INDEPENDENT
INQUIRY into
Insecure Work

Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia

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Dependence at Work

A study of ninety young South Australian workers in an individualised and precarious labour market

A submission to the Independent Inquiry into Insecure work

Dr Catherine Earl

20 January 2012

1. Introduction

This submission consolidates the key findings from 'Dependence at Work' (2010) an Australian Post Graduate Award Industry research project undertaken between 2006-2010. The research was conducted by myself, Dr Catherine Earl at the Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia. The industry partner on the project was SA Unions.

The qualitative research drawn on for this submission is a socio-political analysis of the labour market experience of a group of ninety young South Australian workers. Employment insecurity and the low and precarious wages gained from engagement with the labour market is a central theme of the research and relates directly to the terms of reference for the Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work.

The research questions in focus groups and interviews with young workers consider their degree of power and level of autonomy in the labour market and its role in supporting progress towards financial independence from parents. The research questions were:
1. What are the conditions of young people's employment and what reasons do they give for being concentrated in casual employment, that is, does it reflect preferences and choice, or labour market opportunity?
2. How does work impact on young people's transition to financial independence?
3. Is youth labour commodified and does this limit the effectiveness and/or capacity of young people to experience citizenship and voice in the workplace? What strategies are available and utilised to address and promote citizenship and voice for young people in the workplace?

The findings provide evidence supporting the argument that, for the group studied, their life stage involves high levels of dependency on precarious supports provided by multiple institutions (one of which is the labour market) that require continuous active negotiation. For these young people, the labour market characterised by insecure work and low wages is a particularly hazardous support institution, where they act within a framework of individual responsibility for working conditions.

Policy makers and members of the broader community are often quick to assume young people have less need for secure work because they are dependent on parents for financial security and because work is often not their primary activity. However findings from this research indicate young people have a clear preference for predictable part-time work when combining work with study, because it assists their ability to plan educational activity, and when work is their primary activity they preferred fulltime ongoing work, which they saw as the only enabler of independence from parents and ongoing stability.

This submission will summarise the key findings of this research particularly which relate to the high levels of insecurity of young people's employment tenure. When referring to participants in this submission, please note that all names have been changed so that the identities remain confidential.

2. Youth Transitions and Employment

There is general agreement among researchers that the labour market has been undergoing change in areas which include insecurity of employment (Standing 2002), expansion of underemployment (Bessant 1999; Abbott and Kelly 2005 p.96), flexibility in working hours (Deery and Mahony 1994; Preston 2001) and the intrusion of work into home life (Pocock 2003). Particularly focussing on youth, Wyn (2009a p.1) states, 'the widespread emergence of flexible and precarious employment has meant that individuals need to be able to regularly learn new skills and take up new work options in order to survive'. Young people have been described as being in the 'frontline' of those affected by these changes and are expected in policy and practice to 'make their own way through it' (Spierings 2004 p.86).

Changes in the youth labour market are associated with the increased participation of young people in education. The decade 1996 to 2006 saw growth in numbers of young people, aged fifteen to twenty-four, attending educational institutions (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008 p.95). Census data shows that in 1996, 71% of 15 to 19 year olds were attending education compared with 75% in 2006. Similarly, for 20-24 year olds the figure grew from 27% to 34%. This may be because there is general recognition that education is an increasingly important precursor to employment (Ayers-Wearne 2001). Wyn (2009b p.48) has found that young people understand this importance and try to protect themselves from a changing and precarious labour market through building extensive educational and career biographies in the youth life stage. However, the increased time spent in school and incidence of post-school qualifications has not increased the security of transitions or produced better career outcomes for many young Australians.

Research in the nineties identified that young people in a number of western countries, were no longer experiencing youth as a short and straightforward transition to adulthood (Du Bois-Reymond 1998; Dwyer and Wyn 1998; Looker and Dwyer 1998; Rudd and Evans 1998). While there is general acceptance of this change, there are a range of positions on the extent to which young people are contributing to the changing nature of their life stage or whether they are responding to challenges in a new environment, for example a growth in insecure entry level employment.

