

Juggling work, home and learning in low-paid occupations: a qualitative study

CENTRE FOR WORK + LIFE,
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian

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About the research



Juggling work, home and learning in low-paid occupations: a qualitative study

Barbara Pocock, Jude Elton, Deborah Green, Catherine McMahon and Suzanne Pritchard

The factors that influence the participation of low-skilled and low-paid workers in vocational education and training (VET) is the focus of a major research project being undertaken by the Centre for Work + Life at the University of South Australia.

This report is the culmination of the qualitative component of the larger study and comprises interviews and focus groups with students, employees, employers, training providers and other key stakeholders in the retail, food processing and non-residential aged care sectors across four Australian states.

The study explores a diversity of training needs, time demands, preferences and available support for training from employers, training providers and families. It considers those who spend more time with their families rather than undertake training, as well as those who try to integrate training into their busy lives. It reports on those who prefer jobs which under-utilise their skills as much as it does on those who find themselves caught in such situations. It comments on those who are able to cope with training demands as well as those who face increased challenges because of their literacy skills. It also provides information on employers who are committed to training and, for a variety of reasons, those who do not offer supportive environments for learning.

Key messages

- ✧ While the lack of time to study and costs emerged as the key barriers to training, many of the challenges described by workers and students related to ‘fitting together’ their work, home life, community interests and studying.
- ✧ The financial, time and effort costs of participation in training are high. For low-paid workers in particular any incremental pay or other rewards for extra skills or qualifications gained can be measured in cents rather than dollars—the need to gain or retain a job is the main driver of training.

The authors argue that training models and policies that provide skill-development opportunities over the life course are vital to enable low-paid workers to have multiple opportunities to improve their working lives.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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Executive summary

This report explores the vocational education and training (VET) experiences of low-paid workers in the context of their work–life situations. It is part of a larger study addressing the question of how changing work, home and community structures are affecting the participation of lower-educated and low-paid groups in VET, and the appropriate responses.

It draws on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 158 individuals: 86 workers in retail, food processing and non-residential aged care (a number of whom were also engaged in some form of education and training), 18 students studying to enter these industries, 16 managers and peak council, union, employer and training representatives, 14 vocational educators (teaching courses or coordinating them). Twenty-four ‘strategic interviews’ with stakeholders from industry, government, academe, unions and VET organisations were also conducted.

This report concentrates on the experiences of longer-term low-paid workers, rather than young school or university students, many of whom are casual or short-term.

Many workers find that low-paid jobs provide entry and transition points in the labour market, especially women returning to work, those changing jobs, injured workers and migrants. Their jobs—while low-paid—can help them accommodate caring responsibilities, their desire for a less physically demanding job or they may align with their values and interests. Low-paid jobs can be pathways to transition, for example, to another occupation or to accommodate a change in health circumstances. Others ‘fall’ into low pay, and become unhappily stuck there, with limited pathways to better pay or other work.

Low-paid jobs are diverse. The retail, food processing and aged care industries—and their product markets, income sources, labour processes, skill sets and training arrangements—differ widely. And within each of these industries, circumstances vary between workplaces, especially by size, form of ownership, funding systems, employee turnover, profit margins and the time spans over which profits, costs and investments in training are evaluated. As this report shows, industry and workplaces must recognise this diversity if actions to improve the circumstances of low-paid workers are to succeed.

Many workers in low-paid jobs enjoy aspects of their work: some are eager to learn and they define a good job as one in which they do so. This does not mean, however, that they are satisfied with all aspects of their work or training. Many feel they are underpaid, that rewards for their skill and effort are low; many struggle financially or are stressed by the demands of their job, training and larger life.

This complicates their participation in training, especially where it creates extra financial or time demands. Time and money are major themes in this report: these two factors shape access to, and experience of, VET for workers and students in low-paid occupations. Great diversity in the time and money arrangements for low-paid workers is evident—even amongst those studying in similar occupations, qualifications and locations. Chances are not evenly distributed; they are arbitrarily available.

Workers’ motivations for training are shaped by their work–life context, their life-course stage, the regulatory requirements of their jobs, their employer’s attitude to and support for learning, their

previous educational experiences, the quality of training, and the potential returns from their education and qualifications. Employers' motivations are also multiple and diverse. However, mandatory requirements stand out as major drivers of VET in low-paid occupations. These constitute a major driver of VET for both employers and employees. In contrast, factors like higher pay are weak. Training to keep or get a job figures strongly as a driver for VET for low-paid workers.

This report sets out a range of factors in the domains of industry, work, home and VET facilities that shape the opportunity and inclination to train and the nature of skill development. Learning opportunities that do not create time strains, income loss or costs are much more likely to be entertained by workers, for whom every dollar counts and who are often stretched for time. It is hard to over-estimate the importance of time and money to these workers.

Personal characteristics and educational pedagogies are also important in shaping workers' willingness to train. For example, older men who have prior experience of retrenchment despite having qualifications and skills are much less willing to train than those who are younger and likely to benefit in pay or job security when they train. Many workers and their managers are making implicit 'rate of return' calculations on their investments in education, and in this context, time, costs, age, inconvenience and the economic and non-economic dividends of training are significant. However, many employers and employees perceive the rate of return from VET as low.

Workplace characteristics and cultures are very important, with considerable diversity in evidence. Workplaces with good rewards for training, active training 'agents', an effective voice for workers about their training aspirations, training in paid time, in-house educational infrastructure, and management that prioritises training and skill development and aligns training with real work problems are associated with much more positive outcomes than those that lack these characteristics.

Language and literacy, along with education that builds confidence, are very important to many low-paid workers. Integration of high-quality programs in these areas, including for women re-entering work after children, are also very important.

Not all workers seek formal recognition for their skill development, especially older workers or those with long tenure in their current jobs. Some do not seek 'a piece of paper', while others do, hoping to improve job options, job security and mobility.

Some low-paid workers have skills and/or qualifications that are not utilised. The reasons for this are diverse and interesting, indicating that not all under-utilisation is a bad thing: in some cases, it reflects personal preferences, life stage and health. For others, under-utilisation is very frustrating and stands in the way of participation in further training.

The report summarises factors that create opportunities for training and skill development for low-paid workers in the context of their work-life circumstances. It points to actions to improve the circumstances of low-paid workers, including reducing the time and costs of training and increasing the voice and agency of low-paid workers in making their way through VET in the context of their work and other life activities.

Clearly education and training is an important aspect of working life for many low-paid workers. Many undertake some training fairly frequently. Much of it is driven by mandatory requirements (for example, health and safety, food handling and related training). For some, participation in education and training is essential to enter low-paid jobs, to retain such jobs, and to move between these and other jobs to increase earnings, job satisfaction or improve career options. When time and money are in short supply, the nature of government, employer and educator support is important in enabling successful outcomes. Poor-quality training, high fees or costs, significant employee time and effort, or the failure to provide literacy and learning support, are costly.

This report shows that the experiences of low-paid workers are very uneven, suggesting that more systemic and better coordinated action by the four key parties—managers, educators, governments and employees—could help.

This report is divided into four sections. The first describes the context for the study, including the research approach, the three industries in which the study is concentrated and some key aspects of low-paid work and the context it creates for training and learning. The second section considers the drivers for VET—from the point of view of employers, employees and VET students. The third section explores the barriers that inhibit VET participation in low-paid occupations. The final section sets out a model of the systemic factors that shape VET outcomes in these low-paid occupations in their work, home, community and educational contexts, and outlines the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors that help explain VET outcomes.

Background to the project

This report arises from a three-year project, entitled *Low-paid workers and VET: increasing VET participation amongst lower paid workers over the life cycle*, conducted for NCVER by the Centre for Work + Life. The research set out to examine how changing conditions at work, home and in the wider community affect the participation of lower-educated and lower-paid workers in vocational education and training (VET). Recognising that participation in VET is no panacea for the challenges experienced by low-paid workers, the research considers VET experiences from the viewpoint of employers, employees and students as workers in the context of their changing work–life circumstances.

The study began with a literature review, an analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and NCVER datasets, stakeholder conversations and a discussion paper. In 2009, 2691 Australian workers were surveyed as part of the Centre’s 2009 Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI) and asked how work–life pressures influence the capacity and motivation of individuals across the income spectrum to engage in education and training (including university and VET education). The report, *Work–life issues and participation in education and training* by Natalie Skinner was published by NCVER in late 2009. That research showed that low-paid workers participating in VET experienced significantly higher work–life conflict than those who were not participating in VET. Lower-paid workers were less confident of employer support for their education and training than higher-paid workers and were more likely to lack interest in training. In addition, men were more confident than women that their employer would support and pay for work-related training. Lower-paid women were more likely to be engaged in education or training and they were also more likely to experience higher levels of work–life conflict as a result of their participation. On the other hand, for men, work–life conflict was not affected by participation in education or training.

To supplement that quantitative analysis, in 2008–09 we conducted focus groups and interviews with low-paid workers, VET students, managers and VET educators in four states (South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia) in the non-residential aged care, retail and food processing industries. Following the focus groups and interviews, a series of ‘strategic interviews’ were conducted with senior personnel from government, industry skills councils, businesses and unions and with academics, VET educators and equity, social inclusion and research experts. In this stage of the research 21 interviews were conducted with 24 participants. This paper provides an overview of the analysis of these focus groups, interviews and ‘strategic interviews’.

It is important to distinguish vocational education and training from ‘skill development’ because respondents did not see these as synonymous: sometimes VET did not actually mean the acquisition of new skills. Some VET was undertaken to meet, for example, a mandatory requirement rather than to acquire new skills relevant to the job. Further, there was no automatic flow-on from gaining skills to skills utilisation. Some low-paid workers gained qualifications and new skills without their utilisation. In other cases, low-paid workers had qualifications (for example, university degrees) that were not used in their current working lives. The reasons for this are diverse as discussed in this report.

Research approach

This is a qualitative study. Interviews and focus groups were held in three industries in four states, as follows:

- ✧ food processing: Victoria
- ✧ non-residential aged care: Queensland
- ✧ retail: Western Australia
- ✧ non-residential aged care and retail: South Australia

Students in formal VET courses in TAFE (technical and further education) institutes were interviewed (or participated in focus groups). In addition, employees in a set of workplaces participated in interviews or focus groups; many of these were also participating in some form of training.

Employees were drawn from a small number of enterprises in each of the three industries. In addition, managers, educators, course coordinators, training providers, union representatives and officials and some government experts were interviewed.

These interview and focus group data were gathered to provide insight about the perspectives, motivations and experiences of workers, students, employers and educators in a set of lower-paid occupations, complementing quantitative research.

By and large, our analysis reflects practice in larger enterprises: most interviewees were engaged in larger workplaces, or chains of workplaces. However, some respondents reflected on past experience in smaller workplaces, whether as employees, managers or educators.

The workplace-based interviewees were drawn from a small number of enterprises involved in the study: two large retail chains (with interviews in two states), several large aged care providers (with interviews in two states), and three food processing firms. Managers in each of these sites agreed to the interview of a range of staff about their work, life and educational experiences. This means that this analysis probably reflects the more positive end of actual practice. Larger companies generally are more attentive to education and training than smaller ones. It also means that we cannot generalise from these results to the larger industry sectors in which these enterprises were located, or from the views of a small number of employees, students, managers and educators to the general working population. Participants were interviewed or involved in focus groups and all were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed thematically across a range of issues that emerged from the interviews. In this report interview quotes are attributed to pseudonyms; however, the details for quotes vary, as it was not always possible, especially in focus groups, to trace a comment to a specific person.

Alongside the quantitative studies compiled within the larger project, this report illuminates the experience of employees, students, educators and managers and provides some insights about the complexity of training and skills formation for lower-paid workers in the context of their work-life circumstances.

A more detailed description of the recruitment methodology and profile of participants is provided in appendix 1.

Industry context

The three industries of non-residential aged care, retail and food processing which are the focus of this study are very different. However, all are significant employers in Australia, and they share

some challenging workforce problems, including an aging workforce. Each of them has a significant portion of low-paid jobs.

Table 1 shows that the three larger sectors in which the focus industries are located are significant in employment terms. Together, manufacturing, retail and health care and social assistance accounted for a third of all employment in 2011.

Table 1 Employment by industry sector trend estimates, February 2011, Australia

Industry	Persons	Per cent
Manufacturing	998 400	8.8
Retail trade	1 247 500	10.9
Health care & social assistance	1 310 800	11.5
Other industries	7 856 500	68.8
Total employees	11 413 200	100.0

Source: ABS (2011).

These three industries are all expected to grow in employment in coming years and each is also expected to require an increase in the skills of workers. The 2010 environmental scans for the three national industry skills councils indicate more growth ahead: a rate of 1.1% pa over four years in retail (Service Skills Australia 2010), 5.1% over four years in food processing (Agrifood Industry Skills Council 2010) and a continuation of the current growth rate of over a third in ten years in community services and health (Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council 2010).

These industries face challenges in employment and skills. Each is anticipating skills shortages in coming years. For example, the agrifoods industry identifies key workforce development challenges as ‘attraction of workers, adoption of higher level skills across the workforce, adoption and diffusion of new research, practice and technology across the industry and workforce retention and effective skills utilisation’ (Agrifood Industry Skills Council 2010, p.iii). In the community services sector:

There is a continued need to grow the workforce, reduce the proportion of workers with no qualifications and increase the proportion of workers with higher competencies.

(Community Service and Health Industry Skills Council 2010, p.4)

Given growth in the services sector generally, it is likely that the issues facing low-paid workers in these industries, in the context of their work–life circumstances, have wider relevance.

Each of these industries is labour-intensive and operates on tight margins; this affects their capacity to invest in the development of people. At the same time, each is critically dependent upon the skills and capacities of its workforce. For many workers in each industry, pay rates are low and organisational structures are flat. Many workers are long-term casual or part-time employees. Pay returns on higher skills or qualifications are often low or non-existent: in each industry a pay increase of around 50 cents to \$1 an hour is common for workers who achieve a certificate III. Their base hourly rate is often around \$17 per hour (in 2009–10).

Some training challenges are shared across these three industries. For example, some stakeholders suggest that training places and incentives for employment and/or training are poorly targeted, and in some cases low-paid workers describe training that ‘ticks the box’ to meet audit requirements but delivers few new, relevant skills and is of poor quality. Sometimes new training schemes are hastily implemented, so that managers and educators scramble to find students to fill places and to put together good-quality, appropriate training opportunities.

There are diverse ‘types’ of low-paid workers in these sectors: those who are employed for short periods while they make their way to other occupations and those who are long-term workers in the sector. Our interviews focus upon the latter.

Most of the employees and students interviewed in this study were involved either in in-house training that was often unaccredited (like product knowledge and occupational health and safety training) or in certificate III courses. Training arrangements in the three industries varied according to a range of factors, including the nature of the product/service, its costs and profit, and prevailing training arrangements.

Not surprisingly, our interviews showed great diversity in enterprises. For example, one food processing firm was privately owned, profitable and invested strongly in a well-developed internal education and training program that was highly integrated in the firm’s overall strategy. It was at the ‘high end’ of investment in a knowledgeable, long-tenured workforce and a constantly improving production process, including in relation to minimising environmental impacts. At the other end of the spectrum were accounts from employees, managers and educators in very small retail firms where margins were tight, turnover high and investment in training minimal (and perhaps negative, in view of some evidence of the ‘harvesting’ of government incentive payments for trainees).

This local enterprise level of diversity is important. It shapes the education and training experiences of low-paid workers and it works against any easy generalisations about the experience of low-paid workers and their education and training experiences. However, the study does suggest some factors that emerge as consistently relevant to outcomes.

A more detailed description of each of the industry sectors is provided in appendix 2.

What low-paid jobs are like: the context for VET participation

Working conditions are especially important in shaping VET outcomes in most low-paid occupations, given that much training is undertaken on the job.

It’s taxing

For many, low-paid work is physically taxing. This means opening books at night to study is a strain. Managers and workers in food processing spoke about the physical nature of this production-based work. In the retail sector workers spoke about their jobs being physically tiring, multitasked with multiple demands and with some workers working long shifts and unsocial hours.

For those who work with clients, work can also be emotionally exhausting.

It’s confronting, it’s emotive, we’re seeing people as they’re really are in their homes and it can be quite stressful when you see some of the situations our elderly are living in. They’re isolated often, they’re frail, they’re unwell often and you’re perhaps the only person they see on any given day.

(Natalie, VET educator, aged care, SA)

The costs of work

Low pay, part-time hours, and the lack of promotional possibilities meant that many low-paid workers had very limited financial resources. For some, the costs of working were also problematic. For example, workers in non-residential aged care needed access to a car. Many workers in this sector spoke of the financial difficulties associated with maintaining a vehicle, with

most of the discussion focusing on the reimbursement of travel costs. Such reimbursement varied between employers.

