

Research Brief

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Understanding contract/seasonal employment potential in regions with high youth unemployment: Investigating job seekers' viewpoints

Pascal Tremblay

Regional, Economic & Workforce Development, Northern Institute

pascal.tremblay@cdu.edu.au

Alicia Boyle

Regional, Economic & Workforce Development, Northern Institute

alicia.boyle@cdu.edu.au

RESEARCH AIM

This research brief discusses results from a project that aimed to improve our understanding of the motivations and decision-making behind young peoples' decisions to engage or not to engage with seasonal work, as well as the perceptions of employers towards those job seekers' choices. As past debates have mainly been fuelled by speculations about young job seekers' motives, direct insights could help identify key determinants behind those choices, and prove critical in improving work prospects in regions and industries where young job seekers coexist with significant casual and seasonal labour shortages. The project was undertaken in three regions (Darwin, Cairns and Burnie), encompassed two industries (hospitality and harvest labour), and involved testing a survey instrument exploring respondents' descriptions of their own goals, decisions and reactions to pre-formulated scenarios.

KEY FINDINGS

- The tool developed was valuable in allowing research participants to take positions regarding significant current conjectures about their behaviour, and the political debates surrounding them.
- In terms of reasons for not engaging with seasonal and casual work, the main reasons given were related to transportation issues and work formats.
- On presentation of a job scenario for harvest labour, most participants initially appeared positive, though Burnie participants appeared less interested than those from Darwin and Cairns.
- With accommodation available on site, the overwhelming insistence that transport is a formidable barrier appears questionable.
- Employers use a range of wage payment systems. Certain wage payment systems allow employers to gauge productivity and give youth the chance to demonstrate their capabilities – these might need to be reconsidered.
- The job scenario for a role within a major hotel/event supplier was supported mainly by female job seekers.
- Lifestyle expectations of young job seekers appeared to hinder the appeal of shift-work and there was a noticeable preference for regular, sufficient, predictable and easily managed work hours.
- Some commentary suggested jobs in harvest labour and hospitality would only be considered by job seekers when they 'needed a job' or had 'financial reasons'. This suggested they were comfortable with not working, and were able to get by with family and other support groups, possible undeclared income and/or benefits, or unemployment benefits/welfare system in general.
- A surprisingly large number of interviewees had never undertaken any work during school years. This observation, combined with the apparent lack of stigma arising from not being in the workforce suggests that there is little family and/or peer pressure being placed on those youth to actively seek and/or value employment.
- The overall analysis of the methodology, sampling frame and data suggests young job seekers are highly differentiated with respect to their ability and readiness to engage with work (and with research on that topic). It is likely that our findings predominantly reflect the views of the more articulated and capable cohorts – leaving a research gap with respect to job seekers less competent, less ready or able to undertake introspection, or less confident to express their views. Further analysis with different analytical tools may be required to extract the latter.

1. Introduction

Some Australian regions concurrently experience, (a) high youth unemployment, and (b) cyclical worker shortages linked with casual and seasonal occupations. This apparent contradiction is usually interpreted in much of the academic literature as corroborating their preference for full-time employment (over alternative forms); and explaining the negligible interest of local job seekers towards temporary forms of economic participation. In contrast, in the media, some suggest this is evidence that those youths thereby reveal their limited desire to partake in work that is arduous or challenging, although this is generally conveyed by some employers' subjective but candid views. This contentious issue has had a noteworthy influence on national and local employment policy debates in those regions and industries where there are high casual and seasonal employment opportunities, such as the hospitality and harvest labour industries in Darwin (Northern Territory), Cairns (Queensland) and Burnie (Tasmania).

The facilitation of entry into Australia for working holidaymakers, international students or Seasonal Worker Program workers to meet their workforce requirements is directly linked with the perception that few local job seekers appear interested in or willing to take advantage of these job opportunities. Despite the diversity of possible conjectures suggested to be behind that situation, only minimal research has attempted to substantiate any of the competing views, and policymakers are left with anecdotal understanding of the employment preferences of young job seekers. Little is known about their attitude towards specific forms of employment, their job application selection processes, as well as their rationale for discarding some potential opportunities. In particular, a better understanding of the decision-making and motivation behind young peoples' decisions to engage or not in seasonal work, as well as the perceptions and motivations of employers in relation to using local staff, is critical to address youth unemployment challenges in regions and industries characterised by high levels of casual and seasonal employment opportunities.

No research was found that directly interrogated job seekers on these precise matters. As the Australian Government Department of Employment (AGDE) has been seeking ways of sharing non-sensitive public sector administrative datasets while protecting participant confidentiality, ways of constructing effective recruitment procedures to job seeker cohorts were devised. The project entailed [1] developing a flexible investigation tool and testing it, as well as [2] utilising departmental staff and networks (directed by the research team) to identify, filter and contact potential participants confidentially and satisfy rigorous ethics procedures. The project aimed initially at testing those procedures and making recommendations regarding the validity and potential of the tool.

The initial pilot project was conceived around a limited number of North Australian locations and industries with minimal sample sizes, and funded through a Faculty of LEBA medium research grant. As envisioned, discussions with the AGDE led to funding support for a larger project in three national locations, the development of a broader instrument using mixed interview methods, and access to their datasets and networks for those sites.