3. Employment security matters for young workers

In Australia, 25% of workers are casual, but young people are over represented in the casual workforce with 40% of casual workers aged 15-24 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Casual work is the employment status for 92% of the student workers in the sample for the 'Dependence at Work' research. The majority of the young casual workers interviewed were employed in the retail and hospitality industries. The work is reported to be precarious because of shift rosters, with number of hours and times of work varying from day-to-day and week-to-week, due to market demands.

Initially I did not review literature on working time in depth, both because there appeared to be little directly addressing youth issues and because it was not yet clear to me how important the issue of working time is to young workers. Early in the data collection it became obvious that this was a major concern to participants and that it is a fundamentally negative aspect of many young workers' employment experience.

Subsequently I drew from international authors including Schor (1992), Hochschild (1997) and Epstein and Kalleberg (2001) who have considered issues of working time, although primarily for adult workers. Their findings are relevant to the participants' experiences but do not encompass the range of issues and concerns expressed by young workers such as split shifts, on-call arrangements, fluctuating hours and therefore income, and the effects these conditions have on their relationships with employers.

Participants express two major areas of concern about working hours and insecurity. The first issue is to obtain sufficient predictable and secure hours of employment for their support and income needs. The second issue is the difficulty of meeting competing inflexible demands on their time, most commonly between the labour market and education, which also impact on time for family and social activities. Those participants with strong family support or access to additional income from welfare have less anxiety about their irregular income and are better able to reduce this conflict between employment, education and other life commitments because of their lesser dependence on the labour market for income/sustenance. However for those with access to fewer resources, casual work is a considerable stressor.

3.1 Income Insecurity

Many of the participants told me they entered the labour market to attempt to reduce the need for support from parents and to contribute to the finances of their household and family. Dependence is a major issue raised by the young people I interviewed. Participants are very conscious of their level of dependence or independence and describe their aspirations for and attempts to obtain independence. There is a discernable movement towards independence from parents as the age of the young people increases, but surprisingly there are a significant number of young people who report continued reliance on their parents at twenty-four years, which is the maximum age range I studied.

Parents fall into a number of categories in terms of support provided to participants. There is no standard, with a diversity of attitudes, amounts and conditions offered. There is some indication that participants from poorer families tend to receive less and make a greater contribution to family income, but this is not always the case. I classified the parents into four categories based on the kind of support the participants receive, they are:

- non-supporters, provided little or no support to their working children
- risky/reluctant supporters, were unenthusiastic about the level of support given and made this known to working children
- bargainers, made deals with children about timelines for support linked to educational goals or other activities, and
- unconditional supporters, who provide significant, ongoing support without conditions.

As young workers' engagement with the labour market increases, they begin to contribute to their financial support and family in a myriad of ways, from formal payment or purchasing of food, to occasional contributions of money, goods or labour. Sometimes the young people's earnings are being used in a way that specifically reduces the young person's financial burden on their parents. These arrangements challenge the reduced level of wages for young people, which are

justified in terms of parental subsidy supplementing their wage, and do not recognise the contributions some young workers make to their families.

Almost half of all casual employees have earnings that vary from pay to pay, which compares with only 16% of other employees (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Because of irregular incomes, some participants told me they took on multiple jobs to attempt to secure a liveable level of support in the face of precarious rostering practices, at times in addition to full-time study. A participant from a focus group of young workers in the Health and Community Services sector Delores, comments on the lack of secure hours in her work and consequently, her inadequate income:

> [T]his sort of work is not reliable. You don't know when you are going to have work. You can have stacks of work and then no work and so the work here is kind of like a second job, you need a first job. Currently I don't have another job and so money is pretty low. I'm looking for another job that can support me, so that I know that every week I've got fixed income. (Delores, aged 20)

Delores, like many other participants, is expressing a strong preference for secure part-time work to provide for her living needs while allowing her to continue studying. Finding such a job is rare amongst the participant group.

