



## *The Heart of the Matter:*

*Supportive pathways to sustainable jobs that match the skills and aspirations of those not currently engaged in meaningful employment*



*Dr Joan Benjamin  
Northern Futures  
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This report sits as an adjunct to the work of Dr Louise Johnson whose report *Northern Futures 2008-2016: Retrospect & Prospect* provides considerable detail about the agency's formal relationships, funding arrangements, quantitative data on outcomes and the wider context of the economic environment of Geelong.

Thank you also to Christine Ferguson who helped me understand the history and background of Northern Futures. Fiona McIntyre provided information on the labour market programs that impact on the agency and its clients.

Mostly I must thank Lou Brazier, the Executive Officer of Northern Futures, who inspired me to undertake this task, as she has inspired all those who have and continue to work with Northern Futures.

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Joan Benjamin  
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## Introduction

*Northern Futures data for 2015 shows that through their program they can move a long term unemployed person into paid work for a one-off cost of approximately \$13 993. This compares favourably with the cost of New Start Allowance at \$13 746 per annum for a single person (\$14 869 if they have children) which does not include additional benefits paid for children or rent subsidies. This comparison provides a clear indication that Northern Futures' programs are cost effective as well as socially beneficial p.2 (Johnson, 2017)*

The objective of this report is to understand and document the processes and outcomes of a small community agency\* that can and does achieve this outcome. Northern Futures will be considered from several perspectives but mainly the perspectives of those whose lives have been transformed through their association with the agency. Northern Futures' objectives address place based (the postcode 3214), economic and social disadvantage; factors that are most personally experienced by individual jobseekers. In 2009, the strategy developed by *Northern Futures* to address the personal aspect of these issues was expressed;

*Strategy 4:*

*Reduce Worklessness: Create supportive pathways into jobs that match the skills and aspirations of those residents not currently engaged in the workforce or who have been displaced from the workforce (Northern Futures, 2009).*

And was reiterated in 2014:

*Priority 3:*

*Support the Geelong economy further by identifying key employment gaps and ensuring a flexible approach to shape our education and training programs to meet the needs of the economy (Northern Futures, 2014)*

These objectives indicate that Northern Futures has a significant economic and social change agenda; at its heart lie the aspirations and futures of individuals whose lives have been impacted by economic and social forces outside their control. This report will reflect the participants' personal experiences of the processes and programs that *Northern Futures* has established to enable individuals to "establish effective educational/vocational and employment pathways." (*Northern Futures*, 2009)

Two key factors distinguish *Northern Futures*.

— It is partnered with local businesses, small and large, and government instrumentalities. Not just as sponsors but as participating players in the collaborative enterprise of developing supportive pathways to sustainable jobs that match the skills and aspirations of those not currently engaged in meaningful employment.

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\* The word agency has been used throughout this report because of its dual meanings, the more common use, 'a department or body providing a specific service on behalf of another business, person or group' as well as the meaning 'Intervening action towards an end' is particularly apt. (Oxford Dictionary).

— *Northern Futures* has made explicit that it works with the whole person not just the unemployment they are experiencing; in doing so it uses a group setting and the group experience to enhance the self-discovery, learning and capacity building the job seekers will encounter during their journey with *Northern Futures*. It has adopted a particular approach to understanding and working with people experiencing poverty based on the *Bridges out of Poverty Framework* (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2010). This work is not without controversy and is discussed later in this report.

*Northern Futures* has advocated this approach to the people, partners and organisations who work with them. The intention is to create a milieu that understands the backgrounds and motivations of this group of job seekers and to develop partners that are prepared and willing to work in an encouraging and developmental manner with *Northern Futures* job seekers.

Northern Futures is a collaboration between its staff, the job seekers, trainers from The Gordon Institute of Technology, local businesses, community organisations large and small and government instrumentalities and departments. These are the players at ground level, they are at the heart of *Northern Futures*. But there is another level. Geelong is a regional city, comprised of the City of Greater Geelong, industries, community organisations, and educational institutions. Representatives of these entities are also involved through the *Northern Futures* Board of Management and its Community Advisory Committee (previously the *Northern Futures* Steering Committee initiated in 2007). These bodies remain true to the original mission, to function as a barometer of changes in the employment and training needs of Geelong and to act as a conduit for new opportunities in employment, training and funding. Together they act as the body corporate of *Northern Futures*.

*Northern Futures* has demonstrated how work practices that empower individuals, building a collaborative relationship between services, agencies and places of employment can achieve significant social change. The *Bridges out of Poverty Framework* has worked in the context of the *Northern Futures* model. But the Bridges program is not without its detractors,

This report is an adjunct to the report *Northern Futures 2008-2016 Retrospect & Prospect* (Johnson, 2017). Johnson reports on the economic and policy contexts in which *Northern Futures* operates and provides an assessment of Northern Futures Strategic Plans and an examination of comparable programs.

## **The Context**

*Northern Futures* is a tenant of the Norlane Community Centre (NCC) established in the mid 1980's when local groups recognised the advantages of having a focal point for community development in the area. The Norlane/Corio area is the Northern part of Geelong close to the Port of Geelong and a large rail hub. As the Community Centre developed it housed, initiated and supported a range of community services, including in 2007, Northern Futures.



The Norlane Community Centre provides opportunities for local people to connect, learn and contribute in their local community through social, educational, recreational and support activities.

Norlane Community Centre is proud to auspice Northern Futures in their endeavours to create a sustainable 3214 community by strengthening the local economy and creating employment and training opportunities for those most at risk of becoming or remaining workless.

NCC Website: <http://norlanecommunitycentre.com.au/> accessed April 2017

The origins of *Northern Futures* lie in the Neighbourhood Renewal programs, initiated by the Victorian government as an extension to the neighbourhood house movement in selected areas of the state, one of which was Norlane/Corio. In recalling her work with this team, The Manager\*, Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal, Barwon South Region spoke of her experiences related to one of the six key objectives for the Neighbourhood Renewal program: "Lifting employment, training and education opportunities and expanding local economic activity" p. 4 (Neighbourhood Renewal Branch, 2005).

*"This work was largely focussed on providing jobs for the unemployed, jobs that were created through the efforts of the community sector, they were short term jobs, although they left behind a community benefit they did not lead to an individual sustainable employment path for the workers concerned. As they were funded by government and local council grants they did not have long term economic benefits to the area either.*

*In developing job opportunities, we had no trouble connecting with the community sector. We couldn't for the life of us, connect with the business sector, or with industry. We were speaking from a humanistic social justice mind-set, they were speaking from running a profitable business mind-set. They agreed that what we wanted was a 'good thing' but essentially, they had their businesses to protect and the jobs of the people they currently employed; they couldn't afford to jeopardise that by taking on difficult to place jobseekers." CF; Feb 2017*

It became clear that if expanding local economic activity was to become a reality it was necessary to engage and work with the key economic players in the Geelong region. This was a region that grew out of a thriving wool industry and the dependent industries of manufacturing and transport and a booming automotive industry. The textile industry in particular began its decline in the 1970s, the automotive industry later. A further destabilisation and economic downward trend was the collapse of the Geelong based Pyramid Building Society in 1990 with debts in excess of \$2 billion affecting business and individuals throughout the region (Sykes, 1996). These economic structural shifts transformed a working-class area of Geelong into one containing a significant workless community spanning generations with the concomitant aspects of social disadvantage and poverty.

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\* Christine Ferguson provided an extensive interview for this research, providing a comprehensive account of the beginnings of *Northern Futures*

These were some of the factors that led to a Northern Suburbs Jobs Summit in Geelong in 2007. This brought together Local, State and Federal members of parliament, local businesses, community representatives, policy makers and local residents to discuss employment issues in Northern Geelong. An organising committee was formed to lead in planning and leveraging a whole of government and community approach to minimise the social and economic impact on Geelong's 3214 suburbs. (Johnson, 2017). A move that received ongoing support from the Committee for Geelong.

*The Committee for Geelong was established in 2001 by a group of Geelong leaders who saw an opportunity to collaborate to build a better Geelong. A member of the influential 'Committees for Cities', the Committee for Geelong (CfG) is an independent, member-based organisation committed to leading and influencing long-term outcomes to achieve its strategic objectives for Geelong.*  
<http://www.committeeforgeelong.com.au>

The organising committee for the Jobs Summit became the *Northern Futures* Steering Committee (now named Community Advisory Board to the *Northern Futures* Board of Management) and comprised representatives from local employers, community organisations, government departments and members of Local, State and Federal parliaments. *Northern Futures*, the agency, auspiced and housed by the Norlane Community Centre was initially funded by the Department of Human Services. In 2007 its first success, in collaboration with the Urban Renewal Program, was to place 20 local people into employment (Johnson, 2017).