Hours of work are variable

Industry differences are obvious in relation to hours of work. For example, some part-timers in aged care sought more hours of work, while those in food processing were likely to work shift work (which significantly dampened their enthusiasm for training). In the retail sector hours were sometimes unpredictable, inadequate as a living wage, and many worked outside extended or normal hours (for example, on weekends).

Part-time and casual workers in the retail and aged care sectors spoke of the difficulties created by changes in the hours of work allocated, particularly if limited notice was given. For aged care workers in community settings, the availability of work was dependent on clients' needs, their changing circumstances and the terms of funding care packages. Workers spoke of the difficulties they experienced when their hours of work were tied to particular clients and what it meant when hours were reduced:

Panic first. Then somehow just – because I am paying a mortgage by myself and things are very tight but work is aware of that and they are trying their best to get me more work.

(Ruth, aged care, SA)

Extended hours and shiftwork

Workers in the food processing and retail sectors often worked eight to 12-hour shifts, which could include weekend work. Some worked rotating morning, afternoon and night shifts. Many workers in the retail sector worked weekends to cover for trading hours and described how this interfered with their home and social lives:

We're doing a horrific roster, we're doing a Friday night, coming back Saturday at 8.30 and working and we're not even getting a weekend break and they said 'business needs'. But you still have to have a balanced family life.

(Mandy, retail, WA)

Often the additional hours meant that these workers were 'rushed off their feet' and exhausted at the end of a long shift, straining their work–life balance and sapping energy for additional activities like VET participation:

I'm extremely busy ... our busiest day is Sunday, I worked Sunday, every Sunday ... you're in a sweat box. You're running all day and at the end of the day I've never felt so tired and I've got a lot of energy for my age ... I don't get home until 7.00 I leave at 7.00 in the morning – I find I've been falling asleep.

(Josephine, retail, WA)

Some described the impact that shiftwork had on their social life, family life and health. Workers in the food processing sector described shiftwork as tiring: 'it ruins you'. Working shifts means that training had to be in paid time, if workers were to have the energy for it.

Flexibility: good if you can get it

Employee-centred flexibility enabled workers to balance their home and work lives, while employer-centred flexibility often resulted in difficulties for workers. Some workers moved away from higher-paid work to lower-paid work pursuing hours that better met their needs or enabled them to better balance their work and home lives:

I worked full-time, because my husband passed away two and a half years ago, and I went to full-time, and that was really hard because my kids were always in before school care and after school care. So I was dropping them off at seven o'clock in the morning and not picking them up until five o'clock in the afternoon. I did it for a year, but then I just said 'I can't do this anymore, it's so unfair on them'. So I finish at 2.30 now. It's good because I'm

there to pick the kids up from school and they come home. If your child's sick and you have to go home, they'll just say 'go'. You can work the hours that you want to work.

(Donna, 35–40 years, aged care worker, Qld)

Similarly, Ruth a single mother of a child with special needs looked for work that enabled her to be 'there before and after school'. This was particularly important to her because she had previously experienced difficulties finding suitable childcare. Such employee-based flexibility enables workers to balance their work and home life, often in exchange for lower pay.

Some attributed job satisfaction to working for an organisation that understood their needs and commitments and was 'family minded'. For instance, Sandy works in a large retail company that upholds the philosophy that 'family comes before work. Work is work and family is family'. Sandy's daughter was being bullied at school, so now she starts a bit later so she can walk her daughter to her new school. Sandy appreciates her workplace taking account of her life beyond work in its rostering and does unpaid work after hours, dropping off merchandise to disabled or elderly customers who cannot get to the shop.

While employee-centred flexibility enabled some workers to meet their caring responsibilities, others saw it as a way of accommodating changes in their life course. For instance, Pauline is a single parent of older children who has worked night shifts in the residential aged care industry for many years. More recently she has moved into non-residential, community-based aged care because it offers more job satisfaction and flexibility, an issue of increasing significance as she ages. This flexibility is vital to accommodation of study:

The community work is excellent. It gives you a lot of flexibility in what you want to do and I sort of feel in the future that as I get older I will be able to curtail the work to suit my capabilities in that work and also they are very willing if you want to undertake any extra studies or you have a special occasion or something like that to re-roster your work to somebody else so you can carry that out.

(Pauline, aged care, SA)

Some older workers seek to move from full-time to part-time work as they approach retirement:

I think with some of the more mature ones – they've been in the workforce for a long time and only want three or four days a week. They will say 'I'll do these three days but I prefer you not to ring me for those extra days', they've worked five days a week for a long time.

(Brooke, clinical program manager, aged care, Qld)

Similarly, Kate, a manager in the food processing sector, noted that 'quite a few of our older workers are now choosing to work part-time in order to just slowly ease into [retirement]'. In some instances, employers adopted more flexible work practices, which enabled older workers to job-share as a means of transitioning into retirement. These forms of employee-centred flexibility enable workers to achieve a good work–life balance at different stages of their working lives and can help facilitate skill development.

In some cases flexibilities met employers' needs not employees. For example, aged care workers' hours were linked to client needs, food processing workers' hours were linked to production demands and retail workers' rostering was shaped by economic circumstances:

Your hours get adjusted also by what happens to your clients. Sometimes they go into respite. Sometimes they pass away. So your hours can really fluctuate. You can have a lot one week and then within two or three weeks it can be all gone. I am not working as many hours as I would like at the moment.

(Linay, aged care Qld, studying a certificate III in aged care)

Lack of flexibility encouraged some to change jobs. For example Vince now earns half in retail what he did previously as a machine operator. He is full-time but no longer has to work 12-hour shifts; he prefers the shorter hours. However, Vince would like to use his information technology

(IT) degree and had recently been rejected for a much better paying IT job because 'I couldn't work on Sundays [once a month] because I have to go to church and they couldn't take me for just that reason'.

Second jobs

A small number of participants in this study worked second jobs to supplement their income. Often these jobs were in addition to full-time work that regularly included long hours and shiftwork. This diminished their capacity to participate in VET:

I'm trying to have a kid ... so I will have to find another job along the way or get a better job. Or a second job. Like another one of my colleagues, who is about to get a kid. He told me he would have to go and get a second job, because the pay check is not enough.
(Vince, retail, WA)

Like I'm getting, I'm 21 now, I want to look at moving out of home and all that and like just, pay up front. I wouldn't be able to, so I've got to get out and work harder and get more money.
(Michael, food processing, Vic.)

Chris, a manager in the food processing sector, describes the work that some employees do in addition to their full-time job:

Works part-time at a restaurant. Another guy leaves here and goes to a cleaning contract job. [Another] guy works two jobs as well. He sends money overseas to his family. Works extremely hard, he's extremely generous man, lives very simply.
(Chris, manager, food processing, Vic.)

Workplace injury or retrenchment

Some workers—especially men—find themselves in a low-paid occupation after a workplace injury or retrenchment. As a result some were not using their skills and qualifications. However, they undertake mandatory VET training as requested. For example, Harry had previously worked in timber floor installations, a job he enjoyed and which was better paid than his current retail work. Although he is appreciative of the opportunity to work again, he misses his trade. He describes his current job:

Good, and I've met some good people through it, that's for sure, and it's got me back into work, because I was getting real depressed from not working and just sitting around all the time. I'm not quite a retail person, I'm more of a tradie, but yeah ... kind of a setback to be in retail.
(Harry, retail, WA)

Retrenchment had similar consequences for Philip:

I got made redundant and much of my background is in the printing trade, so this is completely a new field to me and a friend who works here as well, he just managed to get a job here. He told us about it, so I rang up and had an interview and got the job. I suppose it was just a matter of necessity. I've got a family, a mortgage, couldn't be out of work too long so here I am.
(Philip, food processing, Vic.)

Migrants: creating community through work

Some migrants found it easier to find work in areas related to their prior work experience, while others were unable to use their existing qualifications and were employed in unrelated areas. While the transition can entail a cost, it can also bring benefits:

I worked a lot [in the] food area. I was really happy and I now feel it is my home because I work here and I get money from here and I supply my family and home, so I consider it to be my home. And I'm really happy because of my mates, they are friendly.
(Jamie, former teacher in Sudan, food processing, Vic.)

Esther came to Australia from Lebanon. She now works in aged care, and has studied a range of courses: she loves to learn. She enjoys her work and the contribution she makes, including the way her job complements her caring responsibilities for her husband and family at home. Her background raising nine children helped equip her for the job, she says, and as carer in a multicultural service, she can put her experience and language to good use.

The nature of work can constitute a barrier to participation in VET where it is physically or emotionally exhausting, unpredictable, costly or inflexible, or where preceding experience—whether in another occupation or country—has exhausted enthusiasm for learning new skills. However, conditions of work, such as flexibility and predictable hours, can also encourage and support VET participation.

VET learning that accommodates the characteristics of low-paid work has much more chance of success in these industries, especially where it does not add to the time, income or energy shortfalls that affected many interviewees. In the next section we turn to the drivers for VET in these occupations, considering those affecting employers, employees and students.

Drivers for VET

The most notable shared characteristic of training in low-paid occupations in the three focus industries is its diversity. However, amidst that diversity, a set of drivers and circumstances are evident which create opportunities for skill development—or inhibit them. It is useful to consider drivers affecting employers, employees and VET students distinctly, given their differences, and we do so in the following three sections, beginning with the drivers of training from the perspective of employers.

What drives employers of low-paid workers to offer VET?

Compliance

Compliance is a major driver of on-the-job VET for employers of low-paid workers in the three focus industries. This is most evident in food processing and aged care; however, it is also evident in retail, with mandatory requirements associated with training subsidies and award classification structures influencing the nature of training undertaken:

The training is typically around, generally, the compulsories around safety, training and critical control points which we have to do, which are the mandatories.

(Manager, food processing, Vic.)

Requirements in relation to food handling and occupational health and safety drive participation in non-accredited in-house education, which is the most common form of training undertaken by low-paid workers in these sectors.

Other courses are also offered. For example, in the aged care sector there is a growing requirement for a certificate III qualification for non-residential aged carers. This is already a requirement in relation to care financed by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and there is an expectation that this requirement will become general.

Unfortunately, compliance-driven education is not always of high quality. It sometimes constitutes ‘tick the box’ confirmation of existing knowledge, or poor-quality training offered in the form of out-of-date workbooks or training exercises that do not relate well to actual work. In other cases, employees report learning new and interesting things in their courses—sometimes after decades on the job—and sometimes particularly through the peer exchanges that occur in a learning environment more than from the formal content.

This mandatory compliance ‘stick’ drives much employer and employee investment in training in these low-paid occupations. Employees undertake training in this context, not as part of a career progression or in pursuit of higher pay and more challenging work, but in order to *retain* their jobs. On the employer side, training is required of employees either because of regulatory requirements or because training subsidies have been received and require evidence of training.

Product and process knowledge

A second major driver of training and skill development in these workplaces was created by managers' desire for employees to be able to provide good service to customers (for example, product knowledge in retail) or contribute to process improvement and problem-solving (for example, in food processing). This type of non-mandatory training was very unevenly available across different firms, depending upon the inclination of individual employers, managers and supervisors and their approach to work organisation, job design and employee relations (just as Keep has observed in the UK (2009a, p.5). Wide differences in the inclination to train (beyond mandatory requirements) are striking in these occupations.

The quality of the training partnership between employers, employees and training providers was important to the dividends and drivers for clients, process and product-oriented training. Strong partnerships with positive outcomes involved trainers or registered training organisations (RTOs) who ensured that training related to actual operations or was nationally accredited: both of these encouraged workers' participation. Training providers' knowledge of the specific business was very important to quality education, and ensuring this took effort on the part of the employer to carefully partner with a training provider who could deliver this and offer quality training that linked to local workplace processes. 'I don't want a provider who's read a book, and is just going to spit it back', as one manager in food processing put it. In this case, in-house training in process improvement was provided by an external provider, who worked closely with local staff to carefully integrate education with the work process. As the human resources manager put it: 'It is important to take a holistic approach ... We're not just doing the training, we are embedding the training in the processes that enable [it to be used] ... it's important that training providers know your business and that they provide training that is tailored to your business'. The government subsidy for this certificate IV training in competitive manufacturing meant that cost was minimal to the firm.

A similar perspective arose in aged care, where a representative of a peak council for training in aged care explained that training providers who worked closely with workplaces beyond delivering a single outcome could deliver more long-lasting skill development gains, linked to organisational processes:

[RTOs] working with organisations around the transformational process rather than the transactional process in relation to their workforce is a much more useful outcome for everyone ... It's not happening everywhere, but it *is* happening and it is a critical issue. If we can significantly change the sort of relationships that registered training providers, VET institutions and workplaces are having [that will help enormously]. It's then not about how many students can I get, it's actually about what sort of relationship we need to manage so that the workforce can progress ... an RTO partner who can actually support workforce development – and it's not all about qualifications, it's about skill sets, and planned interventions. (VET industry training representative, aged care, Qld)

Does the prospect of a high rate of return motivate employers to create training opportunities?

Economic theory suggests that employer investment in training will reflect their rate of return from such investment. The expectation of a decent rate of return from their extensive investment in training was evident in two firms: one in retail that employed a high proportion of full-timers with long tenure, and one in food processing that paid higher than award rates and significant shift loadings. In both of these firms, investment in training was an explicit strategy to retain employees and deliver high-level customer service (through good product knowledge) and process improvements, in the expectation that their significant investments would reap returns.

In the retail sector more generally, especially in smaller firms and those with high rates of turnover and/or casual workers, beyond mandatory training (for example, for pharmacy assistants so they could handle certain products) employers sought ‘cost neutral’ training (or training that was actually profitable, through receipt of government training subsidies in excess of true costs). As one human resources manager in retail put it, ‘I’d love to say that employers are training-focused but they’re not. They’re dollar focused.’

Implicitly, these employers did not expect to reap a positive return from training. Their margins were so tight that they chose not to invest, and so investment of their own resources in training was low or nil. With a high proportion of casual workers, especially in retail and aged care, and an expectation that casuals ‘could leave at any time’, there is a significant problem of access to training for the large category of casual workers.

Many other accounts in this study suggest that rate of return calculations do not drive VET in these occupations. Mandatory requirements created by industry or national labour standards and qualifications frameworks are much more significant.

Government as a training driver

Many retail managers look for training that is cost-neutral, especially in smaller firms. In some cases, employers receive sizeable incentive payments for taking on trainees and can pay them a low training wage (75–80% of the usual full wage rate); however, students are responsible for paying course fees and some employers do not use some of their government-provided incentive payments to help trainees pay their fees. Others do not provide very positive on-the-job support for trainees. As a human resources manager for a group of small businesses as well as a TAFE educator put it:

Say a trainee is doing Cert II. After the first 3 months, [the employer] gets the first incentive payment [it’s about \$1800]. Really with all due respect, that is what most employers are looking for – getting that incentive payment. I bully the employers into paying the [trainees’] fees, because in retail the fees are the trainees’ responsibility. That’s \$600 so [the fees] are not cheap ... Bear in mind that the trainee is on 75–80% of the award ... If they are on a health care card, the fees are about half. [I say to the employer] ‘Pay the fees, show some confidence in this young person. If you’re going to get your \$1800, invest \$300 in this kid’.

This interviewee went on to comment on the incentive that such payments create for churning through employees: ‘It’s an encouragement to churn because you get a new \$1800 every year’, while the statistics for training numbers suggest an increase in training effort and numbers.

Other employers behave quite differently, passing on a portion of the government incentive payments to help trainees meet their course costs, and provide mentorship and on-the-job support, hoping to develop product knowledge and customer service capacities in employees, and to retain them beyond their traineeship.

Time

As we discuss below, time is a major issue for employees and students participating in VET, as they navigate their work, home and community responsibilities. Time is also a major issue for many managers and supervisors, who find that the demands of production or service delivery constrain time available for training. As one manager put it in food processing, ‘I can’t run the line with even one or two short’. In this food processing firm this meant it was taking workers ‘close to three years’ to complete a certificate II.

Supervisors and managers indicated that they often found it difficult to train workers while also working themselves, and they had great difficulty slowing production in order to develop skill, and this had an impact on overall learning:

Some of the time when you are trying to show people, explain the job to them and that, you're sort of doing it in a work day and because you're working too you haven't got time to do it properly. (Anne, food processing, Vic.)

Employers found it difficult to release staff and reschedule other workers to cover for those who were training. In some instances this had an effect on production, which in turn reduced profitability:

Training is very, very difficult to get from the employer's perspective because how do I free up that time without affecting ... production. (Chris, supervisor, food processing, Vic.)