For young people there is an inverse relationship between parental dependence and labour market dependence. However transition is not stable or linear relating to age because of the insecure nature of the youth labour market. When support from parents is lacking, young people are more dependent on the labour market. This is highly problematic due to the casualised youth labour market, where young people rarely have security of hours and income. Dependence on the youth labour market does not provide young people a secure lifestyle and a number of participants discussed their anxiety about their precarious situation.

3.2 Flexible rostering and work-life conflict
The research analysed the flexibilities in working time required by employers of participants in casual work and their feelings about these conditions. Many participants relate that they are unable to plan their lives because of unpredictable work demands. The few participants who are given more regular hours unanimously express positive views about this arrangement. There is a diverse range of participant experience in the unpredictability or regularity of rosters in the same jobs and industries, which seems to indicate that employers' discretion may be a major factor in predictability of hours.

A number of authors considering the relationship between work and time have emphasised the nature of time as both a finite resource and a socially constructed and manipulated concept (Epstein and Kalleberg 2001; Hearn and Michelson 2006). The social conventions that govern time patterns in relation to work at any given point in history are influenced by constraints such as environmental factors and physical human limits and capacities, but are also shaped by pressures from powerful groups and individuals who require labour (Epstein and Kalleberg 2001 p.5). Hearn and Michelson (2006 p.17) highlight that any investigation of work and time will

encounter a tension between simultaneous demands of 'strictness' on the one side and 'flexibility' on the other.

Rostering practices, sometimes in order to minimise paid working hours, impact significantly on participants' non-working lives. Lily's work commitments are a good example of employer 'flexibility', but 'strictness' for Lily. She is on-call four nights a week for a large retail employer and needs to be available and not make plans, unless she tells them in advance that she cannot work. Lily is sometimes called up at very late notice and if she refuses or is unable to work, her hours are cut the following week.

> I am available to work 4 out of 5 of the weeknights, and I have to work all of Saturday. I'm on call, so I might get a call somewhere between 9.00 and 5.00, and I can't make any plans for the next night because, like I have to tell them if I want a night off. [If they call me] I have to start at 7.00 so the latest I'd get a call is probably, I've gotten 5.30 which really frustrated me, because I'd already arranged stuff, and I tried to get out of working, but then you don't get any hours for the next week, like you only get the one shift for the next week. …I've done this for 2 different bosses… They both, if I said no, I lose all of my hours… with my other boss, he kind of like, guilt-trips you into working some nights. I've been guilt-tripped into working. And like, I've been called up on a Saturday …he rang me up, going, you have an hour to get to work. Which is horrendous. (Lily, 22)

Lily is not paid an on-call allowance and is never rostered on in advance. Therefore she never knows which nights she will actually work. The employer is avoiding the risk that Lily might be underutilised, if she is rostered on in advance. The avoidance of this risk results in complete disruption of Lily's other life activities.

In rural areas many of the participants report working more regular and steady hours and are not on call. These jobs are also casual and in the same or similar industries as Lily's employment. Therefore it seems to be a matter of employer choice, how predictable rosters are for employees.

> I work four to five hours, Tuesday and Friday nights, every week.
> (Mick, 16, Retail)

The regular hours worked by young people like Mick provide the opportunity to organise and participate in other life activities. There are a few examples of predictable shifts in metropolitan locations, although it is less prevalent. Generally, the participants with regular hours appreciate them as they enable workers to plan their time and expenditure.

Rostering is a major theme of discussions on time and notification of the requirement to work varied from one hour to more predictable ongoing rosters. Generally, the shorter the notice, the more disruptive it is to workers' life outside of work. Declining short notice offers of work is often dependent upon access to other resources from family and welfare because refusing offered shifts can be punished by reduced work in following weeks, exemplified by Lily's experience quoted earlier in this section.

Where there is no access to other resources, participants say they need to comply with employer demands.

There are stark contrasts between young workers' experiences, in the same job in the same industry between young people in rural and metropolitan areas. It appears that workplace cultures vary in their valuing and respect of young people's life commitments, to the extent that some employers make an effort to regularise their requirements, and others know that the young people's need for work means they do not have to make this effort and therefore make arrangements on an ad hoc basis. Lack of planning and commitment in rostering allows the employer to exhibit favouritism or punishment very quickly, should they so choose: shifts can be cancelled, favoured employees can be given time off at the last moment or increased shifts on request.

