and to the way in which the research account is constructed' (Berger 2015, p. 221). My emotional reactions provided a strong indication of my level of comfort with elements of the research and findings, and I used this information to further increase awareness of, and reflect on, the patterns and conditioning I was carrying. I questioned my own views and responses, as well as how this was impacting on my actions and study outcomes. For example, when conducting interviews, I remained present and aware of the content and information being shared, as well as the non-verbal, emotional and energetic exchange of information, both from the participants and myself. I made effort to transcribe the interviews as soon as possible after the interviews and focus groups (the same day if possible), which provided further opportunity to revisit and reflect on the conversation. This offered insights into how I was engaging with participants, and also allowed me to question how I was responding, thinking and feeling about what was being said. As noted above, my life experiences appeared to have a positive influence on my relationship with participants and potentially increased the quality of information being shared (Berger 2015, p. 220-221).

Reflexivity was also in play during engagement with my supervisors and colleagues, with frank conversations helping to ensure my assumptions were questioned (both by others and myself). The participatory consultations with stakeholders during the design phase of the research also helped ensure I questioned the why and how of my research, and highlighted some of the pre-conceived ideas, concepts and biases I was bringing to the research.

Limitations of the design

The study involved non-random selection of participants and this selection bias has resulted in non-generalisable findings and potential over-representation of certain cohorts. This could be considered as a limitation of the research by those seeking to generalise the findings. However, the phenomenological approach to this research, including sampling methodology, did not aim to result in generalisability, but aimed to increase understanding of the mothers' experience in relation to employability, conditionality and participation in family services. The stories shared by the participants, particularly by some of the mothers who were in quite vulnerable social positions at the time of interview, has provided insight into the lives of those who live 'at the margins', who experience severe hardship and disadvantage compared to the general population, and who do not always have the opportunity to tell their story.

Another potential limitation of this study is that I am an Australian Public Servant and in various roles have been responsible for policy development and administration of many of the social security payments and programs examined in this study. This potential conflict of interest was disclosed to participants and may have influenced some of the responses I received. Further, interviews and focus groups were conducted in English. It is noted that English may not have been the first or preferred language of all participants and may have altered the information collected or impacted on the sample of people who decided to participate in the study.

Ethical considerations

All aspects of the study strictly adhered to the *ANU Code of Research Conduct*, National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, and related ethics policies and guidelines. The ethical aspects of this research were approved by the ANU HREC on 13 April 2018 (Protocol 2017/815).

Information sheets (provided at Table 3.1) were given to participants prior to participating in the study, outlining the details of the research and reiterating the voluntary nature of their participation. In addition to providing hard copies of the information sheets (or electronic copies in the case of phone interviews) I gave an overview of what the information sheets contained and verbally ensured understanding of key ethical considerations for participants. Written or verbal consent was then obtained from participants prior to commencing the interview.

I am an Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) employee who took an extended period away from my DSS role to complete this PhD. Some of the service providers in my study receive funding from DSS and all the mothers in my study receive a social security payment administered by the government. This potentially created an unequal relationship between participants and me. When introducing myself to participants, and throughout the field work, I made clear that the research was being undertaken in my capacity as a PhD research student at the ANU, all information collected would be de-identified, and participation in the study was completely voluntary and participants could withdraw from the study at any time up until results are ready for submission/publication. I also ensured participants understood participation in the research would not affect any payments or relationships between participants and the DSS or other government departments. By upholding the Australian Public Service Values and Code of Conduct throughout the study, I upheld my professional role in protecting the reputation of the Australian Public Service and government of the day, while also maintaining the academic integrity and ethical practice of the research.

Because the research involved being in the presence of children or regularly on premises where children attended, I applied for and received a NSW Working With Children Check, in addition to the Australian Capital Territory Working With Vulnerable People registration I already held.

During the design and implementation of the study, consideration was given to the ethical nature of working with potentially vulnerable cohorts. It was recognised that some women in the study were experiencing or had experienced significant traumas and difficult circumstances. No information was shared with me related to the current safety of the mothers, their children and others, and did not raise concerns or initiate the need to notify child welfare agencies or other authorities. However, should this have occurred I would have been required to follow process as necessary in line with state mandatory reporting legislation and guidelines. The confidentiality of participants and their families was maintained through upholding my conduct as a researcher, as well as through practical measures such as venue selection for interviews and strict data management practices.

Data management for the research project was strictly in line with ANU guidelines and regulations, and related legislation and requirements, such as the *Privacy Act 1988*. A data management plan was developed with reference to the ANU Data Management Manual.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained the research design of this study. The following chapters provide the findings from this research project, and are organised in line with the overarching research questions.

The following section comprises three chapters which address the first research question and fills one of the identified gaps in the literature by exploring the concept of employability from the perspective of mothers in the social security system. The chapters draw heavily on the employability framework developed by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) to present mothers' views on employment in relation to individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors.

CHAPTER FIVE Mothers' employability: individual factors

Introduction

As established in Chapter Three, existing academic literature on the concept of employability gives limited attention to the understanding of the concept from the perspective of mothers who are receiving social security payments. However, this perspective is important to understand given the growing field of government policies which intend to impact mothers' employability. The previous chapter (Chapter Four) outlined the method this research project used to fill this gap in the literature. The thesis now presents the findings from the research and explores how mothers in Australia's social security system understand, define and interact with the concepts of employability and work readiness.

This thesis seeks to build on McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) employability framework by emphasising the specific needs and perspectives of mothers in the social security system, many of whom experience multiple vulnerabilities and disadvantages. As noted earlier, this thesis is not attempting to point out any potential flaws or deficiencies with McQuaid and Lindsay's existing framework, but rather highlight the factors which mothers in the social security system consider as important to their employability and builds on the framework to make it more applicable to this cohort.

The following three chapters are arranged generally in line with McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework (2005, see Table 3.1), and discuss these findings in relation to the literature and policy practice. This chapter examines mothers' views on individual factors relating to their employability. Chapter Six then considers mothers' personal circumstances in relation to their employability, and Chapter Seven focuses on the external factors. A fourth chapter of findings, Chapter Eight, looks at mothers' perspectives on family services and the potential influence of the services on mothers' employability.

The mothers who participated in this study emphasised the importance of each of the three sets of factors (individual factors; personal circumstances; and external factors) which are outlined in McQuaid and Lindsay's framework. Interestingly, with the exception of childcare, the mothers mostly focused on individual and circumstantial aspects of employability compared to external, demand-side (including institutional and socio-historical) factors. However, it is noted many of the factors are intrinsically linked and the interaction between them means they cannot be disassociated from one another, for example the ongoing external socio-historical factors such as racial discrimination has a direct association with individual

factors such as health and wellbeing (Paradies et al. 2015; Shepherd et al. 2017; Williams & Mohammed 2013).

As already flagged, confidence was the most dominant theme which was consistently identified by mothers regarding their employability and readiness to work. Most mothers considered confidence as paramount to employability. Other essential employability factors which were overwhelmingly raised by the women included childcare, mental health and psychological wellbeing, social connections and supports, suitable work available within school hours, and skills and qualifications. While some factors featured more prominently for the mothers (e.g. confidence and childcare), the below analysis does not intend to create a hierarchy of what is considered important for mothers in relation to employability. Each factor will have a different impact and level of importance based on personal circumstances. For example, homelessness was not consistently raised as a factor by the mothers; however, a mother experiencing homelessness may consider this to have the largest impact on employability.

Where verbatim comments are provided in this thesis, information is provided as to whether the comment is from a mother or a service provider. Additional information on a mother's personal circumstances is sometimes provided where this provides more context to their contribution. In all cases if a name has been assigned to a comment or within the text this name is not the person's real name to protect the identity of the participants, children, and others.

Can employability be defined straight up?

When the mothers who participated in this study were directly asked whether they had heard of or used the word 'employability', and what they thought the term meant, there were mixed responses. Some were unfamiliar with the term, as one mother exclaimed: 'Never heard of it in my life'. Some others had a negative association with the term and reported feelings of being judged in relation to others' expectations of them:

> *Employability. Gosh. That almost feels a bit like, to me that feels like an expectation that you have to meet. That you have to be, like what do you need to be. Do you have it.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 3

> *Like that's someone else judging me. I do enough judging on my own… It's in a negative way. That term has a negative connotation in my mind, not positive, to me. I see it as a judging thing.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 6

Many of the mothers explained that the term was associated with a suite of factors in relation to an individual, as well as their circumstances and the context:

> *I think it's like the skill set, like the general level of skill set. Like the benchmark for a role. Like employability for if I'm a zookeeper, have you done the training, do you drive a car, do you live local. Like that's just a, I don't see it as a negative. I just see it like black and white fact of capabilities, or not capable, to be employed.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 6

> *I think if you want to be something simple, like a waitress and you want to work in that area, or you want to be a barista, or something in hospitality or retail, like an everyday job. It's having the skills for that. And even as an employer, they look at employability and they think, is this person right for this job. And even if they don't have the skills, are they someone who is going to listen and is willing to be trained, because some people aren't, some people don't want to learn and don't want to be told that they don't know how to do something. So I suppose there are many factors*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 5

> *I think it's like your overall skill set and personality. Like a package.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 2

The chapter now turns to the individual factors within this suite of employability factors identified by mothers.

Individual factors

McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) offer an extensive list of factors associated with a person's employability in relation to their individual skills and attributes, demographic characteristics, health and wellbeing, job seeking ability, and adaptability and mobility. Essentially, these are factors which the person themselves possess rather than the circumstances in which they find themselves (personal circumstances) or broader socio-historical, economic and political influences (external factors). However, as noted above, many factors are influenced by each other and a mother's individual factors are heavily influenced by her personal circumstances and external environment. As acknowledged throughout this dissertation and evidenced by the findings, individual factors must be contextualised within the broader economic, social and policy context and there are a multitude of external elements which influence the individual.

The mothers who participated in this study highlighted many individual factors associated with their employability and that of their peers. This section explores the key individual factors identified by the mothers: confidence; self-motivation; social skills; health and wellbeing, specifically mental health; and skills and qualifications, including transferrable skills and work experience.

Confidence

The concept of confidence and its relationship with employability was explored in Chapter Three. Confidence can be described as a person's belief in their ability to succeed at a given task, or across a range of tasks (Perry 2015).

Confidence was the factor most commonly reported by the mothers as being essential for a person to be or have in order to be ready to work. More often than not, this was the first response from the mothers when asked what makes a person employable or work-ready, and was repeatedly raised throughout each conversation:

> *I think confidence is, like, key to getting a job. I really win so many jobs just through confidence.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

Confidence. Confidence to know that they can do it. And that they can go into an interview or, knowing that they have got what it takes.

Mother from Focus Group 5

And I guess, you know, to be employable you have to be confident. And sell yourself. And, you know, for someone to be unemployable, they might lack self-confidence.

Mother from Interview 2

… in my mind I'm thinking self-confidence. I'm going for more the emotional elements because that's probably on my journey. Because to actually go out and put yourself out there you've gotta feel confident, or roughly confident, that you can take on what it's gunna throw at you, the job. Yeah I'd probably go the more social emotional side of it, rather than the functional.

Mother from Joint Interview 3

Service providers echoed this sentiment and highlighted the importance of confidence for mothers when it comes to seeking or finding employment:

We've done some skills audits in the communities and also community consultations and what we find is that people say that they want to work. They are keen to get a job but then when it comes time to actually go to an interview they back out and they have 101 different reasons why. A lot of it just comes down purely to lack of self-confidence. They get scared.

Service Provider from Interview 7

As explored in Chapter Three, a person's self-concept is built in relation to various aspects of their lives and a change in confidence in one area of a person's life can influence their confidence levels in other areas (Perry 2015; Shavelson et al. 1976). In this way, increasing a

mother's confidence in their parenting abilities can increase their confidence in areas such as employment and training. Mothers also recognised the link between being confident within their role as a parent and confidence to approach the workforce:

> *I think if they were confident within themselves and like their homelife and parenting skills it would give them a boost to want to go and work. Be a good role model for your kids and show them that you do need to work.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 3

As explored in Chapter Three, evidence in the literature suggests social connections can increase confidence and the wellbeing of mothers (Berkman et al. 2000; Ellis-Sloan & Tamplin 2019; Hancock et al. 2015; Kawachi & Berkman 2001; Leininger et al. 2009; Manuel et al. 2012; Shulver 2011).

In line with this, many mothers who participated in this study made strong links between their levels of confidence and social connections in relation to their employment:

> *So if you're not a confident person or you're not used to socially networking, even going into an interview could be the most daunting experience ever, and so you have sort of failed in that sense before you even walk in. Because if I sat down and I was employing two people and one walked in confident and, you know, articulate and owning it, and the other one comes in shy and lack of confidence, I know which one I would employ over the other one.*
>
> *So, you know, I think that building up those social skills and confidence in people is so important because that is what's going to get them a job. Because it is the first impression thing as well. You know, it's your qualifications yes, it's what you're skilled in, but it's also how you present yourself and how you interview to an employer as well, so I feel like confidence and being able to speak and socially interact and have those networking skills, if we don't have that you've sort of failed before you even walk in, even if you are the most qualified person in the world.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

While the mothers expressed that confidence and feeling connected to social networks was vital for their employability, many also explained that their confidence levels and social networks, particularly related to employment, were diminished due to taking time out of the workforce and through their reduced labour market attachment:

> *I was gunna say confidence. You know, being a mum, you lose a lot of confidence because you are out of the game for so long. Like I used to be a really fast typer, not anymore. I used to be a really quick thinker, not anymore [laughing]. So my confidence is shut back. And so that's probably gunna change as well what I go for as a job. Like I was high up in my work before, but not keeping up with the pace of the field, I've lost a lot of confidence in that so I probably would have to start back at the basics.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 6

> *Yeah, especially if you've come from someone that's had a couple of kids and spent the majority of their time at home raising the kids. For them to return back to work, the confidence thing after spending six, seven years at home raising their kids, that confidence thing will be a big hurdle for them to get back into the workforce.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 3

As highlighted throughout this research, social isolation was a common experience of many of the mothers. Many who participated in this research expressed how their confidence was diminished due to the social isolation of motherhood. They also spoke of how work provided an opportunity to engage with other adults and taking time away from work further added to the social isolation and lack of confidence experienced by many mothers:

> *I think that when you are out of the workforce having kids you definitely do lose your confidence because you're not dealing with people, you know that social interaction like you would at work. And I think that because you are at home with kids all the time you do lose your confidence. So I think maybe just working or doing a bit of study or*

> *some short courses, or maybe you know some groups or mentoring just to get a bit of confidence back to get ready to get back into the workforce. Coz I think that's the biggest thing, you do lose a lot of confidence after being out of work.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

As we explore in Chapter Eight, many of the mothers were able to regain a sense of social connection and belonging through participation in family services, which in turn increased their confidence.

Social skills

The literature points to the importance of social skills, such as empathy and the ability to relate to others, assertiveness, cooperation, in relation to employability (Agran et al. 2016; Deming 2017; Grob et al. 2019; Hendricks 2010; Murray & Doren 2012). The mothers in this study also identified social skills as another important element of a person's employability, including communication and 'being able to talk properly, being relatable'.

Some of the mothers also made a strong connection between confidence, social interaction and social skills:

> *Oh well that's what it is, you know. It's social interaction, networking is how you meet people, how you get into the work force, how you grow in the workforce. I feel like that's exactly what it's about…I think those are the things that have impacted me the most in what I have chosen to do after having the kids. What workforce I am in is that social side of things, that networking, that confidence that sometimes you are lacking a lot more now than you used to…those are the things that are important to be in the workforce.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

There are close links between social skills and social networks, which are considered in Chapter Six with regard to personal circumstances.

Self-motivation

Personal drive and motivation were other key individual employability factors identified by the mothers, having 'the right attitude and a willingness to want to give anything a go'. It was clear from the mothers that this drive and motivation could be shaped by a range of factors:

> *And another would also have to be matched with that, like, attitude of actually wanting to work and wanting to earn an income for themselves and seeing the benefit of doing that in terms of having that money coming in and that independence and that someone that would see that they would get that self-worth from having a job.*
>
> Mother from Interview 2

> *I mean like personal drive, like motivation. Coz if you're like 'meh whatevs'. Whereas you need to want to do it…And I guess there are different things that cause drive, aren't there. Like there might be financial need, there might be personal gratification – I need to get out of home. Or I feel that my job is really important so I feel I need to go back to it.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 7

Motivation and drive are closely linked to confidence, and confidence is a motivating factor for people to engage in the paid workforce (Dang & Chou 2019; Gard & Sandberg 1998). Therefore, it is clear that some mothers would lack this required motivation and drive if their confidence has been eroded, for example through being socially isolated, out of the workforce for an extended period, or in a domestic violence relationship.

Health and wellbeing

The mothers emphasised the important role of health (specifically mental health) and wellbeing on a person's ability to work, noting to be employable a person 'would have to be mentally and physically healthy' (Mother from Interview 3).

Although not explicitly mentioned in McQuaid and Lindsay's framework, it is clear health and wellbeing also encompasses associated factors such as drug, alcohol and substance abuse and addictions, and the effects of trauma, including domestic violence (DV). These issues are explored further in Chapter Six when considering personal circumstances, noting for many women experiences of domestic violence, criminal history and homelessness, etc., are related to their family and living circumstances. However, it is important to note the inextricable link between a person's external circumstances which impact on them and their intrinsic feelings of health, wellbeing, confidence, motivation and self-worth.

Service providers who work with mothers, including many who participated in this research, spoke of the complex and significant issues many women experience in relation to mental health and psychological wellbeing. The mothers who participated in this study were, understandably, less forward in sharing their personal experiences of trauma and poor mental health and wellbeing, nor were they encouraged to share such information for this research project. However, some of the mothers disclosed their poor mental health, particularly experiences with anxiety, depression and postnatal depression, which is further explored in Chapters Six and Eight.

