Received: 31 August 2023 | Revised: 1 February 2024 | Accepted: 3 March 2024

DOI: 10.1111/1467-8500.12635

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

The role of social procurement policies and cross-sector partnerships in addressing youth unemployment: A construction industry case study from Australia

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Funding information
Australian Research Council, Grant/Award Number: LP170100670

Abstract

In Australia, 9.4% of young people aged 15–24 are unemployed, more than double the national rate. The national employment services system in Australia has, however, not successfully tackled this issue. While some wraparound programs have been implemented to better address young people's needs, most are designed to find young people *any* job rather than being tailored towards a specific career. Despite governments encouraging solutions that involve cross-sector collaboration with private businesses, the potential of industry-specific

solutions has been less well-explored. Addressing this gap, this paper presents an in-depth case study of how one major Australian construction company has implemented an industry-specific collaborative wraparound program to address youth unemployment, called the Connectivity Centre model (CCM). The paper discusses the features of this model that make it distinctive compared to other programs supporting young people's employment. It also discusses how the policy context of social procurement (policies generating social value through procurement processes) and cross-sector collaboration incentivise the model. The policy implications are explored, highlighting how models like the CCM offer a complementary alternative to other unemployment supports available to young jobseekers in Australia.

KEYWORDS
cross-sector partnerships, social procurement, youth unemployment

Points for practitioners

- Social procurement policies incentivise private companies' involvement in youth unemployment programs, including utilising their cross-sector networks.
- Private companies' involvement enables youth unemployment programs that reflect the same benefits as wraparound programs in intensive/personalised support while providing more industry specificity.
- This set of characteristics is unique and complementary within Australia's youth unemployment support landscape.

1 | INTRODUCTION

High levels of youth unemployment are a significant problem in Australia, with 9.4% of people aged 15–24 unemployed in December 2023, more than double the national rate for working-age people (ABS, 2023). This situation has significant consequences as employment is a major determinant of social mobility (Mitchell et al., 2002) and health equity (Robertson, 2019), and lack

of citizen attachment to the labour market generates direct and indirect costs to governments (Tse et al., 2013).

Addressing youth unemployment is, therefore, a priority. Since the early 1990s, Australian employment services have been delivered via a quasi-market model and characterised by a 'work first' logic consistent with workfare (Considine, 2001; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Within this context, selective approaches to integrating disadvantaged people into the workforce through active labour market programs (ALMPs) have emerged. ALMPs seek to stimulate the integration of people into labour markets through both supply (i.e. workers/potential workers) and demand (i.e. employers and labour market) transformations (Frøyland et al., 2019). Demand-side ALMPs focus on incentive reinforcement (tax credits, in-work benefits, sanctions) and legislation (affirmative action and anti-discrimination), while more prevalent supply-side initiatives include employment assistance (placement services, job search programs), occupation (keeping jobless people occupied), and human capital investment (education and vocational training) approaches (Bonoli, 2013). Internationally, different types of ALMPs have been used with young people and other jobseekers, with differing degrees of success in labour market outcomes (Speckesser et al., 2019) and impact on wellbeing (Carter & Whitworth, 2017). Indeed, many supply-side ALMPs associated with the work-first logic of workers integrating quickly into any work have been recognised as detrimental to jobseekers, whereas the human capital investment approach—which is focused on workers' development for long-term and sustainable employment—has greater demonstrated benefits for jobseekers' wellbeing (Carter & Whitworth, 2017). ALMPs may also mix supply and demand side activities, with some hybrid approaches focused on ecosystemic models, which integrate social services support with employer activity and worker development (van Berkel et al., 2017). As Frøyland et al. (2019) observe, such approaches conceptualise work capacity as a relational process involving a variety of actors rather than a quality of individuals.

Social procurement is a demand-side policy lever sometimes used to support policy approaches that aim to create long-term and sustainable employment opportunities (Loosemore et al., 2022). Social procurement has recently re-emerged in Australia as a policy instrument in which governments activate cross-sector partnerships and, in the process, leverage their supply chains to create social value as part of their services/product contracts with private companies (Barraket et al., 2016). Situated within New Public Governance developments, social procurement creates social value either directly (by purchasing welfare services from not-for-profit providers) or indirectly (by requiring the employment of disadvantaged groups as part of a goods and services contract). This latter type of example is where social procurement can be used to affect employment outcomes.

Despite the recent re-emergence of social procurement, there has been little research into its role in improving employment outcomes for young people (Österberg & Zapata, 2023). This paper presents case study research in which a major Australian construction company designed and implemented a social procurement initiative called the Connectivity Centre model (CCM) to address youth unemployment. This paper discusses the features of the CCM that make it distinctive compared to other unemployment supports. It also identifies how the policy context of driving cross-sector partnerships through social procurement distinguishes it from other ALMP models. First, however, the paper begins with some more background context.