4. Power and Voice in the Youth Labour Market

There is extensive evidence of young workers' experience of some of the characteristics of commodification within the institution of the labour market. These include the unpredictability and insecurity of the amount of work available and therefore pay, difficulties with balancing work and other aspects of life because of the on-call nature of much of their work, the at times long and unsociable hours and the transfer of risk from employers onto workers because of these arrangements. As a consequence of experiencing such conditions, some young workers feel they are treated as 'tools', 'numbers' and 'machines' by employers. Commodification typically dehumanises labour and the young workers quoted below, describe this experience in graphic terms.

> I just feel like, I don't know if it makes sense, but I feel like I'm a *tool*, rather than an employee. (Charlie, 19, Retail)

> I feel like, when I'm putting 110% in, I'm working so hard and I'm just getting nothing for it, or I just feel like I'm not getting anywhere, yeah. I know that sounds weird to explain it, but that's the way I feel, just like a *number*, like okay yeah, you're the owner of 1796, you're looking after that business, but I just don't really feel that they even care about us. …I feel as if we can be replaced… [We need] better pay and probably more recognition, probably that would be the main two things, or even the hours to be changed, different like so that they accept that, we do have lives, we're not just like *working machines*, that just work here all the time. (Jean, 22, Hospitality)

Both Jean and another participant, in different interviews use the term 'working machines' to describe the employers' use of their labour, particularly with reference to the expectation that they can be turned on and off at any time of the day and night, without any thought that they might have any other human commitments, responsibilities or any life outside of work. They report receiving no recognition for extra effort and the feeling that they can be readily replaced, without regard for their individuality as people.

A number of participants describe their status at work as connected with their power. This is likely to be a major factor determining the impact of commodification. Status at work is influenced by academic achievement, qualifications obtained, and networks. These are characteristics frequently utilised by upper socio-economic groups to enhance their status in the labour market. Young workers perceive a clear distinction between business owners and professionals and the rest of the workforce. Wendy states differences between the power elites and the rest of the workforce are increasing:

> I pretty much as a casual worker have no rights, I just found a good employer. I mentioned before, I don't get over-time, I don't get holiday pay, award rates, none of it, I don't get paid breaks, I work twelve hour shifts, I don't get paid for a break from that, it's taken out... Unions now effectively have no power, like union members can be arrested for speaking up, I've thought, like, that our constitution said that we could have free voice… (Wendy, 19, Hospitality)

The conditions Wendy describes do not recognise her human needs, which is typical of commodification of labour. Wendy believes her conditions could be worse and that she has found a 'good employer'. In these terms this would seem to mean an employer working within the law, rather than one with any consideration of the employee's life or lifestyle outside of work. Indeed in this workplace, the employer does not accept the cost of basic human needs; even in extended shifts of up to twelve hours the employer does not financially accommodate the need for toilet and food breaks. Other young workers also refer to this concept of the 'good employer', which if found would be the answer to their individual labour market problems. They seldom make any connection between labour market regulation and individual experience, but think their work conditions are primarily a result of their individual relationship with a 'good' or 'bad' supervisor or employer.

4.1 Young people's attempts at building security
Despite the poor conditions of the youth labour market, young people must continue to participate in order to earn income. If they cannot easily exit the employment because of a reliance on income and/or lack better alternatives, young people can be placed in a dependent relationship with their employer. The level of competition for jobs and the predominance of casual employment (that is employment with no guaranteed level of hours or income per week/month), combine to place some participants in a position of 'exploitable dependency'. This means they are dependent on their employer and perceive they are unable to withdraw from this relationship, even if they believe they are being poorly treated.