2. Project design and ethics

2.1 Aims and objectives

The specific aims of the project were to develop a new qualitative tool to directly interrogate young job seekers about their motivation and choices aimed purposely towards industry sectors and regional casual/seasonal work opportunities perceived as fitting their capabilities (as determined by the AGDE), and then test the tool to:

- identify factors that influence young job seekers to take-up (or not) seasonal work opportunities, including their backgrounds
- understand the experience, challenges and benefits of seasonal/casual work from a young job seeker's perspective, and their overall attitude
- observe job seekers' attitudes towards realistic work proposals, and the way they had been promoted by employers and jobactive providers
- assess the plausibility of their answers regarding their motivations, aspirations and willingness to engage in certain types of work activities

2.2 Development and assessment of the research frame and sampling strategy

This project was 'exploratory' insofar as its purpose was to concurrently explore the feasibility of directly obtaining young job seekers' views regarding certain types of seasonal and casual work opportunities, to present these preliminary findings, and to evaluate our methods by assessing their ability to engage with the topics advocated and the credibility of the method. This entailed assessing the trustworthiness and consistency of job seekers' responses across a small number of research procedures, industry contexts and locations (described and assessed in greater detail in the main report to the AGDE). Given the absence of prior knowledge about the ability and willingness of young job seekers to address the question of interest to this research, an adaptable instrument was developed to be used to probe a wide range of related issues and possibilities across focus groups, individual face-to-face and phone interviews.

The opportunistic use of administrative datasets to create a fit-for-purpose sampling frame (by selecting suitable candidates with specific personal and work history attributes that employers would consider) implied the sampling procedure utilised was ultimately non-random, but fit for exploratory and consent purposes. It was built around the necessity to define 'suitable candidates' for this study related to specific types of jobs available; and filtering out unsuitable ones on a number of grounds that would naturally explain non-participation (outside age bracket, no telephone access, need for an interpreter, homeless, drug and alcohol dependency, physical disability and mental health issues preventing them from undertaking the work, have a significant carer responsibility, criminal offender, those who are immune-suppressed, and those flagged as violent). This resulted in a primary research frame listing potential young job seekers in chosen locations (Darwin, Cairns and Burnie), for which 10 jobactive providers supplied names and contact details of appropriate consenting individuals that were likely to be reachable within the available narrow timeframe of negotiated researcher visits – which was anticipated to be sufficient to reach targets in each location.

As a general process, potential participants (that provided initial consent to jobactive associates) were first contacted by researchers. As they provided consent a second time through phone conversation by providing

their email addresses, additional information about the project, including pre-focus group questions, were sent by email. When participants agreed to attend a planned focus group session or an individual interview (either in person or by phone), this became a *de facto* 3rd form of consent as their ability to withdraw anytime was always emphasised.

From that entire process, the names/consent forms for 103 persons were initially provided, 13 of whom remained uncontactable (but had provided prior consent) after three weeks of repeated attempts, leaving 90 possible consenting participants. Typically these job seekers were called and sent SMS messages three to five times and sent two emails within a two week period. A number were reached but hung up before a conversation could be commenced. The aspirational target of 60 participant job seekers was thought achievable by the AGDE if 90 job seekers provided their original consent. To inform future research design and the potential for young job seekers being systematically reticent to partake, inspection of sampling process revealed that of the 90 contacted potential participants, three had obtained a job, five were going interstate, three were not available at any mutually suitable times and one who had originally provided consent changed their mind, leaving a possible total of 78 participants. 39 attended one of the 9 focus groups. One of these nine focus groups was specifically for Transition to Work participants. Eight of the total focus group participants were from the Transition to Work program. Three consenting job seekers were interviewed face-to-face, and five participated through phone surveys. In all cases, the same basic instrument was used.

The ensuing sampling method was therefore an amalgam of convenience sampling (based on ease of reach and cost-effectiveness with respect to creating lists of potential respondents) and judgment sampling (as jobactive and Transition to Work coordinators and researchers doubtlessly pursued some types of respondents that appeared either more likely to be reached and relatively confident, or dissimilar in their circumstances and judged as under-represented). Indirect snowballing occurred in the sampling implementation when a willing jobactive provider managing multiple office sites was asked if they could provide further participants. All these procedures aimed at simultaneously attaining respondent targets in the limited time window available, tackle visible procedural difficulties linked with participation in some locations, and address the hypothesis formulated by researchers that some categories of suitable job seekers ought to be included as legitimate respondents would be difficult to reach or unable to provide responses to specific lines of questioning (either by refusing consent, not following up, or being unreachable). Despite the absence of prior information regarding likely willingness to participate in this exploratory research, it was hypothesised attitudes, circumstances, abilities and disposition of respondents to discuss specific (and perhaps sensitive) matters would affect the response rates and would need to be addressed through the flexibility of the overall approach.

Table 1. Participant numbers by location and type of interview

| | Darwin | Cairns | Burnie | Total |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Raw/approximate number of cases in dataset (18-24 inclusive (See Appendix 1)*) | 2883 | 1014 | 2876** | 6773 |
| Estimated proportion of above excluded (unsuitable)* | 35-50% | 35-50% | 35-50% | 35-50% |
| Names provided by jobactive or TtW provider | 28 | 45 | 30 | 103 |
| Contacted | 25 | 37 | 29 | 91 |
| Accepted Focus Group | 23 | 22 | 26 | 65 |
| Attended Focus Group | 13 | 9 | 17 | 39 |
| Accepted/attended individual interview FtoF | 1 | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| Accepted individual interview by phone | 4 | 7 | 0 | 11 |
| Attended individual interview by phone | 1 | 4 | 0 | 5 |
| Inability to attend due to moving, new job, not available, changing their mind | 2 | 5 | 3 | 12 |