1.1 | Youth unemployment programs in Australia

Since its privatisation in the late 1990s, Australia's national employment services system has been the subject of widespread critique—particularly for young people—across all its iterations: Job

Network (1998–2007), Job Services Australia (2007–2015), jobactive (2015–2022), and, the current model, Workforce Australia (2022–present).

Across these iterations, the system acts as a quasi-market model, commissioned by governments and delivered by a network of private providers contracted to support jobseekers. It provides individualised support to jobseekers to prepare a resume, prepare for job interviews, become 'job ready', and meet 'mutual obligations' requirements to receive welfare payments (e.g. demonstrating they are looking for work, attending job interviews/training). The system has often been criticised as delivering the 'work-first' approach described earlier, including rapid placement in low-paid, part-time, and/or temporary jobs (Cortis et al., 2013; Marshall, 2019). Furthermore, its approach of incentivising contracted agencies to connect people to employment in a competitive market with excessive caseloads tends to inhibit inter-organisational collaboration (Marshall, 2019; Moore, 2019). It also commodifies jobseekers in a way that does not support their wellbeing and provides inadequate support, inputs harsh penalties, and particularly discriminates against marginalised/disadvantaged groups (Marshall, 2019; Moore, 2019). There is particular recognition that one recent system iteration, jobactive, was 'not fit for purpose' (Marshall, 2019, p. xix). Young people suffered under jobactive's universal focus, especially those experiencing complex disadvantage (Marshall, 2019; Moore, 2019). Overall, recent reviews have reinforced the need to improve personalisation, choice, and control for jobseekers (Casey, 2022).

Against this background, several Australian programs have been designed to provide more intensive wraparound support for addressing youth unemployment, reflecting more of the supply-side human capital investment approach described earlier (Bonoli, 2013). Table 1 summarises some recent Australian programs operating this way. Most were designed during the jobactive era and were intended to complement jobactive support.

The main commonalities between the programs in Table 1 are their appreciation for the complexity of youth unemployment and its causes, provision of both vocational and non-vocational support, and ensuring delivery of personalised, intensive, and tailored support. For those that have been evaluated, there is also evidence of better outcomes for young people, both in finding and keeping longer lasting work and gaining more holistic support (Ramia, et al., 2020; Meltzer, et al., 2022; Cross, 2020; Jankovic et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, a limitation of the programs in Table 1 is that most of them focus on employment as a generalised goal and are not industry specific (Ramia, et al., 2020; Cross, 2020; Jankovic et al., 2019). This means the vocational support offered to young people is still usually limited to generalist job search, work readiness, and/or work experience (Ramia, et al., 2020; Cross, 2020; Jankovic et al., 2019), rather than training for a specific industry or long-term career. Therefore, the opportunities created may often still be short term and not meaningful for young people. As such, it is useful to consider programs that can provide industry- and career-specific support. This is where the construction industry-based case study of the CCM becomes relevant. A description of the model is included in Section 2.1; however, the following section first details its policy context: social procurement.

1.2 | Social procurement and construction

Social procurement involves governments incentivising their supply chains to create employment opportunities for priority target groups as part of their services and product contracts (Barraket et al., 2016). The construction industry is a major focus of social procurement policies because of the large amount of money governments spend on construction and large number/range of

TABLE 1 Intensive 'wraparound' youth unemployment supports.

Program name	Target	Focus/wraparound features	Evaluation
Transition to Work	Young people 15–21, not in education or employment - Early school leavers - Disengaged - jobactive referrals	Provides intensive, longer term (12-month), and personalised support, with vocational and non-vocational focuses, including - Workplace/employer expectations - Practical skills - Work experience - Connections to community services	Successfully provides a mixture of vocational and personal support, including - Higher attendance at service appointments - Earlier identification of personal and financial problems - Better assistance with motivation and goal-setting Challenges include program bureaucracy, which impacts how many young people are engaged and retained. The program retains an individualised focus on a lack of skills/motivation.
your job your way (yourtown)	Young people 15–24 - Long-term unemployed	Intensive, personalised, youth-friendly, client-centred response, including - Attention to vocational (job readiness, job search skills) and non-vocational (stability, health, wellbeing) areas - Small caseloads - Practical assistance for job searching (transport, clothes) - Relationship-based practice	Successfully delivers vocational, non-vocational, and economic benefits, including - 82% found a job and 21% kept it for 26 weeks - Positive health/wellbeing outcomes - 1:6 cost-saving - Strong worker–client relationships Challenges include poor employer engagement and retention, impacting the scope of jobs available, as well as barriers to easy/streamlined record-keeping.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Program name	Target	Focus/wraparound features	Evaluation
Empowering YOUth initiatives	Young people 15–24 - Regional - Indigenous - Culturally/linguistically diverse - Early school leavers - Justice involvement - Disability - Homelessness - Out-of-home care	Sees youth unemployment as complex, not only about lack of skills/motivation. Focuses on - Practical and employability skills - Emotional support - Links to community support and health services - Access to peer support networks	[Unevaluated]
Smart, Skilled and Hired: Youth Employment Program	Young people 15–24 - Rural NSW-based: focus on Western Sydney, Hunter/Central Coast, New England/North West, and North Coast	Aims to create new pathways to trainee-ships/apprenticeships, through tailored support plans focused on - Skills training - Accommodation - Transport - Health and wellbeing Complemented by *Infrastructure Skills Legacy* and *Smart, Skilled and Hired* programs, which aim to increase employment opportunities in the construction industry and improve access to certified training.	[Unevaluated]