Most participants report trying to improve their situation on an individual basis through direct relationships with supervisors and employers. From interviews with young people I was able to identify a range of behaviours, which are common and which young people state elicit more favourable treatment by employers. I use the term 'dependant relationship power' (DRP) to describe it. The set of behaviours which participants believe is the most effective way to success, credibility and consideration at work include: submission, obedience and cheerfulness under all circumstances. Rarely questioning, rarely presenting problems and always demonstrating gratitude for work provided are also important. Participants say that if

they exhibit these behaviours their supervisor will be more likely to like them, treat them well, put their interests above others and possibly even protect them in times of economic downturn. They report this type of relationship is their best chance at gaining security. Being a 'favourite' gives them opportunities for voice and influence in the workplace. The actions are an attempt to establish what might be termed a 'personal', rather than a purely professional relationship with supervisors and/or employers. The relationship has characteristics of favouritism, loyalty and nepotism.

Holmes and Gifford's (1996 p.447) research establishes that employers with an ad hoc management style take a 'reciprocity' approach to the employment relationship, where the employer considers minimum legal employment conditions to be a reward for those workers who are perceived as 'good' employees. It is interesting that both the participants in this research as employees and Holmes and Gifford's (1996) employers agree that in order to receive the 'favour' of minimum employment conditions, employees have to perform more than the job requirements.

The model on the next page (figure 1) depicts a process of building DRP that begins when a young person attempts to reduce their dependence on their family or welfare by entering the labour market. The majority of young people commence work as casual workers. They encounter precarious and low paid work conditions and attempt to improve these through exhibiting attitudes and behaviours that they say are desired by their employer. Through this strategy they are attempting to establish a 'reciprocal relationship', where in return for their compliant value-added labour they receive improved working conditions. Because some of the value-adding behaviours are unsustainable in the long-term, for example never being sick and always being available, a breakdown will inevitably occur, which results in one of three options. Firstly, the young person may stay with the employer and attempt to rebuild the relationship, thus continuing the cycle. Secondly, they may obtain alternative employment and build a similar relationship with their new employer or thirdly, they may exit to dependence on welfare or family again. At the very least, a temporary fluctuation in dependence is the likely result of all three options. In option one, there would usually be a reduction in hours given to the worker who has fallen out of favour. In option two, there is likely to be fewer hours until a favoured relationship is built with the new employer. In the third option, unemployment results in a return to full dependence on parents or the welfare system.
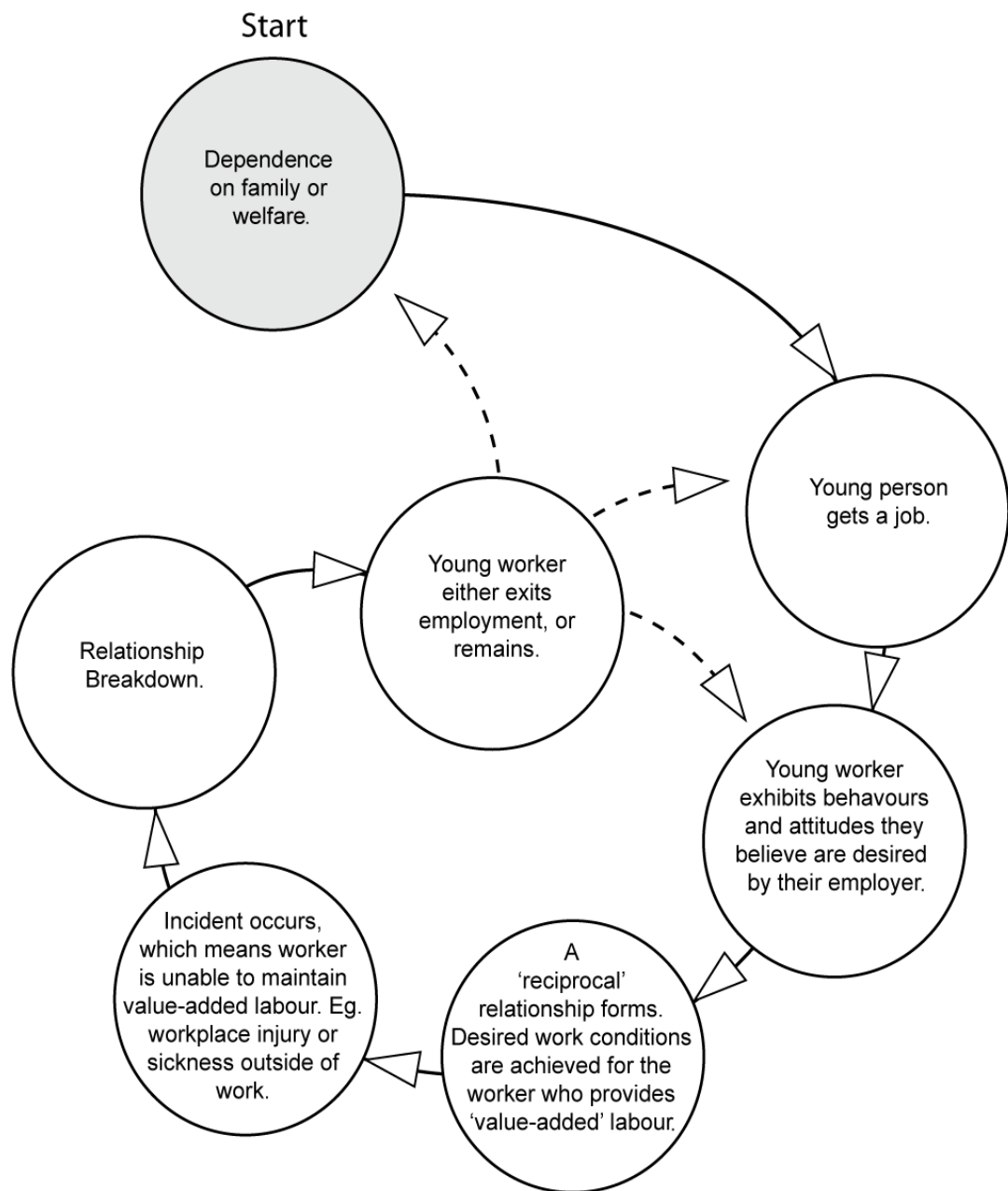
At best, the strategy of DRP is only partially successful in some cases in achieving regular hours and income above that generally available in the youth labour market, but any advantage may be unintentionally gained at the expense of other young workers. Any change that may be achieved through these means will be limited to one or very few individuals in a workplace, and may in fact act to cause further deterioration in the conditions of other workers. There is no wide, systemic or structural change produced by this strategy. In addition, a wide variety of incidents that are beyond the control of the individual, for example illness or injury or a change in commitments outside of work, can cause this strategy to fail, even at the individual level.