Other managers found it difficult to provide the ongoing resources to mentor workers through their training. Where VET educators expect a level of workplace reinforcement as well as delivery of content, this can be challenging for employers, first-line supervisors and managers to deliver:

A lot of the time when the [training] funding comes through, you work in partnership with a provider. That provider will then provide either online or face-to-face workshop sessions, but there is a lot of expectancy by the providers for us to provide resources, to mentor our staff. And, to make sure we keep monitoring where they're at. Now that is resources. So that's on top of all of our other work. That's not funded. And that puts a great strain on the organisation. Sometimes, there have been funding and opportunities that we have said, we just can't do this. We don't have the resources to provide that background support.

(Kate, industry representative, non-residential aged care, SA)

Skill development: fuelling labour turnover?

Some employers believe that qualifications may assist workers in changing jobs. While some valued and supported formal qualifications in their employees, others were concerned they could potentially lose workers after they had invested in training:

You don't want to be training people all the time. It's a very, very costly exercise for companies to continue training new people for a year and then they go.

(Chris, supervisor, food processing, Vic.)

Thus high turnover in some low-paid occupations acts as a systemic disincentive for employers to invest in training. Although Chris believes training to be important, as a supervisor he does not want to spend money (and time) training workers for the next employer. This presents a conflict of interest as low-paid workers on the one hand look to enhance their job mobility through skill, while employers look to retain staff and their investment in training. The degree of this conflict varies between the three sectors and is also shaped by the structure of ownership (for profit or not), funding systems and the nature of profit margins.

What drives employees in low-paid occupations to participate in VET?

Many employees in low-paid occupations are not interested in training: 'I'm too busy and have no desire to become something else', as a male retail worker put it. A female colleague in the same group pointed to a range of factors:

When you work full-time and you have a household to run, you don't have enough hours in the day really ... and also probably the financial side of it ... you're probably not going to get any extra financial assistance from government, so that's put me off. If work was willing to assist or give you a bit more time to put into your study, especially if it was study that's going to lead into your work ...

(Female retail worker, SA)

Across the three sectors, entering low-paid work and undertaking VET in relation to it was driven by a range of reasons. These varied at different stages of the life course. Training to meet mandatory requirements explained a great deal of informal training amongst these workers. Some were motivated to find more intrinsically rewarding or less physically stressful work. For others, low-paid occupations provided either an entry point to the labour market or a stepping stone to higher-paid work. Experiences like injury, retrenchment or immigration also brought workers into low-paid occupations and drew them into VET so they were qualified to remain there.

Mandatory motivations

Generally workers were not calculating—even implicitly—how their investment of time and money might create a positive return later—except that the absence of mandatory skills might cost them their jobs. Like their bosses, they were thus mostly motivated by the mandatory nature of training, which for them meant that without it their job would be at risk:

You've got to jump through the hoop to be an aged carer ... You have to have the piece of paper. (Aged carer, studying certificate III, Qld)

It's not so much money as security of tenure if you like, that staff [who are training] are recognising. (Peak council representative, aged care, Qld)

Some aged care workers found their certificate III materials out of date, poorly written, and simplistic. They wanted to know more about specific diseases of aging and felt their on-the-job in-house training provided by their employer was more relevant, useful and better quality. Relevance was an important driver of training:

[I've done] mostly food and safety training. I found it very good. At the time you don't want to do it. But it was good. I did because it got me a job I believe. I understand quite a bit about the dangers of cleaning and not cleaning. (Worker, food processing, Vic.)

In this factory, workers trained 'because we had to' and described their training as 'all common sense'. Not surprisingly, threat of job loss constituted a powerful motivator: '[I do it] for the sake of keeping my job', as a food processing worker put it. This constitutes a kind of 'rate of return' calculation, in that without such training their income would be nil.

'Because the boss asked me to'

Some workers trained because 'the boss asked me to': 'It was there to do so we took it ... the company wanted us to ... But it didn't make any difference to what we did ... In terms of learning how to use the machines, you just learn off the workers here' (Worker, food processing, Vic.). Kathy's manufacturing supervisor's course was undertaken at her employer's request, to make her boss 'look good': its poor quality made little difference to her skills she felt.

Most employees who participate in mandatory training do so without complaint, because their boss tells them they need to do it—to handle food or patients, for example: 'I'd do more if I had to ... if it has to be done, it has to be done. If it's required you would have to make the time wouldn't you? It's just the way it goes.'

These workers are by and large happy to comply, especially given that most of this training is in paid work time. However, this was not always the case:

My sister had to do her food handlers at night after work. She wasn't paid for it. (Worker, food processing, Vic.)

All the process workers at Factory X did a level II with all their staff ... They expected staff to stay after work hours. Then they were supplied with Pizzas for tea to encourage them to do it in their own time ... once a month I think. [But] normally people would expect to do it during work hours I think. (Manager, food processing, Vic.)

Those studying for a certificate III usually did some study in their own time, as well as some at work.

Is gaining a credential a driver for low-paid employees?

Based on our interviews, we found that gaining a credential is an uneven driver for low-paid employees: it is not available for in-house training in some workplaces. However, in another case managers ensured that advanced manufacturing training provided by an external trainer was accredited to make it more attractive to workers and at their request: ‘the employees asked for national accreditation ... so we went off and we found a nationally accredited [option]’ (Human resources manager, food processing, Vic.). One of the workers in this company describes how experience had taught him the value of accreditation:

When I was retrenched—it was an experience!—I realised that all of the knowledge I had in my past job was all internal courses. Absolutely not recognised outside the company. So when I went to go for a job they’d say, ‘Well, what have you done?’ I’d say ‘I’ve done this and this ...’ – and it comes down to the piece of paper that other companies expect you to have. If you don’t have that or it’s not transferable from one place to another, you might as well not do it.

(Worker, food processing, Vic.)

In another smaller factory, a food processing worker describes the value he saw in a credential: ‘now anywhere in Australia that any one of us goes we’ve got a food handling certificate’. (That said, this worker did not feel that he had learned anything new in gaining this certificate: ‘everyone pretty much knew everything’.) Much of the training for these process operators was learned while working: when you start ‘they just kind of put you in the room where all the machines were ... You just picked it up gradually.’

In other cases, workers had qualifications but they were not recognised, or the skills were not integrated into the work allocation and job design. For shift workers, whose time and energy are short, this kind of unutilised skill or wasted training burns out interest in learning: ‘the company seems a bit oblivious to what skills people have, and what courses they have done’ (Food processing worker, Vic.).

Many workers were not optimistic that employers who provided in-house training would provide a credential. Some workers said they could show their work capabilities in other ways to prospective employers (that is, by describing their experience): ‘I can write it on my resume. They can check it out but I don’t believe I need a certificate’ (Sandy, retail worker, WA). Given the evidence that some employers choose employees based more on behavioural characteristics than formal qualifications, this may be a rational strategy. In both the food processing and retail sectors, qualifications were not seen as essential or actively sought from job applicants. Instead, employers in these sectors placed more value on personal attributes such as loyalty and willingness to work as part of a team:

I think you’ll find that employers are looking for more loyalty and that is they would like to know that they can have people for longer terms of employment, not necessarily longer hours, but knowing that they’re reliable and they can be there.

(Luke, retail, SA)

Recruitment of workers in these sectors is strongly influenced by personal attributes as opposed to formal qualifications. Winnie, an industry representative in the food processing sector, describes the importance of personal attributes:

It’s sort of sad to say but probably the thing that I would find more beneficial is the attitude of the person who comes on board. Not really their Certificate because it hasn’t really added value. So I would see those other things as being probably more important. The attitude of someone, the enthusiasm, the initiative.

(Winnie, training provider, food processing, Vic.)

Some workers recognised that formal qualifications were not always valued by employers and so did not seek them. This was particularly evident in the food processing and retail sectors, where much training tends to be specific to the workplace.

However, some workers in the retail and food processing sectors believed their qualification gave them an edge over other job applicants.

When directly asked about it, younger workers, who anticipate job mobility, showed more interest in achieving formal qualifications with industry recognition and could facilitate mobility: 'Like John and Rohan here: John's near the end of his career and he said training's probably not his thing. But Rohan's looking at it as a long-term career move. So obviously age [matters]' (Food processing worker, Vic.).

Many workers were motivated to train more by the potential of learning skills that help them solve challenges in their jobs; in some cases, learning of this kind—practical and relevant—led to credentials and further training but these were rarely a primary motivation.

Does the prospect of a return on VET motivate employees?

Similar to their employers, the expectation of reaping a financial return from training was a weak motivator for workers to engage in VET in these occupations. As one manager in food processing put it, 'They just want to come to work, do their jobs and I would probably do the same if I was earning the same money ... Why would you want to take on responsibility for the same money as the next person [without a qualification]?'.

For many who gain VET skills in industries like aged care and retail, only small increments in pay are associated with higher qualifications. Many workers were concerned that certificate III qualifications improved pay rates only marginally—and many felt their work was undervalued, relative to the skill and responsibility exercised, especially in the aged care sector.

The cost–benefit calculation around training did not look inviting to many of these workers, some of whom gave up considerable amounts of their own time to certificate III training, for example, as well as paying the costs of books, computers, travel and at least a portion of fees in some cases. With the prospect of a very small increase in hourly rates (most commonly 50 cents an hour, up to \$1.50 for some), the rate of return from formal qualifications was low. Few were likely to advance beyond certificate III to IV, in view of very flat employment structures in all three occupations.

Many recognised the low rates of return from their investment of time and money in training. In the aged care sector, where the certificate III is increasingly a minimum qualification, acquiring this qualification is seen as an instrumental activity essential to job security:

It's disappointing because the difference between someone who walks in off the street, has never done aged care before but says I like working with older people and I think I've got some good skills, and someone that has worked with us for 18 years and has done a Certificate III, perhaps a Certificate IV, has done every course known to man, is probably only something like \$1.10 per hour. ... A lot of them have said if we get the Certificate III will our pay go up? Well no, it's a Certificate III plus 1500 hours of aged care work as well before you'll find much difference in your pay. Then we're talking about each one of the levels going up only perhaps 40 cents or 50 cents as you go up a level. So it's nothing that a care worker can look at and say 'Wow, I've done this effort, so now I'm going to get this reward'.

(Betty, training coordinator, aged care SA)

For workers who paid for their own training, concern centred on whether the amount of time and money invested would help them achieve their goal. For instance, would there be the opportunity to advance their career or change their job upon completion of the qualification? If this was not possible, then training was not seen as beneficial.

Other workers, particularly in the food processing and retail sectors, had given little or no thought to the value of qualifications; however, when their attention was drawn to the potential of achieving an industry-recognised qualification, younger workers were most likely to view it positively: ‘that would be nice’.

Changing occupations over the life course

Some workers had moved away from higher-paid work in search of either greater work–life balance or greater job satisfaction. For example, Vince works in the tool shop of a retail chain, earning half of what he did previously as a machine operator. He left his previous work because it was too physically demanding. He works full-time in his current job but no longer has to work 12-hour shifts. He prefers the shorter hours and the less physically demanding work and is willing to undertake on-the-job training to improve his product knowledge.

Martha worked in a range of medical practices as a receptionist and practice manager before entering aged care. She explained that working in aged care was ‘more satisfying ... [I get] personal pleasure out of watching people’s faces’.

Others indicated that their motivation to change jobs and to retrain was underpinned by the need to find less physically demanding, more rewarding work. As Brooke, a clinical program manager in the aged care sector, explained:

They’ve worked in factories all their life and you know their bodies are starting to wear, whereas they find this as a job where they’re physical but not too physical, they’re looking after their bodies [and] they like mixing with the clients yeah.

(Brooke, clinical program manager, aged care, Qld)

A ‘fit’ between existing life skills and new learning: building confidence

Some workers with low confidence about learning, perceived a ‘fit’ between their prior knowledge and experiences and the work and training they undertook. This perception often provided them with the confidence to take up a job or course. For example, women returning to the workforce after child rearing identified work in the aged care sector as drawing on their prior knowledge and experience. Mercy works in the aged care sector and also cares for her elderly mother, who has Alzheimer’s disease. This experience has provided her with the compassion and confidence to work with and care for other elderly people. Lee, who coordinates a home care program, describes her experiences of workers entering aged care:

Generally we find that they are more often women returning to the workforce because it could be seen as an extension of the work they would do in their own home, and they’re able to then transfer those often not recognised skills into a work situation.

(Lee, coordinator, aged care, SA)

Perceived similarities between home and work duties increase workers’ confidence in performing such skills in the workplace. Self-confidence and belief in one’s ability often underpinned employment and training decisions and success. Sandy is in her late 30s, a sole parent of two and works in retail. Her job involves ‘special orders’, which requires considerable product knowledge. She previously resigned from her job as a school assistant, despite the hours coinciding with her children’s schooling, because she felt ‘I wasn’t actually smart enough for that’. Sandy took a lower-paid job that she felt more comfortable doing. Sadly, many other female participants expressed a lack of confidence in their skills and did not recognise the skills they possessed as a result of their life experiences. This low confidence requires specific pedagogical adaptation to ensure success in VET, including high levels of pastoral care and support in assignments and in forming study habits. For instance, Ruth, a 51-year-old student who works in aged care, is the sole parent of an 11-year-old son with special needs. She also has the sole caring responsibility for her elderly mother. When talking about her motivation to attain a certificate III in aged care she explained:

I don't have any skills. So I wanted to get skills in it. I am 51 now and I want to keep studying – so eventually when I am too old to get down on my hands and knees cleaning people's houses and stuff I can perhaps do coordination work or something like that.

(Ruth, aged care student, SA)

Learning, power and self-efficacy: 'a good job is one where I learn'

Many workers value what they learn at work: they said that 'good jobs' allow them to keep learning—from each other, from experts, from experience and from formal training. This motivated their participation in VET—where it was relevant and useful:

It pays off because you're able to give that customer the information that they need and there's satisfaction. (Peggy, retail, WA)

Of course, [learning] makes you better at your job which makes job satisfaction go up so then you've got happier customers because you're able to service them better and look after their needs. So at the end of the day you walk out of your job and think 'I had a good day'. (Joshua, retail, SA)

Many women were keen to undertake training despite demanding caring responsibilities. For some, learning was a very positive aspect of their work, and enjoyment of training drove their participation in VET, whether formal or informal:

I've worked for [this store] for about three-and-a-half years ... And I actually really enjoy training. I love the in-store training, I love using those skills in the store, and it gives me a lot of confidence to actually feel like I'm helping the customers and have some useful knowledge that I can pass on. You get a lot of lost people down there, and if you think that you can help them out in any way, then it's a bonus. (Briony, retail, WA)

Often these women were willing to address challenges to pursue VET opportunities to learn:

Any training that I think is going to be beneficial, whether it's here or whether I can use it later on. I don't mind doing any of it and time wise it doesn't worry me either. I can fit it in wherever. The Certificate III, some of it I'm thinking, when am I ever going to use this? But I still take it on board. I will still get involved with it and do it. At the moment it might not relate to what I'm doing. But I think, well maybe later on it might come in handy, so it's all more knowledge to me. That's the way I see it. (Kathy, food processing, Vic.)

Some indicated a willingness to train outside working hours and at their own cost, providing the training was relevant to their work or career aspirations:

If work offers to help us with that, it's fine. If I like it I don't care, I'll pay for it. Because education comes first. After I've done my mother duties, all my kids are grown up, some are married, some live out of home, I feel I should do it for myself ... It would be with the help of my husband of course because he's a great helper at the same time. (Esther, aged care, SA)

Support from a partner was vital for many women as they juggled households. However, many women lacked such support or were affected by a lack of self-confidence or perceived lack of knowledge. Low confidence influenced many decisions about and attitudes towards training:

When we were first told we were doing [the course] I was like 'oh!' because I was never any good at school, so I got a bit 'oh I'm never going to be able to do it, especially assignments and stuff, I can't do that'. (Donna, aged care, Qld)

I guess having not studied for a few years now I'm trying to get back into it and remembering my study skills in terms of assignments and bits and pieces like that and also I guess sort of attending classes and being in a classroom environment again. I guess in terms of concentration and all of that. (Jack, aged care, SA)

In this context support while returning to education was very important—whether employees or students in a VET facility. For many, learning new skills generated a very positive source of a sense of achievement and even power. This was a driver of VET participation. For example, Kelly is 18 and works in a large retail store that offers extensive in-house training. This training makes work very attractive to her. She has done all the online courses in the firm:

I'm not sure if I'm supposed to but ... [when] I've cleaned everything I'll just sit down and I'll just get my product knowledge up there and I've done [every possible online course]: forklift driving, gardens, barbeques, special orders, tiles, roofing, everything that's there.