Mental health

Mental health is influenced by a number of factors, including genetics, personal circumstances, and institutional/environmental factors (Brydsten et al. 2018; Dinh et al. 2017; Dohrenwend et al. 1992). However, it is important to note that mental health selection and mental health causation in relation to engagement in paid employment are two intertwined and reciprocal pathways (Allen et al. 2014; Brydsten, et al. 2018; Dohrenwend et al. 1992; Nebhinani & Basu 2019). There is evidence which suggests that being out of the workforce is damaging to mental health and that employment can improve mental health (Dinh et al. 2017; Frech & Damaske 2012; Schuring et al. 2017;), and this aligns with views that work has therapeutic qualities, and supports ideologically-driven policies stemming from a belief that the best form of welfare is a job. However, mental health issues are also a major barrier to engagement in the workforce (Brydsten et al. 2018), and the social determinants of mental health must be carefully considered when understanding the relationship between work, mental health, and policies which force participation in the paid labour force.

The impact of mental health on employability is evident in the findings of numerous studies (Gilchrist et al. 2007; Himle et al. 2014; McArt 2014; Milfort et al. 2015; Moore 2019; Paul &

Moser 2009; Perkins 2008). People in receipt of social security payments are more likely to experience poor mental health than those who do not receive the payments (Butterworth et al. 2006; Helmes & Fudge 2016; Kiely & Butterworth 2013). Single mothers in particular experience very high levels of poor mental health (Butterworth 2003).

The mothers in the study identified that mental health impacted heavily on a mother's employability. They stressed the impact of poor mental health on their confidence levels, coping ability, family and personal relationships and their work readiness, and highlighted the impact of social isolation on their mental health and psychological wellbeing:

> *Sometimes I think it's just a bit unrealistic to just be at home with you and the kids all the time. You know, you've got no contact with any other parents. You know, it's isolation so your morale is going to go down when you've been isolated from the real world in some ways.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 3

The mental health impact of navigating the changes in becoming a parent and the consequences this has on paid work was also raised:

> *I think mental health is a big thing. Mental health that comes with having children and leaving work as well and trying to get back into work whether you have left your job or just had a year off, and the stressors that come with that.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 1

Skills, qualifications and work experience

The mothers who participated in this study considered skills, qualifications and work experience to be important to a person's employability, but these factors were raised less often and with less importance than the socio-emotional considerations of employability, such as confidence and mental health. This is an interesting finding, and points towards the importance of policies which provide mothers with socio-emotional support, rather than focusing on training and education.

Basic transferrable skills

Basic numeracy and literacy skills, including basic digital literacy, were identified by the mothers as conducive to a person's employability. As highlighted in Chapter Four, the region where the interviews and focus groups took place experiences very low levels of education, including well-below-average high-school completion and tertiary education compared to the state and Australian averages. The mothers recognised this fact, as one of the mothers who did not complete Year 9 explained:

> *I think education is a big thing where I live, there's lots of people that don't finish school and sort of don't get those qualifications behind them. Like even myself, I found like that happened to me in some senses when I was young and a teenager where I live, I didn't serve my education as much as I would have liked to. And I feel like that happens quite a lot in the area where we live.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

Some of the mothers, especially those who left school because they had children early, expressed a lack of confidence in their numeracy and literacy skills:

> *Well probably confidence, obviously. I'm not very good with paperwork, typing things and stuff like that. Like I still really don't know punctuation [laughing].*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 4

Service providers also identified digital literacy and access a barrier to employment:

> *We've also found that a lot of people when they do apply for jobs they have to apply online. Which is a major disadvantage for most people. Most people don't have computers or are computer illiterate. So they are not answering a lot of questions even if they do get through the system. So once again their resumes don't even get in front of the boss's face so to speak.*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 7

Formal qualifications

The importance of qualifications to a person's employability was noted by some of the mothers, mostly in relation to following specific career paths and increasing competitiveness in winning a position:

> *And possibly some certificates from TAFE or previous study so they have a good chance against all the other people going for work. Because there seems to be a lot of people going for work at the moment and there's a lot of competition out there. So I feel like the more certificates or study that you have, the better off you are at getting the job.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 1

In the field site, vocational education and training offered through TAFE was acknowledged as a key educational resource for mothers, and mothers noted how such qualifications can support employability. However, the mothers also acknowledged that a person's level of qualification needs to match the jobs which are available, particularly in regional locations such as the field site where employment opportunities are limited:

> *I still go through that thing of, I know what jobs are available in this area and I know that there's not many, and I know a lot are highly skilled positions. So when I look at, like, picking a TAFE course, I kind of go through that thing of, I still want to link it back to what jobs are actually there and are those jobs going to fit my limitations.*
>
> Mother from Interview 2

> *And I'm re-educating myself. So I'm part-way through a TAFE course to enhance what I've already got. So I'm having to educate myself, because I know specifically where I want to go now, because it is a small town. So I have to target that. So I have to be educated specific for what I want to do.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 6

While qualifications were noted as one of the factors associated with employability, they were not considered to be a crucial factor in all circumstances:

> *Sometimes it's necessary, sometimes it's not. The boss I am working for said to me 'at the end of the day it is just a piece of paper'.*
>
> Mother from Interview 1

Overqualification

In contrast to employability being impacted by low levels of skills and qualifications, some mothers complained that *having* qualifications was impacting on their employability. This is an interesting finding which is not echoed loudly in the literature.

As explored in Chapter Six, many mothers change their ambitions and career aspirations after having children because they seek work which fits around their family schedule and lifestyle rather than pursuing their previous career path and qualifications which may not suit their new lifestyle and responsibilities as a parent. In this way, those who are highly qualified and looking for work in a different field may have trouble securing lower-skilled work which offers hours and conditions which are more suitable to their family circumstances. Many mothers reported being unsuccessful for jobs they applied for and being told by the potential employer that they were unsuccessful because they were overqualified for the role:

> *Overqualified. So that didn't go down well in my self-esteem, for prospective employment. It's like, alright, well rule that out because I'm overqualified for that one.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 3

Service providers also recognised being overqualified is a factor impacting on mothers' employability:

> *We have lots of mums that are overqualified. Who perhaps did uni after school, who've got a degree. The degree probably perhaps doesn't fit in with their lifestyle now so how*

do they then get a job that's lower level, without people going, you've got a degree what do you want to come stack shelves for? And you get these mums, like today, who are saying, I will stack a shelf, I will clean a floor, I will do anything to get a job and be out and about doing something, and sadly if your overqualified you're overqualified, you don't even get a look in.

Service Provider from Interview 6

Work experience

The mothers talked about the importance of previous practical work experience, including volunteer work, for their employability and work readiness:

If you don't have experience you won't get the job. You won't get a look in I reckon. If you go for a job they say, ok, what experience do you have. And if you haven't had that experience then obviously they are not going to hire you to teach you, because they want you to already have the experience.

Mother from Joint Interview 1

Some of the mothers noted that they had qualifications but not the practical experience to support them:

Probably more it depends if you've got the confidence with the theory side of things. Like I've done a lot of study, like you were saying education, so I've basically done heaps of education. But when it comes to thinking about actually putting myself in to do a practical job, I don't have as much of that practical confidence because I haven't actually lived it.

Mother from Joint Interview 3

Service providers reported many mothers, particularly those with older children who may be required to participate in education or training as part of their social security mutual obligation requirements, are often undertaking training in areas they do not have an interest in, which do not meet the skills requirements of potential employees. They echoed the mothers' views that employability is reduced if a person does not have the related work experience to support the qualifications:

> *You get people that have no skills and then you can get people who can wallpaper the walls with certificates because they've done training course after training course after training course. But they haven't got the work experience that goes along with it. And that's mainly what the employers are looking for is to find someone who has the physical skills. The piece of paper is the bonus, but if you have the piece of paper without the skills you're not really job ready.*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 7

Being ready to apply for work

As highlighted in McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) framework, job seeking is a key factor associated with a person's employability. The mothers also noted this as being an important factor. Some of the mothers with previous employment history talked about the importance of being prepared for an interview, as a more self-confident mother with recent work experience explained:

> *Well to do research on the company and the job you are actually applying for and know the actual position and what it entails. Having questions that you feel is related to asking for you. Because it is not only you getting interviewed, but it's you interviewing them to see if the position would be right for you and what you are looking for as well. So being prepared in the way of doing research prior and having a bit of background as well.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

For many of the mothers, particularly those without prior work experience, the prospect of applying for work or attending an interview was daunting, and some expressed desire for assistance in getting prepared to apply for work:

> *It's hard coz I don't know how to do it. I've never done one before.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 2

> *See the thing I am thinking is, if I got the newspaper say, and I was like, oh there's a job there. Just say oh there's a florist job there, I might go for that. It feels like there's no net underneath me. It just feels like you're on your own. Like, you've got to go out, be confident about that, I can do that. And sometimes I think people need a bit more support than that if they have been at home and they don't know anything other than being at home.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 3

As the literature shows, many of the soft skills (discussed in Chapter Three) and attributes that workplaces seek in their employees are not emphasised by the employees when applying for roles (Snell et al. 2016). Soft skills which are often acquired through social networks and family interactions, such as communication skills, teamwork, emotional intelligence, etc., are highly desirable to employers (Anderson et al. 2017; Loveder 2017; McDonald et al. 2020; McQuaid et al. 2005; Siekman & Fowler 2017; Tymon 2013). Many of the mothers in this study did not recognise how the skills they had built as a parent could transfer to the workplace and did not feel confident in being able to 'sell themselves' and feel competitive in the labour market:

> *So you know the hardest thing though, is acknowledging and recognising what they are in yourself. So if I were to go and write a resume now, I mean I can do a million things, but I would have trouble recognising the value in myself because I haven't been at work for three years, right. So it's harder to see the things that you are capable of when you've been out of it for a while.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 6

> *… like what we talked about in terms of all the amazing things that parents do as being a full time parent, so just giving them the confidence that they have a lot of skills that they have gained from that and maybe helping them translate that into their resume or like translate that into being able to talk to employers.*
>
> Mother from Interview 2

Service providers also acknowledged the reduced paid-labour market attachment many mothers experience due to having children can reduce self-perceived employability:

> *…I've got families who have never worked before and then that anxiety around, you know, I've never worked, I'm now 30. I've never had a job because I've had 5 kids and no one's even going to employ me, I don't even know how to write a resume or, I don't have a resume or anything to put on my resume.*
>
> Service Provider from Joint Interview 4

It is possible that many mothers do not recognise their skills and employable qualities because they have been influenced by the dominant narrative that paid employment is more valued than non-paid caring roles, including being a parent. De-valuing the role of the parent results in mothers de-valuing the skills and contribution they make to their employability, their families, and society in performing this important function.

Conclusion

This chapter was the first of three chapters which presents this study's findings on how mothers in Australia's social security system understand, define and interact with the concepts of employability. The thematic taxonomy of Chapters Five, Six and Seven are roughly based on McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework (2005), and this chapter examined mothers' views on *individual factors* relating to their employability. The above-mentioned individual factors are impacted upon greatly by mothers' personal circumstances, such as caring responsibilities, safety and wellbeing, and social networks. The following chapter (Chapter Six) now considers these personal circumstances in relation to mothers' employability.

CHAPTER SIX Mothers' employability: personal circumstances

I just take it one day at a time and juggle it the best I can.

Employed young single mother of six children

Introduction

The previous chapter was the first of three chapters (Chapters Five, Six and Seven) which presents this study's findings on mothers' views on employability, with reference to the typology presented in McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework (2005). The previous chapter considered individual factors of employability identified by the mothers, including confidence, mental health, and qualifications. The second component in McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework relates to 'personal circumstances' which 'includes a range of socioeconomic contextual factors related to individuals' social and household circumstances' (2005, p. 212). This chapter presents findings in relation to the personal circumstances of employability, focusing primarily on caring responsibilities, safety and wellbeing factors, social networks and work culture within social spheres.

The inclusion of personal circumstances in McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework make it the most applicable framework to the experience of mothers in the social security system. As outlined in their framework, these factors include things such as caring responsibilities (for children and others such as family members), household situation, family relationships and access to resources. While not explicitly listed in McQuaid and Lindsay's framework, personal circumstances such as domestic violence and interaction with the child protection system also fit within this component of their framework. Such additions to the framework are also considered in this chapter.

The mothers in the study recognised the many and varying circumstances of individuals and families and emphasised the impact this can have on a mother's employability:

> *So I would definitely think of, um like, stability. And the person would have to have like that stable home life and their needs would have to have been met, in terms of like, somewhere safe to live, well supported by family and friends and having that network*

there. So like just going through their hierarchy of needs. They would need to have that kind of stable place to have a good night sleep and be well fed and have a healthy diet and all those types of things need to have been met for them to be able to, kind of, get up or be somewhere or be relied upon to be at a certain place at a certain time.

Mother from Interview 2

I guess what background they've come from, what's happening at home. Whether they have confidence to go to work or to learn…And then there could be the case of, you know, kids with needs, or someone that you're caring for out of home as well. Like it depends. It could be DV, could be alcohol abuse. You know, any of that.

Mother from Focus Group 3

Given the multiple personal circumstances influencing a mother's employability and demanding attention, it is pertinent to consider whether paid employment should always be considered a priority for mothers, or whether their parenting role, other caring responsibilities and addressing immediate pressing needs such as physical safety or housing security, are more urgent and important.

Is work the top priority?

A mother's personal circumstances heavily influences her employability. For many mothers who participated in this study, work was not their top priority given the wide range of personal circumstances in which the mothers found themselves. Caring responsibilities often mean that engagement in the paid labour market is of less importance and priority than a mother's parenting role, even though government policy and societal expectations convey the message that a mother's role as paid-employee is more valuable than her role as a parent. Paid employment is also often a low priority for mothers who are experiencing domestic violence, trauma, homelessness and other extreme family circumstances. For these mothers, immediate concerns such as these usually need to be addressed before they are ready to work. There is evidence which shows single parents often experience a 'spiral of hardship, poor health and low morale', and Marsh explains that single parents in this situation are often not likely to be able to contemplate working (Marsh 2001).

Service providers also recognised that many mothers found themselves in circumstances which resulted in employment being a low priority. For these mothers, addressing their immediate needs and providing a safe environment for their children were more pressing than work, as two service providers explained:

> *Service Provider 1: I don't think from my experience with clients so much, that they have a career focus. It's more a parenting focus. Like you are discussing how to be a good parent and things like that and focusing on the children and themselves. More about their wellbeing than where they are going to go next career wise*
>
> *Service Provider 2: Yeah I agree, it eventually happens. But when they first come to the service they usually present with some sort of crisis. With some sort of saturated problem. And usually that is compounded with children's needs, family violence, isolation, financial issues. So the discussions and conversations around that career path do come but they are not generally a very big focus*
>
> *Service Provider 1: Yeah it's a big build up to get to that point*
>
> Service Providers from Focus Group 8

As expressed by another service provider, many parents are experiencing a range of barriers to employment and may need to focus on stabilising their circumstances before they are ready to work:

> *And I think sometimes when they sign up to the program there's so many other things going on that are so overwhelming that employment is the last thing they are thinking about. So for a parent that's got four kids and two are on the spectrum and have all these needs, or have housing issues, or are having financial difficulties. You know, even though you need employment to be financially stable and to have a house, I'd rather have a house than look for work first…So there are all these other things that come into play that kind of push employment down the line a little bit for some of the families that I see walk in the door.*
>
> Service Providers from Joint Interview 4

Caring and family responsibilities

There is strong evidence to show caring responsibilities, whether caring for children, family members, ageing relatives and others, has an impact on a person's engagement with the paid labour market (Aarntzen et al. 2019; Baxter 2013; Briar & Patterson 2005; Kowalewska 2017; Millar & Ridge 2017; Stockey-Bridge 2015; Wattis et al. 2013). Overwhelmingly, caring responsibilities fall to mothers and women (Baxter 2013; Kowalewska 2017). Although the balance is beginning to shift in two-parent families, most of the childrearing responsibilities continues to fall to the mother (AIFS 2019). In separated families, although there is a growing trend towards shared-care arrangements, the mother most often takes on the role of principal carer for the children (Smyth & Chisholm 2017). Many of the mothers who participated in this study are single mothers and noted the high level of caring responsibilities which rest with them, particularly in the absence of support from family and their ex-partner/s. Several of the mothers were also foster parents and/or caring for children with behavioural, intellectual and physical difficulties and trauma-related conditions.

All of the mothers who participated in this study believed that having children changed a person's employability, mostly due to the responsibility and energy involved in raising children and the additional considerations and demands this placed on the parent.

Some of the mothers said their caring role influenced them towards employment, whether it be for the added stimulation and interpersonal interaction that they missed while being home with children, or to be a stronger role model for their children and show them that employment and increased financial independence was valuable, or due to financial necessity and to reduce poverty.

However, most of the mothers in this study prioritised their caring role over their role as a paid employee. The mothers greatly valued their time at home with their children. Many of the mothers felt their time at home with their children was limited, and they wanted to make the most of it:

> *I'd really like to spend time with them while they're little, and then they will be big. So enjoy them while they're real little.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 3

> *I'm of the opinion where I'm very lucky that I don't need to leave my daughter and I wouldn't want to leave my daughter. So I'm not wanting to look at employment while my daughter is still young, it's the last thing I'm going to do.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 2

> *Like, are you willing to sacrifice the time with your children to go back to work, however many days? Like, that's what it is for me. Sacrificing time with your children. And balance out like how much money you actually need to live and stay afloat.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 1

As covered in Chapters Two and Three, the role of 'the mother' within the social security system has changed over time from one being primarily of raising the next generation, to that of being an adult worker who may take a short time away from paid employment to undertake childrearing activities (Briar & Patterson 2005; Cortis et al. 2008; Humpage 2015; Millar & Rowlingson 2001). The changing narrative around the value of a mother's unpaid labour versus the value placed on paid labour creates great tension for mothers when considering their options around caring for children and paid employment (Cooney 2006; Millar & Rowlingson 2001). For many mothers who participated in this study who were working or contemplating a return to work, the priority they placed on their caring role meant their career aspirations changed, as we will now explore.