*That meeting of the Geelong community, issued a communique stating that there should be an organization formed called Northern Futures that would look at developing and implementing an independent investment and social inclusion plan for this area. It was decided that Northern Futures would be the initiative that led that work here. That's how Northern Futures was established.* LB, Feb 2017, First and current Executive Officer, Northern Futures.

*The stage was set.*

## The jobseeker experience of labour market programs

Jobactive agencies are central to the Federal Government's labour market programs. They are designed to offer personalised support to help job seekers to find a job, and help employers find staff to meet their recruitment needs (Department of Employment, 2017). Services for the unemployed are tailored to accept that jobseekers experience different levels of disadvantage in their endeavours to find employment. On entering the Jobactive system, jobseekers complete a telephone or face-to-face questionnaire based on the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) to determine their readiness for work. They are either allocated to Streams 1 to 3 or referred to a further Employment Services Assessment (ESAt), as a result of which they may be allocated to Stream 4, disability services or another stream. Stream 1 clients are those considered most work ready and Stream 4 clients are those who experience severe barriers to employment (Bodsworth, 2015). Most of the Jobactive clients referred to *Northern Futures* would be designated as Stream 4.

"There are significant barriers within the JSA system that can prohibit Stream 4 job seekers from achieving positive and long-term employment outcomes. Even though the JSA system is intended to be flexible to address the needs of disadvantaged job seekers, it is structured and resourced in a way that typically drives one-size-fits-all operations. This results in highly disadvantaged job seekers often being placed in the 'too hard basket' instead of being provided the kinds of services and support they need to achieve meaningful outcomes" p. 8 (Fowkes, 2011).

Several of the Protégés (*Northern Futures*' jobseekers) described being sent on multiple training courses with different Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), often completing the same course more than once, none of them providing a pathway into employment. They felt alienated by a system that was unable to appreciate their individual difficulties and by the sometimes coercive actions of the system. Particularly in relation to the mutual obligations provisions where they were expected to be in some form of training, employment or 'work-for-the-dole' program.

The Protégé's collective descriptions of the Jobsactive experience is one of bewilderment and frustration leading to cynicism. It would appear there is little or no continuity between visits and no recognition of the particularities of each client.

Joining *Northern Futures* meant that their individual difficulties were recognised and they were made to feel members of the organisation and provided with resources that could be applied to their particular difficulties. They were accepted, encouraged to develop a Learning Plan for their future involvement, and encouraged to see it through.

### One experience of a Registered Training Authority\*

*I had been with various kind of training organisations before. They would all come up to me with promises and stuff like that of "Oh, we'll give you this." When eventually I just kept getting the same certificate over and over again.*

*E every time I completed it, I was doing different work. For example, the first course that I did it in, it was actually a tack on to a certificate 3. I didn't complete my certificate 3 because I had a major anxiety attack during my work placement stage.*

*But they gave me the certificate 1 in vocational preparation because that was purely book work that I'd done during the course. Then the second time I did it, they said "Right, when you complete this course, you'll get a certificate 2 in retail." They reneged on that and said "Okay you're going get a certificate 1 in retail." And then when I finally got my certificate from them it was a certificate 1 in vocational preparation.*

*So there I had done all of this coursework and went "What, why have I got a certificate I've already got?"*

*it was administrative errors on the RTO's part. They admitted that kind of stuff. Then when I finally got the certificate from them I just went "You know what, I'm done." So I just didn't bother. I just went- They'd stuffed us around enough, 'cause I wasn't the only one that had done that course, there were about 12 of us. All of us walked away with a certificate 1 vocational preparation, instead of a certificate 2 in retail which is what we were promised. Protégé*

[\*RTO Registered Training Authority, a for-profit organisation contracted by government to provide training programs for unemployed people. The RTO is reimbursed per capita of completions of approved courses and activities.]

## The Study

The data for this report has been gathered through interviews with a range of people involved with *Northern Futures* in various capacities. For the purposes of this report these groups of people have been assigned particular names that reflect the role they play in the *Northern Futures* collaboration.

- **Protégés:** The jobseekers who become trainees and ultimately, employees;
- **Mentors:** The staff members (Work & Learning Advisors) who initiate the relationship and mentor the jobseekers throughout their journey;
- **Enablers:** The trainers from the Gordon Institute who introduce the protégés into the training pathway; and,
- **Sponsors:** Those who sponsor the protégés in the workplace. These people may not be direct supervisors of the trainees; they take a role within their organisation to manage the trainee program, assist managers and supervisors, understand and orientate the trainees into the workplace, facilitate regular group meetings, act as liaison with *Northern Futures* staff and assist the trainees on an individual basis if need be.

## The Data

Information was collected via interviews with a range of people closely involved with Northern Futures. A Phenomenographic method was used to collect and analyse the data. This method develops a ranking of the different ways in which people describe their experience of the phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2007). When a group of people, who all experience a particular phenomenon, are asked to describe the phenomena, their descriptions will all be slightly different, some will foreground aspects that others do not mention and so on. Each account is a valid description from an individual's own perspective. When these descriptions are considered collectively they provide a multi-perspective view of the phenomena. The descriptions are sorted into groups of similar descriptions. These groups become separate categories of ways to see the phenomena. In considering how these categories differ from each other, and identifying the point of variation and naming it, a ranking emerges from simple descriptions and explanations to ones that are more complex. This enables the variations themselves to form a typology. In phenomenographic literature this typology is known as the 'categories of description'. (Bowden, 2000). The method applied to this study resulted in six variations or categories of description. They provide the structure for the main discussion of Northern Futures' work.

Clients of *Northern Futures* (with an association of 12 months or more) were approached by a staff member and asked to participate in the study; once their agreement was obtained their contact details were forwarded to the researcher who then approached them for interview. The Executive Officer identified a number of *Northern Futures* partners who could be approached and provided introductions, all staff members agreed to be interviewed. The Gordon Committee for Quality and Research granted permission for their staff to be interviewed. Interviews were audio recorded and, later, verbatim transcripts made. These transcripts provided the data discussed here. Twenty-eight people were interviewed.

Protégés	10
Mentors	7
Enablers	2
Sponsors	7

An additional two people were interviewed for their insight into local and historical aspects of the phenomenon of *Northern Futures*. Each interviewee signed their consent to be interviewed after reading a plain English description of the study. The particular methodology was chosen because it has been widely used to study the phenomenon of learning in different settings and most importantly it presents the participants own voices.

## Phenomenographic findings

The following Categories of Description were developed through an examination of the way individuals described *Northern Futures* to the interviewer. Capturing the meaning of each group or category of description developed six perspectives of *Northern Futures* and the picture of a dynamic and transformative agency. Although the variations may be slight they exist; collectively they provide a picture of a collaborative and transformational entity.

### *Categories of description*

1. *Northern Futures* builds confidence and sense of self-worth for each protégé through encouragement, acceptance and inclusion.
2. *Northern Futures* is a transformative environment providing skills based training and the stimulus and the resources which can lead to a change in a person's world view.
3. *Northern Futures'* training courses meet the skills shortages identified by industry partners, enabling the development of people with a needed skill set.
4. *Northern Futures* develops connective mechanisms to enable individuals to navigate the training/employment journey.
5. *Northern Futures* empowers the protégés to take control of their lives.
6. *Northern Futures* is a catalyst for change for the protégés themselves and for the organisations with which they interact.

As in all phenomenographic studies, the categories of description are cumulatively each category includes the previous. Quotations from the interview transcripts are used throughout this report to illustrate the variations, inform the discussion and ensure it is an accurate reflection of the lived experiences of participants in the *Northern Futures* collaboration. The six perspectives (Categories of Description) inform the headings for discussion on the programs and processes that comprise the agency. Note: Categories 3 & 4 whilst different in emphasis address the central employment theme and these two categories have been amalgamated for the purpose of this discussion.

## Northern Futures — An intervention

### Engaging the individual

1. *Northern Futures* builds confidence and sense of self-worth for each protégé through encouragement, acceptance and inclusion.

People approach Northern Futures because they have heard about it from friends or family, through a community grapevine or they may be referred by a local branch of Jobactive. *Northern Futures* has been accredited as an appropriate Activity Centre within the labour market system and this enables Jobactive agencies to refer their clients to the agency.