*Data provided by AGDE, based on second quarter 2016

**Total for North and West Region Tasmania (includes Burnie)

3. Overview of participant responses

3.1 Introductory questions related to respondents' background

The original intention of this section was to ask respondents about the key aspects of their personal circumstances linked with prior education, skills, as well as any previous work they had undertaken. Once the researchers commenced the interviews it became clear it would be necessary to build a richer picture of some basic demographics and other personal circumstances to build credible profiles of respondents. This was undertaken to both gain their confidence to reveal their motives to the interviewer, and to provide a better understanding of who they were, what constraints they faced, and how credible their self-disclosed drives were. Among those who participated in the research, a large proportion of young job seekers appeared eager to volunteer that information so as to contextualize their answers. Whenever possible, responses given during the introductory conversations were subsequently coded during transcription, although they were not necessarily addressed by each participant job seeker (as the project did not intend to produce statistically valid estimates).

The introductory conversations or notes covered items such as:

- gender
- Indigeneity status/ nationality (based only on voluntary comments and visual assessment)
- relative age (visual assessment unless data had been shared by their jobactive provider)
- highest level of education (jobactive data and interview response)
- actual educational level attained and year when they left school
- whether they worked whilst at school
- their employment history post school
- if they held a vehicle driving licence and had access to a vehicle; and,
- their general living arrangements

Responses to the questions above exhibited a fair amount of diversity, with representation across trades and services. Data indicated more job seekers in Burnie had completed Year 12 than in either Darwin or Cairns. From the informal data collected during interviews with job seekers, it appears the low number of qualifications/training undertaken after leaving school could be deemed worrying. Specific discussions in Burnie attributed this situation to the need to travel to Devonport/Launceston/Hobart to access courses job seekers wanted to do. In all three regions, transportation and lack of access or availability to the internet at home were also identified by young job seekers as problematic.

3.1.1 Questions about employment

Participants discussed their work experiences, both during and after schooling years (see Table 2). It is notable that only one (1) job seeker had held any job whilst at school (in Burnie at McDonalds a couple of hours a week in the last six months of school). This raises serious concerns regarding basic 'exposure to work', expectations and readiness to take up any work by those who have apparently never associated with workplaces at all. Respondents' lack of exposure to work at a younger age ought to be contrasted with one of their recurring claims that they now face situations where they are prevented from gaining initial experience for certain types of jobs because younger 'juniors' (presumably school-aged) are offered work (at 'cheaper' award wages) in preference to themselves. Such comments suggest either [1] there is work around for juniors (that they've missed out on), or [2] respondents' wage expectations are misaligned (as they are in reality beginners themselves for most job types), or [3] they might have formulated such explanations for their apparent lack of employability on the basis of employers or other workers' hearsay. Yet, those respondents did not appear to reflect, regret or question their choices of not attempting to take up entry-level jobs when they were themselves in that early age cohort. These initial observations evoke the significance of being exposed early to the world of 'work' as young people are forming opinions and expectations about it, and suggest some circularity in the relationship between accessing early work experience opportunities and employability – as they both reinforce each other in ways that only those with experience can appreciate.

After leaving school, the young job seekers interviewed had in general held a range of predominantly low-skilled job roles, mostly casual and mostly very short term. Some were still employed in casual jobs for only a few hours per week at the time of interview. Among that diverse range, employment in the hospitality sector was relatively common (across all the regions), whilst other types of work appeared in formats more specific for each region:

- harvesting and farm work, fishing, retail clothing and retail other were reported by job seekers in Cairns
- administration/local government, volunteering in community services and a call centre were reported by job seekers in Burnie
- labouring, retail and hairdressing were most evident in Darwin

The very nature of these work options makes these jobs highly 'casualised' and in most cases, job seekers recognised these positions were project-specific (or government initiative specific) and therefore would only be available for a specified duration. On the whole, short term jobs were taken for what they were and respondents did not appear to indicate compelling long-term dislikes for that form, or intentions to avoid them altogether. This is significant as long-term aspirations for long-term work was never mentioned as the main driver of young job seekers.

Some respondents specified current hospitality and retail work experiences could offer longer term employment opportunities, but they were not necessarily keen to pursue them. The work environment (referring to either the management and/or the nature of the work itself) were reasons most commonly cited as why they would not continue in these job roles or sectors.

Some young job seekers actually reported having had particular jobs in the past which they had elected to leave (without another job to go to), without providing a specific rationale for doing so, suggesting not 'enjoying' a job anymore is sufficient for leaving work altogether. Some also spoke of bullying/poor treatment by supervisors/managers in the workplace. A few mentioned feeling like they were scapegoats for other (generally older) workers' mistakes. This indicates limited resilience towards the reality of workplace survival and pressures. The diverse accounts gathered suggest many young people display deficient readiness for the world of work, especially where sustained effort and reliability are required (as in seasonal harvesting) or where pace is fast and quality services expectations are high (as in hospitality). Work in such environments carries high expectations and unsurprisingly leads to ongoing on-the-job misunderstandings which those young people appear poorly equipped to deal with. From the respondents' accounts, it was in the retail sector particularly that they encountered such poor practices and abusive behaviours. Yet, from their viewpoints, respondents described supervisors/managers as having limited understanding of their desires and in need of greater flexibility to deal with young/inexperienced workers; suggesting it was for work to adapt to their needs and shifting the problem towards business organisations.