A carer focus or a career focus?

Most of the mothers said that having children had changed their current and future career aspirations, at least for the time while they have children at home, and their priorities around work had changed. As noted in Chapter Five, some women who had changed their career aspirations and sought work which was more suitable to their family circumstances found themselves overqualified for many of the roles they applied for. For most of the women who participated in this study, finding work which suited their family situation and enabled them to maintain their parenting role was more important than working in a role which suited their ideal career goals or aspirations they had before having children:

If I didn't have kids would I be doing the job that I'm doing now and working the hours that I'm working? No I wouldn't. I would be in a totally different place in my life. Because for me, personally, I've chosen to put my career on hold while the kids are young.

Mother from Interview 3

When it is just you that you have to worry about, you can feel very differently about what you want in life, in terms of everything. When you are thinking only of yourself. But when you have kids you are thinking, is it going to fit in in terms of your life, with the kids.

Mother from Focus Group 2

As explored in Chapter Seven, mothers considered finding work within suitable hours (e.g. school hours) as a key factor related to their employability. Previous research shows that parents look for a job that suits their childcare needs and the amount of time they wish to spend with their children, rather than finding childcare to suit their job (Marsh 2001, p. 32). Many mothers agreed that work hours which were appropriate for their family circumstances and caring responsibilities was more important than working in a role which met other needs:

I'll do anything to have the working hours that suit more than being happy with what I was doing at work.

Mother from Joint Interview 1

I mean, I'm a single mum. So I'm super lucky that I get to stay with [my child]. But eventually, it doesn't matter that I'm not gunna want to leave her, I am going to have to put her into care because I am going to have to go back to work. And it is going to have to be a job that, you know, I'm going to be able to work around with [my child]. So it doesn't really matter what the wages are, it's what I can find that will accommodate to my daughter and me.

Mother from Joint Interview 2

For many mothers, the idea of re-entering the paid workforce after taking time out to care for children was concerning and uncertain, especially given they considered their role as a parent to now be their most important role:

> *I don't even know what I want to do with my future now that I have a child. I had a very crazy job before I had my daughter, and now there's no way my life would ever go back to that. I'm very happy that I can't, but also, I have to…and that's daunting.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 2

> *But I'm on that launching pad and it's really scary. It's quite scary from being at home to, what am I gunna do. You know. And I actually think, what would make that transition easier for mums to build their confidence and make that change. Because it is, it's a big change for a woman, like going from that maternal sort of thing into that other world and letting go of that other role…It's just that feeling of, should I do this? Am I entitled to be able to work one day a week? And it's that guilt of just, well, should I just be a mum, or should I be striving for something more?*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 3

It is not uncommon for mothers to report feelings of guilt when deciding to either work, stay at home to care for children, or mix the two roles, and this guilt is largely associated with conflict between their choices, dominant societal expectations of mothers and the views of those in their social networks (Bird 2019; Borelli, Nelson et al. 2017; Borelli, Nelson-Coffey et al 2017; Guendouzi 2006; Losoncz & Bortolotto 2009; Uysal Irak et al. 2020). Societal expectations to work are considered later in this chapter. Many mothers feel this guilt regardless of the choices they make, or decisions they are required to take through financial necessity or welfare conditionality, regardless of whether they are working full-time, part-time or working as a stay-at-home mum.

In addition to caring for children, mothers also generally take on the primary role as unpaid housekeeper for their household, a role which demands much time and attention in addition to their caring and paid-employment ventures.

Housework and home duties

As noted in Chapter Two, mothers take on 'the lion's share' of the housework and home duties, in addition to childrearing (AIFS 2019). This gendered division of labour has a major impact on mothers' engagement and interaction with the paid labour market (Craig & Brown 2017; Craig & Powell 2011; Dinh et al. 2017; Gjerdingen & Center 2005; Strazdins et al. 2017). It is clear from conversations with mothers in this study that housework and home duties have a direct impact on how they feel about their employability, particularly if they do not have someone to share the load with (either because they are a single parent or if the housework is not shared with their partner or other household members).

Many mothers expressed their role in the house and caring for children as a job in itself, as two mothers explained:

> *Mother 1: And at the end of the day, like you're at home with your kids, you're busy. Like you've got three kids. That to me, that's like a job.*
>
> *Mother 2: Yeah I spend every minute of the day like clean, cook. You feel like you're doing everything all day anyway, so it's basically a job.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 3

Two other mothers described the time and effort, both physical and emotional, to run a household and care for children as a substantial undertaking, highlighting the major impact parenting and home duties have on a mother's employability:

> *Mother 1: Well it's hard. When do you have your time? You're doing your washing, doing your cleaning, wiping noses, breast feeding.*
>
> *Mother 2: You're physically and mentally exhausted. I am. Honestly. I am physically and mentally exhausted. It's a very lonely job.*
>
> *Mother 1: And then you dream about them so you can't even get reprieve there.*
>
> *Mother 2: That's right. It's a very lonely job. I find it's sometimes a perpetual cycle, like you get exhausted, so you feel down about that, then you are down, and then you get*

> *back, and then you just do the washing again and you're back in that and then that's exhausting, and then, you know, there's not much time.*
>
> Mothers from Focus Group 6

A mother of three who had taken over eight years out of the workforce to care for her children shared her hesitation of re-entering the workforce without increased help on the home front, as the large majority of housework and childrearing activities fell to her and she had limited support around the house from her partner or others:

> *Go back to work. Um, if you have support from husbands or like family, yes, 'cause still you gotta do cook, housework, do those things. Yeah. So I don't think I can do it without help. I don't think I can do it by myself.*
>
> Mother from Interview 4

As highlighted in the literature, mothers who have support at home and share the load with their partners when engaged in the paid labour market, experience less time pressure and associated issues (Craig & Brown 2017; Craig et al. 2010; Dinh et al. 2017). However, in Australia and other 'liberal' states such as the UK and USA, women's position in the home is considered a private family issue and government policy is not geared towards supporting an increase in household and caring responsibilities by fathers and reducing the burden on mothers (Craig et al. 2010).

In order to balance the time pressures associated with parenting, managing a household, working and/or other responsibilities, many families need to establish routines and schedules. This issue is now considered.

Routine and stability

According to the mothers who participated in this study, greater stability and routine increases mothers' employability. Having a routine and a sense of organisation can help families to be prepared for various activities and arrive at engagements on time, for example to arrive at school drop-off on time with well rested children who are dressed and fed; however, unstable

work schedules can result in reduced routines and poorer outcomes for families and children, including increased stress, conflict and behavioural complaints (Agrawal et al. 2018; Kalil et al. 2014; Lee et al. 2017, 2018; McLoyd et al. 2008; Strazdins et al. 2006). Many of the mothers talked about how the demands of home life can make it difficult to maintain a stable routine and voiced their concerns of how paid work would add to this pressure:

> *And like morning, even though I'm not working, it's hard to leave house, like to get school. Like by nine o'clock I have to be there, drop kids off. It's hard with three kids. But if you're working, you gotta get ready yourself, and then get ready for kids. And yeah. I suppose you get used to it [laughing].*
>
> Mother from Interview 4

The literature shows that stable work hours can support family routine and wellbeing (McLoyd et al. 2008; Strazdins et al. 2006;). Correspondingly, some mothers in this study spoke of how finding a job which met their ideal employment hours would support their routine and stability at home, and the wellbeing of their children:

> *And I'm aiming for a Monday to Friday 9 to 5 job so I can be at home with the children for dinners and weekends so it's more of a stable, structured week. Rather than working night shifts here and all over the place, I want a structured life for my children.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 1

Finding work within suitable work hours, specifically school hours, is discussed further in the following chapter.

Stability was also referred to by mothers in relation to relocating and having stable employment, and the ability to appear stable to employers. Two of the mothers in this study explained that a mother who has had a stable address and stable employment has increased employability:

Mother 1: And also I've moved around a little bit as well. So I've got a few different places on my resume and had a few different jobs. So people wonder if I'm gunna move and leave.

Mother 2: Yeah, so if you've had stable employment and a stable life as well. So if you have just packed up and left or moved countries or jobs, you're not going to be in the same position as a person who's been in the same job for the last 12 years, gotten in 12 years' experience at the same job, with a degree.

Mothers from Joint Interview 1

Mothers who are receiving social security payments, and therefore are on very low incomes, may feel the additional time pressures associated with creating routine and reducing work-life conflict compared to other working parents because they are less likely to afford time-saving services and items of necessity, such as reliable transport and communication, or items of convenience, such as hiring cleaners, nannies, buying takeaway food, etc.

Following this exploration of some of the personal circumstances related to a mother's role as a parent, it is appropriate to consider some of the factors associated with safety and wellbeing.

Safety and wellbeing

McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) outline an inexhaustive, yet comprehensive, list of personal circumstances which contribute towards an individual's employability. In order for the framework to apply more comprehensively to vulnerable and disadvantaged mothers in Australia's social security system, I argue that this element of McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework should also include circumstantial aspects to do with safety and wellbeing experienced through one's environment and personal context, such as family situations which involve domestic violence (in any of its multiple forms), child protection concerns, drug and alcohol abuse, and interaction with the criminal justice system. The following sections now explore these factors and how they influence mothers' employability.

As outlined in Chapter Four, many people in the locations where the interviews and focus groups took place for this research experience very high levels of disadvantage. Accompanying this disadvantage is increased levels of crime, domestic violence and child

protection reports. As noted by the ANAO, '[T]here are known to be linkages between child maltreatment and levels of economic and social stress which, in turn, are generally prevalent in areas of relative disadvantage' (2013, p. 70). These concerns were consistently raised throughout this research, with some mothers talking about experiencing domestic violence and leaving abusive relationships, which put some of them and their children into homelessness and insecure housing circumstances in addition to impacting severely on their mental health and wellbeing. Understandably, many of these mothers experienced a reduction in their employability due to these factors.

As expressed by some of the service providers, many of the mothers who attended their family services also received more intensive case work support to assist with homelessness, child protection referrals, drug and alcohol dependence, mental health issues and other complex needs and concerns. Many of these mothers had been involved in the child protection system as children themselves and had a history of severe trauma, abuse, neglect, violence and interaction with the criminal justice system.

These observations are consistent with the literature, where comorbidity of such issues is commonplace among vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts, including mothers in the social security system (Bailey et al. 2018; Campbell et al. 2016; Cobb-Clark & Zhu 2017; Dennis & Vigod 2013; Greger et al. 2015; Higgins & Kaspiew 2011; Krammer et al. 2018; Tirado-Muñoz et al. 2017; Tsantefski et al. 2015). People who have experienced trauma are more likely to experience a range of poor life outcomes and experiences, including in the areas of mental and physical health, social and intimate relationships, and educational and employment outcomes (Bailey et al. 2018; Llinares-Insa et al. 2018; Wall et al. 2016).

Family and domestic violence

Family and domestic violence is a prevalent concern and has major impacts on individuals, families, communities and society (Cortis & Bullen 2016; Day et al. 2005; Holt et al. 2008; Katz 2016; Kutin et al. 2017; Showalter 2016). The direct cost on families and children is severe and while attempts have been made to calculate the financial costs of family and domestic violence (Council of Europe 2014; Day et al. 2005; National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2009; PricewaterhouseCoopers Australia 2015) the true immediate and ongoing costs to individuals, families and society cannot be measured. The effect of domestic violence on the employability of mothers who experience it is significant.

Not only does domestic violence have immediate impacts on the employability of mothers, but the long-term impacts continue to effect outcomes and wellbeing for mothers and children, including employability (Evans et al. 2008; Holt et al. 2008; Millar & Ridge 2017). As discussed by Millar and Ridge (2017) mothers and children who had experienced family and domestic violence were affected in the long-term and experienced trust and confidence issues and were cautious regarding their relationships. As already discussed, mothers in this study consider confidence to be of upmost importance to their employability. Therefore, the ongoing trauma of domestic violence and its impact on employability is compounded by the related decrease in confidence experienced by the mothers who have lived through this experience.

Only a small number of the women who participated in this study spoke of their experiences of family and domestic violence. Those who did spoke about the pervasive impact of violence on their whole lives, from housing security and interaction with the child protection system, to personal effects such as trauma, fear and reduced feelings of confidence and self-worth.

Service providers were more open in talking about the impacts of domestic violence on the communities where they operated and the individuals and families who they worked with. The wide-reaching impact and implications of domestic violence on women and their children cannot be underestimated, as one service provider explained in relation to child protection concerns:

> *And then DV relationships, that's very prevalent. And that consumes everything. Because then they're concerned their children could be removed. That's always in the back of their mind, once again comes back from their childhood. A lot of them had been removed or had involvement with DOCS, that's what they called them, and that alone is a fear. A real fear coz they've lived it. And generally it's a bad experience. Because no child, no matter how bad the home is, it's still home. It's what they know, it's their parents, it's where they align themselves with.*
>
> Service Provider from Joint Interview 4

Service providers also talked about the control many partners had over mothers, in relation to social isolation, finances and employment. They reported that many partners encouraged mothers to stay at home and care for children, not socialise with others, not access services and not work, as two service providers explain:

Service Provider 1: And sometimes you see too, I know it sounds silly because its 2018, but there's still that whole power and control that, you know, the dad wants mum to stay at home with the kids and not have those social networks outside of the home, and not get a job, and not have that income, and there's very much a lot of that going on as well with families that I work with. You know mum just stays home with the kids and that's what she does.

Service Provider 2: And that can be like a form of isolation. Knowing where they are, what they're doing, what they are spending. They don't want financial freedom for them. So it's controlling on so many levels.

Service Providers from Joint Interview 4

As highlighted in the literature, coercive behaviours and financial control are common forms of domestic violence (Cortis & Bullen 2016; Katz 2016; Kutin et al. 2017; Showalter 2016). This was a common theme highlighted by service providers in this study who reported many mothers were encouraged to stay home or 'kept pregnant' by their partners so they could not work and gain financial independence. Many of the partners of the mothers also reported themselves to be the principal carers of children so they were eligible for increased payments from Centrelink, while the mothers who took care of the children and needed to provide for them financially did not have access to enough money.

Domestic violence, including controlling and abusive relationships, have an extremely detrimental effect on a mother's employability (Showalter 2016). This occurs through a range of mechanisms, for example reduced mental health and health of the mother which results in reduced employability, direct involvement of the perpetrator at the workplace resulting in the mother being unable to attend work, and the perpetrator using coercive control to prevent the mother from applying for jobs or working (Showalter 2016).

In many cases, substance abuse by a partner is linked to the safety of the family and experiences of domestic violence, and the relationship between substance abuse and domestic violence is well established (Hirschel et al. 2009; James et al. 2004; Stuart et al. 2013). As demonstrated by some of the comments above, some of the mothers in the study also identified drug, alcohol and other substance abuse by individuals and within family and community environments as also having an impact on mothers' employability. Drug, alcohol

and other substance abuse is a major factor associated with the employability of mothers in the social security system, and hence should be included in this component of McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) employability framework. Surprisingly however, the issue did not receive significant attention from the mothers who participated in this study, perhaps due to their not wanting to share these personal details, and as such the issue will not be further examined in this thesis.

Housing security and homelessness

Insecure housing and homelessness were identified as barriers to employment by some of the mothers in the study, and they relayed their personal experiences with homelessness, which was often a result of leaving a domestic violence situation. Clearly, those who do not have somewhere to call home, to feel safe, sleep, cook, wash and belong, are going to experience reduced employability. There are also numerous studies highlighting the impact of housing on employment outcomes and the barrier insecure housing places on a person's employability (Axe et al. 2020; Groton & Radey 2019; McDonald et al. 2020; Poremski et al. 2014; Rosenberg & Kim 2018).

For some women who live in state-provided social or community housing, changes to their income can impact on their eligibility for housing access. Studies have pointed to this disincentive for social housing tenants to work, or correctly report earnings and formalise employment arrangements, for fear of losing access to social housing (Hulse & Randolph 2005; Productivity Commission 2015a). This issue was touched on briefly by participants and service providers. However, income changes impacting on service eligibility was more often raised in relation to eligibility for social security payments, as explored in Chapter Seven.

Poverty and financial constraints

'Access to resources' is included in this component of McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) employability framework, including such things as experience of poverty, household income and debt, financial constraints, access to transport, and access to social capital. This section considers the former factors while social capital is considered in the next section.

The impact of poverty on individuals' employability due to the impact poverty has on factors such as health, wellbeing and cognitive ability, is well known (Allen et al. 2014; Curchin 2017; Fitzsimons et al. 2017; Gracey & King 2009).

All the mothers in the study have low incomes, as the targeted nature of the social security system results in only those on low incomes being eligible for payment. Further, the rate of social security payments in Australia, like in many welfare states, is below the poverty line, with adequacy of payment being a major point of contention between governments and welfare bodies (Commonwealth of Australia 2012a; Mendes 2015). The difficulties, especially financial difficulties, associated with living on social security can be found throughout the literature (Campbell et al. 2016; Cook 2012). Financial constraints and access to resources was highlighted as a key factor of employability for the mothers, and most commonly in relation to the costs of childcare and access to education and course fees, which are covered further in the following section.