(Kelly, retail, WA)

Learning gives Kelly product knowledge and the capacity to assist customers. This knowledge gives her power—a power that she enjoys:

I had a gentleman the other day, wanting some timber cut and I'd only just recently learned how to use the docking saw. And he goes 'Aren't there enough males here to do that?' And I go 'Well, that's why I learn, so I can do it'. He goes 'Oh well, it's usually the males'. I'm like 'Well, I'm here. Do you want me to do it or not?' And I did it and finished it, and it was all done. Sometimes I like getting those customers just so I can stick it to them.

(Kelly, 18, retail, WA)

A learning culture in the workplace

Some workplaces support training by adopting a learning culture that is embedded in workplace culture and practice. This creates strong workplace-based drivers for employee participation in VET. For example, one retail establishment provided learning work stations, set a mandatory number of training hours per employee per year, required supervisors to release staff to participate in learning, included this in supervisory performance evaluation, and celebrated training successes:

We've actually got an in-store trainer that makes sure we get it done ... There's an audit that happens which says 'Bob hasn't done his training. Why not?' So it's not just the company saying 'we will give you training – Oh sorry we didn't have time'. [Supervisors] get audited on whether you did it ... The local boss gets audited.

(Male retail worker, WA)

If you haven't done it, they will ring you and tell you to come up [to the training station]. All in paid time.

(Female retail worker, WA)

These workers were well aware that these arrangements were unusual:

We get pulled off the floor. This is the best [company] by far. All my other jobs have never had any kind of training except for 'this is what you have to do'. There's no detail like your online stuff here.

(Female retail worker, WA)

At times, line managers on the floor argued with supervisors about finding the time away to do training: only the monitored target of 38 hours training a year for each worker prevented work demands from overriding training. This required a strong—and unusual—management commitment to training.

This workplace adopted ongoing skill appraisals together with formal opportunities, the provision of a training coach, and arrangements for workers to attend VET. On-the-job training was workplace and occupation-relevant (but not confined to the current job), up to date and seen to be of practical significance in the workplace. Such an approach is unlikely in smaller workplaces, and requires an investment in human resources and training capacity, as well as integration of VET, job design, production and service processes and goals, and management.

Organisations that embed training and skill development like this increase job attachment and workers' job satisfaction. In other cases, where training is driven more by compliance, training-related productivity gains seem weaker. As one food processing manager put it, 'productivity comes along with staff being happy ... It's not to do with training.' Sandy works in a hardware

store with a positive, holistic training culture. She entered work with very low confidence and a poor educational background and says of her workplace:

They make you feel like you can do anything. You rise above a certain level, you've got constant training. You've got so many opportunities ... All day I'm learning. It's virtually all day I'm learning. It's never boring. I need to be constantly learning because once I stop, I get bored.
(Sandy, retail, WA)

Being in a workplace that offers in-house training, time during working hours to do the training, an in-house training support officer, and a strong employer commitment to training makes learning both very attractive and practically achievable for such workers.

Further to this, some workplaces support workers who are attending formal training even when it is not related to a current job. Such support can involve contributing to costs, changing working hours to accommodate training and providing help and support with assignments.

Those employers who had an embedded learning culture tended to assume a 'whole of company' approach to training. This results in workers being excited by the opportunity to learn and applying their knowledge to solve problems in the workplace that may not directly involve their own work:

The learning thing is an ongoing thing. Some of us here have finished and completed [the manufacturing course], but it's just an ongoing learning – you see something you need to fix it, fix it. It's always there, it doesn't leave your head anymore. Before you'd just [see a problem and] walk by and think yeah, whatever. But now, we actually do something about it and get it fixed.
(Frank, food processing, Vic.)

Stepping stone: low-paid jobs and VET

Some workers and students see low-paid work as a stepping stone to higher-paid work, either in their current workplace or another. These aspirations motivate training. Cristal works in a large retail outlet and has been exposed to wide range of on-the-job and product training. As a result of this training she now wants to work as an interior designer. However, recognising that this might take time, Cristal's short-term goal involves working her way up to become a coordinator in her current workplace.

May currently picks strawberries and is studying a certificate II in retail. She is hoping that this will help her to 'go up the ladder a little bit and better [her employment]'. Aimee also works in retail and shares May's aspiration to advance her career; however, she acknowledges that she will need to 'start at the bottom and work my way up'.

Meaningful work: useful, rewarding, socially connected

Many workers interviewed in aged care and retail in particular were motivated to seek and train for work that had personal meaning and provided job satisfaction. For some, this reflected altruistic motivations to care and provide service to clients. This in turn helped motivate VET participation:

I have a degree in agency law and real estate studies. I was a real estate agent, owned my own office. Before that I brought up my family and did little odd jobs so I could be home when they came home from school. I volunteered for 11 months at the hospital and it was there that I got to work with some of the aged patients and decided that that's the field I wanted to go into. So at 55 I came back to school and now I want to specialise in palliative care. I want to work with the patients, residents, clients and their families because families very often in aged care get forgotten and it's very traumatic when a member gets dementia or something like that. That's what I want to do, so a complete life change for me.
(Sylvia, aged care, Qld)

Similarly, some workers in retail took great satisfaction from having the skills and knowledge to help customers: seeing them walk away with a smile on their face, or helping customers save money. Others were motivated by the desire or need for human contact and they gained it by providing customer service. For instance, Rowan worked as a chef for 22 years prior to moving into the retail sector 18 months ago. He was looking for work that was more satisfying:

[Being a chef] for that long, I wanted to change and I thoroughly enjoy retail, thoroughly enjoy – not necessarily the retail side of it – but just people coming in and saying they’ve got a problem and helping them solve that problem. I really like that. (Rowan, retail, WA)

Many workers, particularly in the aged care and retail sectors, spoke about the rewarding nature of their work and how this often made up for the low pay associated with it:

I think it doesn’t matter what sort of money [you get] because you’ll never get enough in that sort of job. It’s just how rewarding their experience is to give time to them and that sort of thing. (Margaret, aged care, Qld)

Others in the aged sector described rewards in terms of the caring and helping nature of their work, while workers in the retail sector talked about the satisfaction they gained from providing good customer service:

Helping someone that comes in that’s just bought their first house, you can help them with the lowest costs ... it’s just rewarding. It makes you feel that you’ve actually achieved something and got somewhere. (Yvette, retail, WA)

I jump up out of bed at five in the morning and think, fantastic, I’m off to work. My husband thinks it’s hilarious because he’s never heard me say, ‘I can’t wait to get to work’. (Chloe, retail, SA)

Many workers studying in the aged care sector sought work that was intrinsically rewarding, enabling them to give back to the community, even if this meant taking a cut in pay. For example, Pan had worked in banking since leaving school some 27 years ago. Prior to leaving the bank his work life entailed being a ‘workplace trainer, business training specialist, branch manager out in the banks, team leader within a loan processing centre’. When offered a redundancy package Pan decided to enter the aged care sector because of the ‘warm fuzzy feeling inside that maybe you have been able to help in some way’.

Arthur, who previously worked for much higher pay as a first-aid officer in a mine, explains that the work that appeals to him now would not have appealed when he was a younger man. The lower level of stress and enjoyment of care work are attractive to him and he is completing a certificate III at his employer’s suggestion:

I find it more rewarding, I think especially at my age. I think if I was younger I probably wouldn’t want to be doing it at all ... But I’ve always loved older people and disabled people all my life. Because I’m older I don’t want as much stress as I had before. Because you were there for 12 hour shifts and every second you had to wait for that [emergency] call, or you had people coming in with emergency first aid. (Arthur, aged care worker, Qld)

Similarly, Peter, a 25-year-old full-time student who is looking to enter the aged care sector, explains:

I just wanted something more rewarding, something where I was giving to the community where, instead of just going here you go, here’s your change and things like that, something more challenging and something where you know you’re making a difference. (Peter, 25-year-old aged care student, Qld)

Clearly there are multiple drivers for VET amongst employees. These vary over the life course and by age, gender, industry, and the nature of product/service as well as local workplace cultures.

What drives VET students to study in low-paid occupations?

Interviews and focus groups with students in VET classes studying in retail and aged care occupations tell us something about what motivates their participation and the factors that help them succeed. Interviews with teachers, course coordinators and managers and experts in VET institutions illuminate the motivations of students studying in low-paid occupations. Students included welfare recipients, school leavers, new migrants, mothers returning to work, people looking for a career change and some returning to work after an injury. Some were studying to gain the skills necessary to enter or re-enter the workforce; some were using their current study as a stepping stone to further qualifications; some were looking for skills to change their careers while others were seeking secure employment.

Why enrol? ‘It’s jobs and money

Most students were studying to get a job. VET students saw their certificates—mostly at certificate III with some at II—as a gateway to work. For them, gaining a recognised qualification was the goal, and some were paying high fees (especially international students) in the hope that this occurred. Recent evidence on the rate of return accruing from certificates II and III suggests that their confidence may not be misplaced. Long and Shah (2008) found that low-cost, one-year certificate III and IV courses were associated with a 23.6% rate of return for men and 18.1% for women (Long & Shah 2008, p.40). However, such calculations vary with the assumptions that underpin them and our interviews suggest that some of the cost, fee and income assumptions used in that study do not hold for at least some students. Further, there is a significant difference between certificate III and IV, which are collapsed in Long and Shah’s calculations.

‘To get an edge’ in the labour market

Maurice was a typical student. He had been unemployed since leaving high school in Year 11. After a Job Network meeting he decided to undertake a certificate II in retail. His reasons for choosing the retail sector were underpinned by the belief that work in this area was readily available. He hoped his qualification would give him ‘an edge’:

I thought I would pick up the Retail Certificate II course because ... there are always going to be shops and they’re always going to need staff. So when I finished that, I thought I may as well go and do certificate III to hopefully get an edge over other people.

(Maurice, retail, SA)

For other students, life changes such as divorce meant that they needed to find work quickly. Sue needed to support her son after her divorce and looked for work that was easy to find. For her this was aged care. Similarly, Hayley, who had her first child at 16, explained that she had undertaken numerous low-paid jobs in order to re-enter the workforce saying: ‘I just did anything I could find pretty much’. Fay, a VET educator in the retail sector, explains that:

People who are returning into the workforce or have been out of it for a long time see that retail is an achievable outcome from an employment perspective. There are a lot of casual jobs out there and hence entry into the workforce is often via casual jobs. So retailing is something that people think, ‘Yes, I can achieve this’. Whereas something more technical skills-based may be beyond their reach.

(Fay, VET educator, retail, SA)

Centrelink

Some students were ‘motivated’ by the ‘mutual obligation’ requirements that they attend retail and aged care courses in exchange for welfare support.

Interestingly, some students found such ‘conscripted’ students disruptive and not committed to training. Sharing a classroom with those who did not want to learn frustrated fee-paying students:

I had spent \$1200 on my course ... And I was resentful of the fact that I was paying hard-earned money to [do the course] and I wasn't getting the full benefit because of that disruption. (VET student, care course, Qld).

Most adult students receiving Centrelink benefits are entitled to reduced tuition fees (to about half), which they found helpful. Not all beneficiaries were eligible and some found this support arbitrary or did not know who to ask for advice to access financial subsidies. They found it difficult to pay the fee:

I had a mutual obligation with Centrelink so I thought I might have got the course for free, but I ended up having to pay for it because I haven't been on Newstart long enough, which really annoyed me a bit. So the best I could do was a bit of equity assistance and a discount. But it is still a fair bit of money when you're only getting \$200 a week. That was a bit hard. I think the course is a bit dear for what it is. I think four weeks and two weeks work experience for \$600 is a fair bit of money.

(Yoda, VET student retail certificate III TAFE course, SA, 3 children, 2 with disabilities)

I had the first certificate II in retail for free, but now I'm paying for this course. I was hoping to get some help from Centrelink but I don't know which avenue to go through to do it. I don't know where to go for information.

(Betty, VET student retail certificate III TAFE course, SA)

These students were obliged to meet certain requirements to ensure ongoing entitlements. Some of these students—like Dakota—were motivated to study to fulfil their social security requirements and to ‘get a bit more edge’ in the labour market:

Being a single parent, I don't have a whole lot of childcare options where the kids are concerned. My main problem is I have to get jobs in school hours and there are not a lot of job opportunities in that area and not a lot of people are flexible in that respect. So I'm wanting to maybe get some sort of qualification that will give me a bit more of an edge over the younger people, being an older person wanting to find some sort of employment, so that I support my kids rather than being on Centrelink. That's my main goal for doing this course. (Dakota, aged care, Qld)

New migrants

New migrants were among those looking to acquire skills to find work. Many paid high fees (\$6500 in one example).

Prior to her studies, Katrina had worked in India for five to six months in aged care. Having arrived in Australia, she recognised the need to gain a certificate III in order to work in aged care.

It's very hard for us to find job ... We don't have certificates ... If you do a certificate or study or something like that ... you'll get more opportunity to do more study. And if you want to study further or something like that, you can do it. (Katrina, aged care, Qld)

Other migrants were not able to continue work in their previous occupations and therefore needed to acquire new qualifications to gain work. For example, Vergit has experienced a complex path in search of permanent work in Australia. In his home country of India, Vergit worked as a mechanical engineer; however, when he first arrived in Australia the only work he was able to secure was as a chef. Now, to help him gain permanent residency in Australia, he has moved away from hospitality into aged care. To accommodate this move, he is studying a certificate III in aged care.

Re-entering the workforce after children or injury

A number of students in certificate III courses in aged care and retail were looking to re-join the workforce. Many of these were women returning to paid employment after child rearing. For instance, Tanya has two children and has been out of the workforce for 15 years. She has always wanted to be a nurse but was unable to complete the necessary studies while her children were under school age. Now that her youngest child has started school, Tanya sees her studies in aged care as a stepping stone into her dream job of nursing.

Other adult students were looking to re-enter the workforce following an injury. These workers sought work that was less physically demanding. For example, Fred started his working life as an enrolled nurse in New Zealand before working as a builder for 14 years. He sustained an injury, which placed him on a disability pension. He is now looking to re-enter the nursing industry and is studying towards a certificate III in aged care, which he finds interesting.

Changing careers

A number of students were studying to gain qualifications to change their career. Most of these participants were looking for less physically demanding or more intrinsically rewarding work. For example, Gemma has eight children and has not studied since she left school; however, she has decided to move away from her current work as a customer service advisor at a supermarket and enter the aged care sector. She is studying a certificate III in aged care. She was motivated by the desire to do more rewarding work:

I'm sort of just over it and yeah, just to see the smile, the look on people's face when you help them. Like a simple smile, a touch and it just lights their face up. It is really rewarding. I did a little bit of work in food services at a nursing home and realised that I wanted to take care of residents. So this is my first bit of studying since high school.

(Gemma, aged care, Qld)

Anthony was motivated to change his line of work for better pay and healthier working conditions:

I was a welder. I left work mainly because of asthma and because I wanted a bit of a change in direction. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life doing welding. So I sort of did this course one weekend because I was a little bit interested in getting into retail. I wanted to get something where I would get paid a bit more money, get better job opportunities and that sort of stuff.

(Anthony, retail, SA)

A number of older men and some older women were 'down-shifting' (in terms of pay and status) and participating in courses to change occupations to find more personally rewarding work.

Vocational education students at school

A small number of VET students were high school students enrolled in a vocational education program as part of their Year 12 studies. They were studying certificate II in retail, which equated to 1.5 subjects in their Year 12 award. They believed that they would be more attractive to potential employers. For Louise, this program offered an alternative to formal schooling:

I was in Year 11 and I didn't want to go to school anymore, because I was just over it ... So I went to TAFE. They said you can do a TAFE certificate and go to school and just do three subjects and it will count [for] graduation. So yeah, I did that.

(Louise, retail student, WA)

Louise is now planning to enter university to study tourism. Although Louise's studies in retail may not be used in her future work, the opportunity to study away from her normal school setting are enabling her to successfully graduate from school and this has motivated her to continue studying.

Clearly, the prospect of a job is a strong inducement for these VET students to train in low-paid occupations, especially if they can gain access to some fee-support (as Centrelink recipients could). However, the nature of prevailing pedagogies was very important for these students, especially those with poor educational backgrounds, those with many years away from formal education or immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds. If students found their way into a supportive class group with a teacher who could teach to appropriate levels and who could offer strong pastoral care and support with language, literacy and computing skills, their chances of success and enjoyment of education were much more likely.