Discussions overall suggested young job seekers 'wanted their cake and eat it too' in terms of the type of jobs, remuneration and other conditions they are willing to engage with – and would not pursue work opportunities. Many candidly ascertained they 'want their free time', particularly weekends, and some revealed they would absent themselves from work when they consider something more important. It is unclear if this was simple bravado (perhaps due to focus group context) and whether in the past they would have communicated that need to their employer in advance, or, whether they simply don't show up. Although the rightness of various reasons for not attending work differs across individuals and job types, it appears job seekers' expectations are significantly misaligned overall with those of employers (regarding commitment to work effort and reliability) and that more than plain adjustments in communications or employment practices would be required to solve the problem. Irrespective of the blame game implied in these statements, it seems unsurprising that employers regularly express in the media negative views about the work ethics of many young new entrants in the workplace. This in turn raises questions about the way expectations about the world of work, effort, drive and lifestyle are constructed in the minds of many youth, prior to entering the job market. When considering the balance between incentives (remuneration and other work benefits), disincentives (effort required and unattractiveness of the work environment), those job seekers might hold strong misapprehensions about the nature of that trade-off, let alone understand or value the notion of worker reputation, building up an employment profile, or factor in the superficial advantage of remaining on unemployment benefits – the topics theorised in academia.

Some job seekers, particularly in Cairns, participate in the Work for the Dole program, many working in not-for-profit retail or other businesses or engaging in in-house workshops making items for sale between the required 15 to 25 hours per week. Everyone engaged in these positions appear to enjoy these roles and believed they were acquiring new skills (allegedly to be used in later work). How these experiences are scaffolded into an overall program of training and work-readiness is unclear to the respondents. These job seekers themselves did not reveal much about where they intended to 'go', what they thought lay beyond their current situations, appearing almost being content (and perhaps safe) with current arrangements, including their own attitudes.

Table 2. Interview response to employment history post school

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| > 3 years in construction | Electrical work |
| Harvesting and farm work*** | Call centre** |
| 2 years Aged Care | Security** |
| Cleaning | Admin/Local Government*** |
| Hospitality/Food service***** | Spray painting and panel beating |
| > 3 years in hospitality*** | Removals |
| Labourer** | Hairdressing** |
| Fisherman* | Real estate |
| Plant Operator | Tourism |
| Qantas | Volunteering in Community Services*** |
| Retail clothing** | Delivery driver |
| Retail other** | Factory work |
| Direct sales | Electrical work |

* Indicates repeated instances

The context section then turned to the question of whether respondents had access to a vehicle, and whether they were in a position to drive to work. Overall, few respondents had a licence. Some were considering 'going for it' but claimed they are not easy to get and/or retain for young people (mainly for economic reasons), and the majority appeared to consider them out of reach, and probably not accessible in the near future.

Darwin had the highest proportion of respondents with access to a car and licence (7 of the 15 interviewed), with a further one having access to family transport. In Cairns/Mareeba of the 15 job seekers spoken with, five had a licence, of which four (4) had a car and a further two had access to family transport. In Burnie of the 17 job seekers interviewed four had a car and licence, while one had access to family transport.

Job seekers did not generally volunteer information as to why they did not have a licence, but in Cairns in particular, respondents frequently mentioned that the cost of gaining and retaining a licence, together with the number of practice hours required to sit the test were the main hindrances. A number of issues were identified in the conversations surrounding access to transport:

- only a portion of the practice hours required can be gained with a driving instructor, the remainder requires the learner to access a vehicle through their own means, which is problematic for some
- the cost of driving lessons
- access to a vehicle as such, when parents do not have a vehicle themselves, or are using it at inconvenient times preventing job seekers from practicing; and,
- ability to access funds to either purchase or maintain a vehicle in general

Respondents did not refer to having lost their licence (due to infractions or similar causes) as the main reason for not accessing transport, even when the interviewer drilled down into this aspect specifically. Recalling that job seekers were screened to exclude those having been in significant breaches of the law, it remains unclear whether those interviewed had any reason other than economic, motivational or practical for not being able to gain a licence. Given the importance attached by respondents to transport issues for both seasonal (work away from towns) or casual (work at time when public transport is inadequate) employment), it is surprising that they never volunteered or suggested transitional solutions to overcome that barrier (if it is indeed the main issue). Given the lack of clarity about the robustness of various barriers to work and fact some might be compounding (for instance dependency on parents and transport), this line

of enquiry ought to be further developed. It should be noted some of the issues raised linked with learner-licencing requirements were specific to each jurisdiction.

There is no doubt transport issues could constitute genuine and significant limitations to the range of jobs young people can access and retain. Fruit harvest is almost always out of town or rarely accessible by public transport, although accommodation is sometimes provided. The majority of jobs in hospitality are shift-based, and public transport does not always operate at the hours needed to access these jobs in a reasonable timeframe so employees are not able to get to variable shifts at short notice. For trade-related work, again, work sites are often out of town and it is not possible to carry tools and equipment easily without access to a vehicle. In contrast, some employers noted other foreign workers or visa holders did manage to organize transport or deal with public transport inadequacies (or utilise what is provided by specific workplaces), and in some cases to purchase vehicles and address licencing requirements even when lacking community support.

Young job seekers were asked about their living arrangements. It appears in Burnie and to a large extent in Cairns, the majority of respondents had an immediate family base providing shelter and other amenities, more so than in Darwin.