*The model. I love the idea, the model of Northern Futures and what it's about. The fact that it's local, it works with people who live in the area. It's more than just a job placement service. It's about looking at the whole of a person, the people who generally get left behind, who lack the resources to get on with their lives. We can provide resources, encouragement and back up when needed. (Mentor) 1*

*If you want your life back, go in there and ask them to help you. Because they are going to help you. They don't judge. They gave me my life back. (Protégé) 10*

*They went via my needs, understanding about my shyness and not being able to open up to people. I'm very slow, you have to wedge me in before you push me. Ever since Getting Ahead, my feet have been going up and up and up. I went there. I had no idea what I wanted to do. All I knew was I had a disability, and I'm shy and I hate people. And I guess they made me like people. I'm more open now. My mum's very proud. (Protégé) 3*

*They're willing to invest their time to give young people a pathway into employment. They're very supportive to us here in the workplace as well and they celebrate their trainee's achievements. (Sponsor) 6*

Two of the informants to the study identified *Northern Futures* as 'a wraparound agency'. The term 'wrap around' is a recognition that staff are client focussed and their focus is not restricted to the persons' status as a job seeker. At the heart of Northern Futures is the recognition that an individual has more complex needs and aspirations than job seeking.

*I think for me, (the important thing is) knowing that I can potentially make a small change, it's helping a client who walks through our door have a better understanding of the services that are available in the region, finding out exactly what it is that they want to do in life, the ultimate goal obviously is seeing the outcome of them getting that job. It's more about that journey that we go through from them walking through the door, to the end result, sometimes it may happen really quickly, and other times it takes quite a while. When you work in (previous employment in a Jobactive\* agency), you don't have that 'quite a while'. It's pretty much they walk in the door and you've got to get them out as soon as you can. Here, it's not. It's that wrap around service. You're with them the whole time through that journey. (Mentor) 4*

The relationship fostered at point of entry is between a Mentor and a Protégé rather than agency and client. The initial 'intake interview' insures that the protégé is someone who is ready and able to benefit from the training and employment focus of the agency. This first conversation provides an opportunity for a two-way flow of information leading to the development of the Learning Plan, which will be revisited from time to time during the

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\* 'Jobstart' is the current name of the Federal Government's employment service.

journey. The relationship established during the intake interview is maintained throughout the Protégé's journey including after they gain on-going employment. Starting as an intensive mentoring through the training programs, initiation and orientation into a work place and then tapering off into an occasional meeting to ensure that everything is still on track and that there are no significant bumps in the road. The focus is not just on work and training but on the individual and their journey.

For example: One mentor was observed talking with one of her Protégés, who had successfully achieved a job in a community service organisation, and was ready 'to go for his driver's licence'. As he had no experience of a workplace, he didn't know how to negotiate a day of annual leave or whether to negotiate for some time-off-in-lieu that he could then 'make up'. His Mentor talked him through the process of approaching his supervisor in a way that would produce a satisfactory outcome for both him and his workplace.

Developing the Learning Plan together, mentor and Protégé take the first important step on the journey and it is during this process that the decision will be taken, jointly, to start with the *Getting Ahead* program or enrol in one of the accredited courses provided by The Gordon at *Northern Futures*.

## A transformational environment

2. *Northern Futures* is a transformative environment providing skills based training and the stimulus and the resources which can lead to a change in a person's world view.

*I actually tell people it will change your life. The Getting Ahead program has just changed my life. (Protégé) 9*

*In one of my groups, (undertaking the Getting Ahead program) there are some students for whom it is resonating. The pennies are slowly starting to fall, yet there are also some who still have that resentment, that brick wall of resistance. "Not going to change, don't really care what you say, that's me and that's how it is". Mentor 4*

The *Getting Ahead* program is the start of the transformative journey. About 20% of the entrants to Northern Futures are offered a place in a *Getting Ahead* program, others start with one of the vocationally specific accredited certificate courses; Business Basics Certificate 2, Warehousing and Logistics Certificate 2, Individual Personal Support Certificate 3. All these courses are provided within the Norlane Community Centre, the Certificate courses include observational visits to relevant work sites; the courses are delivered by trained teachers from The Gordon Institute of TAFE (on site delivery of training and workplace visits are unique to the Northern Futures program and have been made possible through the collaboration of The Gordon in the collaborative partnership). The Gordon has been providing vocational education in the Geelong region since 1888. In 2017, 23,000 students were studying on-campus, off-campus and in business or industry; they will graduate with qualifications ranging from basic certificate courses to advanced diplomas and articulated pathways to Deakin University. The Gordon is a key partner in the Northern Futures collaboration.

The *Getting Ahead* program is provided under the umbrella of the Gordon's Preparation for Vocational Education.

*We are teaching the Getting Ahead model, using the Getting Ahead workbooks but additionally the students learn and do seven units from Certificate 1 in Permanent Pathways. Additional units places the program within the regular TAFE Framework.*

*This is not your typical course, this a course or programme where the students are called co-investigators, because it's about investigating and helping them see the bigger picture of the impact of poverty on their lives and the community. 'What it is like in the community, what's it like for me as an individual, how can I learn about resources that will build my ability to get out of this situation and have a better life moving forward'. (Enabler 2)*

The impact of this course on the lives of the participants, evidenced in their comments and the comments of the Sponsors they meet in the workplace and of the trainers is remarkable.

*Ever since Getting Ahead, my feet have been going up and up and up (Protégé) 3.*

*Some of them have done the Getting Ahead Program. Some of them don't. Probably maybe 20% of them have. What I do find is that after they have done the Getting Ahead program they are certainly are a very different person. They have a different though process.*

*One of the things I find is that when something comes, they actually just sit back for a second, have a think about what they're doing and how they're going to react to that, rather than just reacting to it and crack it. They actually have a completely different thought process and I like their way of thinking. It really does show. In saying that, I had a couple that come from that programme and there was evidence there how they used to deal with stuff and I can very, very clearly see the difference that they're doing now and why they're thinking about things and how they're dealing with situations. (Enabler 2)*

The *Getting Ahead* program is an integral part of the Bridges out of Poverty framework adopted by Northern Futures. The *Getting Ahead* program is offered to Protégés as a mechanism to assist them see themselves in a new light, as proactive, capable individuals prior to undertaking one of the certificate courses.

The use of an educational program to transform the lives of those living in poverty is not new. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* first published in 1968, Freire described a literacy program he developed which he used as a vehicle to improve the lives of Latin American agricultural workers. He wrote that to change the world one must first understand the world and his term 'conscientization' encapsulates his educational theory. He used his literacy classes to illuminate the learner's understanding of their world. The concept of conscientisation, (Freire, 1972) of developing an understanding of one's world, one's place in the world and developing the understanding, resources and belief to change that world is visible in the conceptual underpinnings of the *Getting Ahead* program where Freire's work is referenced.

The *Getting Ahead* program transforms the learners from trainees to 'co-investigators' who, together, explore their community, their lives and their life chances. The cohort of investigators develop a picture of their lives, the factors that impact on them and explore the pathways that are available to them to create change in their lives. This process is group and outward focussed. It is not based on an individual deficit model.

A Sponsor's description of her observation of the program's impact —

*... I can't tell you in specifics what they talk about or what they learn, but I do know there seems to be quite an impact in the lives of young people who've been through that course. There's just been this big change in the way, even the language they're able to use to talk about how I think about myself, how I interact with others, how there's a place for me in the world. It seems to me, there's a big difference between young people who come to us who've been through that course, and some that have come to us and haven't been through the course, who maybe would be really helped by doing it. (Sponsor 7)*

*It's about learning how to change the situation that they're in. It's very challenging to change because these students experience this constant cycle of same. To learn that changing your thinking around something will make a difference because if you keep doing the same thing over and over again you're going to keep getting the same outcome. Enabler 1)*

The Protégés, Mentors and Sponsors describe the impact of this program as transformative.

The transformational experience does not end with the completion of the *Getting Ahead* program. After completion, the Protégé is invited to enrol in one of the Certificate 2/3 courses offered on site. Whilst these courses are accredited in the usual way the manner of their delivery provides the same “wrap around” experience for the trainee.

