# NCETA workforce development PhD research scholarship – Chelsea Todd

## Researcher

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## Summary

The overall aim of the scholarship was to contribute to the development of high quality research evidence to support best practice in workforce development for the alcohol and other drug (AOD) field.  Funding provided a scholarship for a PhD student to undertake the research.

The study included the following components:

* A literature review and cross-sectional survey of 191 South Australian AOD workers to assess the prevalence of, and significant contributors to, psychological strain and burnout in the AOD sector;
* A literature review of work stress interventions for health and human services. This data was used to develop an internet-based worker wellbeing program to minimise psychological injury and promote work engagement in the AOD sector. The Online Program was underpinned by cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) principles, and the online delivery element overcame potential barriers to the uptake of professional development programs by AOD workers such as varied hours and shift work; and
* A randomised controlled trial of the AOD Worker Wellbeing program.

## Outcomes

The cross-sectional survey found the incidence of stress and burnout among a sample of Australian AOD sector employees to be relatively consistent with other research of the AOD workforce. Elevated psychological strain levels were reported by 66.4 per cent of participants, high emotional exhaustion by 37.8 per cent, personal-related burnout by 34.5 per cent, work-related burnout by 25.2 per cent and client-related burnout by 16.0 per cent. Despite relatively high stress and burnout levels, participants overall reported high work engagement.

As predicted, and according to the Job Demands-Resources Model, high job demands were associated with high levels of burnout, and low job resources were associated with low levels of work engagement. Work-family demands were also significant contributors to psychological outcomes.

In summary, work-family spill-over, workload, and client pressure, together with behavioural disengagement coping, explained the greatest percentage of variance in psychological outcomes, while autonomy was the only variable that significantly related to work engagement. In addition, rewards (e.g., job prospects, job security, salary, fair treatment) contributed significantly to psychological outcomes. The survey also showed higher levels of burnout for employees who reported having been put in fear by clients.

The randomised controlled trial undertaken to assess the effectiveness of the AOD Worker Wellbeing program found an increased sense of personal accomplishment and reduced work-related burnout for program participants over time, compared with participants who did not have access to the program. However, the program did not affect other burnout dimensions or psychological strain, or organisational outcomes such as absenteeism, turnover intention and job satisfaction.

The results suggested that while the program may have increased participants’ awareness of stress and burnout, it did not achieve statistically significant improvements across the full range of wellbeing measures.

Despite some indications of good uptake and program effectiveness, the lack of change on organisational outcomes points to a need to examine other strategies to promote job satisfaction and reduce turnover intention in the drug and alcohol sector.  In addition, while job demands may alleviate some indicators of burnout, increased job resources are likely to be important for boosting work engagement and organisational outcomes.

It is important for future research and practice to explore ways to enhance job resources in tight economic conditions. In this respect, the further development of employee resilience and positive personal coping resources, beyond the AOD Worker Wellbeing program, appears to hold promise for enhancing employee wellbeing.

## Presentation

Todd, C., Roche, A., Bond, M. 2012 [Employee Wellbeing in a Click! An online cognitive behaviour program](/wp-content/uploads/CTodd_ScienceofWellbeing_Final.pdf). The Science of Wellbeing Conference, Adelaide, 24 February 2012.