Barriers to VET participation: putting together work, home, community and VET

In the context of the particular circumstances of low-paid work and the drivers affecting employers, workers and students considered above, a set of intersecting work, home, community and education factors affect VET participation. Ruth's story is illustrative:

'It's a big juggle'

Workers who are studying in low-paid occupations often have demanding caring responsibilities. Life is a juggle. Consider Ruth, who works and studies in aged care. She is a 51-year-old single mother of a child with special needs. She is also the primary carer for her elderly mother, who lives on her own. Ruth visits her daily to help with cooking, cleaning and shopping chores. She describes her life as a 'mad rush': picking her son up from school, visiting her mother, cooking dinner, helping with homework and then finally working on her own studies.

She is currently working ten hours per week and studying to complete her certificate III in aged care. She enjoys her job and her study. In the future she hopes to increase her hours and considers the certificate III important as it shows her employer that she is willing to learn. When entering the aged care workforce she had no qualifications and was therefore keen to acquire the necessary skills and qualifications to help her keep her job. She is planning to stay in aged care until retirement and believes that the certificate III qualification will help her retain her employment when she is no longer capable of doing manual chores such as 'getting down on my hands and knees cleaning people's houses'. Her hourly rate of pay is \$18.69 and \$27.90 for weekend work. Upon completing her certificate III in aged care she expects her pay will increase by \$1.50 per hour, taking her hourly rate of pay to \$20.10 per hour.

Ruth would like to increase her hours of work. She was attracted to this work because its flexible hours allow her to care for her son and mother and still work. She explained that as her son has special needs it was often difficult to find someone to care for him while she worked; therefore, she needed to find employment that would enable her to be at home before and after school. Her current working hours permit this. As a single mother, she is paying a mortgage on a low rate of pay.

She finds studying for her certificate III challenging as she needs to wait until her son goes to bed before she can work on assignments, and by then she is tired after a full day of working and caring:

It is just a big juggle. It is just trying to find time. It is hard finding time. I would like to spend an extra hour here [at work] and do some studying here, [but] that would be impossible for me because I have to get home and get my son into bed otherwise you would never wake him up in the morning. He would be a nightmare and he would have a nightmare day at school.

A further challenge rests with her lack of computer skills. She proudly explains that her son has been able to help her acquire the skills to complete her assignments electronically.

Ruth's household context strongly influences her ability, inclination and likelihood of success with study. Alongside the conditions of work, her VET opportunities are shaped by household and community circumstances, as well as VET facilities and arrangements.

Work, family and education barriers for workers learning on the job

The myriad of barriers—time, money, literacy and educational practices—affecting the participation of workers in VET are well summarised by a union official representing aged care workers:

A lot of these workers have low levels of literacy and they find it difficult to have that exposed ... Then there are financial commitments so that having to make a contribution in any way to the cost of their training will be an impediment. Time commitments and their family–work commitments make it very difficult to find the time to invest in training, though they do see that investing in training will be beneficial to them. They ask, ‘Why do I need a piece of paper to do what I already do?’ Also the length of commitment to training is too long for them and they prefer on-the-job learning to formal learning.

(Union official, aged care, SA)

Family and community support

Not all workers and students in low-paid occupations had support for study. A number of participants mentioned the lack of supportive partners: ‘hubby just wasn’t interested’ (Sue, aged care SA). Betty’s husband questioned her: ‘why are you doing the course, why don’t you just go and get a job? I said I would if I had the qualifications to get into that field’ (Betty, retail, certificate III student, SA). Others had difficulty finding a good study space: Zoe ‘didn’t even have a table, I had a tray sitting on my knee. That’s where I did most of it and my son was “mum, mum, mum” constantly.’ Despite this, many mature-aged students were very positive about relationships with their peers, their study and the pathways it opened: ‘The course is the best thing I have ever done’ (Female student, aged care certificate III, SA).

Tanya’s husband supports her financially and she describes him as ‘very, very supportive’. Others gain financial support from grandparents or parents:

If I didn’t have my parents I don’t know how I would have afforded it.

(Rachel, aged care, Qld)

For many, family responsibilities conflicted with study. Janet, a mother of two children in their early teens, did not want to train:

I just want to continue working in this company. I’m happy with what I’m doing. Spend more time with my family, that’s the main thing, if you’ve got time. (Janet, aged care, Qld)

Like Janet, Esther puts her family and their needs before her career. Although Esther’s children are grown up, she has turned down an opportunity to advance her career because ‘family comes first’:

About two months ago, my senior had to do different work so I was asked if I’d take her position. I said no thank you because for many reasons, having a big family and now going to my daughter’s wedding overseas ... I said no. I wasn’t happy to say no. I wanted it because it’s another challenge in the centre. But family comes first. (Esther, aged care, SA)

Similarly, some workers spoke about their involvement in community activities, and the need for work (and training) to ‘fit’ with their community commitments:

I’ll fit that around other commitments, i.e., doing the bit of volunteer work that I do, or catching up with my father, or whatever, and other involvements with St John’s or Red Cross. (Pan, aged care, SA)

Time

Workers articulated time and energy as amongst the main barriers to participating in training and/or skill development. As a retail worker in SA put it:

I wouldn’t do any [training] outside work hours because of that simple reason [time]: How would I cook dinner? I’ve got to do the washing and all the rest of it. I wouldn’t do any training outside. (Haley, retail worker, SA)

The time workers had for learning was strongly shaped by the demands of work and home and by the time demands of VET itself. Arrangements around time for training varied between industry sectors. For those in employment, non-accredited mandatory training (for example, for occupational health and safety or food handling) mostly occurred in work time: many said they would not do it in unpaid time: 'that's your pleasure time' (Worker, food processing, Vic.). However, for accredited training like certificate III, arrangements varied widely.

The time demands of courses also varied widely. One management interviewee in a manufacturing operation reported that their skilled and experienced technical staff had completed a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment in four days: 'it was extremely challenging ... and it confirmed that what they were doing was right'. (A downstream purchaser of the food product required this training.)

In contrast, many workers studied part-time for 18 months in a certificate III; however, in one factory workers were taking three years to complete a certificate II because production demands prevented training time. Some aged care providers allowed two hours a week for study for those employees enrolled in certificate III. Many of these students also used unpaid time to complete their workbooks and assignments: 'realistically we need more than two hours a week – it's ten hours by the time you have done all the reading' (Aged care worker, studying for certificate III, Qld).

For those completing certificate II, workbooks were often filled out in down time at work—and in some cases this training was viewed as unhelpful:

To be honest, [the certificate II] training didn't make any difference to the way people work ... I guess it makes people more aware of their work. But does it change their skill level? No ... It's really training them to do what they already do. (Supervisor, food processing, Vic.)

This certificate II course was offered to production workers and the company paid a registered training provider to provide the training without government subsidy for costs. While students did the actual lessons in paid work time, they often took homework home. With an economic downturn and the sense that it made little difference to actual skill, certificate II training was unlikely to be offered in the future; instead, the company was likely to return to mandatory courses in house in relation to 'hygiene, basically aspects of the food certificate', putting packages online.

However, in some aged care cases, all study was outside paid time. Consequently, some workers avoided study. This varied by life-course stage:

Well, for me at the moment, with a young family, I don't want to go home and, for example do the manufacturing course. I don't want to go home and study, I want to spend time with my family. (Male, food processing, Vic.)

When this worker's family circumstances change, he may well decide to study: for many low-paid workers, life-course stage strongly affects the inclination to train. Time, money and life-stage factors were often mentioned together:

When you work full-time and you've got a household to run, you don't have enough hours in the day really to properly put everything you need to put into study, to be successful with what you want to do. It's that side of it – and also probably the financial side of it as well: affording to actually do extra study if you work full-time and you're probably not entitled to any extra financial assistance from the government in any way ... so that's put me off. If work was willing to assist or give you a bit more time to put into your study – especially if it was study that's going to lead into your work, whether it be horticultural or something, that's something that I'd be interested in as well. But I'd certainly need some time off from work to put into that study. (Chloe, retail, SA)

Other workers were able to juggle their caring and home commitments to pursue training and some had family support to do this. Not all were so lucky:

I found it a little bit hard to fit all that in and motivation at home when I was doing my course because hubby wasn't interested and I get home from work and I was too tired. I'd start, sit down and try to do it or get away on my own ... And then next minute [the kids were] coming in to see you and then on the weekends, the best time I had then, this is a few years ago, was to sit in the vehicle... I would study on my own there away from home because I find that if you are in your own home, there is always work to do so you had to get away from your home. (Sue, aged care, Qld)

I care for Dad in the morning, go to work and then start all over again when I get home ... I study either early in the mornings or when Dad goes to bed. It's lights out at 6.30 pm and then I go downstairs and I do it then ... or on the weekends. (Beatrice, aged care, Qld)

I look after my parents ... so there's never any time for me really because you sort of go to TAFE, come home, get changed, go to work, come home, look after everyone else, go to bed and get up and do it all over again. (Ellie, aged care, Qld)

The gendered impact of domestic responsibilities is clear in all these accounts. Many low-paid workers—mostly women—were caring for dependent children or elderly parents and juggled study and family needs:

I found that the [VET study] has really impacted on my family. The days I go to TAFE, no one's happy. But I figure that it's now or never. Whenever I do it, it's still going to be a struggle. So I might as well do it when they're all studying and they're young. They're all under 13. It felt like the right time. I was motivated to do it. (Tanya, aged care, Qld)

Finding enough time—as well as care support—to complete assignments and attend to reading was sometimes a struggle—especially when the expectations of women were very traditional:

Because I am by myself I don't have anyone to look after my child. It is hard to get someone to look after my child when I come here [to VET]. That is always a struggle. Also the study. I have to wait until my son is asleep because it is just impossible because he talks your head off. Like it is nine o'clock and the last thing you feel like doing is studying, you just feel like relaxing. But you have to do it. (Ros, aged care, SA)

[Hindu women employees] are the main worker of the family. Not only do they work but they have to look after their husband ... They still have that culture of [husbands say] 'I don't do anything. I come home and put my feet up. You're going to do everything.' So that could have a big bearing on why [these women dropped out of certificate II training]. That's why I think it is important to keep training in work hours. (Manager, food processing, Vic.)

A small number were also involved in community programs such as meals on wheels, caring for neighbours and the like:

I do a lot of voluntary work at the Salvation Army men's hostel and they age from 17 up to 80 or more. So they keep me on my toes dishing up meals and cleaning up after them. (George, 52-year-old aged care student, Qld)

As discussed above, many low-paid workers work shifts or unsocial hours. Those workers in the food processing and retail sectors working shiftwork found studying challenging for a number of reasons: the tiring, demanding nature of shiftwork; working hours that often clashed with class times; and the nature of rotating shifts. The features of the job, sometimes in combination with age, affected their willingness to train:

[I've got] no desire to study any more. I don't think anything would make me want to study as far as for work purposes ... I'm on my feet for eight and a half hours literally running all day, so when I go home the last thing I want to do is open a book and start studying. My brain isn't big enough to do that, and I'm just too tired to think about it. (Matthew, retail, SA)

Not surprisingly, those working late shifts or rotating shifts were often too exhausted to add study to their week. These workers were reluctant to engage in training outside their normal working hours:

I think the hardest thing of the lot is because we do shiftwork these days. That's the hardest of the lot because we're doing this week's day shift, next week's night shift, then you've got afternoon shift. And to study and then just follow in, it just knocks you around a fair bit.

(Male, food processing, Vic.)

Those working rotating shifts found it hard to commit to particular classes because their working hours changed on a weekly or fortnightly basis:

You want to do, say, a TAFE course, it's one day a week, you don't know if you'll be on – it could be days, or nights or afternoons.

(Male, food processing, Vic.)

With shiftwork it's not always easy to study because the hours are prohibitive. The study hours are set and if you're working late shift and you've got a study group then it's not possible for you to change. So that doesn't make it easy.

(Joshua, retail, SA)

Emotional labour

For aged care workers, time strains also arise from the nature of work: many found their jobs (which involved timed household visits) very intensive: 'we never have enough time. We are supposed to give compassionate care', with 'every minute accounted for'. Arthur describes the stress this places on him:

I have that time factor. I saw a lady this morning. She lost her husband a few weeks ago, and we really connected. I had to sort of say listen I've got to go, and kept looking at my watch. I hate that. Because I was really empathising with her, you know, and I felt a little bit upset that I had to be forced to do that ... [to leave]. I'm not blaming anyone that's the way it is.

(Arthur, aged care, Qld)

Arthur is enjoying working in aged care (despite a four-fold fall in pay from his previous job in a mine). But he finds limitations on the time he can give clients very demanding: the feelings he describes are a form of emotional labour—reconciling outward expressions of empathy while managing his limited time.

Money: fees and costs

Like the VET students discussed in the previous section, many workers indicated that they were not interested in training if it involved a cost to them—whether of time or money. Some had drawn on their superannuation or on their extended families to meet their fees and costs:

To enable me to come to the course – because I'm on disability pension because of my injuries – I've had to draw on my superannuation to afford the finance to come.

(David, VET student, Qld)

Workers identified the issue of costs as a barrier to training in all sectors:

There is something I had wanted to do in training and I didn't do it because of the money.

So yes, I thought I won't do it because I haven't got the money.

(Sandy, retail, WA)

The absence of government fee assistance often precluded participation in VET or pursuit of job preferences:

Yes, if you've got to pay rent and bills and feed kids and all that sort of thing. Where are we going to find so many thousand dollars to enrol in a course? You'll just think, oh I'll just stick to the job I was doing before; at least I get an income. It's not going to be too hard. I don't have to work and study seven days of the week and I have some life. However you

don't get to go ahead in what you want to do. You don't get to realise any ambitions that you might have to change careers and courses and that sort of thing. (Bill, aged care, Qld)

Some students required to do placements found that the loss of income while they completed these created difficulties. Other financial commitments compete with training costs in the context of very tight household money or time budgets for low-paid workers:

We just built a house. I've never had a mortgage, I've only rented. And we're newlyweds, we got married a year ago, and the house is a year old ... I'm happy just going to work. I'm a big girl now. I'm married, I've got a house, I go to work. That's leaving me with no time. (Chloe, retail, SA)

Some workers were willing to train at their own cost where it was either essential, helped retain a job or promised future job mobility, but where money is short and the hourly rate is around \$17, meeting such costs is a challenge.

The fee costs to low-paid workers varied widely. Some employers worked with training organisations that could organise access to subsidised training places and fees were reduced. In some cases employers paid all fees. However, the timing of training, the type of training schemes and subsidies on offer, the nature or presence of training brokers and the local/state arrangements in relation to fees resulted in very diverse fee and cost outcomes. This diversity existed both for employees who were training in occupationally relevant courses, as well as for students who were training in the hope of employment. The incidence of fees was very inconsistent. This had very significant effects on the inclination to train. Workers and students in very similar life and income circumstances appeared to face very different levels of financial cost, with variable knowledge about entitlements and arbitrary and changing eligibility criteria. In some cases, employers received very significant incentives to employ trainees on discounted trainee wages, but did not help use these funds to directly help trainees meet their course fees.

One human resources/TAFE educator observed that these incentive payments 'just go into general revenue. It doesn't contribute to the youngster's training ... It's basically a payment to get the employer to take on the training...and to make the Department's numbers look really good'. Employers in receipt of such payments were able to pay their trainees a discounted pay rate of 75–80%.

Beyond fees, many low-paid workers or welfare recipients in training found the costs of texts, computing, travel and work clothes (while on placement, for example) hard to manage. Many sought to pay fees in increments and this arrangement was very helpful to many.

The quality, relevance and accessibility of training

Some workers indicated that the training they had engaged in was irrelevant and a waste of time:

[It would be good to do] something that's interesting and relevant to your job. There are some courses that we go to that are nothing to do with us. It's more admin. You sort of sit there and think, 'Why are we on this course?' (Apple, aged care studying certificate III, Qld)

I did a [TAFE] supervisor's course which I thought was a waste of time ... The best I got out of it was talking to all the other people there and [them] giving you feedback on what they did with problems in the workplace, but as far as the course, I thought it was a waste of time. (Supervisor, food processing, Vic.)

When time is short, useless training is painful. These workers reported a lack of interest in future training. Some workers who had been in the industry for many years perceived training as unnecessary because they already had skills through experience and therefore did not need formal qualifications or training. Against this, some workers and managers felt that completing a certificate was worthwhile even for workers with long work experience: learning the explanations

for practices or behaviour; for example, more knowledge about the diseases of aging and treatment, was often a very positive consequence of quality training.