This model of behaviour, that is to 'add-value' to your employment by being compliant, by working in excess of specified duties and/or exhibiting personal characteristics that are seen to be attractive to your employer, may have wider

implications in the future. These behaviours are being recommended in the popular press, to adult workers, as a legitimate strategy to preserve the security of even full-time, permanent jobs in times of high competition or economic downturn (Nicholas 2009 p.1).

The use of 'dependent relationship power' -while at times providing temporary improvements for individuals- involves no transfer of power from the employer who has complete discretion as to the duration and terms of the relationship. DRP also has no impact on the general citizenship and voice of young people in the labour market. This lack of power provides opportunity for exploitation and inequity.

Figure 1 – Cycle of Dependent Relationship Power (DRP)

5. What can be done to provide more certainty to young workers?

It is important to recognise that a major challenge to improving young people's working conditions is the pervasive discourse, exemplified by media reports portraying young people as demanding, career savvy, self-indulgent 'job snobs' (Schriever and Leneghan 2007 p.19, Thomson 2007 p.5, Carty 2009 p.8). This research does not support these stereotypes. Instead many participants appeared to be hard working, eager to please and willing to accept insecure, low paid and low skilled work. However, they usually maintain traditional aspirations for the future in terms of career and other life goals. There is clearly a huge disparity between the media portrayal and the reality of young workers' experiences and attitudes. Resources and assistance with issues identified in this research may be difficult to access while there continues to be a public depiction of young people as powerful free agents, choosing their circumstances and future pathways. This erroneous public image needs to be challenged.