*First of all, they're unemployed, where the other ones aren't. They also don't have the life skills that they need to make it in the workplace. We try and include some very simple life skills and employability skills like turning up on time, communication. Also, if they're going to be late for work they need to ring in. They actually have to ring us and say, "Listen, I'm running late for the class." Yeah, the training is slightly different. They need a lot more life skills as well as the warehousing operation skills.*

*The content of the two-month course is the same as a conventional course comprising core units and electives; they attend three days a week, two of those days are course days and the third day is spent on Industry visits. These visits are unique to Northern Futures. Site visits are group excursions to local businesses and industries. They develop social cohesion for the group itself, they show them actual workplaces and they interact with the workers there, see what the work of a particular place involves. They are an essential part of the course and very popular with the trainees.*

*At the conclusion of the course they have to pass an exam and at the end we hold a graduation ceremony attended by family and friends and they are presented with their Gordon Institute Certificate 2 in Warehousing and Logistics\*. (Enabler 2)*

It is important to note the use of group membership and type of learning experience encountered by the protégés in their time at *Northern Futures*. The work of Lave and Wenger on ‘situated learning’ is referenced in the *Getting Ahead* program. Situated learning is explained as occurring through membership of a particular community or group. Engagement and participation in the learning activity, not passive listening, leads to the development of enhanced awareness. The discussions which are integral to the manner in which the courses are delivered is a crucial element. The opportunity to discuss and think about ideas with one’s peers is to enable the learner to make new and different sense of previous understandings. The learning process accelerates with the increasing engagement and participation in the day-to-day activities of the group.

Learning is viewed as a social practice rather than dependent on curriculum or educational objectives; learning is a product or outcome of a social process rather than an internal and individual process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This theory of learning was developed through study of the way apprentices learn on-the-job hence the term ‘situated learning’ the learning is situated in a particular work place. Reciprocity is an outcome of learning as a social practice. Several of the Protégés describe instances of reciprocal learning. Protégé 5 for instance, described sharing his work place experiences with younger group members and they in turn are able to share their more recently acquired maths knowledge and their more advanced computer skills with him.

Clearly group discussion is a key part of engaging the participants in the learning. The shift from didactic teaching to expecting contributions from the learner indicates quite strongly the value placed on their existing knowledge.

*Participating in a group can enable people to feel:*

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\* Australian Qualifications Framework accredited course.

**Competent** — Everybody has skills and knowledge of some kind and enjoys having their knowledge acknowledged, the acknowledgement promotes confidence;

**Valued** — When we feel our contribution is appreciated by others, we learn to value ourselves more;

**Knowledgeable** — When people feel that their contribution is relevant to the task at hand and move the discussion along members tend to feel helpful and knowledgeable p.93-92 (Benjamin, Bessant, & Watts, 1997).

Both the *Getting Ahead* program and the certificate courses held at Northern Futures use these group processes and situate the learning in the workplace and the learner's own context.

The Community Centre itself provides group membership, the Protégés meet their mentors at the centre, they socialise with each other in breaks during classes. Every Protégé has a sense of being part of a cohort of belonging to a group where the members share particular characteristics. This is an effective antidote to the sense of isolation and alienation engendered by attendance at a job placement agency. Where the job seeker is an individual with a problem or deficit and often subjected to coercion and control. Northern Future's approach is one of engendering confidence and competence.

All the Protégés experience these transformational opportunities in their journey to sustainable employment through training and through the 'wrap around service' before more formally encountering the workplace.

### Teaching the *Getting Ahead* program

*What I love about this course, it helps them understand that firstly we're working on this matrix which is based on Ruby Payne's model (Bridges out of Poverty Framework) which is about learning about and understanding poverty — my story now, and my future story. How to build resources by understanding the hidden rules in the different economic classes and then being able to change your day to day life, with your thinking and by building your resources.*

*When the students start, they don't know each other, so introductions are important and I tell them that this is not a course "like you've ever done before, there'll be things in here that you'll think, why are we learning that? You are going to learn things from each other not just from me"..*

*What else is different is that this course is based on their own life experiences, the fact that they are learning in a group where they have come to trust each other so that there is the security necessary for them to share their stories honestly. To work together on different aspects of the course. And in helping each other they learn they have their own capacities. They are co-investigators, and I say to them 'you're detectives, you're detecting, and you are going to find out some answers'. They learn that if you change something you get a different outcome and they are so sick of their own life outcomes which is always more of the same they are eager to learn about change. (Enabler 1)*

## **Partnerships — the connective mechanism of matching training to local skills shortages**

3. *Northern Futures'* training courses meet the skills shortages identified by industry partners, enabling the development of people with a needed skill set. &

4. *Northern Futures* develops connective mechanisms to enable individuals to navigate the training/employment journey.

*Northern Futures is a community of people who look after people, young, middle aged, trying to get in the workforce. They guide and support them into preparation for the workplace and they build the workplace's ability to deal with that person and their baggage. (Sponsor) 5*

*We need to make sure that if somebody completes our courses they not only have jobs to go to but the workplace will be receptive and accommodating. We train the industry partners in the Bridges out of Poverty approach. Once they understand that framework they are happy to take our graduates on board. Our partners agree that if someone successfully completes a Northern Futures training program there will be a job at the end. Once we make that connection, it is just moving forward. (Mentor) 5*

For *Northern Futures* to achieve successful pathways into sustainable employment for its Protégés it needed to engage business and industry. There were initial difficulties in engaging with this community but through the efforts of members of the Committee for Geelong acting as advocates and their advice shaping the Northern Futures story —

*Once we started putting things in to the language, from an economic benefit point of view, and presenting an economic argument about Geelong not being able to grow unless it attracted a greater work force. Pointing out that it didn't need to go anywhere to get more people, it just needed to utilise better the people who are here and currently underutilised. That argument made sense to them. (CF Feb. 2017).*

As business and industry joined the collaboration they were provided with the *Bridges out of Poverty Framework* training through workshops for their staff. Training designed to provide a supportive work environment for the Protégés. In the early years one large Geelong corporation funded a Bridges out of Poverty trainer to conduct a two-day workshop for its staff and invited additional community representatives to ensure that both the corporation and the Protégés had a positive beginning and ongoing support.

The collaborative partnership is reflected at the organisational level and is maintained through the *Northern Futures* Board of Management. The Board's Community Advisory Committee with a broader membership from industry, training institutions, and community groups is able to keep the courses, pathways and potential destinations current and expanding.

The knowledge shared through these relationships is reflected in the choice of certificate courses offered at *Northern Futures*. The courses meet the skill needs of industry partners, thus providing potential employment and career destinations post training. Local businesses participate by providing access to the Protégés to visit their work sites during training, providing traineeships and employment. The visits ground the training in the real world of work ensuring that the courses are workplace referenced as well as skill based referenced.

*Industry visits are good because when we go out to the sites (we're connected to about 16 different industries in Geelong and Melbourne) and we actually get access to walking through the warehouse and they actually show us different departments there, what goes on, the layout of the place, how stock comes in, how stock gets taken out, and also the equipment that they use. One of the interesting parts about that is that while we're in class we talk about different things in class and many, many times the students don't quite get what I'm talking about in class, but when they go to the industry and they see this machinery or equipment, quite often the students say to me, "Hey Rob, that's that thing we were talking about in class yesterday." I go, "Yeah, it is." It's like a bit of a puzzle. The industry visits, it joins all the links. The industry visits are really important to us. (Enabler 2)*

The industry visits are a key part of the training offered, comprising a third of the training experience, they are unique to the *Northern Futures*-Gordon partnership as is the onsite delivery which speaks to the significance of the relationship and its importance to the success of the training programs.

The Community Advisory Committee of the *Northern Futures* Board of Management is a public expression of the collaboration.

*The steering committee is there as a group of people who can influence and advocate. But, at the same time the EO is educating the membership about this community, and so there is a two-way flow of information, that is helping people understand what's going on out there. But also, arming them with the information they need to protect it, as well. (Mentor 6)*

Annual Industry Breakfasts are more than a way of saying thank you to the members of the collaboration. They present an opportunity to advocate the *Northern Futures* approach and reinforce the connective mechanisms that enable individuals to navigate the training/employment pathway.

## Empowerment

5. *Northern Futures* empowers the protégés to take control of their lives.

*It's a place where you can come, be retrained, learn about yourself, what you can do and give something a try. It is that you've got a support system there. It's just that way of building up yourself so you don't have to be like your neighbour next door who's curled up in the gutter in town. You can make a difference in yourself, and give yourself the confidence. They push you at the beginning, but in the end, you start taking control, and then you realise that you can control your own destiny. The only person who can do that is yourself and they give you the tools, the knowledge and experience to actually do it. (Protégé 1)*

Empowerment in the context of *Northern Futures* is encapsulated in the phrase, “You can make a difference in yourself, and give yourself the confidence ... that you can control your own destiny”.