The impact of poverty on the mothers and their children and the difficulties in managing financially when in receipt of social security was evident in this research:

> *Because by the time you pay your bills, your rent, you're only left with minimal. Christmas coming up, like where's this money gunna come from? And yeah. Especially if you're a single mum and you've got several kids. It's just hard.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 5

Many of the mothers in the study also mentioned not being able to afford basic household items and services such as groceries and utilities, and the stresses associated with this took their toll on the mothers' wellbeing and employability. Some shared that they did not have the internet at home due to the cost which further limited their studying and employment prospects. As well as being able to provide the basics for their family, mothers identified that access to financial resources was also important for them to be able to have the clothes and appearance required to be presentable for an interview or employment:

> *They would need to have, I guess, the means to get themselves the shoes and the clothing that they need, and a haircut. And all those things that you need to make yourself presentable for a job.*
>
> Mother from Interview 2

Service providers noted the difficult financial situation of the mothers who access their services. Some noted the additional financial pressures and stress that welfare conditions can place on families, particularly through the sanction regime:

> *A lot of the families are already in such financial hardship that if they do get their payments reduced or stopped they could end up being homeless potentially. It just puts a lot of pressure on the families.*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

Access to transport was another factor of employability identified by the mothers related to access to resources. Unfortunately, many of the mothers did not have access to affordable, reliable transport and this limited their education, employment and social opportunities, as well as created difficulties in taking children to school, attending appointments and doing grocery shopping, etc.

> *You really need transport wherever you work, you can't rely on someone else all the time.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 1

> *There are some more [training courses] in [the next large town] but I don't have no transport so I can't go.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 1

Service providers also noted the lack of public transport and the difficulties it presented:

> *Transport is a barrier. So you know working in a small town and then we've got the small outside beach towns. There's not a lot of jobs in those areas and if you don't have transport, all you've got is a school bus, you're leaving your kids at home unsupervised so you can try to catch a bus to your employment.*
>
> Service Provider from Joint Interview 4

Access to transport was also related to the ability to get a driver licence. As one mother exclaimed, 'I don't have anyone to teach me how to drive' (Mother from Focus Group 1). Service providers also noted that unpaid fines often resulted in some mothers being unable to get a driver licence until these fines were paid off or waived, which created a major barrier to transport and employment.

As noted above, nearly all the mothers, with the exception of those with access to family support for childcare, identified financial constraints in relation to childcare as one of the greatest factors impacting their employability. Childcare is discussed in the following chapter. Another key resource for mothers is financial capital, which we will now explore.

Work culture and social capital

Access to social capital includes such things as 'personal and family support networks, formal and informal community support networks especially those relevant to job seeking' (McQuaid & Lindsay 2005, p. 212). McQuaid and Lindsay talk about the importance of 'the existence of a culture in which work is encouraged and supported within the family, among peers or other personal relationships and the wider community' (2005, p. 210). This was raised by the mothers in relation to their employability on a number of fronts, particularly regarding intergenerational disadvantage, role models and the various value systems which placed conflicting pressures on mothers to either work or stay home with their children.

McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) point out that the literature shows social networks to be especially important in some local economies and can lead to people finding work and advancing when in the workforce, which was also identified by the mothers in this study, as discussed below. However, two vital ways social capital can impact mothers' employability are not explicitly covered in the framework. The first is related to how social networks and supports increase mothers' sense of value and self-worth, which leads to increased confidence and self-perceived employability. The second is the support social and family networks can provide to working mothers by way of childcare and meeting other household responsibilities.

Intergenerational disadvantage and role models

Intergenerational disadvantage relates to a lack of social mobility experienced in some families or locations, and research indicates many people follow in the footsteps of their parents when it comes to social security receipt (Breheny & Stephens 2008; Bubonya & Cobb-Clark 2021; Chetty & Hendren 2018; Deutscher 2020). It is argued that people often inherit views and

attitudes towards welfare receipt from their immediate families and are influenced by their family experience, more so than from the expectations of their broader neighbourhood and peers (Barón et al. 2015).

The influence of intergenerational family and community attitudes on a mother's employability was recognised by the mothers who participated in this study, as one mother explains:

> *Within the area where I live there is a very high percentage of unemployed people. And a lot of it is generational where they just haven't finished school, or don't have those skills to get into the workforce. Or their parents were never in the workforce so it wasn't passed down, that work ethic. So I guess where we live that makes it really hard for people that come from that sort of a background and have that sort of a lifestyle to then break that and to then go back into the workforce*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

Service providers also noted the impact family role models had on a person's employability:

> *Yeah they don't have role models in their family, people role modelling actually going to work and a lot of the children from those homes as they grow up have also dropped out of school. So numeracy and literacy is a big gap for a lot of people trying to get work. But also that good work habit. Getting up in the morning, planning the day, going to work, putting in a whole day and then coming home and taking care of whatever you have to take care of, so there's more than just that one gap.*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 7

> *I think also, in some areas, pockets and towns, there are generational problems. I don't like the word dysfunction. But problems, issues you know. Whether its unemployment or drug and alcohol. Lack of initiative, or, you know. So they become barriers. I see young people who just don't know how to get past that trauma, or that attitude they've inherited.*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 8

Intergenerational disadvantage and role models are closely tied with social expectations.

Social expectations

Social expectations regarding a mother's role as a mother, home-maker and worker have a major impact on the mother's expectations of themselves and the support they are likely to receive as a carer at home and/or in the paid workforce. Further, different social circles have different expectations and so mothers experience different expectations placed upon them, sometimes for cultural or religious reasons. For example, a service provider pointed out that some mothers who accessed the service experience great pressure to stay home to care for children, usually from their immediate or extended family, rather than pursue education or career opportunities:

> *For some I think socially there's a bit of a social barrier about, once they have children then they don't return to work. So a lot of mums might want to go study but it's not really accepted for them to go and study or go to work, they're meant to be at home. So we do have quite a few young mums who do complain about that aspect of their life.*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 6

Few of the mothers talked about the societal expectations on them to stay home and care for children. On the other hand, many of the mothers noted the strong societal expectations for them to return to the workforce after having children, and highlighted how this conflicted with their values around childrearing and having the right to take time out of the paid workforce to be with their children:

> *Mother 1: I get a lot of attitudes where people are like, so you're just happy at home? You just do that? Don't you get bored? Because there are a lot of women now that won't settle for just being at home… And I think that's what my frustration is. With that whole side of things. Is it's great to get women back into work, or mothers or whatever, but the most important job you can do is be at home with your kids and it's really under-valued. It's really, there's this pressure to get back to work so what, you can put your child in care? And you only get like five years with them before they go to school anyway. So I feel, like I get passionate about it. I really feel it's the attitudes.*

> *Mother 2: Yeah, I hear a lot of that. Dole bludgers because you are not at work or something. It's like, I still want to enjoy time with my kids. I can't justify giving up time with them to work at Maccas. No thank you. And to me there is no other choice because, like, I applied everywhere. And that was the outcome.*
>
> Mothers from Joint Interview 3

Most mothers who raised this issue talked about how mothers are in a variety of situations regarding their families and work, recognising for some mothers there is no choice but to work due to financial constraints, and for others working comprises an important part of their identity and value system. However, the societal pressure to work while also being perceived to be a 'good mother' were identified to impact on mothers' employability. The tension between being a stay-at-home mother and a working mother, and what is considered to be a 'good' mother has been outlined in the literature (see Chapter Three).

The tensions associated with conflicting values and social norms surrounding the roles of mother and paid worker are evident in the mothers' comments. We can also see from the above quote that mothers experience stigmatisation and judgements form others about their circumstances regarding paid work and parenting responsibilities. Derogatory terms such as 'dole bludger' and the associated stigmatisation surrounding welfare receipt are well documented in the literature (Archer 2009; Brady & Cook 2015; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013; Patulny et al. 2019; Peterie 2019b), as we have considered in Chapter Three. Societal expectations, including those of family and friends are important to mothers' sense of confidence and wellbeing. This analysis will now turn to exploring the factor of social networks in relation to employability, including how social networks can lead to employment and how they can create a sense of belonging and self-value which increases mothers' confidence, and therefore their employability.

Social networks

Many of the mothers expressed a desire for finding out more about what types of job opportunities and training was available to them. They noted it was very hard to find out about jobs which might suit school hours, and if these were even available. Some mentioned they would like the opportunity to first 'try out' working in a career field or particular job before committing to the work or training to see if it suited them and their family's needs.

In relation to their employability, the mothers noted the importance of informal mechanisms to find out about areas of work and learning about possible career paths. They also identified how social networks helped them find out about job vacancies and gain employment, through 'word-of-mouth'. This is reflected in the literature, which shows social networks can support people in their job search endeavours (Bonoli 2014; Patulny et al. 2019). The mothers interviewed highlighted the importance of professional networks and the doors this opens for employment opportunities, particularly in regional locations where 'it's not what you know, it's who you know'. As one mother explained, her social networks paved her avenue into employment:

> *Well, mine was just, mainly because I live in a small community, was just networking and the people that I knew, and seeing that there were jobs available and being a local and networking, that was how I got back into the workforce.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

The mothers in this study noted that social networks and family support can impact greatly on their employability, particularly in relation to childcare and juggling family and household responsibilities with work. Those without family support felt they were less work-ready than those who had this support, as we touched on above regarding caring responsibilities and housework. The mothers interviewed expressed a need for extra support when they are working so they can continue to meet their childrearing responsibilities, as one mother explained:

> *And even not if it's your partner, even in general support from anyone. If you don't have the support to lean on when you get stuck it is really hard to be able to fulfil your responsibilities. Especially if you don't have a typical 9–5 position, it sometimes is really hard.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 3

Service providers also noted the difficulties mothers face if they don't have support, notably support from family to care for children:

> *We do have a lot of families, a lot of mums that don't have support networks here. They don't have a mum or a nan or someone that they can go to. How do they then juggle going to apply for a job, being available for an appointment or an interview when they don't know how they can then leave their child somewhere or who they could do that with. And I think that stops a lot of women. Men as well, husbands as well. Well I can't even go for an interview. How can I go for an interview when I can't even leave my child somewhere?*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 6

> *Family support is one of the biggest things. The ones who don't have a lot of family support we kind of see struggle a little bit more.*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 9

Many mothers rely on informal day care (grandparents, other family members) as their main form of childcare (ABS 2017; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019). In Australia in 2017, 49.3 per cent of children aged 0–12 years usually attended some type of care, with 22.2 per cent accessing informal care, 17.4 per cent accessing formal care, and 9.7 per cent accessing a combination of both formal and informal care (ABS 2017). Children under 1-year-old and school-age children were more likely to usually access informal care, while children aged 2–4 years were more likely to access formal care (ABS 2017; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019). Children in couple families are more likely to access formal childcare when both parents are working, and children in sing-parent families are more likely to access formal childcare when the parent is working (ABS 2017).

Although accessing informal childcare is common, receiving support from family and other relationships can create a feeling of obligation on mothers. As discussed in Chapter Three, Cook (2012) reported that mothers' reliance on such networks can place increased burden on them, including guilt and obligations of reciprocity. Mothers in this study also noted that caring for children can place additional burden on family members, and noted that grandparents' working commitments can reduce ability to help with childcare, and caring for grandchildren can sometimes interfere with the grandparents' employment:

> *Our parents are expected to work longer, and if you don't have family members, like, that don't work as well and that are basically on call at the drop of a hat to be there to look after the, someone's got to pick up that slack of looking after the children.*
>
> Mother from Interview 2

Something this research highlighted is the absolute importance mothers place on feeling connected to others and the community. As explored in Chapter Three, the inextricable links between social connections and emotional wellbeing, among other benefits, is well recognised in the literature (Baumeister 1999; Berkman et al. 2000; Graham & McDermott 2006; Hancock et al. 2015; Kawachi & Berkman 2001; Keam et al. 2018; Leininger et al. 2009; Manuel et al. 2012; Patulny et al. 2019; Pierce & Gardner 2004; Shulver 2011;).

Many of the mothers interviewed clearly expressed the link between emotional health, social connections and employability. In one focus group, a mother was talking about how having social connections with supportive people can help a mother develop confidence and move closer towards employment. Another mother who had met and befriended this first mother through a playgroup, highlighted the supportive role that friends can play in the journey and the overall positive impact of friendship on wellbeing:

> *Mother 1: Oh, just baby steps in that area [of employment] that you want to do I suppose. Like having someone be kind to you, and helpful in building that confidence. Having someone ring you up, you know.*
>
> *Mother 2: I would be your cheer squad. We spend a lot of our time discussing how we empower each other and other people, don't we. We talk a lot about raising as opposed to pulling down. We work a lot on that.*
>
> *Mother 1: Yesterday we had a coffee at a friend's house, and I phoned her in the afternoon. And it was an hour, but I phoned to say, look thank you so much, because it was just such a nice, bonding, uplifting, dump, and then to go home and face the day happier. So I think just all that sort of stuff. Like emotional mental health, keep yourself happy. Feeling safe, feeling wanted and able. It's a nice feeling, to feel like that*
>
> Mothers from Focus Group 6

Positive social interactions may act to increase confidence and support mothers' employability. However, it is also important to note there that the inverse may also be true is in the case of negative social interactions. For example, and as we have explored above, if a mothers' social network comprises of many people who are unemployed and/or hold certain opinions and values in relation to employment, then this may have a negative effect on the mother's experience and attitudes towards and experiences of employment (James et al. 2004; Shulver 2011).

Conclusion

This chapter presented this study's findings in relation to mothers' views on the personal circumstances of employability. Key themes included caring responsibilities, safety and wellbeing factors, social networks and work culture within social spheres. The discussion included an examination of mothers' priorities, including parenting and caring roles, home-duties and addressing immediate safety and personal concerns, such as trauma, family and domestic violence and housing security. It is evident from the findings that mothers' priorities differ according to their personal circumstances and values, and to maintain the wellbeing of the mothers and their children, paid-employment must balance with these other priorities.

This chapter also examined mothers' access to resources, including finances, transport and social capital. Social capital, including social networks and societal expectations was considered by mothers to have a significant influence on employability. Social norms and conflicting values surrounding social security receipt, motherhood and paid-work affects mothers' behaviours towards paid-employment, and causes stigmatisation which results in a decline in mothers' confidence, motivation and self-worth. Social networks and friendships were seen by mothers as a factor influencing their employability, in relation to gaining employment, providing emotional and material support (such as the provision of informal childcare from family and friends), and increasing mothers' confidence, wellbeing and sense of belonging and shared values.

Again, it must be highlighted that these factors do not occur in a vacuum, and the individual and personal experiences of the mothers are heavily influenced by the broader economic, social and policy environment. These influences, such as government policy and the paid labour market, have a significant impact on mothers, including how they balance their priorities and reconcile values.Chapter Seven now explores some of these external factors which mothers identified as key to their employability.

CHAPTER SEVEN Mothers' employability: external factors

Introduction

This chapter is the third chapter presenting findings from this research and explores mothers' views on external factors relevant to their employability. Chapters Five and Six presented mothers' views on individual factors and personal circumstances, in line with the components outlined in McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework (2005). The third component of McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework covers external factors, including 'labour demand conditions and enabling support of employment-related public services' (2005, p. 213). External factors include demand-side factors such as labour market and macroeconomic factors, local and regional market conditions, vacancy characteristics and recruitment factors, enabling support factors such as employment policies and welfare reform measures, and other enabling policy factors such as public transport, childcare and other support services.

The external factors highlighted by the mothers in this study as impacting on their employability included availability of appropriate jobs, particularly those with work hours which suited family circumstances, willingness of employers to hire mothers and not discriminate against them due to their family responsibilities, the interaction between employment and the social security system, the affordability and accessibility of childcare, and access to support services. An underlying theme across these factors is the impact of high effective marginal tax rates on mothers' employability, and so this issue is now briefly explored.

Effective marginal tax rates (EMTRs)

'High effective tax rates arise when individuals increase their private income and are then affected by the (often simultaneous) withdrawal of means-tested cash transfers and increases in income tax liabilities' (Harding et al. 2009, p. 449). Whiteford (2012, p. 27) explains that the:

> *income testing of social security benefits can interact with the progressive income tax system to produce high combined EMTRs, thus reducing incentives to work and creating 'poverty traps' or low income traps.*

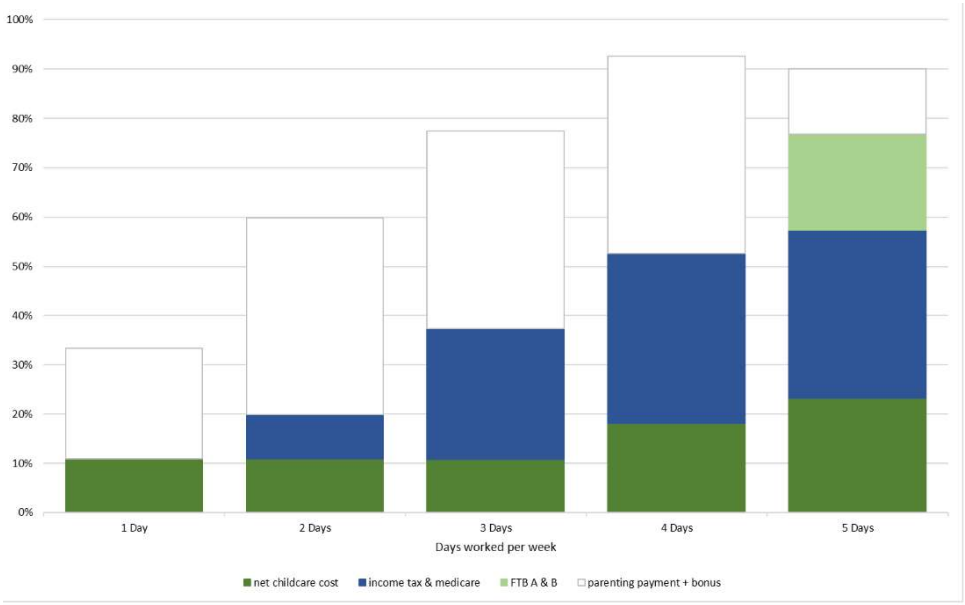
Such issues have led governments in many countries to introduce policies to ensure that 'work pays', so working families earn more than families relying solely on welfare (Gregory 2013;

Lister 2001; Millar & Rowlingson 2001). However, as the comments from the mothers in this study demonstrate, barriers to paid employment and financial disincentives still exist. Australia has a highly targeted social security system with stringent income-tests for payments, and while the withdrawal rate of social security payments due to employment income is lower than some other countries (Whiteford 2009) the issue of EMTRs is still a pertinent issue in relation to workforce participation (Kalb 2007; Stewart 2017; Whiteford 2012).