Table 3. Job seeker living arrangements

| | Darwin | Cairns | Burnie | Total |
|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| With immediate family | 2 | 8 | 8 | 18 |
| With relative | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Nearby family | 6 | 2 | 2 | 10 |
| **Not stated | 6 | 5 | 7 | 18 |

In Darwin, two job seekers live with immediate family, one with a relative and a further six near family members. In Cairns/Mareeba, eight job seekers live with immediate family and two near family, whilst in Burnie, eight (8) live with immediate family and two near family. 18 job seekers across the three regions either did not specifically state, or do not reside near family.

Very few of the respondents indicated they had children/dependants. There was one pregnant job seeker in Darwin, one pregnant in Cairns and one supporting a child in Cairns. This is likely to be due to the screening out of candidates 'with significant carer responsibilities'. It also suggests young parents (even with lesser carer responsibilities) might be less likely to participate in such research, which possibly results in self-selection bias.

These living arrangements do signal relatively high economic and possibly social dependency, where unemployment status can be interpreted as both cause and effect. While having a roof over their head could be interpreted as an enabling resource (to seek work and follow opportunities), it is also possible permanent or recurring reliance on family connections (similar to a cushion or safety net) could negatively impact on their autonomy and overall motivations to control their own circumstances. This would support the view that specific family and community contexts might undermine young job seekers' capabilities and skills in general, even their motivation to deal with mobility issues and consider options to overcome such barriers.¹ The possibility of inter-generationally transmitted attitudes and lifestyle habits could be deemed unproductive if diminishing young job seekers' employability (extending to considerations of flexibility,

¹ As suggested in Bearup, G. (2014). *What prospects do Burnie's young unemployed really have?* The Australian, August 16, 2014; <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/what-prospects-do-burnies-young-unemployed-really-have/story-e6frg8h6-1227024011118>.

motivation, transportation, etc.) must be considered. While these issues were not investigated directly in the current research's focus groups or interviews, they surfaced and suggest understanding incentives to undertake various types of work will require a more in-depth grasp of job seekers' material and living arrangements. The alignment of elements discussed in this section suggest a causal link could be hypothesised to exist between 'employability', motivation and the desire for independence by young people, and those youth that have stayed at home, not been exposed to work (prior to the end of their schooling), and not acquired the means to be mobile might be reticent to (or inhibited from) transitioning to independent working lives.

To conclude this section describing the circumstances of those who participated in the research, we observe it is likely the recruitment process used in this research is likely to have left aside many of the most disenfranchised job seeking youth, and selected some of the most willing and capable potential respondents. This occurred by design as the process filtered out those most disabled, legally disqualified, homeless, and other 'unsuitable' cases deemed to lack some essential capabilities required to be employable (as established during sector-specific employers focus groups). It is also likely to be the case the least confident cohorts who would have felt apprehensive not only towards work, but also towards participating in research requiring the ability to articulate issues, undertake some introspection, assert preferences and aspirations, provide examples and express opinions about interactions with work environments and the bureaucracy surrounding job seeking – and would ultimately have avoided participating.

The interviewer also notes the job seekers who participated in the research all presented appropriately for the occasion and displayed an obvious level of keenness being almost all early for their interview or focus group, in stark contrast to the communication proficiency of those who agreed to attend but never showed up despite being provided alternative options to participate and obtain the compensation voucher for participation. The large number of eligible job seekers (on the list provided by AGDE) that simply did not respond to repeated phone calls, text messages and/or emails suggests further research attempting to interact with a more representative array of job seekers will need to formulate alternative strategies to target those more difficult cases, and develop lines of questioning adapted to different levels of capability for those finding it challenging to reflect on their personal circumstances and articulate their motives.

3.2 Setting the scene: Discussing their 'ideal' job

Prior to discussing their attitudes towards specific types of seasonal or casual jobs, research participants were asked about their 'ideal job' to further contextualize their attitudes towards specific opportunities. In all, only five (5) respondents, stated they did not know what they wanted to do, while most could provide one or more descriptions; which was expected given their ongoing interactions with employment services bureaucrats and providers helping them to formulate their skills and interests. The list for each locality is provided in Table 4 below; which shows for many – but not all – answering questions about an ideal job appears for the majority to be connected to industries, sectors or work opportunities they believe may be within reach. Yet it is unclear whether respondents really believe such jobs do (or will) exist locally and whether they grasp the nature of the skills required to gain employment in those fields, are aware of the scope of capabilities needed, visualize the paths most likely to lead to entry in those sectors and ultimately whether those job types present them with a viable future.

Table 4. Responses to 'ideal' job/industry of employment by region

| Darwin | Cairns | Burnie |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Electrician* | Aged care | With animals** |
| Landscaping | Diesel fitter | Cinematic make-up artist |
| Retail manager - clothing | Government/public service | Own business - computer games/ indoor sport centre manager |
| Tourism industry* | Disability | Midwife |
| Wildlife/Park ranger** | Hospitality* | Early Childhood Educator |
| Solider | Fitness industry | Chef/Baker* |
| V8 Pit Crew | Retail - general /electronics/computers* | Artist – comic books |
| Forensic scientist | On-board international boat maintenance | Judge |
| Community/Youth services | Fireman | Traditional cabinet maker |
| | Scaffolding | Hospitality |
| | Electronic music production | Mechanic |
| | | Talk show radio host |

* Indicates repeated instances

When questioned specifically about skill requirements, job seekers recognised they needed to undertake training (generally TAFE was mentioned) or higher level studies. Some appreciated they required to undertake an apprenticeship (which they had not instigated) but some also commented *'apprenticeships are very hard to get, ...like looking for a needle in a haystack'* – giving the impression this was intended as a generic comment about availability of training locally, or yet perhaps doubting a simple path to, or optimal fit with, the 'ideal' job would be straightforward. When questioned about their efforts towards training, many respondents referred to aspects of access to the course; claiming 'place', 'the need to travel for studying' or the costs of relocating if necessary were the main practical issues stopping them. But more troubling is the fact that in many cases there appeared to be a misalignment between what job seekers stated as their 'ideal' job and the training they were currently undertaking to meet their activity requirement.

