

Inquiry into Employment: Increasing Participation in Paid Work

**A submission to
The House of Representatives
Standing Committee**

Employment and Workplace Relations

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This submission is based on the findings of a collaborative research project recently undertaken by colleagues from the Divisions of Health Science, Business and Enterprise and Education, Arts and Social Sciences at the University of South Australia. We wish to make comment in relation to the following term of reference:

- **Measures that can be implemented to increase the level of participation in paid work in Australia.**

Set against the background of global population ageing and continuing high levels of sustained mature aged unemployment (and under-employment) the twin aims of this project were to:

1. investigate the possibility of providing a positive solution to the workforce crisis that currently threatens the provision of health and care services to Australia's rapidly ageing population, by
2. harnessing the latent potential of the mature aged unemployed person.

Underpinning the development of this study was the view that the life skills and experiences of mature aged persons may be well suited to meeting the needs of older people. Yet despite the fact that we have this accessible and employable pool of mature and under-utilised potential workers, surprisingly little attention has been directed toward the development of strategies to facilitate their employment specifically within the residential and community aged care sector.

Recent demographic projections suggest that the ageing of the Australian workforce and projected increases in service requirements make it unlikely that unemployment will exceed levels of 2.5% in coming years. Yet despite this, as our research findings indicate the views of mature aged people towards aged care work make it equally unlikely that difficulties in the recruitment and retention of aged care staff will subside. It was (and still is) our contention that strategies are needed to encourage mature aged participation both from the perspective of employers and mature aged people themselves in relation to the aged care workforce. We are currently seeking ongoing research funding to support our research program.

We submit that findings from our research inform the deliberations of the Inquiry into Employment into measures that can be implemented to increase the level of participation in paid work in Australia.

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On behalf of the research team

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What we found in our study

Based upon the findings of our study issues related to the views of unemployed mature aged people were organised around the following themes:

- what factors influence the mature aged person's ability/ willingness to obtain and participate in paid employment [1];
- what factors influence the mature aged person's ability/ willingness to participate in further education and training [2], and
- what factors influence the mature aged unemployed person's willingness to undertake a career in the work of caring for older people[3].

Key findings of our research indicate:

- that most mature aged people do not want to work in aged care, and
- that many service providers are reluctant to employ mature aged people (let alone those who may also be unemployed)
- **age**, is perceived by many mature aged unemployed (and underemployed) persons to be the single most significant factor in preventing their gaining paid employment;
- the **costs** and **time** associated with undertaking a VET Course rendered ongoing education an unattainable goal for many mature aged people , and
- the mature aged persons willingness to undertake work in the residential aged care is influenced by the **image of the aged care industry**, the **nature of aged care work** and the **employment conditions** of the aged care industry

Discussion and Findings

Factors influencing the mature aged person's participation in paid employment

Consistent with the findings of this study, much of the literature pertaining to the issue of mature age unemployment suggests that negative stereotypical images of ageing have operated covertly to form the basis of age discrimination in employment [4-6]. Defined as "differential and discriminatory treatment on the grounds of age"[7], age discrimination in the labour market has been identified in numerous studies as a primary factor in limiting not only the employment opportunities available to mature aged workers, but the training opportunities and conditions of employment as well [6].

As echoed in the findings of this study, many mature aged job seekers report being coerced into early retirement through retrenchment and/or redundancy, or being forced into accepting part-time, casual or contract work with no sustainable or foreseeable long-term employment prospects. Paradoxically, this is despite legislative interventions that support the equitable treatment of all labour market participants irrespective of age [8].

Significantly, in a recent report issued by the Council on the Ageing [COTA, 9], the authors caution that in the absence of additional measures to tackle age discrimination, legislation alone may not provide sufficient incentive for employers to revise their ageist practices. Rather, in terms of labour market participation, they caution that in the absence of supportive strategies that legislation may well act to promote covert and insidious discriminatory practices [9]. Our findings support this view.

Whilst few would dispute the complexities of challenging any entrenched oppressive social structure, be it racism, ageism, sexism or the like, the social and economic costs to society and the individual that accompany the devaluing of ageing render its confrontation an absolute imperative. Indeed, many have argued for the social and economic benefits to be achieved through the prolonged participation of mature aged people in the workforce [10-12].