Source: Department of Employment (2016), Jankovic et al. (2019), Cross (2020), Ramia et al. (2020), and Meltzer, et al.(2022).

employment opportunities it offers (Loosemore, et al., 2022). The most common approach is the insertion of clauses in government contracts requiring construction companies to create training/employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups within building projects (Loosemore, et al., 2016; McNeill, 2017). Construction companies can either directly employ these groups or engage specialist organisations to do so. Most social procurement policies either directly or indirectly require private companies in supply chains to develop cross-sector partnerships or collaborations with government, social sector organisations, and/or 'minority' businesses to co-create these opportunities (Raiden et al., 2018).

Research, including much by the current authors, has explored the implementation of social procurement policies within construction, with views from construction managers, social enterprises, and sub-contractors (Barraket and Loosemore, 2018; Loosemore, et al., 2021a). It has been shown that implementing social procurement in this sector challenges existing procurement and employment practices, supply chain relationships, notions of 'value', and attitudes towards

risk mitigation (Loosemore, et al., 2019; Troje & Andersson, 2020). Social procurement is also challenging given the project-based nature of construction and its transitionary and dynamic subcontracting model, which makes the employment of disadvantaged groups logistically difficult over a project life cycle (Loosemore, et al., 2021a). Notably, young people are often perceived to be the most difficult employees due to common perceptions that they present with risky behaviour, mental health problems, and/or poor communication skills (Loosemore, et al., 2019). Therefore project-based intermediaries that foster cross-sector partnerships or collaboration between government, private, and social sector organisations have been proposed to mediate young people's employment in social procurement settings (Loosemore et al., 2021a). There have, however, been few examples of intermediaries' implementation in practice and consequently little-to-no research into young people's experiences of this kind of support.

Responding to this context, this paper offers the case study of the CCM, a model which provides wraparound support to young people and which is driven by social procurement policies and cross-sector partnerships/collaboration. While not formally intermediaries, the Connectivity Centres (CCs) developed under the CCM nevertheless mediate between organisations to generate long-term, industry-specific employment outcomes for young people (i.e. sustainable/ongoing permanent employment in the construction industry which lasts for more than 6 months and results in jobseekers no longer requiring unemployment support).

Drawing on data from young people and staff involved with the CCM, the paper examines the following research questions:

- What are young people's experiences of receiving CC support?
- What is the difference between the support young people receive through the CCs and that in other unemployment support models?
- How are the differences between the CCM and other unemployment support models incentivised by social procurement policies and cross-sector partnerships?

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Case study approach

The intent of the case study is to offer the CCM as an in-depth example exploring the point-of-difference when social procurement practices and cross-sector partnerships are used to incentivise youth unemployment supports. In this exploration, a comparison is made using a combination of insights from the existing literature and empirical data from the study. In this respect, key insights from the literature—for example Table 1 presented earlier, as well as the review of the problems with jobactive—are critical in framing and understanding the comparison.

2.2 | About the CCM

A major Australian construction company created the CCM. The model sets up a series of CCs attached to individual construction projects supporting disadvantaged jobseekers employed under the company's social procurement targets. Young people are one stated target cohort of the CCs, and others include Indigenous workers, women, refugees, migrants, people with disability, and people who have been long-term unemployed. Some of these categories, of course, overlap.

The model can be characterised as a hybrid supply and demand-side ALMP, which is incentivised through the demand-side policy lever of social procurement. The CCs purposefully seek to create cross-sector partnerships to assist employment outcomes and leverage collaboration across government, private, and social sector organisations. Partners typically include the contractor and client of each project, subcontractors, consultants, training organisations, disability/employment service providers, Indigenous and refugee support agencies, government employment agencies, social enterprises, minority businesses, not-for-profits/charities, and community service organisations.

Setting up a CC involves establishing a physical venue adjacent to a construction project, which provides a shared space for the partners to meet, work together, and provide training/support. The venue, and hence each CC, is time limited for a specific construction project. Support is offered via a wraparound model. It includes non-vocational (e.g. counselling, mentoring, legal support, mental health support) and vocational support (e.g. recruitment assistance, industry learning, accredited training, workplace rotation programme), with personalised assessment/tailoring for each jobseeker for at least 12 months. It is important to note that the vocational support provided by the CCs (such as training to understand construction industry culture and work expectations, technical language, and industry roles, responsibilities and relationships, as demonstrated later in the findings of this paper) is significantly different from the typical construction industry training provided by more mainstream employment services, which often instead provide support in areas such as gaining fork-lift licenses and worksite permits. To do this, the CCs must interact with the formal government employment system and the many not-for-profit, voluntary, and community organisations highlighted above, which are needed to secure meaningful and sustainable employment in the construction industry. The design philosophy behind the CCM is that it re-connects this fragmented system.