In some respondents' descriptions of past training activities, it appeared that previously completed qualifications had not been considered themselves as pathways to new qualifications and/or had formerly had little to do with the job seekers' 'ideal' job. For instance, a job seeker who has an undergraduate humanities degree and wishes to work in human resource management or business administration in the government, currently works extensively in hospitality but does not want to continue to do so is now however undertaking a Certificate III in Customer Engagement, suggesting a focus on training tag names rather than skills. It might also signal an inevitable chasm between short-term opportunism (obtaining skills or contract work immediately) and a notional ideal job not connected to current circumstances, including present choice of residence location. Irrespective of the interpretation of the above, it is notable most respondents made little effort to articulate or explicitly link recent choices with long-term aspirations by proposing they might have been concealing some strategic direction or intent.

By their own admission, there appeared generally a lack of consideration and planning on their part for any training and employment pathways that young and willing job seekers would feel confident about. In contrast, a cohort of young job seekers was not so different from employed young people; as they appeared to presume it's not possible to know where genuine long-term opportunities might lie. They might therefore have a prior sense there is a connection between learning about shifting employment prospects and taking

advantage of immediate opportunities. In that sense, some might not only be aware that their own reputations (with employers) and job profile requires them to have been sufficiently 'busy' (as in willing to work), but also constructing realistic aspirations about employment ambitions requires sustained involvement with the 'world of work' itself. In fact, for this subgroup of job seekers, conveying that message about the benefits of involvement with work (including in its seasonal and casual formats) for the sake of discovering new opportunities is likely to be much more powerful than trying to convince them their reputation as effective workers is at stake.

The lack of access to technology, in particular limited ownership of a computer or internet connection, was asserted by most respondents to constitute a major hindrance to their search for their ideal job, likely to compound job market exclusion by missing out on reacting and providing timely responses to unexpected opportunities. From the point of view of this research, it also potentially signals a limited ability for some to connect with contemporary employment expectations. It alludes to deeper structural issues related to the ability and willingness to organise one's life so as to be employable, in ways complementary to having access to transport and organising living arrangements ensuring feasible participation in work activities.

Although intricate, discussing a notional 'ideal job' was useful for this research because much academic debates about seasonal and casual work have been framed around the question of whether non-standard (casual or seasonal) opportunities help or hinder access to long-term employment (the ideal), the latter being implicitly framed as the actively planned direction sought by the unemployed. Questions related to temporary work therefore refer to the signalling potential of non-permanent work (hypothesised sometimes as signals of willingness to work, of employability, of work ethics, etc.) and to the demonstrable acquisition and maintenance of relevant skills showed those links are loose, and investments in well-planned skills acquisition strategies are more often the exception rather than the rule for those cohorts.

The responses obtained about ideal jobs were diverse, and the concept appears to apply mainly to some youth more inclined to suggest they have a plan. In all, the current exploratory research would suggest that the notion that most job seekers have in mind an 'ideal job', let alone a strategy to reach it, is debatable and cannot constitute a universal premise. We estimate the ability to express and articulate a clear direction or aspiration regarding future employment, as well as describing the steps to reach it is associated with cohorts displaying greater level of readiness to work than average. We recognise it is also possible for some job seekers to rehearse desired behaviour (to appear to know what one wants and how to get there), and the definitive proof lies ultimately with corroborating actions. Yet, we propose this 'readiness' dimension constitutes a valuable perspective to consider when undertaking further research, and should even prove useful to discriminate between types of young job seekers when considering alternative management and policy approaches.

Job seekers articulated, or otherwise made obvious, a broad range of personal issues/situations during discussions about their 'ideal' job. They claim these issues impact on both their ability/desire to undertake training and/or gain employment in their 'ideal' job. Based on job seeker responses, ability to communicate, attitudes and the overall stories and personal situations they described, it was possible for the main interviewer to loosely assess that out of the 47 respondents in total, 23 displayed signs of being 'employable' (and/or successfully undertake and complete higher level studies) in the immediate future. The results from that subjective assessment are broken down by regions in the table below:

Table 5. Number of job seekers by region with issues or in situations making the undertaking of training and/or employment more difficult or problematic

| | Darwin | Cairns | Burnie | Total |
|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Total | 15 | 15 | 17 | 47 |
| Employable | 7 | 8 | 8 | 23 |
| % | 47% | 53% | 47% | |

The apparent misalignments between training and employment pathways could only be superficially unpacked in a focus group situation and undoubtedly could be pursued through detailed individual interviews.

3.3 General questions about seasonal/casual work

Opinions regarding seasonal and casual work opportunities in fruit harvesting and hospitality were explored immediately afterwards. All participating job seekers were supplied with an ‘individual’ sheet to record their responses which are displayed in table 6.