In addition to the withdrawal of social security payments and increased income tax, people entering employment may also be affected by things such as childcare costs and social housing income criteria (Dockery & Ong 2011; Kalb 2007, 2017; Stewart 2017; Whiteford 2012). High income families can also experience a reduction in the amount of childcare subsidy they are eligible for, which further increases the costs of working. As Stewart explains, '[T]he particular effect [of a high EMTR on earnings] will depend on the circumstances of the individual, family structure, wages, hours of work and cost of child care' (2017, p. 19).

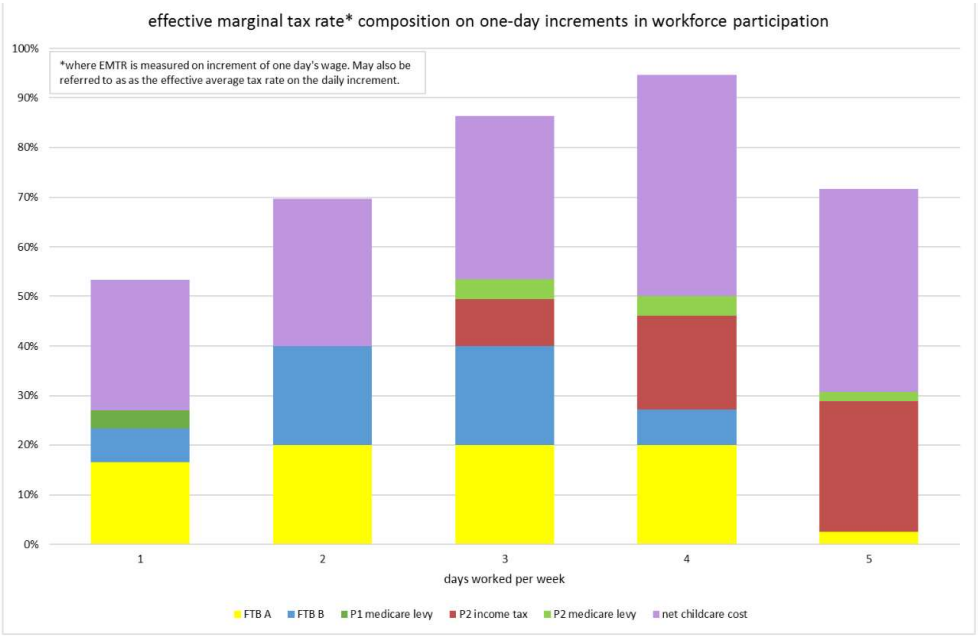
The EMTRs are relevant to both single and coupled mothers, and work by the Australian Productivity Commission into EMTRs showed some mothers face EMTRs higher than 100 per cent of their earnings (Ingles & Plunkett 2016; Productivity Commission 2015b; Stewart 2017). The following figures by Ingles and Plunkett (2016) draw on the findings in the Productivity Commission report to illustrate EMTRs per day of work for single parents (Figure 7.1) and the second earner in a couple when the primary earner has a fixed income (Figure 7.2). While the exact calculations used by the Productivity Commission, and Ingles and Plunkett, are not included in the information provided here, these figures are presented to show that mothers experience increasing EMTRs as their working hours and income increases. Stewart explains that '[T]he effect of EMTRs, combined with the additional costs of working, mean that many mothers derive little, if any, financial return from a return to or increase in work hours' (2017, p. 19).

Figure 7.1 Daily EMTR for single parent with two children aged 2 and 3 years



Source: Ingles & Plunkett 2016, p. 8.

Figure 7.2 Daily EMTR for coupled parent with two children aged 2 and 3 years



Source: Ingles & Plunkett 2016, p. 10.

While the mothers in this study do not have access to the sophisticated calculations and data used by the Productivity Commission, the financial implications of EMTRs can still be felt. The mothers expressed the calculations which came into play when considering their employability, as expressed in the following reflection and in many quotes throughout this chapter:

> *So I'm a single mum as of the last few years. And being a single mum, I can work 3 days a week doing what I'm doing and I'm getting money from the government and assistance, which is great, but for me to go and work 5 days a week I actually don't end up being any better off for doing that. So why would you, I guess, is the question. It's sort of one of those catch 22s. Yes you want to work and you want to be career driven and you want to do that, but at the end of the day we do work for financial gain, that's why we go to work every day, we have bills to pay.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

Stewart (with reference to Kalb 2017) argues that:

> *the decision not to work, or to work only a few hours per week, made on the basis of short-term financial impact because of high EMTRs, can have long-term consequences on the earning capacity of mothers over their lifetime. At the same time, it contributes to the social construction of gendered behaviour and reinforcement of gendered social norms* (2017, p. 21).

Demand factors

As considered in Chapter Two, requiring mothers or unemployed people to work through LMAPs assumes that there are jobs available (Borland 2015; Froyland et al. 2019, p. 314). The mothers who participated in the study made clear their employability was influenced by the labour market and local/regional conditions. There is a high unemployment rate in the region where the fieldwork took place. The estimated smoothed unemployment rate for the Bellingen LGA in the September quarter 2018 was 8.8 per cent, compared to the estimated seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for September 2018 of 5 per cent across Australia and 4.4 per cent in NSW (Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018, 2019). These factors were identified by the mothers:

But we also come from an area where there's low employment opportunities. So that's another struggle that you face. Like you have to leave town to work, or travel to work because the opportunity for employment in town isn't very high either. So you face that barrier as well.

Mother from Focus Group 3

The mothers talked about how employers' expectations and discriminatory practices when considering a woman for a role, plus their flexible work practices when the mother was in the workplace, had an impact on work readiness and employability. Some identified this issue as gender discrimination:

I'd like to think that discrimination wasn't as issue, but I think sometimes it still is, you know in the modern world. Because it's so competitive. Like everybody is employing somebody to advance their business or advance their service and sometimes, yeah, they are not ready to wait for that person to, you know, show what they can do. I think it is sometimes a bit of an issue. And I think it is getting better with the women, you know female male balance. But I still think there is a bit of a way to go for women. Like you said, you've actually gotta prove that you're, you know, not as good as a man, but you've got the gusto to come up with the goods.

Mother from Joint Interview 3

As well as gender discrimination, others identified that sometimes employers discriminated against them for being a mother. Most of the mothers in the study felt that people with responsibility for children, usually mothers, were not as employable as people without children. As one mother explained, some employers would think twice about hiring a mother for a role due the many other conflicting priorities associated with her role as a mother and home-keeper:

Well not just single parents, any woman with young children. They might think, is she gunna have more children, the kids are gunna be sick and she is gunna need time off, or she's gunna not be able to work the hours we need her to work, she won't be available weekends, there will be sick days, there'll be, like all the other full time CEO

> *house running duties that she has, and now work duties are gunna be, like, competing with all her other obligations.*
>
> Mother from Interview 2

Single mothers in the study felt they experienced greater employer discrimination compared to partnered mothers because of the additional responsibilities of being a sole parent without partner and family support, as one single mother explained:

> *I think if you don't have kids you're more likely to get work. I've found there has been a lot of discrimination about being pregnant or having children and having broken families as well, because they think, like, it's going to be trouble. I actually have had someone interview me and say, oh what happens if your kid gets sick at day care, are you going to go leave the reception to go pick them up? And I said, oh well I could get my ex-partner to go pick them up, or a friend to pick them up. And they were like, oh yeah but they probably work too, don't they? So he was just straight out discriminating, then. And then, I had another friend go for an interview and she's a single mum and doesn't have support from family or her ex-partner, but she has friends that could help. But she didn't get the job and she thinks it's because she didn't have, yeah, they just weren't happy that she was a single mum and had children to think of.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 1

These findings reflect reports from service providers in the UK-based research by Batty et al. (2017) that employers discriminated against single mothers due to concerns they would not be as reliable as other workers due to their caring responsibilities.

Childcare

Childcare was one of the most important employability factors raised by mothers. Access to appropriate and suitable childcare, both within and outside of school hours, is a common concern for working mothers, reported across the literature (Arpino & Luppi 2020; Batty et al. 2017; Brady & Perales 2016; Craig & Mullan 2012; Craig et al. 2010; Rodriguez Castro et al. 2020).

The financial cost of childcare was reported as a primary barrier to mothers' engagement with the labour market:

> *Sometimes the cost to have childcare and working a few days a week it actually works out financially better off that you don't work, and you get more time with your kids. So it's weighing up the time and the money.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

> *If you're just bringing your own kids up and not work, or go to work, pay childcare and come out the same, you'd be better off just staying home and looking after your own kids, that's how I feel.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 1

> *I had to wait till my kids were at school 'cause financially I couldn't afford day care five days a week.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 3

As we can see from these comments, it is not just the potential income that would be received from employment that is considered when calculating the financial costs and benefits of working, but numerous other things including the costs of childcare, reduced income support payments, travel costs and reduced time at home with children. As discussed above, the costs associated with childcare and working create very high effective marginal tax rates and reduce the financial rewards of working. As explained by Kalb (2017, p. 137), who has done extensive work on EMTRs for women:

> *[I]f informal care (by grandparents, for example) is not available, then formal child care can make the cost of work prohibitively high. This is particularly the case for low-wage*

> *women, who may compare their hourly additional income with the hourly cost of child care, and find that they are working for limited or no additional household income*.

Given the other positive benefits of children accessing childcare and quality childhood education, particularly for children from the most disadvantaged families (Aguiar & Aguiar 2020; Archambault et al. 2020; Fordham & Kennedy 2017), the cost of childcare not only represents a barrier to employment but also a barrier to improved childhood outcomes regardless of whether the parent accessing the childcare is in paid work or not.

School holidays also pose an issue for many mothers in relation to paid employment. The costs for school holiday care can often far exceed their wages and taking time off work to care for the children during the holidays is often not accepted by employers:

> *My friend that I was working with, she's just got older kids but she's got one 3-year-old and two boys in primary school. During school holidays it takes all of her wages to pay for day care. The whole lot. So she has to budget through the school term to have enough money to cover the school holidays so she can put her kids into day care. And so she's behind the 8-ball all the time.*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 7

Affordability of childcare not only had an impact on mothers being able to do paid work, but also their ability to improve their employability through education and training. As one mother explained, on an extremely limited household income you need to make your budget stretch and paying for childcare without using that time to earn an income is difficult to justify:

> *I could have tried to do a face-to-face delivery but then I just made the decision when I looked at my budget that I couldn't afford to pay for childcare to go and study face-to-face, like I kind of can only afford to pay for childcare if I am earning an income … I can't afford to go and pay for childcare and sit in a room doing a TAFE course three days a week, I need to be working if I am paying for childcare.*
>
> Mother from Interview 2

As explored in the previous chapter, some mothers access informal childcare through family and social networks, but this too can have its drawbacks, particularly related to feelings of guilt and reciprocal obligation (Cook 2012). Childcare policy is outside the scope of this study, so is not explored in more detail here. Given the difficulties in affording childcare, many of the mothers spoke of the importance of school in giving mothers a window in which to do paid employment, as we now discuss.

Working within school hours

> *The school drop-off and pick-up, that's what I'm a slave to. The drop-off and pick-up.*
>
> Stay-at-home mother of two

This sentiment was echoed by most mothers with school-aged children who participated in this study. The ability to find work which fit around school hours was identified as key to a mother's employability, especially for mothers without family supports and due to the costs and availability of childcare and after-school care. As explored in Chapter Six, finding work which suited available hours and family responsibilities was more important than the type of paid work a mother did. It is interesting that the mothers framed this in terms of finding work in suitable hours rather than expressing a need for better access to flexible childcare hours and/or babysitting.

From a demand factor perspective, having school-hour friendly employment opportunities and employers which can accommodate work within school hours plays a major role in mothers' employability. Many of the mothers in this study claimed there is limited work available within these hours and there is high demand for such roles which increases the competition for these jobs. Such issues are potentially exaggerated in regional locations where unemployment levels are already high. One mother explained her thinking around the issue and the cost of childcare, which is further considered below:

> *You don't want shift work, you'd rather it be hours when the kids are at school because then kids get home in the afternoon then you've got to work out who's gunna look after my kids in the afternoon. So 9–3 when kids are at school is what you, I aim for. Because then I don't have to worry, otherwise I'm still working, I'm already paying day care fees*

> *for the ones that aren't at school, plus afternoon care for the kids. And it just defeats the purpose of even trying to work because you're getting paid but you not getting paid because it's all going on fees anyways.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 3

Many mothers talked about wanting to go back to work when their children started preschool or school. For many mothers this timeframe suits (re)entry into the labour market because of reduced need for childcare and the associated costs, and also because their children are older and the mother has more time which is not taken up by childrearing activities. Research has shown many mothers delay paid employment until this time (Marsh 2001; Stockey-Bridge 2015).

In addition to finding work within school hours, many mothers expressed the issues associated with needing to take time off from work to care for children when they fall sick. As noted above, there was a belief that employers often discriminated against hiring mothers for this reason. A service provider summed this up for one of the mothers in her caseload:

> *Like I've got one mum who's got seven children, and she's like well how am I going to find childcare for seven children and go back to work? And what if one of them's sick? I can't just like leave them with mum or her dad every time they're sick, she said like I need to be there for them too. So I think she's got a lot of pressure*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

The above discussion demonstrates that mothers often consider the immediate financial and logistical side of paid-employment and, due to these, have less scope to factor in other benefits of paid employment such as receiving superannuation contributions, maintaining attachment to the paid labour market, gaining work experience etc. It shows some of the very real caveats and practical restraints to the sentiment that 'any job is better than no job'. In many situations simply accepting any job is not an option (or not a good option) (Cook & Noblet 2012).

Financial reward

Financial reward was identified by mothers as a key reason to return to the paid workforce. The need to earn an income, or supplement income available through the social security system, means many mothers must undertake paid work due to financial necessity, even if some would prefer to be home caring for their children:

> *I do think it changes things when you are a parent. I think to be a parent and to be prepared to go back to work, I think the main reason why we do go back to work is because financially we can't just live on one income these days, if you're in a partnership. And even as a single mum, you know with all benefits and things like that, it is still very hard to live without being on a wage. So that is one reason why people go back to work, maybe sometimes sooner than they are probably ready, or they would like to with the children.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

However, as noted above, for many of the mothers the costs associated with employment and childcare are greater than the financial benefits of working. Add to the mix the high effective marginal tax rates of reduced social security payments and potential to lose state-provided housing, and the disincentives to do paid work quickly outweigh the incentives. For many mothers who want to engage in paid work, there is no immediate financial reward to do so:

> *When I work at places like Maccas and that, I am making less money than Centrelink any way, so what's the point? I'm missing out on money.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 2

> *Mother 1: I honestly think mainly it's the financial side of it. Especially with Centrelink, you lose so much to work, but then you're paying so much more.*
>
> *Mother 2: Even with all the reforms going on.*
>
> *Mother 1: Even though they've fixed it now so day care fees are still supposed to be cheaper, they're not that much cheaper. They've done that new Centrelink, that new*

thing, and it's not a great deal cheaper. They want you to get out. My thing is that if they want mothers to get out there and work they need to make it more affordable. People aren't gunna want to go out and work if they can pretty much stay at home and get the same amount of money. Like you are working for nothing, really.

Mothers from Focus Group 3

In couple households, finding the balance between working and caring for children can be complicated by needing to meet eligibility requirements for social security payments (as mutual obligation requirements are generally based on individual criteria, rather than shared criteria for couples, while income tests consider both members of the couple) and the gender disparities in financial renumeration which exist in the paid labour market:

Sometimes like I would rather work, and he can stay at home if he wants to. You just don't get paid as much as men, that's what I've found out.

Mother from Joint Interview 3

Because that's another thing, like Centrelink, depending on what you're doing and your situation. Like I really struggled, because you know, my partner has a good job, he doesn't earn a lot of money, but he has a good job. And I had a good job and I left my job to have [my daughter], and I was studying while I was working as well. And then I told them, well I'm going to just study and be a stay-at-home mum. And they were just like, what do you mean, you are completely capable. So I earn basically nothing from Centrelink because they are quite strict. So all this pressure, it makes me think well should I go back to work?

Mother from Focus Group 5

As we see from these reflections, for some mothers in this study, financial reward acted as an incentive to work and increased their employability. For others, the lack of financial reward and

the financial disincentives associated with work, such as paying for childcare and receiving reduced social security income, reduced their employability.

Access to training and education

As noted previously, the mothers in this study valued vocational education and training and many were grateful they had access to local TAFE campuses. However, this factor featured less prominently than childcare and financial considerations. The benefits of studying while also caring for young children was identified as a way mothers can remain attached to continuous learning and maintain employability while also being able to prioritise their parenting role:

> *Studying is a great thing when you're at home with the kids. If you can be at home with your kids and you can do study and externally, that's kind of getting you qualified and ready so you can have mainly that time with your kids and enjoy them growing up. But it's also getting you prepared so when you're ready to go back to work you're more qualified to get into a job that you want as well for yourself.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

Some of the women who participated in this study stated they would like to access training and education but are limited due to affordability of the courses. As noted above, paying for childcare to enable the mother's attendance at a course was one of the many financial considerations. While some financial assistance is sometimes available to undertake education and training, for example through Centrelink or subsidised courses, this did not cover the full course fees plus additional expenses and the course remained unaffordable and out of reach:

> *Yeah, like I'm trying to save up to do a course, but that's gunna take forever. Coz you add up that cost, and then you gotta pay off your course at the same time, it's just not possible.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 3

Some of the women identified that more financial support to complete education and training would help them to undertake courses which would increase their employability:

> *I think some more help from the government with retraining. Coz it's pretty tough sometimes to re-enter the workforce and do what you were doing before. And it's hard sometimes financially to go and do a course when you've got kids and so maybe some type of subsidy towards courses.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 2

Limited access to transport remains a barrier to education and training, and some of the mothers who lived out of town or in adjacent towns noted the difficulties involved in accessing courses due to lack of transportation. Access to resources such as transportation was considered in Chapter 6.