Unfortunately, not all the education underway was good quality. Some employees engaged in certificate III studies complained about workbooks that were out of date, or educators who did not turn up to the workplace for weeks or even months to check workbooks and sign off on students' progress: 'they were going to come out to the workplace and assess us but nothing has ever happened. So really, all we've had is our folders. And we haven't really learned anything have we?—it's what we do anyway' (Donna aged care worker, Qld). Sally is a retail worker who was a teacher for 38 years and now is doing a certificate in horticulture, which is 'hard yakka'. She compares the learning environment in TAFE and her retail workplace:

The online training here is so much more interesting than TAFE. That is the most boring thing. I'm appalled that things haven't changed in all this time since I last did a course. You sit there and they drone on and you have to learn it by rote ... No wonder people drop out. It's just 'Here's your notes, read through'. (Female retail worker, studying horticulture, SA)

Brod's comment brings together a number of these issues. He finds much training boring or useless, and he is cynical about whether training will give him job protection or is simply a tax ruse:

I know I don't want to study. I'm just not that way inclined any more. Every job I've done has [required training] to get you to some level, and then they pull the pin out of that job. So it all seems like a lot of the study at work is just there to cover their own butt in the sense that they get the tax break at the end of the year because they're training people. And you have to sit there and smile and tick the forms. (Brod, retail, WA)

Relevance was a vital and much-discussed aspect of training for employees who were studying. For those engaged in on-the-job learning that was closely linked to actual work processes or client care, it was valued highly: its absence was a barrier to VET. Many found training that was located in the workplace better on this count.

Workers were disappointed by training that was out of date or irrelevant. This was a major source of disengagement for some. Where time and money are in such short supply, it is not surprising that many employees and students look for quality, relevant, applicable skills and hope for quality workbooks and educators. Their absence makes diligence by employers and governments in ensuring quality training of considerable importance. It was inadequate in some locations. Some employers pointed to the lack of support for ensuring good-quality training and support for students and the resources to devote to ensuring quality, relevant training and VET outcomes.

Some managers, workers and educators were dubious about recognition of prior learning (RPL) practices that 'ticked off' workers competencies. They felt that formal study inevitably taught some new skills, especially where quality materials and good teaching was underway.

They gain from [being in the classroom]. I know of a class where one woman left the class in tears. It was a class on dementia and she learned something that she felt she should have known all those years. She couldn't wait to see this particular resident the next day. Because she has made a judgment against this person, and she had now learned [what was wrong with her]. (VET course provider, aged care, Qld)

I'm not a big believer in recognition of prior learning (RPL) myself because I believe you can always learn something ... Someone who has RPL in something very often has lost the opportunity for extra learning ... If they have been through the course and done it properly, they begin to see the real purpose behind what they're doing and move away from 'Oh I just want to help people' into ... what it is really about, which is focusing on the science of helping [clients] to live they way they want.

(Employer peak council representative, aged care, Qld)

Both educators and students felt that sharing experiences with other workers/students and educators or supervisors inevitably lifted the skills and knowledge of workers in very positive ways. Those whose competencies were merely ‘ticked off’ did not benefit from this enrichment and learning, which was sometimes unexpected.

Language and literacy

Many employers, educators, workers and students identified poor language and literacy skills as a barrier to learning. As Victoria put it, particular problems affect low-paid immigrant workers, especially when learning in a class group:

Simply being able to follow the content, particularly if it’s done in a group setting. If it’s done in a one-to-one setting, it’s not the same. But being able to follow the content, if they’re from a non-English speaking background and have a basic education ... It’s getting their heads around the concepts, in a language that they might be quite familiar with as a spoken language but often as a written language, they’re not able to put things to paper quite the same way.

(Victoria, VET educator, aged care, Qld)

Although Victoria highlights the difficulties faced by workers for whom English is a second language, educators, students and workers also identified difficulties for many Australian-born students in both understanding and expressing their learning in written assignments.

Some workers, particularly those in aged care, were required to have computing skills to engage in their certificate III training and employment and this was challenging. As one employer explains:

Now a lot of our information is on what we call our intranet. We do have hard copy policies and manuals, but the intranet is where we as an office group go because you can just go straight in and get the most current information. So that hindered some of them that didn’t have computing, typing or keyboard skills. That certificate slowed them down.

(Betty, aged care, SA)

Work, family and education barriers for students

The challenges identified above for workers engaged in VET while juggling family and study also affect students. They struggle for time to study where they have care obligations, and they struggle with course fees and the travel, materials and computing costs of study:

The main challenge is ... I still have to go to work on weekends. In the week I am here [at TAFE] so I’ve got no time off, no time for me for the month, and I’m really exhausted. But it’s well worth it because I want to better myself. So I guess that’s the challenge and the sacrifice that we have to make.

(May, retail certificate III student SA, previously unemployed for 11 years)

May’s course cost \$1440 and she put half the cost on her credit card: ‘It’s a lot for me. I am over 50. I had to pay the whole price. There was no discount, which I thought was a bit sad.’

Some of [the students] have to work and I feel sorry for them, particularly the factory workers who often are migrants and they have to leave here by 3 pm because they’ve got to go and work in a factory until midnight and then go home and grab some sleep and come back here [at 8.30 am to TAFE], which is really hard.

(VET educator, care course, Qld)

Dakota’s course fees were paid by Centrelink; without this: ‘There’s no way I would have been able to afford it because I’m the only one that has any kind of money coming in [to the household]. And it’s not working money [it’s Centrelink]’ (Dakota, retail certificate III student, SA).

Educators also identified language and literacy barriers as a double hurdle for students who struggle to gain access to and use of computers. Although many training providers allow students

to use computers on campus, they were often difficult to access as they needed to organise childcare and travel. For some, this meant purchasing a computer, which they found financially difficult. Two years of saving were involved for Dakota:

Up until the end of last year, I didn't have a computer at all, so ... I had to come here if I needed anything, with two kids in tow. Trying to concentrate on what I needed to get done as well as trying to make sure that they didn't destroy the whole place was a definite issue... I couldn't leave them with anybody because I have very limited childcare options. So that was a big issue. Now it's not so much because I've got my own computer at home and things are a lot easier. But up until that point, until the end of last year – and I had been studying for over 18 months – it was pure torture. But the financial side of buying one was another issue. Because I'm not exactly rich, so I can't just go into a store and buy a computer and pay for it then and there. So I had to save up a couple of years.

(Dakota, retail, SA)

Challenges for VET educators

VET educators concurred with many of the challenges identified above. Many worked hard to meet the needs of students, and some students recognised the challenges educators confronted, as the comment from this student in relation to her issues demonstrates:

The lecturers are fantastic. I enjoy both of them. But they don't fully understand that we know nothing. Do you understand? It's like we are starting from kindy of something. We don't understand computers, we haven't studied for a long time. We are starting from scratch. I haven't written a letter for years and years.

(Female student, certificate III, aged care, SA)

Educators also faced difficulties finding enough resources to meet the needs of students who in some cases had complex, multiple needs:

Our hours are really only allocated on our [teaching] contact time ... then we get smaller amount of hours allocated to coordination. Pastoral care ... student support isn't really factored into those hours.

(Regina, VET educator, aged care)

Regina's role as an educator goes beyond basic teaching and incorporates a pastoral care role, for which she is not paid. The provision of appropriate levels of general support, assistance in navigating education and income support systems, job search advice and other forms of pastoral care were vital parts of the role of educators working with students in these occupations. Students and educators drew attention to the meagre and inadequate funding for pastoral care and saw 'wrap around' support of this kind as very important.

Educators often found the organisation of work placements challenging and time-consuming because of the reluctance they faced from employers:

The other issue for us in terms of running those courses is getting placements for students with employers, because when a student goes into a ward on clinical placement, that takes time from the staff that are being paid by the employer.

(Larnie, VET educator, aged care)

Workers and students valued educators who respond comprehensively to their learning and life situations. Such supporters—whether in VET classrooms or on the job—were highlighted by workers and students as a major support and often the chief reason that they persisted in their learning or courses. Good teaching pedagogies that take account of challenges such as limited literacy, negative past educational experiences and complex family demands were vital.

Getting workplace-based education right

For those learning on the job, time to learn, the availability of co-workers and supervisors to coach and teach, and supervisors' time and support to complete workbooks or assignments were very important. Both workers and students highlighted the importance of social interaction in training. For many, training with peers served a dual purpose: it was more enjoyable and it provided additional support in terms of learning and assessments. When Sophia was asked what made her certificate III training or easier she responded:

You get good support from your workmates [who] encourage you and if you need help, there's always someone there to help so you're not out on your own. There is help always.
(Sophia, aged care, Qld)

Sue and her aged care peers describe how important it is to have supportive supervisors available at work when studying: 'there's always someone to ask'. Workers also emphasised the importance and advantage of a mentor who provided support and guidance in learning. Good workplace training cultures can address these needs by providing workers with an opportunity to learn with their peers and have access to mentors, making training both enjoyable and relevant.

Further to this, training that was easily accessible was embraced by workers. In some instances, workers were able to engage in training during down time or when things were quiet, without disrupting their normal working hours.

Gender, education and training

Many studies highlight differences between men and women in terms of their willingness to engage in training and its wage and occupational rewards (Fitzenburger & Kunze 2005; Butler & Ferrier 2006; Skinner 2009). Our analysis also shows significant gender differences.

Women are disproportionately found in low-paid jobs, in part because many such jobs are part-time or allow workers to have some control over working time and so fit their home and care activities and demands alongside those of work. Many women with intensive domestic and care responsibilities want a job that allows them to put their families first and many accept low pay if they can do this.

There are gendered differences in barriers and supports for training in low-paid occupations. Not least of these were the domestic work and caring responsibilities that women disproportionately carry: these affected the time and money that individual women could allocate to VET. On the other hand, in our interviewee group, older men were more likely to have undertaken VET in the past at the request of employers and find their skills no protection against retrenchment, and they were more likely to be exhausted by shift work or seriously injured. Women were more likely to be burned out by work/care responsibilities, while men were more likely to be burned by the circumstances of their prior working conditions and VET experiences.

Men were more inclined to train for advancement than women. For example, Matilda, a VET educator in the aged care sector, highlights that men who enjoy working in the aged care sector tend to use it as a stepping stone to higher-paid work:

In aged care the males if they like it they stay. But the percentage isn't that high [for] males who actually stay. The problem with a lot of males in nursing is that they go on to finish their RN but they don't seem to work that long ... Some do but quite a number don't they go straight into the admin area of health and they'll go and do a health management course and the next thing you know they're up the hierarchy. (Matilda, VET educator, aged care)

In one regional food processing factory, a Certificate IV in Competitive Manufacturing was needed to advance. Significantly, more men were interested and involved in that training than women, and thus advancement was more assured.

In the retail sector, women made up the majority of employees and VET participants, reflecting their much higher proportion of employment in the sector:

Well it's always been the same. You could pretty much guarantee two boys per class. So it's really hugely women in the retail sector, but we get about two to three gentlemen per class. And that is due to them losing jobs. For example, [with closure of major SA manufacturing plant], we saw more men coming, we saw a more consistent group of men coming through. So basically they haven't really got any qualifications ... So it's not balanced at all. The majority is women.

(Jazz, VET educator, retail, SA)

Redundancy from another occupation more commonly explained men's entry into retail than women's. A number of men in the study were cynical about the benefits of training, especially if they had been required to undertake training in a previous workplace and then been retrenched. They were more likely than women to be forthright about the employer's responsibility to pay for training and to train in paid time and more likely to mention a lack of benefits (for example, higher pay) arising from previous education. A number of women mentioned partners who were not supportive of their training, or children who were demanding when they were trying to study; no men mentioned these kinds of domestic opposition.

Utilisation of skills and qualifications

Watson (2008) has drawn attention to the under-utilisation of skills in the Australian workforce. While this was not a direct focus of this study, our interviews cast some light on the many reasons for this. Within each of the three sectors studied, some workers had formal qualifications that were not used in their current employment, for example, in teaching, music, IT, medicine and finance. Others had trade qualifications in areas that were also unrelated to their current employment.

Many of these 'over-qualified' workers were making decisions about where to work in the context of their life course and household situation, seeking out opportunities to recover from demanding work or injury or to find flexible hours or a less demanding job. Some hoped or expected to return to the use of their skills and qualifications in the future. Others were unable to find appropriate work in their area of skill and regretted this and its pay consequences.

Workers like Jonathan talked of the frustration associated with not receiving recognition for their qualifications or getting the opportunity to use the skills associated with their training. In some cases workers held overseas qualifications that were not recognised in Australia:

Before I came here I was working in a bank, and before that I was teaching; so teaching and then bank.

(Jamie, aged 35–44, food processing, Vic.)

Some changed their area of work as a result of health or life issues, therefore moving away from their area of qualification, while others moved away in search of job satisfaction:

I went to uni and did a double degree in social science, majoring in policy and a degree in arts majoring in political science and philosophy. My intentions with that were to work in Government as a policy adviser. Towards the end of my degree I got some admin work at a hospital. It was doing clerical patient services officer position. Then from that I went to work in a community nursing agency ... My mum's a nurse so I know a lot about what it involves. Because my degree in policy couldn't really get me into what I wanted to because they didn't have it as hands on – they've now updated the degree – I decided that I wanted to do nursing. I lost my job and I had some time before uni started so I decided to do this

certificate III and now I've just started doing my bachelor of nursing, graduate entry. I've decided now that I've got a particular interest in wound care. I'd like to do like wound management in a hospital situation. (Rachel, aged 26–34, aged care, Qld)

Josephine had undertaken a range of courses but kept her qualifications 'under cover' as she did not want to become a manager:

I've done that [management training] myself, for myself. But that was for my esteem and it's actually helped me with a lot of things in the workplace. I did some psychology, I did counselling. I have done some management courses but I don't tell them that because I don't want to be management. (Josephine, retail, WA)

Some workers felt restricted by an apprenticeship and 'trade' and therefore chose to move away from the area of their qualifications in search of flexibility and better working conditions:

Coming back from a trade I probably wouldn't push [students] towards that, unless you got into like a building trade or something like that. With a trade you've got to be pretty selective on what you actually get into because of conditions and money and all that sort of stuff. But to get into a factory where you get looked after, would be a good thing even though you have got shiftwork ... to have a fairly decent lifestyle. (Henry, food processing, Vic.)

Complex sets of multiple factors often shape skill utilisation. Two groups of factors repeatedly occurred in our data. The first related to personal circumstances and included factors such as health or burnout in a previous occupation or a need to generate income quickly rather than wait for a job that uses qualifications and experience and personal preferences (for example, working in a job that aligns with values rather than qualifications).

The second set of factors related to the workplace and included difficulty finding a job aligned with skill, the failure of supervisors or management to recognise or reward skills and qualifications and inflexible work arrangements that prevent workers taking jobs aligned with skills (for example, 24/7 availability for IT specialists).

Not surprisingly, factors associated with the personal preferences of workers were associated with less frustration than those related to inflexible labour markets or workplace practices. This set of factors suggests that not all 'under-utilisation' is a bad thing: some of it is 'frictional' and is associated with a healthy labour market and personal and household transitions. In other cases, under-utilisation; for example, that arising from inflexible job design, is associated with significant penalties for workers, lost participation and lower productivity to workplaces.

Participating in VET within a work, home and community context

Our analysis suggests that a number of factors shape VET in low-paid occupations—work, family and community contexts. Together these factors make up a system that conditions the VET opportunities available to low-paid workers. This system comprises a set of ‘work’ arrangements—at job, workplace, industry and national levels. This multi-layered ‘work’ domain intersects with the domains of household, community and VET. The way that work intersects with these other domains and the larger lives of those employed in, or training for, low-paid occupations, shapes their effective opportunities and the outcomes of education.

Employers, managers and supervisors also live in this world of multiple domains, as they make calculations about when, how and how much to invest in skill development and its utilisation. Some parts of this system operate in perverse and contradictory ways. For example, some employers have a strong disincentive to see their low-paid employees increase their skill for fear that they will leave, thus adding to already high rates of labour turnover. A better understanding of the components and operation of this system may help to diagnose and redress its weaknesses and improve its strengths. In this section we develop a model of this system, building on previous sections exploring the drivers of, and barriers to, VET from the perspectives of employers, employees, students and VET providers.

The complex domain of ‘work’

Our analysis suggests that many aspects of ‘work’ are critical to the opportunities that are created for workers to develop and use skills.

We find that a set of identifiable work-related factors contribute to the context of training in low-paid jobs. Some factors arise from overall labour-market settings (like industrial relations law and the national qualifications framework), while others are industry-related (like mandatory industry training requirements), or are determined at the workplace (like firm-specific policy and cultures) or according to job level (like job design and first-line supervision). Relevant factors exist at all four levels, with the job embedded in the workplace/industry and larger labour market as set out in figure 1.