The CCs are modelled, funded, and run through the construction company, not government. This means they sit outside the national employment services system in that they are not subject to the same compliance requirements, caseload/staffing model, or contracting system as government-run unemployment services. The CCs do, however, sometimes partner with government-contracted jobactive/Workforce Australia providers within their collaborative model, as they do with other government-supported services. However, one of the unique characteristics of the CCs is that they specifically focus on the most disadvantaged and hard-to-place job seekers who are often poorly served by traditional employment services. The CCs do this because social procurement policies have made serving disadvantaged jobseekers a source of significant competitive advantage in seeking government contracts, as their employment is a significantly weighted non-price criterion in tendering for government construction projects (one which can represent up to 30% of a project bid). Therefore, if the host company of the CCs is to differentiate itself in an increasingly competitive construction market and win contracts, supporting significantly disadvantaged jobseekers is one way to do so. This is what is meant when this paper notes that social procurement incentivises the CCM.

Previous research by the project research team has highlighted that the CCM has the potential to be highly effective in delivering outcomes for job seekers, including reducing complexity in job seeking, customised support (Loosemore et al., 2020), and building jobseekers' employment networks (Woolcott et al., 2023). The research also highlights that these positive outcomes are a result of building exceptional trust with CC participants (Woolcott et al., 2024) and the use of a cross-sector collaborative model (Loosemore et al., 2020).

Since 2010, 14 CCs have been established, which have serviced 1500+ jobseekers. The current study drew participants from two CCs, those operating at the time of the research. While the CCs service a larger age range, participants included only those aged 18–28[1], consistent with the focus on youth unemployment. As such, while the sample reported below is small, it included a substantial number of the young people serviced by the CCs at the time of the research. Of note, Guest et al. (2006) have found that in studies using purposive sampling, 12 interviewees can be sufficient to achieve data saturation, where the aim is to understand common perceptions/experiences amongst a group of relatively homogenous individuals, such as the participants in this study.

2.3 | Participant characteristics and recruitment

There were two participant groups:

- **Young people aged 18–28 currently ($n = 9$) or previously ($n = 2$) supported by a CC**. Nine were men and two women; five noted they were Indigenous; one identified as LGBTIQ+; five lived with their partner; five lived with other family and one with a roommate; and five had children, while two were primary carers for younger siblings. All but one had experienced significant difficulty finding/keeping work, with reasons including incomplete education, gender discrimination, justice involvement, disability, low literacy, trauma, and mental illness. The majority referenced previously accessing other employment supports before a CC, commonly through jobactive. The nine participants who were currently receiving support from a CC were pre-placement in employment, although some had been offered positions they were yet to start. Of the two participants who had graduated, one had remained with the employer the CC had placed them with, while the other had pursued other options.

  In line with ethics protocols (ETH204886 at [university]), young people were recruited based on being aged 18–28 and a current/past CC participant. Recruitment was at arm's length from the team researchers, with staff of the CCs or partner agencies passing on recruitment invites while emphasising the voluntary/anonymous nature of participation and that refusal would not affect ongoing services. The involvement of CC staff in approaching potential participants was essential in engendering trust for the research process. While CC staff were involved in approaching participants and providing them with the initial recruitment paperwork, each participant's final decision about whether or not to participate was always made in a private online meeting with a researcher, who explained the consent material and implications of participation one-on-one. This ensured that there was no involvement in the final decision-making or coercion by the CC staff. During this process, participants were given the opportunity to say no to an interview and withdraw their consent at any time before, during or after the interview in complete anonymity. The participants were also interviewed without CC staff present. They were assured that their interviews would be treated confidentially and would only be available to the research team, not CC staff.
- **CC staff ($n = 3$)**. Three CC workers participated, for the purpose of providing complementary perspectives to those of young people. Staff were recruited through the CCs, through one central contact. Their roles covered administration and direct support to young people.

2.4 | Data collection

All respondents participated in 30- to 60-min semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom or telephone (due to face-to-face restrictions during COVID-19). The semi-structured interviews allowed young people to articulate in their own words their experiences of receiving support from the CCs. All participants but one completed their interviews in a private room at a CC or another support service, using the services' technological infrastructure and, for young people, with staff onsite (but not in the same room) to provide technical/emotional support. The final participant requested a phone call to their phone. All young people had the option of having an independent support person present, but only one chose to. In line with the study's research questions, policy framing, and focus on the lived experience of young people, young people were asked accessible questions, such as

- What has the CC helped you with?
- What has changed for you since being involved in the CC?
- What makes the CC different from other places you've got help from before?

Staff were asked questions such as

- What is CC's approach to helping young people find work?
- What do you see as the similarities/differences between the CC and other unemployment supports for young people?
- Do you have any comments about the social procurement policies the CC addresses through its work?