The confidence and sense of achievement developed during the training courses is further developed in the work place — their target destination.

*I see them taking people through the Getting Ahead course, and I think a lot of the young people that I had from Northern Futures that I've spoken to about Getting Ahead, you can tell how much that has changed their lives. How it's changed their thinking, how it's made them feel valuable, and then they're ready to go through one of the other courses, like business basics or the logistics course and actually having that confidence and having that sense of value, then going, "Well, where to from here, let's make a life. (Sponsor 7)*

Finding your place in the workplace is daunting for all new workers but for those who have experienced barriers of one sort or another it is more difficult. However, the experience of successfully negotiating a pathway into paid employment that provides a career path is in itself an empowering experience.

*Probably having people that trust in your ability enough to give you something to do, but then also if you stuff it, they're not going to say, "Nah, you're done. You can't do that anymore, because you stuffed it." Instead they're like, "It's all good. This is what you should have done. Try again. Off you go". So, having people believe in you and giving you things to do, more time in the role. As time goes on, you know how to do things. You know how not to stuff it. (Protégé 8)*

The influence of the *Bridges out of Poverty* approach on the partnership workplaces has made them welcoming and accommodating. Not only are the sponsors and fellow workers encouraged to deploy ‘the fair go’ adage towards newcomers there are also systems in place to provide additional support. The mentors meet with the Protégés and Sponsors in their respective workplaces on a regular basis. The workplaces also provide an opportunity for the protégés to meet together regularly for mutual support. Hiccups can be dealt with quickly before they become problems.

*Even now I'm at work they've introduced us to other people that are going through the same thing, even though we might be doing different courses and being at different stages in our traineeships. It's kind of unconsciously brought together at our own little support network. (Protégé 6)*

The workplaces have provided flexibility in making a good match between protégé and job.

*I've probably struggled a little bit first off, and then they actually offered me a different type of job to what I was doing. They said, "could you do resourcing and cleaning for us?" And I said, "yeah, I'll do that okay." And so I've been doing that ever since. I love it. You have a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day if the place is all clean. ( Protégé 5)*

*And offering further training opportunities,*

*After that they said, "Okay we've set it up now that you've been in the industry for a year, we'd like you to do a Certificate 4, I'd already done a Certificate 3, and that was while you were actually there. So that was good. And you got to know a bit more about the industry that you were in. But that was probably tougher to do that course in regard to you had to find the time yourself.(Protégé 5)*

Whilst a small agency such as Northern Futures cannot achieve sweeping social change such as addressing income inequality, resourcing all schools to equip every child to reach their full potential or achieve full employment for all Australian residents. Northern Futures can and does empower people, at a local level, to take more control over their own lives and it does this through recognising the fundamental importance of meaningful paid work in achieving autonomy.

A small experimental anti-poverty program in 1970's Fitzroy, Melbourne set out a program to *Attacking Poverty through Participation* (Benn, 1981). *The Family Centre Project*, a program of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, identified a process for empowering significantly disadvantaged families (Benjamin, 1980; Benn, 1981; Liffman, 1978). The program proposed an alternative method to case work for working with people experiencing economic and social disadvantage. The model which came to be known as the Developmental Model was based on the assumption that the chief cause of poverty was a lack of essential resources, not just financial resources but also employment, housing, knowledge, sense of self-worth. Lack of access to resources led to a lack of self-determination and autonomy, resulting in poverty.

There are parallels between *Northern Futures*, *The Family Centre Project* and the *Bridges out of Poverty Framework*. In the *Family Centre Project* the 'Developmental Model' (in contrast to a welfare or therapeutic model of practice) sought to give poor families power over resources, relationships, information and decision-making to improve their social and economic condition. The model required a change to the work practice of the social workers, teachers and youth workers, the provision of a Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI for the 3 years of the Project) and mechanisms to encourage client participation in the governance of the Centre (Benjamin, 1980; Benn, 1981; Liffman, 1978). Both *The Family Centre* in the 1970s and *Northern Futures* today recognise the need for three levels of change if people are to take control of their lives —

- Provision of resources and programs for people experiencing poverty.
- Methods of work that recognise potential, encourage and support autonomy and acknowledge success.
- Opportunity to grow, thrive and participate in the world (Benjamin, 1980).

## Catalyst for change

5. *Northern Futures* is a catalyst for change for the protégés themselves and for the organisations with which they interact.

The previous sections present the evidence from the perspectives of the staff, the sponsors and protégés that show the ways in which *Northern Futures* contributes to a social change agenda.

*Northern Futures works with young people or disadvantaged people of all ages to secure a placement for them. They do that in partnership with businesses and organisations. They have good solid partnerships with businesses and organisations. That's a pipeline of opportunities. This approach is embedded in Northern Futures and in the local area. Northern Futures uses its structure of industry partnership to provide real opportunities for sustainable employment not just temporary work. (Sponsor 2)*

*They encourage people to take a broader perspective of themselves and on the job industry and move their mindset away from the mindset of the northern suburbs. (Protégé 7)*

*Through the agencies promotion of the Bridges out of Poverty framework to the systems and organisations encountered by the unemployed there is a change in the way Northern Futures protégés are received. At the same time, Northern Futures provides the resources the protégés need to arrive at a point where they can change something in their lives. (Enabler 1)*

The primary objective of this study was a modest one, to explore the programs and processes that achieved the remarkable fact that with the same amount of money the government spends per individual, per year on the New Start Allowance (\$13,746, with no additional benefit other than a subsistence level income for its recipients) *Northern Futures* provides a life changing experience and in most cases a pathway into sustainable employment for the cost of \$13,993 per person. Additionally there is a completion of training rate of 83% and an employment rate of 71% (Johnson, 2017).

*Northern Futures* strategic plan for 2014-2018 identified 6 priority areas.

1. Policy and Advocacy: Use our expertise and proven track record to become the key advocate group for the Northern Suburbs. Use our accredited voice to shape policy on education training and employment to deliver better outcomes for the community.
2. Supporting Economic growth: We work alongside community leaders on creating Economic Independence and Social Inclusion for the Northern Suburbs to drive the economic development in the area.
3. Education and training: Support the Geelong economy further by identifying key employment gaps and ensuring a flexible approach to shape our education and training programs to meet the needs of the economy.
4. Workforce Placement: Increase our current workforce placements to positively shape the Northern Suburbs unemployment rate and ensure ongoing long-term employment opportunities for the area.

5. Industry Collaboration: Proactively and positively work with supporting industries to achieve higher and longer term workforce placements — working for a more collaborative approach to program delivery focussed on driving inclusive growth.
6. Organisational Performance: Securing the future sustainability of Northern Futures through the adoption of best practice systems and additional resources, accompanied by a secure ongoing funding source.  
P.15 (Northern Futures, 2014)

The data gathered for this study has confirmed that all six of these priority areas are integral to its social change agenda and each has contributed to the Protégés successful navigation from discouraged jobseekers to people who are participating in the workforce and in their community.

## The Bridges out of Poverty Framework

From its inception in 2007, *Northern Futures* has embedded the *Bridges out of Poverty Framework* in shaping of its programs and the work practices of the staff. As part of its advocacy role it has promoted the values and practices of the framework throughout the region; particularly focussing on the professionals and organisations that form the collaborative partnership and contribute to its work. *Northern Futures* sponsors the *Bridges out of Poverty* programs in the Geelong region as a means of promoting a change in the way trainers, workplace sponsors, and other professionals who work, not just with *Northern Futures* Protégés but with all those who experience social disadvantage and poverty in their lives.