Table 6. Number of job seekers (combined individual and focus groups) who had experienced fruit harvesting and/or hospitality by region

| Region | Experience in Fruit Harvesting | | Experience in Hospitality | |
|---------------|--------------------------------|----|---------------------------|----|
| | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| Darwin (n=15) | 4 | 11 | 6 | 9 |
| Cairns (n=15) | 4 | 11 | 6 | 9 |
| Burnie (n=17) | 2 | 15 | 9 | 8 |

Table 7 highlights the three or four most commonly positive and negative reasons for considering harvest and hospitality non-permanent work respectively.

Table 7. Ranked reasons cited as positives or negatives for undertaking harvest labour or hospitality jobs

| | Reasons Most Commonly Cited |
|--|---|
| Q1. Positive reasons for undertaking harvest labour jobs | 1a. Access to fresh fruit 1b. Physical job that keeps you fit and active 2. Pay is good 3a. Gets you experience for another job, shows you can work 3b. Outdoors in the fresh air |
| Q2. Negative reasons for undertaking harvest labour jobs | Physical nature of the work Hot work in the sun, or weather related Need for a car/transport Very seasonal – not reliable work |
| Q3. Positive reasons for undertaking hospitality jobs | Learn new things Enjoyable working environment – staff Meet new people |
| Q4. Negative reasons for undertaking hospitality jobs | Customer with bad attitudes, rude customers Rushed pace, stressful working environment |

* Combines individual and focus group across the 3 regions

** All individual and focus group responses coded and ranked by frequency

For Q1, all reasons provided had relatively similar frequencies, but for Q2, 3 and 4, answer #1 largely dominated the cohorts, with no apparent patterns differentiating the regions.

3.4 Detailed discussion about seasonal/casual work

Element 1: Listing aspects that would support consideration of certain forms or types of employment.

In the second part of the conversation with job seekers about the merit of seasonal and casual work, each participant was presented with a list of reasons (developed previously in collaboration with industry) as to why they might consider undertaking seasonal harvest or hospitality work, and were requested to give a score on a 5-point Likert scale. Although this research is not based on a representative sampling frame nor random sampling, average scores were calculated and relative rankings of each answer are presented below (rather than frequencies) for ease of presentation of respondents' opinions.

From cursory observation, there were no major differences between the responses provided by job seekers in the individual interviews and focus groups, or between regions. The list below shows the rankings of the most strongly supported reasons for job seekers to consider taking up harvest labour or hospitality jobs generally (starting from highest rank; a & b answers indicate equal scores).

1. Will get some money from my own work
- 2a. Training – will get new skills
- 2b. Will find out new opportunities and be able to get into permanent employment through that new knowledge and new contacts
3. Will be good for my CV – can show that I'm willing to work hard and can learn
4. Incentive to undertake economic/financial planning
5. Will be able to demonstrate what I can do
6. Will do/learn something new/different
7. Will meet new people and get new ideas
8. Will go somewhere new
9. Limited duration – I can see whether I like it or not
10. Limited number of hours – can attend to other things
11. Will impress friends and relatives

It is noticeable the 'learning' aspect (which was not top of mind when job seekers were asked about positive reasons as 'open questions') struck a chord when they were listed. That fact alone shows they don't make those connections necessarily, but realise their importance when forced to undertake introspection (or perhaps feel obligated to demonstrate an intent to 'get a job' in this research context).

Element 2: Listing aspects that would inhibit/prevent consideration of certain forms or types of employment.

Job seekers were also each presented with a list of reasons why they might not consider undertaking seasonal harvest or hospitality work (also initially developed by industry and training bodies), coded, aggregated and reported the same way.

The list below displays the ranking (in declining order) of the most highly supported reasons for which job seekers would not consider taking up harvest labour or hospitality jobs.

1. Access or transport to the job
2. Duration of the job offer (in weeks/months – only temporary)
3. Needing accommodation onsite
4. I am looking for full time work
5. Wage/pay levels
6. Number of hours

7. Might miss out on a better job while involved in seasonal/casual work
8. Will affect current benefits in a negative way/or make benefits difficult to get back after seasonal work
9. Nature of the work – physical
10. Contributes little because skills obtained from harvest labour will not be useful later
11. Skill level expected for the job
12. Belief that seasonal/casual work is a trap (results in bad reputation if trying to find a permanent job)
13. Contributes little because skills obtained from hospitality will not be useful later
14. Nature of the work – interacting with clients or customer service
15. Levels of literacy or numeracy expected

Open discussions (in focus group or interview contexts) followed and focused on the three most critical aspects that respondents would, in hindsight, choose as main reasons preventing them from considering seasonal or contractual types of work. Responses for this aspect of the conversation were collected jointly for all participants in the focus group and respondents were compelled to broadly agree on their ranking of the top three (3) aspects after clarifying their perspectives. Inspection of results reveals little differences or patterns between regions and individual/focus group responses and answers below have been aggregated.

Element 3: Ranking the top three (3) aspects that would inhibit/prevent consideration of certain forms or types of employment.

1. Access or transport to the job
2. Number of hours
3. Nature of the work – physical
- 4a. Wage/pay levels
- 4b. I am looking for full time work
5. Needing accommodation onsite
6. Duration of job offer (in weeks/months – only temporary)
7. Will affect current benefits in a negative way/or make benefits difficult to get back after seasonal work
- 8a. Skill level expected for the job
- 8b. Contributes little because skills obtained from harvest labour will not be useful later
- 8c. Might miss out on a better job while involved in seasonal/casual work

It must be noted that ‘Access or transport to the job’ was three times more important than the next inhibiting aspect on the list. Aspects two to five were closely ranked to each other, whilst the remainder were considered much less important. Some aspects were not ranked at all, including the belief that seasonal/casual work is a trap (results in bad reputation if trying to find a permanent job), that it contributes little to capabilities because skills obtained from hospitality will not be useful later, the nature of the work – interacting with clients or customer service and the levels of literacy or numeracy expected.