The data were collected during 2020–2021, during jobactive. Therefore, comparisons were made to jobactive supports by participants themselves and are reflected in the findings.

2.5 | Data analysis

Following the interpretive approach, interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically using NVivo 12, using a two-stage process. First, the full dataset was coded to pre-set codes, using the study's research questions as the analytical starting point. Example pre-set codes include 'Work history', 'What is different about the CC', 'Impact of the CC', and 'Areas where the CC could be improved'. The purpose was to section-up the data, which would facilitate subsequent deeper analysis. In the second stage, data within each pre-set code were re-coded into emergent sub-themes reflecting the points raised by participants themselves. The broad stages of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process were used for the data within each pre-set code—data familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for/reviewing themes, and defining, naming, and reporting on the final themes. The themes that resulted form the basis of the results discussed below.

3 | FINDINGS

The analysis resulted in three main themes about young people's experience of the CCM: (1) intensive and personalised support; (2) construction-specific knowledge, skills, and

qualifications; and (3) links into industry. These themes are discussed below, focusing on the extent to which they mean the CCM differs from other youth unemployment supports, including how social procurement policy and cross-sector partnerships incentivise the differences.

3.1 | Intensive and personalised support

When asked directly about the point-of-difference between the CCs and other employment services they had used, the responses from young people were overwhelmingly about the intensive and personalised nature of the support provided.

Young people described receiving a much greater degree of personal support, with what felt like a higher level of dedication and responsiveness, from the CC than they had from other previous employment services, usually jobactive:

> '[At the CC] they help you out, and they don't just help out a bit and then just forget about you. Like that's basically what [the other employment agency I used] does: they'll help you out as much as they can, and then they'll leave you… [Whereas here] they'll help you out and they'll follow through with it… if they say they're going to do something they actually do it' (YP_05).

Young people also described higher levels of care, communication, trust, and empathy at their CC than in traditional employment agencies, noting that their CC felt like 'home' (YP_01) and 'family' (YP_02, YP_03). They noted their CC cultivated this personalised feeling by getting to know them in an individualised way. For example, where some of the young people were young parents or young carers, the CCs showed interest in or provided resources for their children or family members. In other cases, CC staff met their parents/community; helped them with personal confidence and communication; and assisted them with individual goals, such as gaining a driver's license. Young people also noted the importance of having staff who had insight and/or connections into their own backgrounds, for example staff from similar cultural/socio-economic circumstances themselves.

Young people also mentioned that the CC staff spent more time assisting them and working to understand their complex circumstances than those from other employment agencies, and used more accessible language. Both aspects helped them feel valued and cultivated feelings of trust and authenticity:

> '[I] went through [another employment agency before]… they were just there to do their job, they wanted me in and out the door as fast as they could. And then you come to places like this and they would want to sit there and work with you and help you through whatever's going on' (YP_03).

> 'They're not up there – they come down to our level, to where we need to be and speak our language, not like big words the way other people do it' (YP_04).

Reflections from staff supported young people's accounts, noting that they sought to provide a 'one stop shop' (CC_01) of intensive wraparound supports. Notably, staff emphasised that their wraparound model included a significant degree of non-vocational support to many of the young people they serviced, who often presented with multiple barriers to employment:

> 'Certainly, it wouldn't be unrealistic to say that a large proportion of the people we dealt with had mental health issues, housing issues, legal issues and to a lesser extent existing drug and alcohol issues' (CC_03).

> 'Some of the things… that we do through the CC is the sourcing coordination of crisis and temporary accommodation, legal representation, representation to Family Courts, Family Services, representation to support probation and parole, drug and alcohol counselling, gambling addiction counselling, family support, literacy support, psychiatrist and psychology support, transport issues, food, clothing, workwear and mentoring, and that's outside of actually getting them the job and training them… This is part of the rationale behind the CC, is to create sustainable employment… Now the reality of it is that if you've got someone who's living rough, living in their car or starving, they're not going to be able to hold down a job. So what we do is we try and have a look at all of those [social] factors and try and alleviate [them] where we can, to provide the most support to enable them to stay employed' (CC_02).

Staff noted that, especially given the multiple barriers many of the young people they serviced faced, they wanted the CC to provide support with a personalised feeling based on 'familiarity' (CC_02) that was 'not a tick a box exercise' (CC_02). Notably, one described how the CCs' position as a private initiative outside the compliance requirements, caseload/staffing model, and contracting system of the government's jobactive approach was what enabled them to action this intent and build better rapport with young people, as well as spend time directly on support work:

> 'There are mandated compliance requirements with [jobactive], and there are penalties associated with that compliance or mutual obligation. That puts them in a very difficult position where they're trying to be good cop and bad cop all at the same time. Also from experience, I am very well aware that the administrative load on those providers is extreme, and accordingly the amount of time that they actually spend with an individual, helping that individual to progress in their life, is extremely limited… So that's a big, big difference between what the CC can offer the individual versus the [other types of employment agencies]' (CC_03).