Figure 1 Work-related levels shaping VET opportunities in low-paid jobs

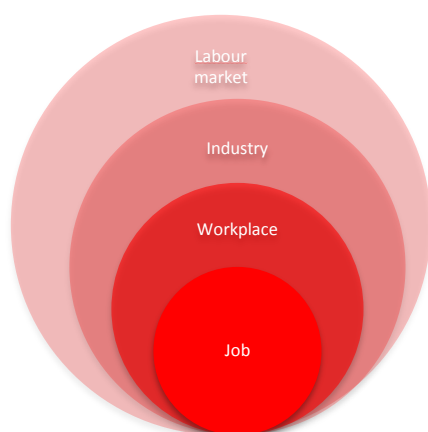


Table 2 sets out how some aspects of each of these levels affect VET opportunities in low-paid jobs.

Table 2 Four levels of work and their VET ‘drivers’

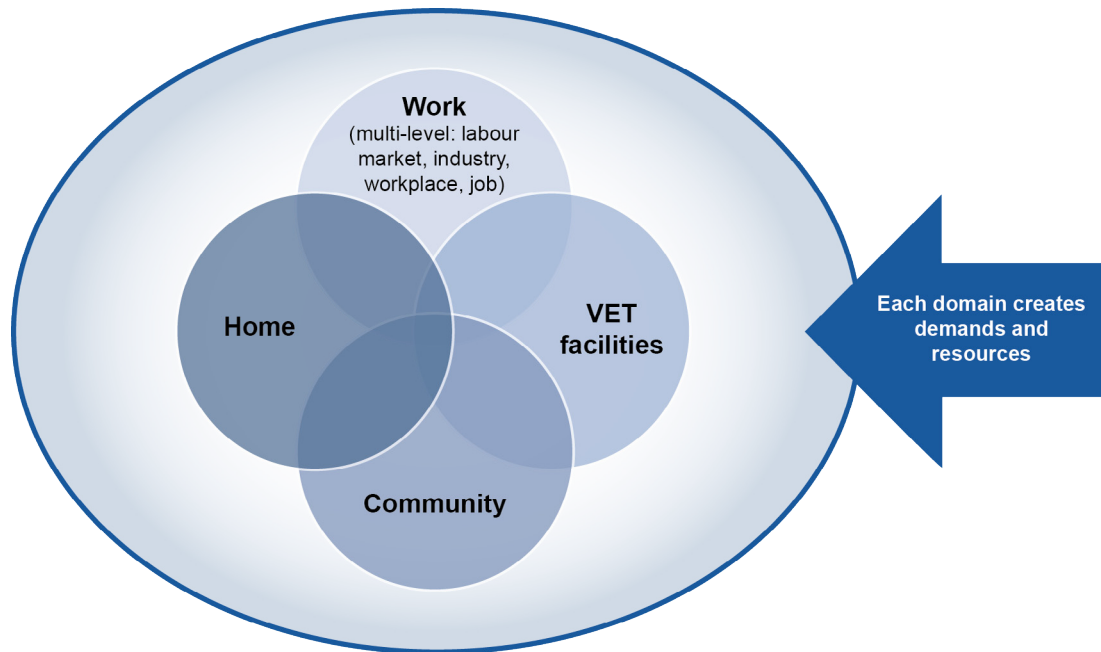
Level	Work-related elements that ‘drive’ training
Labour market	<p>Industrial laws, awards, enterprise agreements (statutory standards, facilitative rights, and enforcement machinery)</p> <p>Age of workforce, literacy, unemployment level</p> <p>Education system: schools, VET, tertiary</p> <p>Social norms (e.g. work–life expectations and gender norms)</p>
Industry	<p>Industry regulations that drive compliance-related training (OH&S, product regulations, training and skill requirements)</p> <p>Industry training arrangements and qualification frameworks; award/enterprise job classifications</p> <p>Nature of product market (internationalised, profit levels, service/manufacturing/other, labour intensity)</p> <p>Funding/business model (government, not-for-profit, private profit)</p> <p>High/low skill</p>
Workplace	<p>Structure of ownership (private, public, listed)</p> <p>Management policies, support and investment of money and time in training</p> <p>Workplace training culture</p> <p>Size of firm; nature of technology; level of investment in training</p> <p>Supply-chain/purchaser requirements for training and certification</p>
Job	<p>Direct supervisor support; intensity of work; colleague attitudes to training</p>

Family: a demand and a resource

Beyond the domain of work and its multiple levels, home life also conditions low-paid workers’ ability to engage in VET. Families acted as a demand on many in this study. They were also a source of support: both workers and students highlighted the important role a supportive family can play when they are studying. Many workers highlighted the importance of family in relation to their work and life generally: ‘family comes first’. In addition to caring for dependent children, women often had the extra responsibility of caring for husbands, children and/or parents, while some men worked two jobs to meet the needs of their family and provide them with future opportunities. For many workers it was important to find work—and education—that ‘fits’ with their family life, recognising that this ‘fit’ varies over the life course.

Our findings in relation to work, home and community life suggest that participation in VET—whether on the job or in a VET facility—is shaped by conditions at work, at home, in the community, and in the VET facilities themselves (their support, hours, costs and accessibility, for example). Beyond their independent effects, these four domains—work, home, community and VET—intersect. Figure 2 maps these domains and their intersections schematically.

Figure 2 A socio-ecological system of work, home, community and VET



Our analysis suggests that several important aspects of these domains, and their intersection, affect workers' and students' participation in VET. Each of these domains is a source of potential resources and demands. For example, work can either create positive learning opportunities through quality on-the-job training, or it can send workers home too tired to study. A lack of paid time at work to train creates a demand by increasing pressure on workers, as does training that is not seen as relevant. Insecure employment, shift work, a lack of employer interest in skill development, long hours of work, the lack of a good study environment at work and the absence of opportunities to undertake 'in situ' training (for example, through online learning) can all create demands that work against successful participation in training. Similarly, home can be a source of computing facilities and support, or can create demands in the form of care, time, money or unhappy and unsupportive partner or children. Similarly, the domain of the community can support VET by providing neighbours who help care for kids, or public libraries that provide resources, or it can provide a social context, where education and advancement are not valued or resourced, or where community needs add to demands in the form of requests for volunteer work. A similar 'nest' of demands or resources exists in the VET system: supportive pastoral care, help with literacy and fee relief are vital resources.

Another set of demands or resources arises from the ways in which these domains operate together, especially in relation to their spatial and temporal alignment. For example, long distances and poor transport between VET institutions, work and home adds to time and money strain. Work, VET and school schedules that do not synchronise well can also add to strain.

Table 3 sets these out demands in the four domains of work, home, the community and VET and their 'cross-domain' intersection suggested by our analysis.

Table 3 Demands and resources affecting low-paid workers' participation in skill development in the context of their work–life situations

Domain	Demands (the reverse of most of these constitutes a 'resource')
VET:	Fees and costs (books, computing, travel, uniform, travel) Foregone wages (e.g. to undertake job placements) Time to travel to VET Poor-quality teaching Course content that does not relate directly to job Poor language or literacy; absence of language and literacy support Absence of 'wrap-around' pastoral support (e.g. counselling, encouragement, adult learner pedagogies) Lack of computer literacy or equipment Learning that does not occur at appropriate pace (too fast, too slow)
Work:	Lack of learning opportunities in paid work time Training not linked to job Lack of time/opportunity to reinforce learning Casual employment, shift work, long hours Employers, supervisors, managers who do not support training Lack of quiet study space or peer support/exchange Lack of access to online learning where appropriate
Home:	Care responsibilities (children/parents/grandparents/other) Time and income poverty Unsupportive partner Long commutes Slow internet, no internet Poor transport options No/poor household technology or space (e.g. computer, quiet space) Unaffordable, inaccessible, low-quality care options
Community:	Volunteer obligations or demands Lack of community support for participation in education (e.g. unsupportive socioeconomic context and cultural attitudes to VET) Absence of IT facilities and support Poor local facilities (especially libraries, education, care) Absence of peers, friends and community support for education, or for help with care
Cross-domain:	Poor spatial alignment of work, family, community and VET Poor temporal alignment of work, family, community and VET Poor transport options (cost, timing, regularity, no cars) Poor technology (e.g. computer) Limited local educational opportunities (e.g. VET, uni) Slow internet, no internet

Money, time, life course

As table 3 sets out, many of the challenges described by workers and students in this study relate to fitting together the four domains of work, home, community and study and they particularly focus on money (fees, costs, foregone income) and time. These challenges vary over the life course, with age, gender and health also affecting individual experiences and VET outcomes. Six factors were especially important:

- ✧ *Workers' work–life context:* in the context of their often busy, larger lives, many low-paid workers (especially women) find it difficult to participate in training and skill development, particularly

if this falls outside their normal working day. Lack of support on the home front makes some reluctant to train.

- ✧ *Workers' life-course stage*: older workers were less inclined to seek qualifications, while younger ones saw more value in a recognised qualification. Carers were less likely to engage in VET voluntarily.
- ✧ *Workers' previous educational experiences*: workers with negative earlier educational experience or who had participated in VET to find that it was irrelevant or did not protect against dismissal were reluctant to train or approached learning with low confidence.
- ✧ *Potential returns from education—for employees and employers*: the prospect of a very low increase in pay made many workers reluctant to invest in education. Where employers saw weak returns from their investments (for example, because of high rates of turnover), they were also reluctant.
- ✧ *Industry qualification requirements and the national regulatory context*: training in many low-paid occupations is shaped by regulatory requirements, for example, mandatory qualifications and safety, rather than being oriented to the development of workers and their longer-term careers and employment trajectories. National awards and industrial provisions also shape opportunity.
- ✧ *Employer attitudes to and provision of training*: there is great variability in employer commitment to VET skills development and utilisation in low-paid occupations. Some of this variability reflects industry and product market differences. However, some of it is explained by local workplace strategies and local manager and supervisors' values and behaviour.

Keep (2009b) argues that there has been, in the UK at least, too much reliance placed upon the expected rate of return (RoR) (that is, costs versus longer-term returns) as a motivation for training. He argues that rate of return calculations are often unreliable, that they are uncertain in relation to VET and especially informal on-the-job training (the largest source of skill development, especially for low-paid workers), and are over-relied upon as a source of motivation for both employers and employees when many other motivations exist. Despite some evidence of positive rates of return on certificate III/IV education in Australia (Long & Shah 2008), our analysis provides support for Keep's critique. Few low-paid workers in this study suggested that their primary motivation to learn related to a higher rate of earnings, mostly because they saw these returns as very low and the costs sometimes very high. More commonly they were motivated by the possibility of job loss if they did not train. Other significant sources of motivation arose, including regulatory requirements.

Keep questions the focus of training providers on education-related incentives (such as qualifications targets) without paying enough attention to the workplace development and utilisation of qualifications and skills, and the nature of work, workplace cultures and job design. Our analysis suggests that an individual's home, community, and life stage also strongly affect the strength of incentives. For instance, someone who is juggling work, VET and care—like many in our study—will struggle to fit in education, regardless of its possible rate of return. An older worker who has care responsibilities or is tired from years of work in a demanding if low-paid job may choose to under-utilise their qualifications and accept low pay and decline training.

The motivations for training vary widely amongst low-paid workers, reflecting their diverse individual, household, and life-stage circumstances. As one supervisor observed:

I would say [the motivation] is actually ... 33/33/33% ... There are those that are really keen. There are those that say 'Yeah, if there's something in it for me' sort of thing. And there's another group that's just not very [interested], and they're not very interested because 'This is how I see myself in my life, I'm happy to take home my pay cheque'.

(Chris, manager, food processing, Vic.)

Local workplace cultures and employer and supervisor attitudes are very important. These include employer support for skill development and workplace facilities for training like computers, trainers, peer support and peer educators, leave for training, assistance with meeting the costs of training and provision for training in working time. Even where incentives to provide employment and/or training exist and pedagogical practices are exemplary, if workplace support is weak or work–life pressures intense, low-paid workers are unlikely to train.

Further, different types of motivations are linked in many circumstances. Where good workplace cultures support training, employers are likely to: utilise training subsidies in their workplaces; link skill development to pay increases or other workplace benefits (like promotion or recognition); provide training in working hours to minimise work–life interference; give workers some flexibility to ‘put together’ training, work and home life; ensure that training is well taught and relevant to work; and recruit workers who are personally inclined to develop their skills and draw intrinsic rewards from training. A virtuous circle gathers momentum. In our study, a significant human resources capacity underpinned these practices—on a scale that does not exist in smaller workplaces, where many lower-paid workers are employed. In smaller workplaces a committed owner–operator can help ensure VET participation, and we heard of examples of this but this is not common. More commonly, tight margins in smaller companies tended to crowd out VET.

Our analysis suggests that a number of factors strongly ‘push’ workers and students towards VET (such as mandatory training), while other, weaker factors attract or ‘pull’ them (such as higher earnings). Push factors are much stronger than pull factors for both employers and employees. It is useful to consider these ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors for the three stakeholder groups: workers, employers and students, and which we set out in table 4.

Table 4 ‘Push’ and ‘pull’ factors motivating VET in low-paid occupations, from the perspective of workers, employers and students

	‘Push’ factors	‘Pull’ factors
Workers	<p>Compliance—to meet mandatory requirements facing the employer (e.g. health and safety, food safety)</p> <p>Compliance—job entry—mandatory requirement for entry to employment</p> <p>Compliance—to meet the requirements of government training subsidies</p> <p>Job security—training to improve job security</p>	<p>Reward for qualifications (weak)</p> <p>Personal development, interest advancement, more responsibility</p> <p>More job mobility</p> <p>Stepping stone to future qualifications</p> <p>Increase skills to make job easier/improve level of care</p> <p>Intrinsic rewards—love of learning</p>
Employers	<p>Compliance—to meet mandatory requirements</p> <p>Compliance—to meet the demands of buyers (e.g. large supermarkets)</p> <p>Compliance—to meet the requirements of government training subsidies</p> <p>Compliance—legislation, awards, enterprise agreements setting minimum qualifications</p> <p>Eligibility for government incentives</p>	<p>Improve retention</p> <p>Increase productivity</p> <p>Improve workers’ skills</p> <p>Improve quality of work</p> <p>Making a difference in workers’ lives</p>
Students	<p>Compliance—meet government requirements (e.g. Centrelink)</p> <p>Compliance—job entry—mandatory qualifications</p>	<p>Stepping stone to future qualifications</p> <p>Interest</p> <p>Gain employment—earn money, change jobs</p> <p>Personal interest</p>

Table 4 highlights that compliance in one form or another plays a large role in ‘pushing’ VET in these occupations. Policy changes that result in better rates of return, lower fees, help spread out payments, reduce time and travel demands and provide better spatial and temporal ‘fits’ between

life, work and VET (all of which save time and money) would be helpful. In the current system low-paid workers experience very variable access to fee help, variable costs, and a variable time burden when participating in VET, with certificate III courses, for example, ranging from four days to years in length. It also appears that some low-paid workers and potential students are unaware of opportunities for VET that could enable them to meet their work-life needs. This requires new thinking about community-based training, brokerage supports, more student-centred or demand-driven funding, and more worker voice about VET and its provision. Better career, course, fee, cost and labour market information, including for casual workers, might help them identify pathways to more secure work. The high proportion of casual workers in these jobs and the low rate of return that many employers and casuals expect to earn on investment in their skills act as a systemic disincentive to train for many low-paid workers. Australia's industrial and employment relations system, which results in a high proportion of casual workers, has a significant indirect effect on VET. This effect is especially visited upon low-paid workers in areas such as aged care and retail, despite the long tenure of many such 'casual' workers.

In conclusion—what will help?

Many low-paid workers define a 'good job' as one in which they learn. There is a positive inclination to education amongst around half of the low-paid employees we interviewed, with many VET students enjoying aspects of their courses and the doors they open.

Some workers are not interested in VET: they tend to be older; already have experience and skills and see no need for more training; lack confidence in the quality of training or its outcomes; have had prior negative educational experiences; have been made redundant in the past, despite having undertaken training; are too tired and busy; have skills that are currently under-utilised; see the training on offer as 'tick the box' or 'mickey mouse'; or are simply not interested. For some, household demands crowd out VET.

Employment in these low-paid occupations can function as an important entry and re-entry pathway to employment—whether in retail, food processing or non-residential aged care. While many low-paid workers enjoy their jobs, including the skills they gain and exercise, for those who want to move up and earn more, promotional opportunities are scarce. While not all seek advancement and more complex or challenging work, this does not mean that these workers lack an appetite for learning or that they should be denied training opportunities both within their employment and beyond it. In many cases, the appetite for learning is shaped by money, time, life stage, work-life circumstances and local workplace cultures. This means that the decision to decline training today may not be the same tomorrow. Training models that enable skill development over the life course—lifelong learning—are vital for these workers so that they have second, third and fourth chances to improve their working lives. Further, policy mechanisms that help smooth out the money and time costs of training over the life course (through HECS-type fee arrangements or entitlements to training assistance that can be drawn down over the life course) will help.