The participants' statements regarding their working conditions being at the discretion of the employer, indicates not only a lack of knowledge of their minimum rights but also a lack of experience of regulatory inspection or related activity within worksites. Given the significant proportions of informal cash work, both in the participant group and in other Australian research, an increased presence of regulatory bodies in workplaces seems necessary to ensure young workers have knowledge of and are receiving at least their minimum legal entitlements. This will increase the capabilities of young people to access rights that are currently unavailable to many because of insufficient support. Such activity may reduce young people's perceptions that they have individual responsibility for working conditions over which they have little influence.

Almost all the work undertaken by student participants is casual and unpredictable. These young people find it very difficult to manage their study, finances and other life commitments with unpredictable work. Much of the conflict and anxiety reported by participants could be reduced if hours of employment were more stable. Therefore strategies need to be developed to increase the amount of regular work that is available to them. Some examples may include paid internships, incentives to employers and conversion of casual to part-time worker after a specified period. Stable part-time employment for these young people would reduce the precariousness of their dependence on multiple institutions and might decrease the amount of ongoing negotiation necessary for secure support.

Participants report clear inequities relating to reductions in pay based on age, for example some participants receive less pay than older staff with less skill. This challenges the assumption that the more skilled young person would lose their employment if they needed to be paid at an adult rate. In addition, such low pay rates cause considerable hardship for independent young people or those attempting transition. Youth rates of pay contribute to young people's inability to support themselves and therefore their continued dependence on family and/or welfare. Managing up to three separate sources of income (that is from family, work and welfare) requires ongoing active negotiation. These inequities and hardships require a reconsideration of the justice of lower pay rates based on age, and a reconsideration of a system where individual young people carry the burden of the incentive for their

own employment. If incentives are considered necessary, other methods may be more appropriate, for example financial bonuses or reduced payroll or other taxes.

Given the high level of commodification of young people's labour and lack of effective strategies to develop power or voice in the workplace, there is a clear need for the development of support mechanisms specifically for this group. Traditional mechanisms such as unionism and exit-voice (that is, leaving employment as an expression of dissatisfaction) are under-utilised and/or ineffective. Participants described an individual strategy (DRP), which is also generally ineffective and produces little long-term improvement, even at an individual level. While the DRP approach to influencing working conditions has many ramifications in workplaces, the example of its effect on occupational health and safety practise and experience is used to demonstrate the hazardous nature of an individualised labour market for young people. Without effective strategies, conditions are unlikely to improve and could deteriorate. Education of young people in the power of collective action may assist in increasing young workers involvement in organisations such as unions, which may then have the potential to improve their conditions. Given that union membership is in decline in Australia, union renewal may necessarily involve a reconsideration of how to attract and maintain young members. While the youth labour market is characterised by high turnover and competition for jobs, it is unlikely that exit-voice can be an effective strategy for achieving positive change in the workplace. The lack of power and inability of young workers to develop citizenship and voice in the labour market provides potential for exploitation and inequity.

6. Conclusion

The 'Dependence at Work' research findings provide evidence that young people's transition from full dependence on parents to independence from parents (which comes from engagement with the labour market and/or welfare) involves continuous active negotiation of precarious supports from institutions, one of which is the labour market. For these young people the labour market is characterised by insecure work and low wages which makes independence difficult. Without better knowledge and experience of regulative bodies and unions there is little recourse for the protection of their rights. In this context young people act within a framework of individual responsibility for working conditions and attempt to improve their work situations by building relationships with their employers.

The attitudes of policy makers and the broader community are based on the assumption that young people do not need secure work because of their dependence on parents and the other activities they need to engage in such as education. While this is true for many young people, others need the income gained from labour market engagement. This research indicates that young people prefer predictable part-time work when studying or fulltime ongoing work when they have completed their education or training. Precarious casual work is disruptive to life outside of work and rarely provides them with financial autonomy. Fulltime work outside of the labour market is seen to be the only enabler of transition to independence from parents and the achievement of adult goals and aspirations.

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