Another staff member emphasised that being outside the terms of the contracts for the government's national employment services system also enabled more creativity in offering personalised support:

> 'Because we are not contracted to government to provide this service… we can continue to evolve it and develop it and innovate through it. Whereas a lot of the employment services networks… [are] very compliance-driven and they've got very prescribed contracts. So this allows us the freedom to do that and it allows us to focus especially on what we want to do and connect with the community' (CC_02).

Triangulating these accounts suggests the CCM—like the benefits of other wraparound programs (e.g. Ramia et al., 2020)—can provide more intensive and personalised support to young people than employment agencies operating under Australian's national employment services system (e.g. jobactive). This value-add appears to be due to being outside the compliance requirements,

caseload/staffing model, and contracting system of the government's national employment services system, yet still involved with youth unemployment supports—a position enabled by the CCs being a private company's initiative incentivised through government social procurement policy, as explained earlier in this paper.

3.2 | Construction-specific knowledge, skills, and qualifications

When asked about what their CC had assisted them with, young people (and staff) gave a variety of examples of the CC's assistance with both non-vocational and vocational areas—thus implying wraparound support. Wraparound support is not unique to the CCM. As acknowledged earlier, other wraparound programs assist young people with a range of needs related to stability, wellbeing, and personal development, as well as vocationally oriented skills (Ramia et al., 2020; Cross, 2020; Jankovic et al., 2019). However, within the mix of areas covered by the CCs, one is distinctive: the CCs have a high emphasis on industry- and career-specific training, as they deliberately focus on helping young people acquire construction-specific knowledge, skills, and qualifications to set them up for a long-term role in the construction industry. This is a critical difference to other employment services, which are often more generic in their focus on getting young people into any role (Cortis et al., 2013).

Young people gave examples of how their CC had helped cultivate their construction-specific knowledge, skills, and qualifications. They noted the CC provided avenues for substantial education in construction skills (such as concreting, scaffolding, bricklaying, plumbing, working at heights, safety) as well as helped them with more minor tasks involved in gaining necessary permits/licenses (including scissor-lift licenses, worksite permits). Young people also noted their CC helped to develop their foundational cultural knowledge of working on a construction site (e.g. unspoken rules/expectations for behaviour, attitudes, communication norms). One young person mentioned, for example, learning about 'how you talk to others on a worksite and greet each other' (YP_09). Another described learning about worksite culture in relation to being a woman in construction.

Staff accounts supported young people's comments and also noted an emphasis on developing longer term outcomes and accredited training beyond the immediate needs of the construction project to which each CC was attached, as well as the training they would need for that project. In this sense, the CCM leverages an individual project as a catalyst for longer term careers. For example, one said:

> 'So, we're basically running these pre-vocational courses which are aligned to… the build as it's coming up… we're starting to train people in and around earthworks, concreting, steel-fixing, plumbing, electrical…. We're [also] giving some generic building skills, a partial qualification, a Statement of Attainment, generally a Certificate II in Construction Pathways, that gives them a fairly decent footing to get started in employment' (CC_03).

Staff spoke about the reasons for this balance, noting it is in the interests of the construction company that runs the CCs to ensure all young people are well-prepared in knowledge, skills, and qualifications for a longer term career in the construction industry. As one staff member said: '… the bottom line is it represents performance opportunities for [the company]' (CC_03)—that is performing against the non-price criteria that help them be competitive

to win tenders/contracts. They also noted the CCs aim to complement young people's new skills, knowledge, and qualifications with educating others in their company's supply chain, to slowly shift the culture/institutional norms surrounding young people's employment in the industry.

The link between training/employment outcomes for young people and the performance/contract opportunities for the company that runs the CCs is a critical point-of-difference of this model compared to other programs operating under Australia's national employment services system. It implies reciprocal benefits, where the effort put in for young people translates to benefits for the company as well. Because social procurement policy requires the private company to employ young people if they are to be competitive and win contracts, it is this policy that starts—and thus incentivises—the cycle of the company needing to put effort into cultivating young people's industry- and career-specific training and knowledge to achieve their own outcomes.

3.3 | Links into industry

Accounts from staff also demonstrated a final point-of-difference: the CCM has more links into industry than many other youth unemployment services. These links are a consequence of the CCs being directly connected to a major construction company with a wide network.

Staff noted that 'having the direct association with a major builder is key' (CC_03). In contrast to many other unemployment services, which have a tenuous relationship with industry (Ramia et al., 2020), the CCs are closely connected to the supply chain of their host company, which gives them better access to a pipeline of jobs:

> 'The other problem with [other] employment services is they really don't have access to industry; they've got the occasional employer here and there… [But] what we've got, which is quite significant, is we are the employer and our subcontractors are the employer, [so] we've got a direct pipeline to opportunity' (CC_02).