ParentsNext

> *I'd succeed in something that I am actually interested in, rather than something I am forced to do.*
>
> Pregnant young mother of two

ParentsNext is one of the key employment services available to mothers. The policy was regularly raised by mothers in relation to employability and work readiness. However, the feedback from mothers about ParentsNext was mixed, with some expressing negative experiences with the program while others praised the program. Many of these findings reflect those from program evaluations and the Parliamentary Inquiry into the program, as presented in Chapter Two (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019).

Some mothers who were facing mental health issues and other complex circumstances raised concerns about how added stress from this program was causing additional pressure on their wellbeing. One of the service providers explained how welfare conditionality requirements were adding additional pressure to some vulnerable mothers without supporting them to address their underlying concerns and barriers to employment:

> *I think the services or the programs that are sending these parents here aren't asking in depth questions, they're just trying to link them in somewhere. But not looking to see if the family might have domestic violence, depression, anxiety. And sometimes they're the things that they should be focusing on, rather than trying to get them to engage with a playgroup or a TAFE course. Sometimes it's that inner stuff that needs to be mended.*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

Some of the mothers were able to meet the compliance requirements of ParentsNext and were partly supportive of the help it could provide in getting ready for work, but noted that the program was sometimes difficult to fit into their busy lives:

> *Coz what is it, that [name of provider] or whatever, do you go to that program? Yeah I go to that. Wasting your time. But it is good if you're looking for work. And like I come to this [playgroup], so I put down that I come to this, that I come here. Because you've got to have your hour a week of social skills, like you gotta take your child somewhere. And like it is good. Like if they try to get you to do a course, they do help you out and pay for your course, you know, to get back into the workforce. But it is very hard to try to juggle it.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 4

As we can see from this comment, attending employment services are sometimes considered to be a waste of time by mothers. This is reflected in the literature, which found time a key issue for mothers who are already extremely time poor due to their parenting, caring and household responsibilities (Campbell et al. 2016; Cook 2012; Holdsworth 2017). Many mothers in these studies noted that the additional time required to meet bureaucratic conditions and attend appointments etc. was detracting from the time they had available to increase their employability and look for or do paid work, in addition to the time it took away from parenting their children and undertaking their other responsibilities (Campbell et al. 2016; Cook 2012; Holdsworth 2017).

Some others had not been able to meet the requirements for a variety of reasons and were financially penalised for this, which placed increased strain on families which were already struggling financially:

> *They are pushy. I forgot to report and didn't attend playgroup and the next day I got an email and then my payment was cut the next day.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 1

On the other hand, some mothers praised the program for assisting them to pay for educational expenses and giving them information and guidance in relation to their study and employment plans. One mother who had a positive experience participating in ParentsNext explained the support the program provides:

> *The whole reason with ParentsNext is, if you have a child under five it's ok that you're not working. But if there is something that you do want to do, we are going to help you do it. So that like, when your kid is five and does go to school, you feel like you have the skills that you can go and do that. It's not like when your kid turns five you have to get a job, it's just that we are going to help get you there. And if we have to push you a little bit then we will, but it's nothing outside of your comfort zone. Like they work with you.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 5

Others were frustrated they were ineligible to participate voluntarily in the ParentsNext program and considered it unfair that they could not access support and funding to further their education and re-enter the paid labour market. Many mothers wanted to access support but navigating a bureaucracy they felt did not understand or provide for their individual needs resulted in frustration and discouragement, as one mother shared:

> *Because I don't fit into her mould, and I don't fit into her mould [gesturing to other mothers in the room]. My scenario is different and hers is different. Like we all got to tick a box and slot into it, and if you don't you fall through the cracks. It's not fair. I should be able to approach the Department of Human Services and say, you know, I'm*

> *trying to re-educate myself, I'm trying to, whatever. I'm doing three kids on my own, my mum's just died, I've lost, like...If you gave me this to help me with that, I guarantee that I will give to this community and help this town. There's not a form for that.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 6

Other research has also found mothers are frustrated and insulted by the lack of personalised support received and how activation requirements fail to meet their individual needs (Bodsworth 2010; Brady & Cook 2015; Grahame & Marston 2012; McArthur et al. 2013). Experiences of feeling 'dehumanised' by the conditional and impersonal nature of LMAPs is reflected in other studies (Peterie et al. 2019a). Centrelink and ParentsNext were mentioned less than the other employability factors explored in this chapter and so are not expanded on further here. There is substantial literature on the impact of welfare reform policies on mothers and a growing body of work on welfare conditionality measures to which readers can refer, as outlined in Chapters Two and Three. The following chapter (Chapter 8) considers ParentsNext in relation to participation in family services.

Other support services

The final component of McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) employability framework which received attention from the mothers is support services and the key role they play in increasing the employability of mothers. Mothers mentioned having support available to them from community and other organisations in relation to a wide range of issues can help them with employment and work readiness.

In addition to accessing the services, there was a resounding desire from the mothers to have better access to information on services and supports available to them:

> *It's hard to know what's happening where. I didn't know about this [family service] until someone told me, and someone had told them.*
>
> *Mother from Focus Group 2*

> *There could be more things where people know what they are entitled to or what's available to them. Because there's lots of services out there that people don't even*

> *know about because for them it doesn't exist, they don't know. So I think it's letting people know about different programs and things that are available can be a huge thing, because you don't know unless you ask the questions, or you know somebody who knows and they tell you.*
>
> Mother from Interview 3

It is to such services that this thesis now turns, as it examines the mothers' views on the benefits of family services and considers the potential flow-on effects to mothers' employability.

Conclusion

This chapter is the last of three chapters which presents findings from this research on mothers' views on employability, in line with the three components outlined in McQuaid and Lindsay's employability framework (2005). These components relate to individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors of employability. The key external factors highlighted by mothers as impacting on their employability included availability of appropriate jobs, particularly those with work hours which suited family circumstances, willingness of employers to hire mothers and not discriminate against them due to their family responsibilities, the interaction between employment and social security system, the affordability and accessibility of childcare, and access to support services. It is clear when reviewing the experiences of the mothers in this study in relation to these external factors that policies which address only supply-side dynamics of employability and fail to address barriers to employment related to demand-side dynamics are highly unlikely to be successful in increasing the employability of mothers. As reiterated throughout this dissertation, there are a multitude of external elements which influence an individual, and individual and personal factors of employment must be considered within the broader economic, social and policy context.

The following chapter (Chapter Eight) is the final chapter which presents findings from this research. The chapter explores mothers' perceptions of the impacts of family services and considers these findings in relation to mothers' views on employability factors. The views of service providers are also considered.

CHAPTER EIGHT Family services and employability

I live for Wednesdays!

Pregnant mother attending a Wednesday morning playgroup

Introduction

This chapter presents the perspectives of the mothers' interviewed in this study on the impacts and benefits of family services, and also considers the views of service providers. The chapter covers the key themes raised by the mothers in relation to service access, and links this back to the previous chapters which explored the mothers' understanding on the concept of employability. In this way, we can clearly see the strong connection between participation in family services and the positive impacts this has on the mothers' self-perceived employability. The chapter also includes service providers' views on how mothers are being affected by family services in relation to employability.

It is evident from the findings that the mothers interviewed benefited greatly from the social connections they made and maintained through services, particularly playgroups and mothers' groups. For many of the mothers, attending playgroup was the only outing they had with their children during the week, with the exception of doing the grocery shopping. Many of the mothers explained how socially isolated they were before joining a playgroup and that they greatly valued the positive impact that making social connections had on their lives, self-confidence and psychological wellbeing.

The chapter commences by examining the importance of social connections and looks at mothers' views on how reducing social isolation and improving social networks has influenced their employability and general wellbeing. It then goes on to look at the impact that service participation has on the mothers' confidence levels, which was identified by the mothers as the most vital element of their employability. The impact of service attendance on mental health and family routine and stability is also explored. The chapter shows how family services expose mothers to new information and ideas regarding parenting and employment.

The chapter presents views on service provision and the interaction between welfare conditionality and service access. For the most disadvantaged and vulnerable mothers, as the chapter explores, service access can open doors to improving their circumstances and accessing supports. Concerningly however, evidence suggests that forcing people to undertake activities they are already voluntarily participating in, can reduce motivation and decrease trust and participation with the services (Brady & Cook 2015; McArthur et al. 2013). This dynamic is also considered.

As covered in Chapter Two, family services have a range of intended outcomes and their key performance indicators and funding structures vary (e.g. they may receive a mix of outcome payments and base funding from a variety of sources). This thesis recognises that the primary intention of family services is not to increase the employability of mothers. This research seeks to identify what the impacts of the services are from mothers' point of view, without regard to what the formal intentions of the services are, and discover which aspects of the services are most valued by the mothers in relation to their employability. It is important to note child development and wellbeing were also identified by the mothers interviewed as primary benefits of accessing family services. This is covered briefly in relevant sections of this chapter. However, the focus of this study is on the perceived impacts family services have on mothers – and therefore child outcomes are not concentrated on in this thesis. An important element of this chapter is also giving voice to service providers about some of the secondary impacts of their services in addition to their reportable key performance indicators, in order to develop a broader view of how the services may be impacting mothers in the social security system.

Perceived benefits of services

Social interaction and breaking isolation

All mothers in the study reported that they value the social interactions they had at family services, both with other families and the service providers. Many of the mothers spoke of how being a parent sometimes led to reduced contact and connection with others and often resulted in social isolation. As mentioned above, many mothers talked about how they rarely left the house and became restricted by their parenting role, as evidenced here in conversation between two mothers:

> *Mother 1: And it is easy after a few years at home to get comfortable in the home scenario.*

> *Mother 2: Yeah and only have to go once a week to get groceries. Like, you're at home with kids.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 3

Some of the mothers mentioned they did not have social connections with other mothers before they had started attending the family services. Making social connections through the services made the mothers feel more connected to the community and gave them a space to share experiences and build social bonds. As explored later in this chapter, building these connections appeared to be particularly beneficial for those mothers who were in difficult circumstances, such as experiencing mental health issues like post-natal depression or dealing with the trauma associated with domestic violence.

Friendships formed through playgroups and support services were identified by the mothers as an important element of the mothers' ability to cope emotionally with the demands of being a parent, and life in general. These findings reflect several studies which highlight the socio-emotional benefits of friendships forged through parent groups and the relief this provided to isolated and lonely mothers (Ellis-Sloan 2015; Ellis-Sloan & Tamplin 2019; Jackson 2011; Harman et al. 2014; Yardley 2009).

When discussing the impacts of family services, the mothers expressed how attending playgroups and other such services gave them an avenue for connection with other adults and helped break their social isolation:

> *I think it can be pretty isolating when you've had child, after child, after child and you kind of fall off the face of the earth. So yeah, coming here helps you feel a bit more normal.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 2

It's just a social outlet so you feel like, you can go and have adult conversation with other parents, or you can make new friends, instead of just being at home and watching Peppa Pig and making sandwiches [laughing].

Mother from Focus Group 4

It's really good. It's basically all I really do now, I don't really go anywhere else, like, throughout the week. Unless it comes to the weekend where I go out with their dad with us. This is all I do all week, stay at home the rest of the time. So it's just good to get out.

Mother from Focus Group 5

These findings reflect those from other studies, including Mills et al. (2013) and Oke et al. (2007), in which mothers looked forward to the mothers' group as an opportunity to get out of the house, socialise with other mothers and have a break from being the centre of their child's attention because their children were busy playing with other children and doing different activities while at the service.

The interviewed mothers were open about the struggles of parenting, and the emotional and social toll it took on their psychological wellbeing. The reflections below shine light on how taxing and stressful the parenting role can be. The mothers expressed that family services, particularly playgroups, gave them the space to feel 'normal' and vindicated in their emotions and parenting experience:

What do parents get out of it? Sanity! When you just want to cry, and you cry here and feel better, or you don't cry because you're here and you feel better because you're outside – getting out of the house when she hasn't slept through the night for so long.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Well like I said, everyone kind of talks about what they are going through. And I guess being able to talk with other parents and share things you get to see that other people

are also struggling in a sense with the same thing, like behaviours and lack of sleep, stuff like that. You know it is normal, it's not just you.

Mother from Focus Group 4

To break the chains of like that whole shock to the system and overwhelm-ment and come and debrief and hear other nightmare stories. It made me feel human, it made me feel justified in my feelings. It made me feel so uplifted. Just hearing that people weren't coping, hearing that people had shit birth stories, to hear that people cry every day. It makes you feel normal.

Mother from Focus Group 6

These reflections by the mothers reflect the findings in research by Ellis-Sloan (2015) which showed parent groups can give mothers an opportunity to share their experiences and build a sense of belonging and normality (see also Harman et al. 2014; Stockey-Bridge 2015). This also has the potential to increase mothers' confidence and build a positive perception of their parenting abilities.

Service providers also identified that many mothers were able to break their social isolation by attending a family service and accessing additional services and supports:

Oh some of them are so isolated when they first come [to the service] and I think they make strong foundations and connections with other families, they make friendships, and they really build their self-worth.

Service Provider from Focus Group 8

And you find a lot of mums come and they haven't got any family, they don't have anyone. Like they might have just moved here with their partner or have just relocated for a variety of reasons. So they've got no family support, no connections with anyone in the community. So they make those connections at the playgroup.

Service Provider from Focus Group 8

As discussed in Chapter Four, social connections are vital to a mother's wellbeing and that of their children. That mothers can build social connections and reduce isolation and loneliness through playgroups and family services highlights how the services benefit mothers in addition to the primary aims and performance indicators of the services. Ellis-Sloan takes this argument further, claiming: '[F]riendships should not therefore be looked at as a pleasant by-product of group working, but a key means by which young parents can receive support' (2015, p. 544)

Confidence

I'm not a confident person so it has really helped me build up.

Young mother of six children

The above quote was from a mother who disclosed her experience with domestic violence, homelessness, poor mental health and childhood trauma. The mother explained that participating in playgroup and accessing the associated support provided by her local family service had resulted in increased self-confidence across various areas of her life. During the interview, the mother said that once she had stabilised her family situation, including housing and mental health, she was then able to go on to find and keep a job. This mother's story demonstrates that it can be a long journey towards employment, with multiple and complex barriers along the way. Not all people are able to overcome such hurdles, and sometimes progress to self-healing is slow, additional traumas and setbacks are experienced, and sustainable employment is an unrealistic immediate expectation.

As discussed below, and echoed in the literature (Millar & Ridge 2017), the confidence of many women in domestic violence situations is significantly decreased, sometimes indefinitely. Providing these women with a safe environment to connect with services and other mothers, seek support with their parenting, and rebuild their trust and confidence, has a positive impact on the lives of the mothers and their children, regardless of the employability-increasing potential of the services.

Even mothers who did not reveal past trauma during the interviews/focus groups noted the confidence-building role of family services, as evident in the quotes provided above. Many of the mothers were also grateful for the parenting tips and advice they received from other

parents who attended the family services. The mothers spoke of how the services helped them to share ideas and experiences and feel more comfortable and confident in their parenting role:

> *I was really nervous to come to the first one. I was nervous as, get out. I was sooo nervous. Because, you know, I was breast feeding a baby. It was the first time I was going to get dressed. It was like a really scary thing to do. But first five minutes, seen every one struggling with their prams, where to put their diaper bags, tits hanging out, and you just go, oh this is alright. No-one's perfect here.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 6

Increasing confidence in a mother's parenting role can then flow on to increased confidence in other areas of their lives, including employment. As already discussed, a person's confidence is built in relation to various aspects of their lives and a change in confidence in one area can influence their confidence in other areas (Perry 2015; Shavelson et al. 1976). Service providers also recognised this impact of services on mothers' confidence and the flow-on effect this has in other areas of their life:

> *So for our service our focus is on parent interaction and community engagement. Getting families out and about, seeing what's out here. But in saying that, we find if the parent is confident in themselves, confident in what they're doing, that's going to then leak into every aspect of their life. We get a lot of parents that come and our focus is just on getting them here, getting them to connect with others. And from that then they go onto build their own social network out of here, which then changes their whole outlook on what they can achieve, what they can do moving forward.*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 6

The way a service is delivered influences its confidence-building effects on service participants. A study by Lindsay et al. (2018b) on employability services for single mothers in the UK has also shown that women benefited from services which were empowering in nature, compared to those which were more authoritarian and compulsory in nature. Family service

providers who participated in this study made clear that supporting mothers to have choice was a vital part of increasing mothers' confidence and wellbeing:

> *And I think empowering them to have their own voice and their own choices to make their own decisions. Because I think a lot of people come to the services and think I'm gunna be told what I've got to do, or I'm just here to tick another box, or I'm just gunna be made to do this. Whereas I think if you give them the opportunity to tell you what they want, and what they need and then we support them through that process and give them that empowerment. You see their self-esteem rise; you see their confidence go up. And you know, not only for the parent but even for the children. And even something as small as going to playgroup is huge for some parents, because some parents won't even leave their house. So whether you have to go with them to playgroup one or two times, for them to go back each week without you, is such a huge step. So even the smallest things.*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

Service providers identified that after building confidence through family services, mothers self-reliance also increases and their need for the service declines:

> *And I think too, when families have had so much on and so many crises and they come out stronger at the end of those and they realise, wow, I overcome that, so I can do this and I can do that. Because prior there is a lot of self-doubt like, no I can't do that or I don't know how to do that, and so they don't try. And so I think too when you work with services and you build up that confidence and that self-esteem and you overcome certain things and things start to settle and fall into place a bit more. I have seen families that have gone out and they're like, I applied for six jobs this week, and it's like wow, you didn't even call me until now. So it's like, you see some families that go and do things for themselves rather than lean on you to do these things for them. I think is a huge strength too. Whether they got any of those six jobs or not, the fact that they went out there and put themselves out there.*
>
> Service Provider from Joint Interview 4

When specifically talking about the role family services have in supporting mothers to increase their employability, service providers strongly believed the wellbeing of the mother and children was the most important focus, and that employment is best considered within the whole family context:

> *Service Provider 1: Some of the young mums I work with often come with no career goal and after some engagement there is conversations around breaking the isolation, being empowered, where they can find a pathway into something that they like to do, maybe for their own self-worth and self-confidence. And I think that is usually fostered by processing steps, looking at linking them in with employment agencies, or doing resumes together, looking at childcare, looking at all the different facets you need for that career.*
>
> *Service Provider 2: I don't think our role is to evaluate how ready they are for work, it's just about evaluating their wellbeing. Are they well, are they happy. Building that self-worth and confidence with them, and their children. So it's just about empowering them and getting them so they can be independent basically. It's not about work. So I think if that's an aspiration they want it is certainly something we discuss.*
>
> Service Providers from Focus Group 8

The above reflections and discussion demonstrate that participation in family services can increase mothers' confidence, and therefore their employability, primarily through increased social connections, and sharing experiences with other mothers to increase feelings of normalcy and capability in their parenting role. Family services also play a strong role in empowering mothers, especially when engagement with the service is voluntary on the mothers' part; however, this empowerment can also occur once services build rapport with mothers who are compulsorily required to attend the service.