In challenging traditional ideologies that have determined factors such as the 'duration of the working life', Carson and Kerr [13] argue that Commonwealth government policy objectives are fraught with inherent tensions that undermine the welfare of mature aged workers. For example, baby-boomers, described as victims of the legacy of neo-liberal ideologies, as Carson and Kerr [13] argue, are subject to government policy objectives that on one hand promote labour market restructuring, where high unemployment and non-standard forms of employment [casual, part-time and contract] preclude individual capacity for saving and self-reliance. Yet on the other hand, are subject to policy rhetoric that embraces the competing ideals of independence and self-reliance [13]. The deleterious effects of which, as shown in the findings of this and other studies [14], include not only the harmful effects to the individual through loss of self-esteem and sense of membership, but also the tragic loss to society through the waste of human capital. In the words of one survey respondent:

"I live a pathetic life now.....I haven't worked for 6 years. I'm 49 years old, I had the one job for 27 years. I'm too old to get a job. It's pathetic. I've had 4 interviews in 6 years. I've had about 50 replies from companies, an absolute disgrace. I'm now an empty shell. I've seen the same midday movies repeated 3 times already. You ask why. Is this living? I might as well be dead".

Factors influencing the mature aged person's participation in Vocational Education and Training

In relation to factors that influence the willingness of mature aged persons to undertake further education and training, in light of the findings of this study, two key points need to be highlighted. First, analyses of the findings suggest that there exists much conjecture amongst the mature aged cohort as to the relevance of formal qualifications. Not only were many participants suspicious of extent to which potential employers valued qualifications, but they also expressed concern over their need to attain formal qualifications. Underpinning these concerns were comparative questions related to the amount of time that would be required to actually complete a qualification, as opposed to their age and the anticipated length of working life. Not surprisingly, many participants demonstrated a preference for short courses where they could quickly acquire the skills they needed to return to the workforce.

In relation to the specific needs of older learners, in reconsidering the relevance of formal qualifications, this calls into question our previous assumptions about what it actually means to undertake education and training. As Robinson [15] cautions, no longer can we take for granted the assumption that post-compulsory education entails the rigorous completion of academically recognized qualifications. Rather, if we are to respond to, and foster, the needs of older learners, and particularly those who are marginally attached to the labour market, it is imperative that more diverse, creative and flexible approaches to learning are continuously developed. Like for example, the success that has been seen in the increased participation in adult learning through the modularization of the VET curriculum [16].

The second point to this discussion that warrants further attention relates to the difficulties that are experienced by mature aged [unemployed] people in the self-financing of vocational education and training. These difficulties are especially significant for those mature aged people who are either unemployed, or only marginally attached to the labour force. As Chapman [17] concedes:

“HECS arrangements for higher education offer a solution to the financial market problems inherent in charging for VET. In contrast the up-front fee regimes in Australian VET are poor policy, for both economic and social reasons. Attention should be given to moving VET charging mechanisms more towards income-contingent repayment, which means centralizing the collection of charges through the Australian Taxation Office (p.43).”

Many mature aged people perceive that they are unable to change their unemployment status because of the costs associated with courses, and the seemingly greater value that is placed on educating and employing younger qualified persons. They feel denied access to a livelihood and devalued as a result. They are as Bauman [18 ;41] suggests, “for that reason the [sic] waste of economic progress”.

Factors influencing the mature aged person’s willingness to undertake a career in the work of caring for older people

As outlined earlier, this study was built upon the premise that the life skills and experiences of mature aged persons may be well suited to meeting the needs of older people. Significantly, almost one third (31.4%) of all those surveyed expressed an interest in undertaking a career in the work of caring for older people, Yet, when asked additional questions relating to the acquisition of the necessary educational qualifications this percentage reduced by half to 16%. The most frequently cited concerns that were advanced in explanation were the preservation of their own physical and mental health. This finding focuses attention toward the urgent need for work practices to minimise the Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) hazards that are associated with the work of caring for older people.

The survey findings support the experiences of the case-study participants, each of who complained that the work of caring for older people was physically demanding, if not exhausting, despite the introduction of occupational health and safety protocols such as “the no lift policy¹”[19]. Yet, at the same time they perceived the rewards associated with

¹ A “no lifting” approach refers to a policy where staff are discouraged from physically supporting the weight of those that they are assisting. Mechanical and other aids, such as, slide boards are used instead.

being able to make a positive contribution by caring for another person by far outweighed the negative aspects of performing individual tasks, no matter how unpleasant. However, the environment in which the work was carried out remained problematic.

Consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Marquis [20], that explored the relational deprivation and abuse experienced by residents when denied adequate social and emotional integration, an over reliance on mechanistic and system driven protocols created the greatest level of disenchantment amongst the case study participants. Lescoe-Long [21] and Robertshaw [22] support this view, and concede that the highly structured and inflexible nature of bureaucratic organisational culture, an integral part of many aged care facilities, may not sit comfortably with the expectations and values held by people who are attracted to the work of caring for older people. To strengthen this point, Lescoe-Long [21] adds that those who choose to undertake work of a caring nature often feel some sort of calling (dispositional characteristics) toward the profession. This insight was echoed repeatedly throughout our study.

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