Staff noted the CCs have greater opportunity to collaboratively develop, refine, and continuously improve relationships with employers. Importantly, this means subcontractors who might hire young people are more closely involved in the system of support to them and, as a result, there is increased accountability to them than is typical of other unemployment services. Ultimately, this means there is more opportunity to work together towards better outcomes for young people that also suit employers:

> 'So, I firmly believe that we were able to actually improve what we were doing because there was more stability, and that stability led to the identification of issues [with employers]. So, we could work on them rather than sitting there thinking 'Oh wow, we've just dealt with this employer once and everything's turned upside down, how do we fix this?' Often… you just move on. [But] with this CC… [it] forces us to actually be responsible and come up with solutions… there's no easy get out of jail free card [where] you just go onto the next employer to burn. And typically, and historically the employment services sector has burnt so many employers it's not funny' (CC_03).

These closer, ongoing relationships mean more collaborative opportunities for support and ultimately employment can be built and leveraged over time:

> 'See this is the other thing, the employment services networks are in competition with each other… they don't network as a general rule… We on the other hand, we work with everybody, we're open, we're collaborative, we bring people in and ask anyone to have a seat at the table' (CC_02).

The deliberative nurturing of such collaborative links into industry is a further point of difference of the CCs to other unemployment services and a distinct way in which the CCs are connected into a pipeline of jobs, with employers who may potentially be more interested in taking young people on than others in a more general marketplace. Importantly, this point of difference appears to be a direct consequence of the cross-sector partnership and social procurement context of the model: by sitting outside Australia's national employment services system and directly within the private network of a major construction company, the CCs have their own set of cross-sector relationships with employers (i.e. the company's subcontractors). Because social procurement policies in the company's contracts require it to employ young people if they are to be competitive and win contracts, they are then incentivised to use their cross-sector relationships to assist in employing young people.

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined how one major Australian construction company implemented an industry-specific wraparound program to address youth unemployment, called the CCM. It explored the features of the model that make it distinctive compared to other Australian youth unemployment supports, and how the policy context of social procurement and cross-sector partnerships incentivises the differences.

As a hybrid demand- and supply-side ALMP (Frøyland et al., 2019), the CCM addresses some of the wider systemic problems in Australia's national employment services system. It does this by positioning labour market activation as a shared effort and worker capacity as relational work, deliberately facilitating cross-sector partnerships and closer integration between government, private, and social sector organisations to provide more intensive and personalised wraparound support and more links into industry for young people than agencies operating under government-contracted employment services (Marshall, 2019; Moore, 2019; Casey, 2022). The support offered through the CCM is not only personalised, but designed and delivered in a relational setting, which fosters a sense of belonging among participants, and a cross-sector setting, which affords them additional opportunities by virtue of benefiting from the host company's network.

The result is that the CCM provides a unique offering within the landscape of youth unemployment supports in Australia. As shown in Table 1 earlier in the paper, some of Australia's other wraparound unemployment support programs provide a similar level of intensive and personalised support to the CCM (e.g. Ramia et al., 2020; Meltzer et al., 2022). Yet, the CCM distinguishes itself from these other services through also having an explicit focus on cultivating more industry/construction-specific knowledge, skills, and qualifications for young people (Ramia et al., 2020; Cross, 2020; Jankovic et al., 2019). Further, the model also plays a linking role with potential employers in construction, fostering robust relationships with them that can be leveraged for

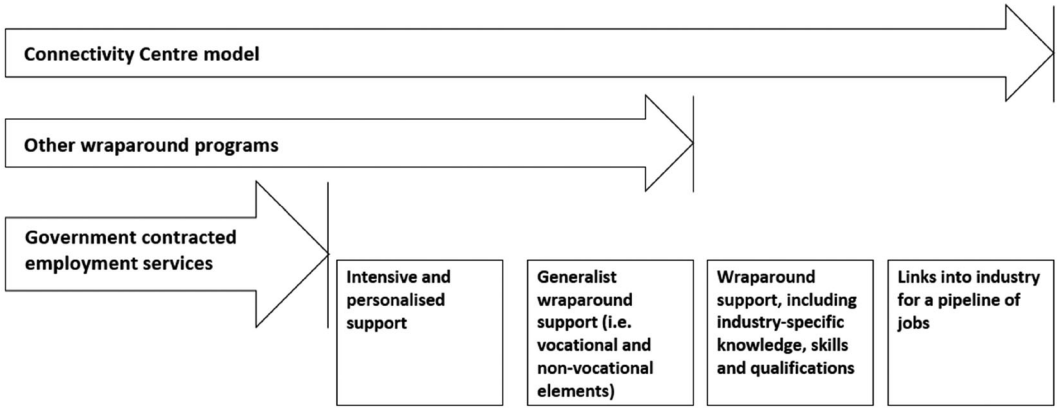

FIGURE 1 The Connectivity Centre model (CCM) compared to other Australian youth unemployment supports.

the benefit of young people, an area which other programs have struggled with (e.g. your job your way; Ramia et al., 2020). In effect, this means the CCM has more links into and relationships with industry than either government-contracted employment services (i.e. jobactive/Workforce Australia) or most other wraparound programs, which enhances young people's access to a pipeline of jobs. As such, the key finding of this paper is that it is the sum of these differences that makes the CCM substantially different from the other options available. The CCM harnesses the same benefits as some of the other wraparound programs in terms of intensive and personalised support but does so while also providing a more industry- and career-specific experience. These findings are illustrated in Figure 1, which should be read in connection with the Table 1 review of other wraparound programs earlier in the paper.