Mental health

The mothers in this study clearly demonstrated that participation in family services can help build foundations for improved mental health through increased social interaction:

> *And this [family service], like this helps with mental health a lot, just being out in public and having a social life. So just like getting out of the house and getting out of your rut*

at home. And making yourself feel normal again. I think having an hour or two amongst the living [laughing] is very beneficial to mental health I think.

Mother from Focus Group 2

Some of the mothers shared their experiences with poor mental health, including post-natal depression. They expressed that participation in family services helped them alleviate some of their symptoms and was part of the process towards regaining their mental health and wellbeing:

So it's like a god send honestly. Because when I started coming back to playgroup I had postnatal depression with [my child]. And it got me out of the house. And it's just a saviour. You just think, oh there's other people who are struggling too. You're not alone at home just trying to cope. It's the motivation of it…You are not just at home, sitting there watching your child going, oh my gosh what am I doing. So to me, it's invaluable. Yeah, really good. Love playgroup.

Mother from Joint Interview 3

I think playgroup is really good. Like it's good for us. Like we don't socialise a lot. Like when I started [my daughter] was only four months old and I had really bad postnatal depression. And living out of town there wasn't anything, it was just so isolating. Like I didn't go and see people or do anything. So it was really good to come and not be judged.

Mother from Focus Group 5

The link between mental health and social support is well established in the literature (Berkman et al. 2000; Ellis-Sloan 2015; Ellis-Sloan & Tamplin 2019; Manuel et al. 2012; Mills et al. 2013; Strange et al. 2014). The research by Ellis-Sloan and Tampin (2019) also draws links between social connections and mental health, and they express:

> *[W]hilst friendship support may not mitigate underlying causes of mental health problems, navigating such challenges is likely to be made all the more difficult without the emotional support friends evidently supply* (2019, p. 211).

For many of the mothers in Ellis-Sloan's (2015) study, mental health was apparent, either through open disclosure by the mothers or through visible self-harm scars.

As the results presented in Chapter Five demonstrate, mental health was identified by mothers as a key factor impacting their employability. Family services can play a role in helping increase the employability of mothers in the social security system by providing safe environments for mothers to build social connections, confidence and support mental health and psychological wellbeing.

Routine and structure

As explored in the analysis of the results presented in Chapter Six, mothers also valued stability and routine in relation to their employability. The literature demonstrates that having stable work hours and routine can increase child and family wellbeing, including parenting effectiveness and child socio-emotional outcomes (Agrawal et al. 2018; Kalil et al. 2014; Lee et al. 2017, 2018; McLoyd et al. 2008; Strazdins et al. 2006). When discussing the impacts of family services, many mothers expressed how attending the services was part of their family routine:

> *It's good routine I think, it's a good part of the weekly routine.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 2

> *I had a structure that I ended up liking and following, which was doing something in the morning with the children, going home for lunch and then a nap or quiet time in the afternoon and then take them outside for a run around in the back yard. Do dinner, bath, bed. That kind of thing. So I liked wearing them out in the morning and then rest a bit in the afternoon.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 1

Service providers also highlighted how service participation helped families embed routine and structure, which had the potential to lead to improved employability:

> *Even the reliability. Families that come week in week out knowing that it's on and that they come here every week, that's a skill in itself. To get yourself here on time, to be ready and prepped and have your family prepped to go, that's a skill, that some people lack [laughing] a lot of people lack. But they show, you know, that they are committed to attending or they're committed to attending a community thing and they attend every week. Rain, hail or shine they are here. And I think if you could sell that on your resume, that's what people want, somebody who is going to turn up.*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 6

> *And once that structure takes hold, it just lessons the stress levels all 'round and they start enjoying the kids. And you get that a lot. Oh I'm actually enjoying the kids now, I'm not fighting with them. And from that grows, once again, that structure and direction. The children have direction as well, so they know what is expected of them. And even with that, to go into a workplace. We know that a workplace is structured. There's routine you've got to follow. So everything you do is a learning opportunity for them, the parents and the kids. Every little bit. It adds up. It's a start for them.*
>
> Service Provider from Joint Interview 4

Providing mothers with opportunity to engage in regular, routine activities and support can help build routine and stability within their household. This in turn can help build foundations required to maintain employment and address some of the complexity involved in 'juggling' work with an instable home life. This routine and external activity is very important for mothers who are isolated at home and do not have other external activities or social interactions, and limited existing family routine. It should be noted that routine in this context relates to routine surrounding children and parenting (e.g. regular bedtimes, patterns in social connectivity etc), as opposed to routine which may be required in a work context (i.e. some of the mothers in the

study may undertake low-skilled employment which may be routine in nature, while many will also undertake professional roles with a higher degree of autonomy).

Exposure to new things and alternate pathways

As noted in Chapter Seven, mothers identified that access to services and supports impacted on their employability and they wanted more information on which services and supports were available. Mothers talked about how participation in family services exposed them to other services and supports available to them, and provided avenues to further support if required:

> *But if you need any help or anything, you can just ask. They know where to guide you, what direction to guide, or another parent might be going through the same thing so you have a talk.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 4

> *It's kind of opened our eyes I think, there's a lot of services around town that we didn't know existed, or I didn't know existed, or what they offered. And even just participating in that, even showing up to a few little community events you know, you're meeting other organisations and services and seeing what they offer and what's around town.*
>
> Mother from Focus Group 3

Attending the services helped the mothers find out about employment and training opportunities, including job vacancies and local vocational education options. Many of the family services invited representatives from local educational and vocational training institutions, such as the TAFE, to visit the service and talk with the mothers about what training and education opportunities might be available. As noted in the previous chapter, mothers identified social connections and word-of-mouth to be beneficial in relation to their employability. One mother talked about her recent employment gained through contacts made at a mothers' group:

> *I even got work out of word-of-mouth through friends through a mothers' group. I went to a birthday party from a day care friend and that lady is now my boss. She asked me*

> *if I wanted to do cleaning with her. So I think that the more you get out there and do things with your children and meet people, there's more opportunities for you.*
>
> Mother from Joint Interview 1

Service providers talked about how participation in the services benefited the mothers in this way:

> *Families get exposed to a lot of different families which is nice. From all different age groups to family structures, to backgrounds. To being employed or not. It exposes them to what else is out there or how other families live. That works really well for us…*
>
> *Yes it's definitely been interesting to see families who perhaps might be on a high level of education, who might have high role positions in our community, talking to families who might be on long-term benefits. Interacting I guess in social circles that they normally wouldn't. And it gets a few of the other families asking questions, like how they got into their job, what did they study, what do they like about their jobs. And I think that just breeds that bit of drive. You get families that are really intrigued by other families' jobs or how they earn an income. Or the different ways that that can happen in our community.*
>
> Service Provider from Interview 6

As covered elsewhere in this thesis, the mothers also talked about how family services provide an opportunity for mothers to be exposed to parenting ideas and advice, and ways of living including healthy relationships and lifestyles. This finding aligns with other studies which demonstrate playgroups and parenting groups are an important source of information and guidance, particularly for disadvantaged mothers (Berthelsen et al. 2012; McLean et al. 2017; Marsh 2001; Oke et al. 2007; Shulver 2011; Stratigos & Fenech 2018).

Services providing a safe and nurturing environment

The mothers were vocal about their appreciation for the support they received at the family services. Many had come to trust the service providers and playgroup facilitators and felt safe at the services. This relationship was important for the mothers and created a warm environment for their social interactions. The literature shows the importance of service

provider staff and facilitators on the outcomes of services (Commerford & Robinson 2016; Ellis-Sloan 2015; Flaxman et al. 2009; Shulver 2011; Williams et al. 2018). The following conversation between two of the mothers, who spoke very highly of their playgroup facilitator and the role she played in actively building social connections between the mothers, demonstrates the valuable role family service facilitators and staff play:

> *Mother 1: But there's security and comfort here. And that's specifically because of how [the facilitator] has created it. She is an amazing woman, who supports us all individually. She has a capacity bigger than anybody I've ever met, and she allows us this space. And if she knows one of us is doing it tough, she calls in the back up troops. And if she hasn't seen us for two weeks, she comes and knocks on our door. Like we can't ask for more than that, can ya?*
>
> *Mother 2: So she's helped navigate friendships, she's helped everyone.*
>
> *Mother 1: And she says oh I like that you two are friends.*
>
> *Mother 2: Yep, she's girly, she's motherly, she's nurturing, she's fun. Vital. So needed. Just so needed. Especially not knowing anyone in this town.*
>
> Mothers from Focus Group 6

It was noted amongst service providers that when parents were forced to attend the services, such as through child protection services or welfare reform policies, the time it took to build trust and rapport with the service was extended compared to those who voluntarily attended the service. Trust is an important element of building a relationship with a service provider or new friends (Mills et al. 2013; Shulver 2011).

Family services for the most vulnerable

The safe and nurturing environment offered by family services is of great benefit to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged mothers, particularly those with experience of domestic violence and other trauma. Playgroups and other family services are a 'soft entry' point where families are connected to additional supports if required (Commerford & Robinson 2016; Cortis et al. 2009; Williams et al. 2018). For example, women experiencing severe family safety concerns can access supports and referrals once they have connected with a service. As discussed

below, for some women a family service is a safe place to go and is one of the few places controlling partners will 'allow' them to go because it is seen as an activity for the child, not the mother.

Mothers in this study recognised that service providers could help people who attended their service to access other support where required:

> *I guess for family services that's something that they could do to help families. All those little snippets that you pick up from kind of chatting to people. And just I guess the families that might be experiencing drug and alcohol or domestic violence or other, like they might have children with special needs, obviously any way that they can refer services and support those families would be beneficial.*
>
> Mother from Interview 2

Service providers working with services which offer a range of services, from more generalist services such as playgroups to intensive tertiary services such as case management for families in the child protection system, recognised the importance of playgroups and other soft-touch generalist family services as a way to connect mothers to more intensive support when required:

> *And that's what playgroup is, it's the entry point to everything. And they have no one sometimes so this is the only place to come for support.*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

> *That connection at playgroup is the foundation of this service, because that is the first entry point into here. If you have a family that is resistant to engage, entry point into playgroup is the start for their new life basically. They are talking to other mums with children their own age. They're asking other mums for tips and advice on solids and sleeping and toilet training or asking [the facilitator] and that sparks interest. But it is, it's the foundation.*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

It should be noted that many of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable women may require specialist care and supports, and many will not access the services on their own accord. The literature shows many of the people who would most benefit from services are the least likely to access the services they need (Cortis et al. 2009; McArthur & Winkworth 2016; Moore 2012). As discussed later in this chapter, services providers talked about the additional pressure compulsory attendance at services placed on mothers with anxiety, resulting in negative experiences with the services and the need for the service to provide additional support to the mother, for example withdrawing her from the immediate situation to help her feel safe.

Addressing more complex issues

As demonstrated by Lindsay et al. (2007), addressing the wide range of issues (as well as the institutional, and socio-historical factors which perpetuate such issues) which exist as major barriers to employment is vital to a person being ready for work.

Many family services provide intensive case management and support for those experiencing multiple disadvantages. The service providers who participated in this study noted many mothers were dealing with severe trauma and other concerns which meant employment was not a current priority while the mothers' energy was spent keeping their children safe, securing housing and addressing their mental health concerns and other needs. Once these needs were addressed and healing had begun to occur, the mothers might then be in a position where they were ready to consider employment, as one service provider described:

> *To try and get that job is such a huge step. Because that particular mum, six months ago, was homeless, going through DV, did not care about employment. And for her to gain housing and her kids to be stable and they feel safe, and then for her to gain that strength and say, you know even though I am a single mum I can still go out and have a job and get an income and do something for her as well. Because I think a lot of my parents feel isolated. I'm just a mum who sits at home and I don't do anything and I don't get out and then they can fall into like, depression and that kind of thing. And so even small things.*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

For some mothers, small steps towards healing and wellbeing are the priority focus for the mother and service provider, and employment might remain a long way off. Focusing on stabilising the family situation can have positive outcomes for the mother and children, even if employment is not yet, or may never be, a priority. A family service provider described the improvements experienced by one of the mothers who accessed the service:

> *I've got one at the moment, and she had no confidence to do anything and now she is just flying. She's had the second child, addressed her mental health. She was very severely, seriously abused as a child, removed, all that sort of thing. She is just flourishing. You know, and she said you could never have told me I would be able to do this. So it does work. It does work.*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

Trauma

As identified in Chapter Seven, trauma can play a major role in a mother's employability. Trauma can impact on various areas of a person's life, if not all areas, over an undefined period of time. Service providers are aware of the impact of trauma on the people accessing their services and those interviewed in this research noted how addressing trauma is often the fundamental shift needed to help lead to improved outcomes for mothers:

> *Trauma. Their childhood trauma that was never addressed that sort of caries on into unable to cope, communication, and with parenting their kids even, you know, their mental health is not at a stable place where they can cope with the pressures of their kids. Let alone if their kids have additional needs and things like that. That's from the childhood trauma. And I think there's a big focus shifted over that in the last 12 months. Is to go to the foundation of the parent and them addressing their mental health needs.*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

As an example of how complex and difficult trauma and life circumstances can be for a mother, and the associated impact this can have on one's employability in the immediate and longer term, a service provider has shared the story presented in Box 8.1. While this story has a 'happy ending' in relation to employment, it is clear that various other aspects of this mother's life required support and healing before employment could be contemplated and realised. For other mothers, the healing journey can be long and ongoing to the point where employment may never be a viable option.

Family and domestic violence

As noted in the previous chapters, many mothers experiencing family and domestic violence are often isolated and unable to seek support from services, for a multitude of reasons. As demonstrated above, family services, particularly playgroups, can help mothers break their social isolation and make connections. For many of the mothers, attending a playgroup or other child-focused family service was one of the only activities they attended outside of the house. As this research shows, mothers in these situations benefit greatly from attending such services, and often go on to access needed support.

Those who have experienced, or continue to live with, domestic violence can benefit greatly from building social connections and having a safe place to visit, as one of the service providers expressed:

> *Playgroup's that great entry point, too, for people that are being isolated or in DV and have that trauma of not feeling like they can really go outside still, even though they mightn't be in the relationship any more, they come to playgroup and it's that safe soft entry into the outer world really. And then they might start going on outings on their own and stuff like that.*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

Box 8.1 Sharing the story of trauma and confidence

So to give you an example, I worked with a young mum she was 15, pregnant, ready to have the baby at 16. Worked with her very briefly, then she disengaged, went off had the baby. Then the second pregnancy and came back to the service.

In the meanwhile had kinship care of her siblings who were all in primary school.

So it was just a journey of following her through, found a pathway though FACS, got custody of the children.

She was in and out of DV with the same partner, family violence.

All the children had different needs.

She then had her third baby, moved away. Came back, engaged with the service again. Huge mental health. And so supporting her.

And now she came to me recently and said 'I want to get a job'. So we did a resume. Went online and applied. Now she is working two or three days a week.

And has separated from her [partner], taken herself out of that family violence situation and is a sole parent, which is something that she never thought she could do.

So that's been probably six or seven years of really intensive, on and off work, and for long periods of time. Probably eight to 12 months at a time. But she always knew that she could come back, the door was always open for her. And she always came back when there was a problem.

And it's about empowering them, not enabling, but empowering them to make those decisions for themselves. Have those conversations, well what would it be like if you got a job. What would that be like, what would you have to organise. So it's organising the kids to school. You know, the paediatrician appointments for a child with a disability, childcare for the toddler, managing dinners, longer hours, school hours.

And she had been a child in trauma herself. And then basically got the [siblings] who had lived the trauma that she had lived, so was trying to repair herself whilst being a mum, with a second baby on the way, with these [siblings] compounded with trauma.

And to try and link in with other services, like mental health, psychologists, huge financial issues, huge manipulation power and control, isolation, keeping her pregnant so she couldn't go to work, and you know it's amazing.