*Bridges out of Poverty is a comprehensive approach to understanding the dynamics that cause and maintain poverty from the individual to the systemic level. Bridges out of Poverty uses its lens of economic class and provides concrete tools and strategies for a community to prevent, reduce and alleviate poverty (Northern Futures, 2014).*

*It was a real eye opener for me because I thought I knew enough about my students, but when you do the Bridges out of Poverty training, it really highlights some issues that we don't think about and it really opens your eyes up to think, "Well, hang on a sec, that's why they think the way they think," or, "That's why they're reacting the way they're reacting." We don't understand that until we do this training. I'm a great fan of the Bridges out of Poverty training. Why I say other people should it, I think everyone should do it. All the trainers should do it because it really gives you a good understanding of the students. You can't teach if you don't understand them. I think I've got a really good understanding of my students, and I set up relationships with them quite quickly because I understand them better. I'm a great fan of it and I would thoroughly recommend everyone to do the two-day course, without a doubt.*

*The reality is there are rules for surviving in the workplace and if you don't keep them you won't survive. Bridges out of Poverty points out that not all people necessarily know them it's up to us trainers to make sure our trainees know them. That's why I teach the way I do and that's why the Industry visits are so important. (Enabler 2)*

### Background to the *Bridges out of Poverty Framework*.

In 2002, the Federal Government of the USA passed legislation (*The No Child Left Behind Act*) which created a category of students (economically disadvantaged) whose test scores would be monitored by the US Department of Education (Bomer, Joel, May, & Semingson, 2008). This led to a national demand for professional development programs for teachers to help them improve their practice in educating children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Payne had founded the company *aha!Process* in 1996 and published the first of several editions of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. The company provided staff development workshops and developed resource materials. The resource materials, including, the Getting Ahead program, were designed to support teachers in implementing the *Bridges out of Poverty* framework as a way to alleviate the impact of poverty on children's learning outcomes. Payne's company was in a position to offer resources and training to support teachers and schools who had decided to act to improve the education of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The critique of the framework has largely focussed on the way in which Payne describes poverty and the behaviour of people who experience it. The discourse on poverty and its cause, impact, alleviation/solution is in itself a highly-contested arena. Payne is clearly not a sociologist, economist or political scientist and her explanations of poverty lack empirical evidence, or the depth achieved by authors trained in these disciplines. She has not provided new insights into poverty she has based her work on existing published work. Payne is both an activist and an educator. All good teachers develop metaphors, stories and arguments to stir their learners to think differently and this is what Payne's work is designed to do. She has developed a series of polemics and activities expressly designed to shift teachers' thinking from an attitude of blaming and ignoring the children in their classes, who do not conform to middle class norms, to an attitude that seeks to both explain and overcome disadvantage. Her success in this has led to other professionals working in community settings, criminal justice and employment institutions to adopt the framework. See <http://schenectadybridges.com/>

The *Northern Futures* experience has demonstrated that exposure to the ideas in *Bridges out of Poverty* profoundly changes the receptiveness of workplaces and training programs to its clients thus enabling them to move further into sustainable employment and to change their lives.

*I've had four trainees now, including one that didn't work out so well, I think I get good results when I work out where the person is at, what they need. Some people need to be driven a little bit harder.*

*I think it's just working out the personality of the person and the best way to tackle that. I'm not a great expert on the Bridges out of Poverty course, but I've taken a lot out of it, and realised that we quite often have an expectation of someone without explaining that to them. So, that's been a key thing for me too, just making sure that people understand what it is that's required, and also talking to my colleagues about it. (Sponsor 7)*

## The theory base of the study

There are three main explanations of poverty used to shape public policy designed to address poverty and social disadvantage. The cultural explanation, the systemic or structural explanation and the relational explanation. The clearest expression of the link between government policy and perspectives on poverty can be seen in the arrangements governments make to regulate the labour market and provide income support for those who are unemployed.

The cultural perspective: identifies the lower class as engaging in patterns of behaviours and values which differ from those of the dominant class and culture, and continue to transmit these characteristics inter-generationally. The lower classes will avoid work if they can.

The situational perspective: the behaviour patterns of the poor are not seen as pathologies but rather the patterns are seen as reactions to the situations in which they find themselves. In times of economic restructuring jobs will disappear, the kinds of skills required change and there are more people unemployed than there are jobs available.

The third perspective on poverty and of significant relevance to the work of *Northern Futures* is a relational perspective of poverty. The relational perspective: identifies the position of the poor within the social structure, the attitudes and actions of the non-poor toward the poor, and the effects of these upon the poor themselves as contributing to poverty (Waxman, 1977).

One of the earliest theorists to argue against the cultural and systemic explanations of poverty was Herbert Gans who argued the unacceptability of *“the tendency to see behaviour pattern as resistant to change, as persisting simply because it is culture, even though there is no real evidence of this view.”* p. 153 (Gans, 1970)

The first two explanations, particularly the cultural perspective, have dominated employment and income security arrangements in most of the western world. The exception being the Scandinavian countries post World War II. Social policy responses that are designed to be corrective and to control those who are dependent on government for income support and assistance in gaining employment are based on a cultural perspective of the causes of poverty. The policy outcome is to institute an income security system that protects ‘the work ethic’, i.e. by keeping income provision levels low to discourage any tendency to ‘loaf about on the tax-payers’ largess’. But more than this, to use the provision or non-provision of income support to regulate behaviour. The Australian Government Budget of 2016-17 has added to its income security control measures by introducing drug tests for people in receipt of the New Start Allowance (at the time of writing the arrangements for instituting this new measure are unclear). Such a measure is a clear illustration of a culture of poverty perspective in action.

*The Bridges out of Poverty* literature moves fairly indiscriminately through these three perspectives. The cultural perspective is used to name the coping mechanisms of economically disadvantaged people, the situational perspective is used explain why these mechanisms are used and the relational view underpins the purpose of the framework which is on the one hand to increase understanding and reduce blaming attitudes amongst

the non-poor and on the other hand to provide navigational tools for the poor to participate more fully in the worlds of school and work.

At *Northern Futures*, the personal backgrounds of the Protégés indicated they experienced a diverse range of barriers to their successful navigation of the path to sustainable employment. What they shared with this research was an encounter with a system that didn't work for them until they found or were referred to *Northern Futures*. It could be argued that the system did work for them if it was a Jobactive agency that referred them, but only after they had all had demoralising and disheartening experiences as they attempted to find or regain their place in the workforce.

*Northern Futures'* role is one of advocacy at the personal level and at the structural level. The Bridges framework is used as a tool for change at the personal level through the *Getting Ahead* Program and at the structural level by changing attitudes amongst the professional staff and the organisations with whom the Protégés come in contact. The Bridges approach provides a useful framework of explanation and persuasion.

In considering the work of *Northern Futures* it is instructive to consider the question posed by Daniel Moynihan during the War on Poverty in the USA.

*Will the program and policy, in the long run, lead to an integration of the poor into society, or will it inevitably lead to their further isolation?* (Moynihan, 1965) A question as relevant now as it was then with the USA's War on Poverty in full swing.

In the case of the *Northern Futures* approach the answer is that far from leading to further isolation it leads to participation in a collaboration to find pathways to sustainable employment.

## Reflecting on the data

*They're there to try and educate you so that you've got the right tools to be able to get into the workforce. But they don't just educate you about the workforce. I think they try and educate you more into to have the right mind-set to actually go into the workforce, which is very important. (Protégé 5)*

The *Getting Ahead* program is an adaption of Freire's work. The *Northern Futures* skills training courses are grounded in a vocational education framework and have been influenced by the sector's application of adult education theory and practice. Traditionally the vocational courses offered by the TAFE System all have strong connections to industry and work place learning.

Moving forward in time, and from a developing nation to the developed world, but maintaining the thread to Freire through the idea of critical awareness, is the work of Jack Mezirow, much concerned with the phenomena of adult learning. He identified five kinds of learning:

- Learning how to do something;
- Learning about the way something works, how the pieces fit together;
- Learning what others expect (of me);
- Learning to develop a concept of myself as a person with certain values that are important to me; and
- Learning to become critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves (Mezirow, 1978).

Mezirow is critical of the lack of attention paid to these kinds of learning in arrangements for adult learning particularly the last two, developing a concept of self and developing critical awareness of the influences on our lives. He refers to both the work of Freire and the consciousness raising in the women's movement in the 1970s as examples where personal inquiry into one's cultural assumptions and how they were formed by influential others and by social structures is a liberating and transformative experience.

There is an extensive literature on the transformative power of education in general and a specific body of literature addressing 'transformational learning'. This latter has significant resonance with the *Bridges out of Poverty* (Payne, 2013) literature, and the *Getting Ahead* program (DeVol, 2013). Payne and her colleague De Vol both reference the work of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972).

Whilst adult learning and workplace learning are not specifically mentioned by the trainers during the interviews, the trainees are engaged in work place learning prior to their entry into the workforce. The workplace is made real through the site visits which comprise a third of the *Northern Futures* delivery of the basic certificate courses.

This report has discussed the 'wrap-around' nature of the service *Northern Futures* provides, the pipeline of training and job placement and the matching of skills training that matches skill shortages. The nature and quality of the learning experienced by the participants is a key ingredient to the successful outcomes achieved by *Northern Futures*.

That the courses are delivered in the community centre; by trainers from the Gordon TAFE (Technical and Further Education System); that the Certificate courses have the unique distinction of including programed visits to local work sites are testament to the commitment to provide 'Bridges out of Poverty and unemployment.