Importantly, the findings also show that social procurement policies and cross-sector partnerships are critical to incentivising the CCM's points of difference. By making serving disadvantaged jobseekers a source of competitive advantage in the process of tendering for government contracts, social procurement policies prompt or incentivise private companies to input significant time, effort, and resources from their cross-sector networks into fostering employment for disadvantaged groups, in this case young people, and to operate a support option that sits outside the constraints on government-run unemployment support services (e.g. compliance requirements, caseload/staffing model, and contracts of government-regulated system). Because of this, the CCM can then provide additional opportunities to innovate, collaborate, and create solutions, which are relatively unique within the landscape of youth unemployment supports in Australia and which lead it to fit with a human capital investment approach. This is possible precisely because of the CCM's social procurement policy context and host company's position within a cross-sector collaborative context.

The strengths of the CCM address many of the criticisms of Australia's national employment services system. Specifically, the model addresses problems identified with jobactive, such as lack of tailoring to young people's context, impersonal and unsupportive administrative processes, and churning jobseekers through short-term and unsustainable work (Casey, 2022; Marshall, 2019; Moore, 2019). Further, by building and sustaining robust relationships and collaborative practices with private industry, it also addresses documented challenges for some wraparound programs, such as poor employer engagement/retention (Ramia et al., 2020). Finally, the CCM complements

the existing landscape of youth unemployment supports by contributing an industry- and career-specific support model, which almost none of the other government-contracted and wraparound models provide (Ramia et al., 2020; Cross, 2020; Jankovic et al., 2019).

It is, however, important to note that unemployment support initiatives incentivised by social procurement policies, such as the CCM, will not work in all contexts and can have drawbacks. Such initiatives are only possible within industries that have the scope/scale to support them and incentive to implement them, such as construction. Therefore, this type of initiative is constrained in what kinds of employment opportunities it can foster and limited by the conditions/biases of their host industries (e.g. lower rate of employment of women in construction). In addition, there are potential drawbacks to unemployment supports being closely linked to private industry. Tight links to private industry may limit young people's opportunities to only what is supported by private companies, instead of young people having greater choice. Furthermore, while this paper has demonstrated the advantages of the CCs sitting outside the government-supported unemployment services system as well as the effort put in by CC staff to ensure that significantly disadvantaged young people were recruited to the CCs, existing outside the government-regulated system enhances the potential for staff of this kind of model to 'cream' or 'cherry-pick' the candidates that may succeed the most in their program, without rules about having to take on the most difficult cases as there are in government-regulated services. In this sense, while not evidenced in the case of the CCs, the potential to treat this kind of model as a box-ticking exercise exists, if not done with the right intentions or recruitment. Nevertheless, despite these potential drawbacks, such programs provide an important complement to the existing landscape of youth unemployment supports, when seen in addition to rather than instead of other options.

While making an important contribution, this paper has some limitations. Firstly, it does not provide an empirical comparison with other unemployment support programs and thus its generalisability to other contexts is limited. There is a need to re-examine the findings with more companies/industries and with the beneficiaries/staff of other unemployment support models. A deeper examination would also need to include comparative outcomes data to address the limits of the self-report data included here. Secondly, the sample is small; a larger sample would allow greater socio-demographic stratification as well as greater exploration of the influence of young people's pathways to the CC. While not claiming that the CCs are entirely responsible for the employment outcomes achieved for participants, the paper nevertheless does little to explore the cumulative impact of other supports that young people may have received prior (or concurrent) to their CC experience, and this should be further examined. Finally, several factors potentially increased the likelihood of participants expressing positive perspectives about the CCs. These include the combination of including only CC participants/staff; the small sample; recruitment being assisted by CC staff who (while instructed not to) may have potentially screened out some negative perspectives; and interviews being conducted with young people onsite at the CCs where they may have felt less inclined to criticise those who had helped them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge all the members of our wider research team, who contributed to the project of which this paper is part. We would also like to acknowledge the research participants for their time and contributions in participating.

Open access publishing facilitated by University of New South Wales, as part of the Wiley - University of New South Wales agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Authors elect not to share data.

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ENDNOTE

[1]Although youth is usually defined as up to 25, the study included older participants, up to age 28. This was appropriate as some participants received support from the CC when they were younger.

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How to cite this article: Meltzer, A., Loosemore, M., Barraket, J., Keast, R., Powell, A., Muir, K., & Denny-Smith, G. (2024). The role of social procurement policies and cross-sector partnerships in addressing youth unemployment: A construction industry case study from Australia. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12635