I'm just incredibly proud of her now that she's got a job. She's empowered, she's so confident. She's come in in times of struggle, really not looking after herself, and then to see her dressed up, makeup on, high heels on, and just so confident and so empowered and so, just really fills your heart.

You just know that you've done some really good work. And she's done the good work, you've just been walking the journey along beside her. She's done the good work.

It can take that long with the trauma, that's the thing.

Service Provider from Focus Group 8

For mothers who are currently in unhealthy, controlling relationships and experiencing domestic violence, playgroups and other child-focused activities can provide a safe venue to access with their children. For some of these mothers, attending a family service was one of the few outings their partners 'allowed' them to attend because it was seen as an activity for the child/ren, not for the mother. This can lead to referrals and entry to other support services, as the following discussion between service providers demonstrates:

> *Service Provider 1: They come [to play group] for the kids to give them that socialisation, which is great for them too. But then mums will start having conversations and they've been through similar things, like might be trauma, and they don't even realise they're starting the conversation, and they get together and start talking through it.*
>
> *Service Provider 2: And some of them don't even have the opportunity to go out without the kids.*
>
> *Service Provider 1: This is the place they are allowed to come.*
>
> *Service Provider 3: Or if it's domestic violence they might be able to come here with the kids but then be able to seek help from other services without the perpetrator knowing. So sometimes it's just that safety.*
>
> *Interviewer: Because they are going to playgroup.*
>
> *Service Provider 3: Yep, which is for the kids, they're not going anywhere by themselves.*
>
> Service Providers from Focus Group 8

It is important to note that many mothers, including those not in a domestic violence situation, can feel more justified to attend a family service which has a child focus (e.g. playgroup) rather than attend a service that has a parent focus, because they are attending in the best interest of their child/ren and not for their own self-interest, even though the mothers themselves benefit greatly from attendance (Berthelsen et al. 2012; McLean et al. 2017; Shulver 2011).

Some women do not realise they are in a domestic violence situation until they are exposed to what a healthy relationship looks like and they reflect on their own experience. As mentioned earlier, one of the benefits of family services identified by mothers was sharing information and educating each other on things such as child development, available services, and employment opportunities and pathways. Service providers pointed out that mothers also learn about relationships and what is and is not acceptable relative to their own and others' situations:

> *And I think awareness and education while they're here [at playgroup] as well. Some might come and start talking about their relationship, and you might get another mum go, oh that's not normal, my partner doesn't do that. And then it gets that person thinking oh, that's not normal. Or another person might put their spin on it… They might not know. There's no physical violence but there might be extremely financial abusive relationship, sexually abusive relationship, verbally abusive and not realise that their children are witnessing this. So I think that is good, they are learning skills and education and knowledge by coming to playgroup.*
>
> Service Provider from Focus Group 8

Mothers who are connected in with the playgroup or other family service and who have built trust with the service and facilitators may feel more comfortable to seek further support regarding their domestic violence situation and to help heal past trauma. However, it is important to note that building trust can be hampered by removing the voluntary nature of service access (Brady & Cook 2015; McArthur et al. 2013). The impacts of compulsory service access are now considered in the following section.

Conditionality and service access

As explored in chapters Two and Three, conditions on welfare receipt are increasingly seeing parents of young children be required to participate in certain activities in order to receive their social security payments. Under recent social security conditions introduced through the ParentsNext program, some mothers are now obliged to attend playgroup or other family services. Mothers' experiences regarding ParentsNext in relation to their employability were discussed in Chapter Seven. This section considers ParentsNext in relation to participation in family services.

Compulsory participation in family services is changing the nature of engagement in family services and the cohort of mothers who participate. Generally, family services are voluntary and accessed by a wide range of families. Some mothers had previously been attending services compulsorily in order to meet conditions placed upon them by child protection services (e.g. in order to maintain custody of their children or as part of a reunification plan). However, ParentsNext is making attendance at family services compulsory for a wider range of mothers.

The Australian Government notes the benefits of such services for mothers and explains the policy rationale on their website:

> *Parents can identify activities such as playgroups or other similar things (while the children are very young) as a way to overcome isolation, develop social connections and networking opportunities. Parents with limited work history and significant challenges such as a lack of education, medical conditions and language, literacy and numeracy barriers may find this the most appropriate activity early in their time in the program* (Australian Government Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business 2019).

This rationale aligns with the findings of this research on the positive impacts of family services on mothers, including increased social connections and networking and reduced social isolation. However, it is possible that these benefits are primarily applicable to mothers who voluntarily access the services, and that those who are forced to participate in the services have reduced benefits, or even negative experiences with, the service. As noted above, this study and others have found that mothers who are forced to attend services are less trusting of the services and the staff (Brady & Cook 2015; McArthur et al. 2013). Further, compulsory service attendance can result in mothers feeling disempowered and stigmatised, which negatively impacts on their confidence, mental health and wellbeing (Brady & Cook 2015; Grahame & Marston 2012; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013).

Several mothers interviewed for this study spoke of how they already attended playgroup or other family services and child-focused activities prior to the introduction of ParentsNext. While attending a service was now compulsory for them as part of their social security obligations, they expressed they would attend the playgroup regardless of this obligation. One of the mothers who had playgroup attendance included in her ParentsNext Participation Plan shared her experience with the policy:

> *Once a month, [I] have appointment. And have to every Wednesday, I have to report that just I go to playgroup, make sure. So I have to go to like MyGov*[9] *and go to like a job activity and you have to submit that you go to playgroup…It's just. I don't know. And she's only one. If I work probably, I'm not gunna work probably until she goes to school. Another four years or something. And it's like, do you need to get ready for four years? Like, I don't think so. But if I don't do that, I'm not gonna get parent payments. So yeah. But even, not that I don't like come here [to playgroup], it's good for me, I come anyway. So I'm not coming here for ParentsNext, I'm always come here before ParentsNext start[ed].*
>
> Mother from Interview 4

Some of the service providers shared concerns about the additional pressure placed on mothers by the compulsory attendance required through ParentsNext. This was mainly in relation to mothers who were already experiencing debilitating conditions such as severe mental health, trauma and domestic violence. For example, the service providers reported that some mothers' mental health conditions were exacerbated by the additional anxiety associated with forced attendance at a playgroup.

It is also important to recognise the potential shame and stigma associated with accessing some services and the impact this can have on mothers. Some service providers reported mothers can feel shame and worry about being seen visiting a certain shopfront or service, and such issues can be exacerbated within small communities. Knowing people who are delivering or attending the service can be an issue in relation to privacy, and also for those attempting to remove themselves from certain environments, such as not wanting to mix with their previous circle of acquaintances when rehabilitating from drug use. Compulsory service participation can reduce the choice mothers have in which services they attend and this can increase the shame and stigma they experience.

Having access to culturally appropriate services is also an important consideration for mothers. This not only arose in the context of culture and ethno-racial background, but also religion. For example, in locations where the only available playgroup is run at the local church, several parents expressed their preference to attend non-denominational services, including

[9] MyGov is an online account linked to Centrelink and other government services and is used by social security recipients to report their earnings, job search activities and other reporting requirements.

government-funded services, and they reported some parents did not attend the local playgroup because of its perceived religious undertones.

It is noted the sampling methodology of this study meant participants were primarily those who attend family services and those who do not attend services made up a smaller percentage of participants. Therefore the views of those who participate in family services is dominant in the findings. However, this does not impact the findings of the study's exploration of the perceived impacts of family services on mothers' employability. All of mothers who participated in this study found the family services they attend, either voluntarily or compulsorily, to be conducive to their and their children's wellbeing. None of the mothers in the study stated they did not wish to attend the service or were only attending because they had been forced to do so.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented mothers' and service providers' views on the perceived impacts of family services, and touched on the potential flow-on effects these impacts can have on mothers' employability.

The mothers who participated in this study were empowered and uplifted through their attendance at playgroups and other family services, and their confidence levels increased through strengthened social connections. Family services played a role in creating family routine for many mothers, particularly those who are socially isolated and do not engage in other social or family activities. Mothers who had their confidence undermined by their circumstances, be that the new pressures and isolation of parenthood or finding themselves in abusive or controlling relationships, were able to find a sense of connection, rebuild their confidence and support their emotional and mental wellbeing within the safe and nurturing environments provided by the family services. Compulsory attendance at family services was also discussed in this chapter, and the potential negative effects this may have on service participants compared to voluntary participation.

As this chapter has shown, many of the benefits provided by the family services support the development of skills, attributes and circumstances which mothers found to be crucial to their employability. This chapter is the final chapter presenting findings from this study. The concluding chapter, Chapter Nine, discusses the concept of employability from the perspective of mothers, the views of mothers and service providers on the impacts of family services, and

the relationship between the two; specifically, how family services may impact on mothers' employability.

CHAPTER NINE Conclusion

This chapter concludes the thesis by outlining the key research findings in relation to the study's aims and research questions. The original and significant contributions of the research are reiterated, and the policy implications of the research are considered. Finally, research shortcomings are noted, and future research is recommended.

This thesis has explored the concept of employability from the perspective of mothers who are receiving social security benefits and examined the role of family services on mothers' employability.

Several gaps in evidence and theoretical understanding have been addressed: earlier literature has not addressed the question of how parents who receive social security payments perceive and define employability, and there has been limited exploration of the role of family services in relation to conditionality policies or the employability of parents.

In this thesis, I have argued that it is vital that mothers (re)entering the workforce after taking time off to care for child(ren) are included in the conversation around what their skills needs are, and how they can meet the workforce participation expectations of government and industry. This is particularly the case for disadvantaged and vulnerable parents who may be experiencing intense individual, circumstantial and structural barriers to economic engagement, noting that these policies operate in a broader social, economic and political environment. This thesis has made a contribution to the public policy literature by introducing mothers' perspectives and reconceptualising employability in relation to the experience of mothers in the social security system. This research provides a voice to mothers in receipt of social security payments in relation to their perceived employability skills and service needs to support their (re)engagement with the workforce, thus adding to existing understandings of maternal employability.

Considering the research aims and the gaps in the literature, the study was guided by three overarching research questions:

- How do mothers in the social security system define the concept of 'employability,' and to what extent does this definition align with, or diverge from, definitions of the concept in the literature and government policy?

- What experiences do mothers in the social security system have with family services, such as playgroup and parenting programs?

- In what ways might family services influence the employability of mothers in the social security system?

The thesis analysed mothers' perspectives on employability in relation to the literature and the existing evidence base. McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) employability framework provided the basis for much of the analysis, and the thesis builds on the framework to make it more applicable to mothers in the Australian social security system. Most mothers considered confidence as paramount to employability. Other essential employability factors which were overwhelmingly raised by the women included childcare, mental health and psychological wellbeing, social connections and supports, suitable work available within school hours, and skills and qualifications.

The mothers who participated in this study emphasised the importance of each of the three sets of factors (individual factors; personal circumstances; and external factors) which are outlined in McQuaid and Lindsay's framework, and clearly expressed that both individual (supply-side) and structural (demand-side) factors were important to them being work-ready and gaining and maintaining employment.

However, overwhelmingly, the mothers in this study identified confidence and social connections as vital to their employability. Interestingly, with the exception of childcare, the mothers mostly focused on individual and circumstantial aspects of employability compared to external, demand-side (including institutional and socio-historical) factors. This insight shows that mothers place emphasis on individual aspects of employability and builds on the findings of existing studies into the employment experiences of mothers who receive social security benefits, which primarily report that structural factors dominate women's decisions and outcomes relating to work.

It is noted that many of the factors are intrinsically linked and the interaction between them means they cannot be disassociated from one another, for example the ongoing external socio-historical factors such as racial discrimination has a direct association with individual factors such as health and wellbeing (Paradies et al. 2015; Shepherd et al. 2017; Williams & Mohammed 2013). As the findings of this study demonstrated, personal circumstances (such

as domestic violence, homelessness) and external factors (such as conditionality policies) were inextricably connected to the mothers' confidence, health and wellbeing.

While the definitions of employability embodied in government policy somewhat reflects the perspectives of the mothers in this study, there is not the same level of emphasis on fundamental aspects of a mother's wellbeing, including confidence and social connections. The greatest incongruence between government policy regarding employability and the perspectives of the mothers in this study is the misalignment between values and priorities. This thesis argues that in many instances employment is not a mother's key focus and instead the parenting role is given most value, which is sometimes a contradictory view to the policy emphasis and government rhetoric around the higher value placed on a mother's role in paid employment over their caring role. There is evidence which suggests that the rhetoric around the importance of paid employment is reducing the value placed on unpaid caring roles, further reducing mothers' confidence and feeling of adequacy in their role as a parent (Baker & Tippin 2002; Brady & Cook 2015; Cooney 2006; Marston & McDonald 2008; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013; Marston & McDonald 2008). This evidence was echoed by the experiences of the mothers in this study.

Further, some mothers are experiencing significant disadvantage and very painful circumstances, and healing from severe traumas. This results in a need to prioritise self-care and safety for themselves and their children, rather than divert energy to paid employment or policy settings which prolong or impede their healing process. The thesis argues that for many disadvantaged and vulnerable parents, support to build social networks and regain confidence in themselves, both as parents and workers, is required before more intensive employability-increasing activities are undertaken. In such instances, LMAPs can be highly detrimental and reduce mothers' employability and wellbeing.

This thesis also explored the mothers' experiences with family services and considered the potential impacts of family services on the employability of mothers in the social security system. The mothers explained that the isolation and challenges experienced in their role as a mother can greatly reduce their levels of confidence. Making social connections and feeling valued in their parenting role was reported to increase the mothers' confidence. The mothers who participated in this study benefited greatly from participation in family programs, particularly playgroups, due to the social connections they built, and being in an environment where they felt normal and valued in their parenting role. This thesis therefore concludes that

participation in family services is leading to increased levels of confidence which may lead to increased employability.

The research examined how LMAPs and related welfare conditionality is interacting with family services and changing the dynamic of parents' relationships with service providers. The thesis considered mothers' experiences with conditionality programs, in particular ParentsNext, which requires some mothers to compulsorily participate in family services as a condition of receiving their social security payments. The feedback on the program was mixed, and most mothers who participated in the family services as a condition of their welfare receipt suggested they would attend the services voluntarily anyway. Oftentimes, the conditions and reporting requirements added additional stresses, inconvenience and complications. Other studies have shown that LMAPs with harsh conditions reduces social security recipients' levels of confidence and wellbeing (Baker & Tippin 2002; Brady & Cook 2015; Cooney 2006; Holdsworth 2017; McArthur et al. 2013; Marston & McDonald 2008; Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018; Wright 2016). Reducing the voluntary nature of service access and making accessing services a condition of social security receipt, risks reducing the trust and engagement in the services and reducing mothers' confidence and wellbeing. Given the mothers participating in this study consider confidence to be the most important element of their employability, and forced participation in programs has the potential to reduce participants' confidence and wellbeing, then making participation in family services a condition of welfare receipt has the potential to actually reduce the mothers' employability.

In addition to the academic contribution, this research will provide evidence for policy makers to further inform policies which aim to meet the needs of mothers in the social security system. Policies which celebrate and value mothers' parenting role as a vital contribution to society, and help build confidence and social connections, should be prioritised over punitive policies which reduce confidence, disempower mothers, and result in reduced employability. Policies and programs which governments deliver that do not have an employment focus, such as family services, should be considered a key element of the investment and effort to increase mothers' employability. Family services can provide a safe environment for parents to build confidence, break isolation, build social connections and access other vital resources. This in turn builds the foundations for mothers' current and future employability, in addition to improving their general wellbeing. In order to successfully increase mothers' employability, participation in family services should be voluntary, and conditions on the receipt of social security payments for mothers should be reconsidered and removed.

The shortcomings of this research include having a small number of participants in study, the inability to generalise the findings to the broader population, and other inherent limitations of using a qualitative methodology. The scope of the research also limits the findings and implications and does not consider the views of mothers who are not receiving social security payments. In order to not create further stigma or differentiation between the mothers attending the playgroups where this research was undertaken, some mothers who engaged in the interviews and focus groups were not in receipt of social security benefits. The information shared by these parents had the potential to influence the views of the researcher or other mothers in the research. All effort was taken to remove the contributions made by these mothers from the data so only the views of mothers in the social security system were included. Further, as most mothers recruited to the study were attending a playgroup, the study had a limited number of participants who did not access these services, and therefore the results may be biased towards mothers who had positive expectations of participating in the services. It is also noted that while this research focuses on the employability of mothers in the social security system, employability and paid employment are not important considerations for all mothers and their priorities and goals may relate to other areas of their lives. These shortcomings are accepted.

Future research should further consider mothers' views on confidence and self-worth, including how confidence is defined, experienced and impacted. Given the importance the mothers in this study placed on confidence, further exploration of confidence will give greater insights into how mothers can be supported to increase their confidence as well as having implications for government's employability policies and efforts to support the wellbeing of mothers and families, and ultimately society. While this research has begun to address the gap in knowledge around the views of mothers in the social security system regarding employability, further research could be conducted into how the concept is understood by mothers more generally, and by other jobseekers and welfare recipients, as these gaps in the literature remain (Guilbert et al. 2016). While this research has focused on mothers, the experiences of fathers and other caregivers are also significant and worthy of further research. Finally, this research was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and future research could examine the implications of policy changes (such as reduced conditionality requirements) introduced during the pandemic.

This thesis has contributed to addressing gaps in the literature by exploring the concept of employability from the perspective of mothers who are receiving social security benefits and examined the role of family services in relation to parents' employability. It has clearly shown

the importance of confidence and positive social networks on mothers' employability and wellbeing, and the potential for mothers to increase these employability factors through voluntary participation in family services. The research also emphasises the need for mothers to be valued and supported in the full range of roles they play, noting these roles are not limited to parent, carer or worker. A mother's intrinsic value cannot be determined in relation to standards and expectations imposed by policies and societal norms which do not reflect the mother's best interests and highest potential.

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