The participants, in this study, with one exception, all spent time in a Victorian secondary school, leaving at different exit points. What is missing from their experience of school and the national discourse around labour market arrangements and educational institutions is the notion of career development. Not only are the kinds of learning identified by Mezirow ignored in adult education they are largely ignored in all our educational institutions and nowhere is this gap more serious than in preparing young people for the world of work and life after school. The Universities, TAFE Providers and RTO's all advertise courses and their associated career destinations. The secondary schools provide assistance in making applications to tertiary courses. There is no specific space, particularly in the secondary school sector, of developing a sense of a career, of the world of work and how this may change over time. Secondary schools have a well-documented focus on Higher Education destinations, a broader approach to career development including consideration of a broader set of vocational opportunities is needed. With the increased rate of change impacting the labour market there is an even more urgent need for *"Learning to develop a concept of myself as a person with certain values that are important to me; and Learning to become critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves (Mezirow, 1978)"*

Learning about the world of work, how technology and the economy impact on work opportunities, how the pieces fit together; In relation to developing a sense of who I might be in the future and having the opportunity to consider many options in relation to spending my time doing things I'm good at and enjoy rather than focussing narrowly on choosing a University or TAFE course.

Young people need to be encouraged to ask themselves —

- What are my aspirations?
- What do I like doing?
- What sorts of jobs will provide the tasks I enjoy doing?
- What kinds of skills are needed to do this job?
- What course will equip me to become what I want to become?

Some of the young people encountered in this study moved from school to couch, particularly the young women. They were disarmingly frank about their lives before they came to *Northern Futures*. The application of targeted resources, personal encouragement and real jobs transformed their lives. Had their schooling included consideration of life and work they may not have wasted those years.

## Stories of Transformation

As the title suggests, at the core of *Northern Futures* is its success in placing disadvantaged job seekers into sustainable employment — *making transformation the heart of the matter*.

The following four stories, told by the participants, illustrate their personal journey.

Throughout this report extracts from verbatim transcripts of participant interviews have been used to illustrate the *Northern Futures* story. In this section, four edited individual transcripts are presented to illustrate the personal journeys. They have been edited to ensure clarity and remove extraneous material.

## **They really push people out of their comfort zones —**

I got involved with *Northern Futures* as I was a job seeker and I lived in Corio. My job network at the time was SkillShare, they sent me. A very friendly lady interviewed me and thought that I would be a good candidate for their warehousing and distribution certificate II that they had running. I was a bit nervous but I needed a job and I thought that sounded like a good idea so I went in to a big group with *Northern Futures*, all learning transport, logistics, warehousing and distribution and we had trainers from The Gordon come in.

During that process, with good trainers, I became a lot more confident. I made friends with the people in my course, I was getting good reviews from my trainers. My staff member would be coming in and doing like little side mentoring sessions, so just having a nice talk to all the people doing the course about different ways to get out of your shell or different ways to communicate or just how to listen, different things like that. At the end of that course, I passed and we all passed in our group and I thought that might have been the end of my journey with *Northern Futures*. I was very wrong because *Northern Futures* doesn't just let you go and they don't really care if you're with a job network or not, they just take you on.

I was home schooled and I didn't have any social interaction from the age of 9 except when my Mum took me to church on weekends. I don't have my year anything. I went to The Gordon when I was 17, I tried to do my Cert II in General Education, and actually failed but I some made friends. That was my only formal schooling, but I did read a lot of books.

I never had any luck with a job network in finding a job and I never really gained any skills from a job network. In interviews, my resumes were always something shocking until I went to *Northern Futures* where, as part of their course as well, they actually go through your resume bit by bit. They would do one-on-one mock interviews with you.

And they would keep putting you forward for interviews. I was never let slip back into the comfort zone that I was in before. It's a comfort zone even though it wasn't a comfortable comfort zone. That was good, they'd never get off your back.

In that period, my staff member put me forward for two traineeships. I went for a traineeship at a Child's Play Café and I went for a traineeship at the TAC. They went well, I had two good interviews and then shortly after that, my father passed away in August.

Then I had a break for a bit and then in November of the same year, *Northern Futures* told me I'd got the traineeship at the TAC. They prepared me again for the interview, drove me in there, helped me to find clothes to wear because it was the second interview. The TAC hired me. The whole time I was a trainee at the TAC, the Northern Futures staff member would come in every, say two weeks or every month depending on how she thought we were going. She was building rapport with our managers, she would always just try and find a foot in the door for anywhere that she could put new trainees but supporting us at the same time.

I finished there after a year and seven months; a year as a trainee and seven months as a casual and then I fell out of work again and I thought, surely this is the end of my time with

*Northern Futures*. This was in 2013, I had stopped working again. I didn't even know why I was still on their books really. They've helped me get jobs, they've supported me through two traineeships and two certificates. Then I think 7 months later after I finished at the TAC, With Northern Futures help I started another traineeship at Barwon Health in 2014 and got the same support. It was a partnership between Barwon Health and *Northern Futures*.

We still have monthly traineeship visits for all the trainees from all over Barwon Health sites. including the previous trainees. I just feel that what makes them tick is they don't let people fall away if they can help it. They really push people out of their comfort zones and don't let them get lazy. I'm a personal assistant now to two people. Now I might sit on the front reception desk, I talk to people all day. I have to smile and project as if I'm an extrovert person. Northern Futures really pushed me to get out of my comfort zone and just ... yeah.

I've changed a lot. I don't know if it's just age as well but I have also had a lot of support from a lot of strong women like all the ladies at *Northern Futures* they are very strong women so I've tried to maybe mimic them in certain ways. I have tried to mimic certain bits of them and also just with age, learning, and coming from being home-schooled so not necessarily having so much social interaction, just learning how to be more confident with myself and not care what people think or learning to be more diplomatic with people. I don't think it looks really great to be an introvert and out of work when necessarily ... You've got to talk people and that makes your life easier if you can talk to people.

### **Before ‘Getting Ahead’ my way of thinking was very, very, thin —**

“My job search agency forwarded me on to them. Well, actually they forwarded my details onto (Mentor at *Northern Futures*). She reached out to me and told me about the Getting Ahead programme. I was in quite a rough spot of my life and I needed to do something, and so I agreed to take part in it.

“She explained that *Northern Futures* is about getting people that are in the low socioeconomic areas, especially the 3214 post code. Helping people to find work and stuff like that. It was more about self-development and not so much going “We’re going to find a job for you.” It’s going to be “We’re going to help you gain what you need, but you still need to put yourself out there to do it.” Which was really good for me because I’m someone that, at that point in life I was feeling very out of control of things. Being told that this was something that, although it would be something that I could ultimately control, but with their help, that was what I needed at the time.

‘It took a lot of courage. I was umming and ahing about it for a good two weeks before I finally went in there and met with them. Then again, they said “You know, you don’t have to make a decision right now.” But, I went “It took a lot of courage for me just to come in here, so if I don’t say yes now, I never will.” That was why I said “Yes”.

“I had been with various kinds of training organisations before. They would all come up to me with promises and stuff like that of “Oh, we’ll give you this.” When eventually I just kept getting the same certificate over and over again.

The certificate 1 in vocational preparation.

But, every time I completed it, I was doing different work.

Okay you’re going to get a certificate 1 in retail.” And then when I finally got my certificate from them it was a certificate 1 in vocational preparation. So there I had done all of this coursework and went ‘What, why have I got a certificate I’ve already got?’

“But *Getting Ahead* was different. It’s really hard to explain.

I think we were given this book called *Getting Ahead*. The book itself had a lot of stuff that talked about the low socioeconomic and bridges out poverty and stuff like that. Thinking about various things, things that we need to help us get by. There was a lot of the socioeconomic talk and how it makes people in that group feel.

“And so there was a lot of thinking “How can we as being down here, start thinking about things that these kinds of people would think about?”

Because the people that are in the middle and further up, they have the resources to be comfortable enough to think about the what if. Whereas us, the people down in the low socioeconomic areas, generational poverty and stuff like that, they’re always thinking in survival. So, they don’t have the resources they need to think about the what if.

“Yeah, I got the support that I needed to work things through in my own terms. Having (Enabler) there and challenging us at every turn. Assisting us in changing the way that we think and we perceive things. Then that really helped me with changing my entire outlook on life, really.