However, in relation to the workers themselves, it is clear from the above analysis that VET and job preferences change over the life cycle, with changing work-family circumstances and with personal characteristics like health or age. Policy measures that facilitate training through personal and work-family transitions over the life course are very important. Supports that deal with the financial, temporal and spatial realities of the lives of low-paid workers are vital. Many lack a voice at work—whether because they are very busy, casual, part-time, women or non-unionised—so creating ways in which training preferences can be heard and realised is an important policy challenge.

In relation to employers, it is evident that what workplaces do and their established cultures, and in particular the stance they adopt in relation to training, are very significant to learning outcomes

for low-paid workers. Efforts to provide training in work time, minimise costs to workers, enable training without disruption of normal working and home arrangements, and which encourage, facilitate and reward VET are important.

How governments influence workplace practice and shape the time and money costs of training are also very significant. As funders of a major portion of services like aged care, the allocation of resources by government to these sectors affects the pay rewards for skill and thus the rate of return from investment in training. In addition, governments have an important role in ensuring the quality of training. Merely adding to the pool of qualifications amongst low-paid workers is not enough. Indeed it is counter-productive, where such qualifications do not result in real skill increases, exhaust the willingness to train and fail to deliver relevant skills, but and merely add to the demands on already over-burdened and poorly paid workers. To work well for low-paid workers, training must be in relevant skills that are rewarded and utilised (rather than merely used as recruitment-screening devices to meet arbitrary qualifications targets or as a route to training incentives or wage subsidies).

In many accounts through this study, workers depend on the personal support and ‘wrap-around’ pastoral care of their educators—whether in the workplace or beyond. Personal and pastoral support for those with low confidence, prior negative educational experience, low literacy, or a hostile family helps low-paid workers to successfully learn and achieve qualifications. At present literacy and numeracy problems afflict many low-paid workers and narrow their employment choices. Appropriate funding for comprehensive pastoral care, as well as appropriate pedagogies and educational resources are essential, as is training that minimises the financial, temporal and spatial disruption of low-paid workers’ lives.

Our interviews with diverse stakeholders suggest that actions by employers, government, educators, and the workers and students themselves, are important to improving outcomes. Each of these groups of actors faces different kinds of challenges. We turn to the implications of the above qualitative analysis, along with others from the larger study, in this project’s final report *Work, life and VET participation amongst lower-paid workers*.

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Appendix 1

Recruitment method and profile of participants

Recruitment method

In consultation with NCVER and key stakeholders it was agreed that the three industries to be covered by this study were food processing, retail and non-residential aged care. Workers and students seeking employment in these three industries were to be interviewed as well as VET educators and employers/industry representatives. Food manufacturing has a higher proportion of male workers than female workers and offered the opportunity to consider regionally based employment. In retail, knowing that there are large numbers of school students and higher education students for whom employment in the industry is short-term, it was agreed that those students would not be participants in this study, and that we would recruit workers anticipating longer-term or ongoing employment in retail. Non-residential aged care was selected because of the paucity of research on this form of care compared with residential aged care. Aged care employs more women than men, giving us potential for gender balance in our overall industry and participant sample.

In seeking to interview workers in these sectors it was generally necessary to contact them via their employer and so their employer's interest in the study and willingness to promote involvement were crucial to their participation. In some instances workers were released for focus groups during work time and for others times were scheduled after work hours. Operational or HR managers who were contacted expressed interest in and support for the study and advised that they would promote the opportunity generally to staff and invite them to participate. A voucher was provided for participation outside work hours and participation by workers was generally fairly readily achieved.

In the retail industry most workers interviewed were employed in a large national retail chain and multiple focus groups were conducted with staff in South Australia and Western Australia. In Western Australia the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Union organised a breakfast focus group with workers from another national retail chain. In food processing a smaller outer metropolitan company and a large regionally based food manufacturing plant in Victoria organised focus groups with workers. In the non-residential aged care sector in South Australia and Queensland larger non-government organisations were approached and their workers participated with the organisations' support.

To interview students seeking to enter employment in aged care, contact was made with TAFE providers in South Australia and Queensland and students participated with the generous support of their lecturers. Also with their lecturers' support, TAFE students undertaking retail studies were interviewed in South Australia and vocational education students undertaking school-based studies were interviewed in Western Australia. TAFE providers were interviewed in Victoria and since lower-level certificates were not offered in food processing at TAFE campuses but at worksites, workers who were or had undertaken VET studies were interviewed at their places of employment.

Profile of participants

Participants in the focus groups/interviews included:

- ✧ 86 employees in retail, food processing and non-residential aged care, of whom 24 (28%) were also undertaking VET study
- ✧ 18 students in VET education in retail and non-residential aged care
- ✧ 16 employers/industry representatives (including first-line supervisors, human resources managers, plant managers, training coordinators, members of industry training councils and peak bodies and representatives of employer or union peak bodies)
- ✧ 14 vocational educators (including classroom teachers, student coordinators, institutional leaders, workplace-based educators and coordinators).

In addition to the qualitative interviews and focus groups, worker and student participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which provided demographic information. One hundred and four participants completed this questionnaire. However, not all questions were answered by all respondents. Table 1 shows the breakdown of worker and student participants by gender, employment/training, state, industry and age.

Table A1 Characteristics of workers and students interviewed or participating in focus groups

Characteristic	Categories	Proportion
Gender	Male	44%
	Female	56%
Industry	Retail	35%
	Aged care	30%
	Food processing	23%
	Not specified	3%
Age	Under 25	16%
	26–34	10%
	35–44	30%
	45–54	23%
	55+	21%
State	Vic.	32%
	SA	20%
	WA	23%
	Qld	25%
Employment/student status	Employed not studying	60%
	Employed and studying	23%
	Studying only	17%

Note: N = 104 interviewees.

The worker and student participants in this study included community and personal care workers in non-residential aged care, sales workers in retail, and process operators in food processing, as well as some VET students, not currently in regular employment. Half of the participants lived in metropolitan areas, with most of the others living in regional centres and a few in rural areas. Three-quarters of all participants were aged 35 and over.

The study included slightly more women than men, with a fairly even gender balance across all age groups. Women workers significantly outnumbered men in the retail and aged care industries, with men outnumbering women in food processing.

Three-quarters of participants lived with a partner or other adult and over a third had dependent children living with them. Just over one-quarter of the women lived in single households, a slightly higher rate than for single men. Half of the single women households had dependent children, whereas none were indicated in single male households.

About a quarter of the workers had a personal income of less than \$26K and another quarter a personal income above \$46K; the latter were predominately food processing workers in a plant that paid above-award wages and significant shift penalties. Total household income was over \$46 000 for more than half of the participant households, with a fairly even distribution between the over \$15 000, \$26 000 and \$35 000 income categories. Some 10% indicated either no household income or income below \$15 000.

Just under half of the participants indicated that they were involved in community activities. Of those indicating they were active in the community, most were members of a social, sports or other club or society. Smaller proportions were involved in religious activities or as volunteers in less formal activities.

Most participants were currently in employment, with the rest not currently working but engaged in VET training. Over a third of all participants indicated that they were currently undertaking VET study, and over half of these were also currently in employment.

Characteristics of workers

More than three-quarters of workers in the study were permanent employees, with the rest working on a casual basis. Equal numbers of men and women were employed on a permanent basis, with a few more women than men amongst casual workers. Over 90% of the workers in food processing and retail were permanent employees, compared with two-thirds in the aged care industry.

More than three-quarters of those currently working were aged over 35, with few in the under 25 age group. The food processing industry workers had the highest percentage of older workers, with almost all being over 35, and two-thirds over 45. More than three-quarters of workers in the aged care industry were over 35, while in the retail industry just over half were aged over 35.

Over half of the workers were in full-time employment, with almost a quarter working long part-time hours (that is, 16–35 hours). The majority of workers in retail and in food processing worked full-time hours, whereas most in aged care worked long part-time hours. Just over half indicated that they did shiftwork, with the majority of these working in food processing, followed by retail workers and very few in aged care.

While the majority of participants were low-paid workers, it should be noted that some of the food processing workers were paid above-award wages and shift penalties and so earned more than the OECD definition of low pay (that is, less than two-thirds of median earnings; OECD 2006).

More than half of the workers had a personal income of less than \$36 000, with a quarter earning under \$26 000. Most workers earning under \$26 000 were in the aged care industry, with most retail sector participants earning between \$26 000 and \$36 000. It should be noted that a high percentage of workers in aged care worked on a part-time rather than full-time basis.

Workers and students

More than a quarter of workers (28%) were currently studying and they are included in the above profile of workers. Most worker–students were in aged care, followed by food processing, with a small proportion in retail. Almost two-thirds of these worker–students were women. All worker–

students in aged care were studying VET certificate IIIs that were related to their current jobs. However, most worker–students in retail and food processing were gaining mandated skills or doing in-house courses in, for example, product knowledge. A few in these industries were doing VET certificates IV or equivalent in supervision, advanced manufacturing or other courses.

Two-thirds of worker–students were working part-time and most of these worked long part-time hours. A third worked normal full-time hours. Their personal income levels were fairly low, with three-quarters earning under \$36 000 pa and most earning between \$15 000 to \$26 000 pa. Three-quarters lived in partnered households and over half had dependent children.

Two-thirds of the student-only group were female. A third were undertaking VET retail studies. Three Western Australian students were undertaking school-based certificate II vocational education studies in retail and the remainder were undertaking training in aged care. More than half of the students were living in partnered households and a third had dependent children.

Existing qualifications

Approximately half of the participants had completed Year 10 or 11, while just under half had completed Year 12. Only a small number had left school prior to Year 10. Just under two-thirds of participants indicated that they had undertaken training or already had qualifications. This included certificates I through to IV, apprenticeships, diplomas, associate diplomas and degrees, as well as units or modules of study. For most, the area of study related to their current work or future occupation; however, there were exceptions. One in ten participants indicated they had diplomas and a few had degrees (including overseas qualifications) or other qualifications, including trade qualifications. Of those with diplomas, two-thirds were in retail, with the rest mainly in aged care. Those with degrees were mainly working in aged care.

More women than men had completed certificate III and diplomas, while more men had completed certificate IV or equivalent. Small numbers of both women and men had degrees. Slightly over a third of all participants indicated that they had not previously completed qualifications or training, slightly more men than women.

A third of all participants indicated that they had undertaken one or more workplace-based training courses. This included a third of those participants who had not completed qualifications previously. This workplace-based training related to participants' current occupations. Equal numbers of men and women had undertaken one or more workplace-based training courses.

Current training

Forty per cent of participants were currently undertaking VET training (including several Year 12 students). A third of those who had not undertaken training or other qualifications previously were currently undertaking a VET certificate program (predominantly certificate III but some certificate IV courses).

A quarter of participants were working as well as studying and most of these worked in aged care, along with some in food processing. The smallest number working and studying VET courses were in retail. Two-thirds of these working students were working part-time. Women accounted for two-thirds of the working and studying group.

Appendix 2

Industry contexts

Retail

In the retail sector, our study involved two large national retail chains. Interviews were conducted in South Australia and Western Australia. According to one industry expert, one of these firms was at the ‘better end’ of large retail employers, offering, for example, opportunities and support to injured workers returning to work and mature-aged workers. It had an extensive in-house training capacity, which formed part of its retention strategy.

A number of retail workers were employed full-time and so were not representative of casual workers and workers in the small or medium-sized retail establishments which dominate employment in the sector. In recruiting retail workers for the study we sought to exclude high school and university students for whom retail will not generally be their long-term career.

The retail sector accounts for a large and growing share of employment in Australia. Around half of all Australian workers are expected to work in the retail sector at least some time in their lives. It contains both very large chains as well as many very small firms, and training capacity varies significantly by size. The retail industry is characterised by a high degree of casual, part-time and seasonal employment and suffers from high staff turnover. Small firms run on very tight margins. These factors affect the explicit or implicit rate of return calculations that employers make. For example, in smaller firms where employee turnover and casualisation are high, employers are unlikely to invest in training: they look to government support so that training is cost-neutral. In larger firms, however, where the profit horizon is longer and margins wider, where firm ownership is more stable and where more workers are full-time and stay for longer, greater investment in training is justified. At our interview sites, this training was mostly in-house and non-accredited, except for those undertaking supervisory and management training.

However, this greater investment in education was not always evident; for example, several focus group interviewees working in a large retail firm described their employers’ reduced investment in training (for example, induction training had been reduced from five days to one) because the current owners—a private equity firm—were focused on improving the bottom line in advance of sale. In this context, the structure of ownership and corporate strategy drove low investment in training.

Some interviewees raised concerns about the quality and usefulness of certificate II training in retail that involved ‘tick the box’ notebooks and little new skill acquisition. (Certificate III training was viewed much more positively.) In addition, we interviewed three students still at school who had gained a certificate II in retail and hoped this would help them gain retail jobs in future (move them ‘up the queue’).

Few retail employees were undertaking accredited formal training. Most employees participating in training in retail were involved in non-accredited in-house training.

It seems that many retail firms recruit according to personal attributes rather than qualifications or skills, and in these circumstances equipping individuals with qualifications makes little difference to their employment chances. In this context qualifications perform a screening function that

bears little relationship to productivity or the exercise or attainment of skill. Those with a certificate II in retail, for example, hoped this would put them ahead in the competition for jobs and show prospective employees that they were positive prospects. This is an expensive form of recruitment screening, especially when we take account of the full training costs.

Food processing

The food processing industry includes firms that process all forms of food—wine, fruit, vegetables and meat. Much of this production is in competition with international products.

In the main, training amongst process operators is driven by the need to be compliant with a range of health and safety and food-handling requirements. Some additional on-the-job training related to processes is also common and is generally firm- and process-specific. Some advanced manufacturing courses had external recognition. Like retail, employers often recruit according to behavioural and experiential characteristics: 'I look for someone with dairy industry experience', for example. Some looked for employees with a family and a mortgage because it lowered the chances of turnover. The employment and training experiences of employees vary widely and depend upon patterns of ownership, product range, size of firm, profitability, growth prospects, and the personal commitments and values of supervisors and managers.

Our study focused on three enterprises: one a small metropolitan food production operation, the second, a large multinational food producer, and the third a modestly sized food producer. The first small firm worked with a consultant who helped guide and deliver its training program. Most of the training was driven by regulatory requirements. The second, larger firm had an extensive training program that was integrated into overall production and processes of continuous improvement. The company was privately owned and strongly supported the training of its employees through internal training programs, assisting with paid time off and reimbursing employees for their course fees on completion of other external formal courses. Workers in this plant were paid above the award and most received shift allowances, taking their pay above the OECD definition of low-paid.

Non-residential aged care

Non-residential aged care services provide 'in home' care to aged citizens, in contrast to the residential care sector, where care is provided in institutions like aged care homes. This type of care is expanding rapidly in Australia, as more and more clients seek it, and governments prefer its provision to expensive residential care. Most of the industry relies on government funding; many workers are conditioned by this fact to be pessimistic about the prospects of a pay rise. However, many feel that their jobs are skilled and undervalued. They contrast their lack of medical back-up to residential care facilities: when they arrive at an old person's house to care for them they must be ready to deal with a range of possible scenarios alone (death, health emergencies, for example). Many find that they must work very intensively, monitoring the time they spend with each client. This can also involve emotional labour as they manage their own emotional responses, as well as those of their clients.

A growing number of workers in this sector are non-Australian born: many are from Africa or Asia. This can help in providing language and culturally appropriate services to a client base that is increasingly multicultural, but their background also complicates the provision of education and training where English literacy is low.

The sector includes large not-for-profit providers, government providers and for-profit services. The business model in the industry relies on government payments for services provided, with

different 'plans' for different types of clients. Clients in the non-residential aged care sector have needs that change daily, depending upon appointments, health and other personal circumstances. This variability makes rostering complex and means that many workers have unpredictable hours of work. There was some evidence of under-employment. Many employees are part-time; however, many are permanent part-time with guaranteed basic hours. Some not-for-profits were opposed to employing casually because they wanted employees to have access to holidays and sick leave. However, casual work is common in the sector.

Employer support for training in the industry is variable, depending upon enterprise policies, local supervisory capacity and inclination, government training support (which changes often and sometimes quickly, for example, the Productivity Places Program required rapid response) and the availability, costs and approach of TAFE and registered training providers.

Education and training in the residential aged care sector is increasingly driven by government requirements for certification of in-home carers at certificate III level.

Our study included major aged care providers in Queensland and South Australia. The main providers were not-for profit, with supervisors and managers keen to provide learning opportunities for staff. Most employers assisted with some paid time for learning and ensured that employees did not have to pay their certificate III course fees.



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