"There was one thing that I'm grateful to *Northern Futures* for. In terms of my anxiety and stuff like that, because I do have anxiety and I'm taking medication for it, but that's not to do with them. But, I was always afraid to tell people about the anxiety, and now, thanks to everything that I've gone through and how much I've changed. I actually had the courage to write about it. And so I've written a one person show, and I performed it last year out in Drysdale. A 12-minute monologue about- my experiences with anxiety disorder ... Visualising them as stop signs and various other signposts, and that the anxiety is like seeing them all around you and they're crushing you and telling you "Go this way, no go this way." But because there are so many of them, you can't see what they're talking about. But then, with their help, I started to realise that the signs weren't there, I'd placed all of that on myself and had become my own stop sign. With their help, I started to move forward and found my paths. So, I did a performance all about that. I wouldn't have had the courage to write about it if it weren't for what they did.

It was a competition. My play didn't win, but I did get a lot of audience members coming up to me afterwards and going "That really resonated with me, that was a way of thinking of anxiety that I've never thought about before." A few anxiety sufferers came up and told me about their experiences and stuff as well.

There was one lady that came up to me that said "My son's an anxiety sufferer." This was an older lady and she said her son "He's in a well-to-do job, but he's an anxiety sufferer." And she said "I've never been able to think about what he's going through." 'Cause she kind of threw anxiety away as one of those throw away mental illnesses, sort of thing. But she said 'With your explanation, I kind of understand what he's going through now. It was a really good way of visualising how one person can feel with that kind of mindset.' And so, she was really grateful. She said 'It can open up so much in terms of being able to converse with my son about it.'

**The fact that I was 50 really rattled me. They'd see straight away how old you were. You knew they weren't going to take you on —**

I'd been in the workforce before, 25 years in the same job. When it ended it was ... You did know that they were going to put off a certain number of people, but you were sort of hoping that it wasn't you, but in the back of your mind, you're sort of, "Well maybe I'm one of them." I don't know.

Then I was unemployed for year and a half, or two years maybe. Just trying to get jobs, casual bit and pieces. Doing sort of odd stuff, you know? Phone deliveries some of the time, working the elections. Just sort of anything you could get; at one stage I was doing deliveries for Frisco, just up the road

I was put on to the *Northern Futures* training programme by a job search network — it was an eight or ten-week course. You had proper teachers from The Gordon. They were really good. You got a real qualification.

You did work, some out of booklets. You sort of answering questions, but they're sort of going along with you. It was like classroom sort of experience, you're going along. There was practical sort of stuff that you had to do too. And then they'd give you certain stuff that you'd have to ... certain units that you'd have to read. And you'd have to answer questions, say that you understood what was in there.

Some of it for me was easy because of my workplace experiences.

"You went out to industries within the Geelong region. They were good. They were good. You got to see the kind of work you would be doing and the different workplaces.

I enjoyed the course It was sort of amazing how you mated up with people really quickly. I suppose you had to, really, because some of them would rely on you. Some that weren't ... I'd been fairly well schooled, which was lucky but some of them obviously weren't and you'd have to help them, which was good. I didn't mind that, because when it came to maths and some of the stuff you had to do, sort of graphs of a computer or whatever, some of them helped me out too. It was sort of helping each other ... yeah.

I didn't get a job straight away. And that was massively depressing for me. *Northern Futures* still helped, they kept in touch. They put me onto some casual jobs during this time.

And then I got my job.

Encouragement was the thing that kept me going while I waited. Encouragement. Encouragement is really a massive thing really, because if you're down you need to be able to see some sort of light at the end. Keep you sort of involved by actually being part of a group. Probably being part of a group is probably good too, because the ones that haven't been in the workforce get some of that experience and knowledge of people that have been at work before. That's what I found good about doing it. The people that ask you stuff that you ... just basic knowledge, but because they haven't been in the workforce, it was fascinating for them. And It was interesting. Sometimes you'd get a little bit frustrated, you're thinking 'Oh, you should know this', but it was good to be able to pass on that knowledge to them. Yeah. Even when I had got out in the workforce there came up to me, and I think

it might've been an incident report or something like that, but because they'd never had to fill one out, they didn't have a clue. And so, I was quite happy to help them through it.

And then yeah, gradually you're sort of doing your job out there, and like I said, I've probably struggled a little bit first off, and then they actually offered me a different type of job to what I was doing. They said, "could you do resourcing and cleaning for us?" And I said, "yeah, I'll do that okay." And so I've been doing that ever since. I love it. You have a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day if the place is all clean.

After one year, I was made permanent and they had a little ceremony, which was quite nice really. But it was a bit weird too because half the people there didn't know me. And sometimes they ask me to come into the board room and give a bit of a spiel. I guess I'm a lot more confident now. Just more confident in what I'm doing. Because when you are unemployed you get really down, you know? You hate having to use the word, but you got depressed. Got massively depressed and you just couldn't see a way out. But luckily, I did get on to *Northern Futures* because I'd hate to think of where I would've ended up otherwise.

And even then, *Northern Futures* was still around and helped me get started in more courses, I've got a Cert 4 now.

One other thing, the company actually sent me overseas. That was an amazing experience. The CottonOn Foundation has a place in Southern Uganda where they have set up a school, a church and the best thing, a medical centre

I think I had to get about 18 injections and I was probably lucky in that okay you probably had to pay out of your own money first, but the company reimbursed you. And the company paid for the flight and everything. You didn't really know what to expect. But it was an amazing experience.

These people they didn't really know you but they really treated you like a celebrity. It was like a really good thing, you'd wave or smile and just the faces would just light up. It was quite amazing. And what they have to go through, and you sort of think 'geeze we're not doing tough at all'. Yeah.

## **I wouldn't be where I am if it wasn't for Northern Futures —**

This participant was invited to contribute to the study after the researcher overheard a conversation between her and the Norlane Community Centre receptionist. She was asking to speak with one of the *Northern Futures* staff members because she was concerned that one of their previous clients was having 'a bad trot' at their shared workplace. She was herself 'an old hand' when it came to Northern Futures.

(The Jobsactive agency) sent me here. I remember I had an interview with a staff member who said I'd be perfect for the Warehouse/Logistics course. ... Once your child gets to primary school you've got to go and get a job. So, trying to find a job that coincides with school hours is very, very difficult. So, it's been a bit of a battle. She's now ten, so it's a lot easier now, but at the beginning there, you have all the pressures of ... you want to be a good mum, and you want to be there for your child and all these pressures, when you can't take time off.

I'm not a pushy person or anything like that. But I came from a bad marriage, and my husband had taken away all of who I was. After he passed away I was a bit lost and had a bit of a break down, and came out a lot stronger and then I did the course at Northern Futures.

I had a couple of jobs before I ended up where I am now. I started here as part of The 180° Program\*. It was explained as an opportunity to do a complete change about of your world. We'd sit down every month or so and they'd say how well, or what we needed to pick up on, it was a sort of buffer, it wasn't like they were telling us off — it was quite relaxed we'd have lunch together.

It was good to keep us all together, so if somebody got into trouble, they knew they could come to a Northern Futures person and had an understanding, so we were able to support each other at work. That was three years ago now.

I've been back to *Northern Futures* a few times, basically with people who come from Northern Futures who are having trouble. A few have lost their jobs along the way, some are still holding on. But this particular boss, (that you heard me talking about) he's just putting a little too much pressure on people who don't need it. Because I'm a union delegate I have to come up and think outside of the box to ... without explaining people's personal things, hit them in a way that they can't just walk over somebody. They can't go prying into people's privacy. If someone says it's a personal matter, they've got to leave it at that and take them at face value. Now if they're questioning that, and I can't say anything, if I get someone (*Northern Futures* mentor) who's got the knowledge behind them to let them know, now there is a problem, you don't need to know about it, then they'll back off. Well that's my hope.

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\* The 180° Program was to support and mentor 6 graduates from the Logistic and Transport Certificate II (Warehousing) course into full time employment at the Cotton On Group for 12 months with the goal of integrating them into ongoing employment (Johnson, 2013)

I've been in a lot of meetings with these particular bosses and have managed to get them to apologise for the way they've spoken to certain individuals, change their way of doing their toolbox so that they're not talking down to people. They still do, every so often, but I'll go out there and say, "What's wrong, what's happened?" I've now got a bit of a rapport with them. They listen to me, I listen to them, and we try to hash it out in a way that's beneficial for both sides, without being union.

I think I've gotten a lot more respect from the people I work with. I think that sort of builds my character up a bit. Definitely boosts my ego, so I have got the confidence to go in and bat for people. Learning how to speak in not an angry way, and that's ... Listening, I've always had the listening skills but now, having the tools in which to apply my knowledge and my confidence.

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