3.5 Considering and reviewing real job scenarios

Later, participants were provided copies of two job scenarios/descriptions, one for harvest labour (slightly adjusted to fit each region where the research was conducted), and the other for a hospitality position in a major hotel/event supplier (both of which had been developed as realistic and endorsed by AGDE and supporting employers). Based on the description provided within each scenario, job seekers were requested

to identify whether they would consider taking the job, what the pros and cons of each scenario were, and under what conditions they might revise their opinions of these jobs. They are examined in turn below.

Job Scenario 1. Harvest Labour

What: Picking, general farm duties/Packing, boxing, cleaning

Where: Berry Springs, Humpty Doo, Acacia or Kuranda, Atherton, Innisfail, Dimbulah or Devonport, Smithton

Conditions: \$21/hour, 6 days/week up to 10hrs/day weather dependent

Access: Need own transport

Accommodation: Available on-site

Duration: 6-10 weeks

Other: Full training included, send resume and work references

Table 8. Job seekers declared attitudes towards taking up or otherwise job in scenario 1 – harvest labour

| Response | Region | | | | | Total |
|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------|
| | Darwin | | Cairns | | Burnie | |
| | Individual n=2 | Focus Group n=13 | Individual n=6 | Focus Group n=9 | Focus Group n=17 | |
| Would take up job | 2 | 10 | 6 | 7 | 0 | 25 |
| Would not take up job | | | | | | |
| Maybe take up job | | 3 | | 2 | 17 | 22 |
| No specific response | | | | | | |

Extended discussions revealed overwhelmingly what respondents saw as unattractive about the job is the need for transport to be able to get to the job (despite available accommodation onsite), the physical nature of the job was also raised as a potential problem and the likely absence of suitable work references (which is not really job-specific). All job seekers reacted positively towards the wage and the provision of full training. This raises a relevant issue for those job seekers as in reality not all employers pay hourly wages (which would allow for a trial period for those without references), and even when feasible, it is done on a strict ‘no work, no pay’ basis. There are other employers who pay piece rates and others again who may commence workers on piece rates and then, once proficient (however this is defined), are transferred onto hourly rates. Yet, in the job scenario presented to participants, hourly wages were provided. In that context, the overwhelming agreement on transport as a barrier raises questions about the convenience of that rationalisation and the overall credibility of that being the main reason for not having a go – especially if onsite accommodation is available.

The considerable difference in responses from the job seekers in Burnie to the harvest labour job scenario is also noticeable. It is possible to speculate their reactions result from a combination of factors including the lack of suitable transport (given Burnie is an hour away from the nearest major harvest sites) and respondents’ knowledge, experience or belief (based on hearsay or local media) that the wages (and possibly working conditions) are not that good on commencement – although participants did not want to articulate those points. It could also partially be due to some topical discussions that took place about the politics of the Seasonal Workers program in that community.

Job Scenario 2. Major Hotel/Event Supplier

What: At events - kitchen hands, stewards, buffet runners, F&B attendants, set-up staff

Where: Large hotel/Convention Centre

Conditions: \$19-23/hour depending on age, irregular hours, likely on weekends and weeks (day, night, any)

Access: Need own transport

Duration: June - November

Other: Full training included for low skilled functions, send resume and work references

Table 9. Job seekers considering take up or otherwise of job scenario 2 – major hotel/event supplier

| Response | Region | | | | | Total |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------|
| | Darwin | | Cairns | | Burnie | |
| | Individual n=2 | Focus Group n=13 | Individual n=6 | Focus Group n=9 | Focus Group n=17 | |
| Would take up job | 4 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 20 |
| Would not take up job | | 3 | 2 | | 2 | 7 |
| Maybe take up job | | 7 | | 1 | 2 | 10 |
| No specific response | | | | 3 | 7 | 10 |

Whilst transport remained the overwhelming problem with this option for job seekers in Burnie, this issue was not so frequently raised with job seekers from Darwin or Cairns, perhaps more within their expectations set. Overall, male job seekers were less interested in this job. Although they all thought the wages were acceptable for the job, they would have preferred to be guaranteed a certain number of hours, ideally a minimum of eight hrs per day to make it worthwhile, which contrasts with industry knowledge regarding international students' preferences for short-term work involving concentrated long hours. Research participants appeared quite concerned about the fact they may not always know when they were going to be working and they were not 'fans' of rosters, or short notice for shifts (but again this presumably does not affect international students who are otherwise quite busy with their studies). This suggests a proportion of young job seekers easily disregard such opportunities unless they fit their lifestyles or replicate full-time employment patterns (regular, sufficient, predictable and easily managed work hours). It must be noted this would equally apply to other types of jobs (as rosters are commonplace in a very large number of industries, government services and trades).

Two respondents answering 'maybe' from focus groups in Darwin interestingly stated they would consider those jobs if they 'needed a job' or had 'financial reasons' suggesting being employed and earning extra money through employment were not their highest priorities. This echoes the suggestion that some participants are comfortable with not working, and are satisfied with what they currently get financially from their family and support groups (including possibly undeclared benefits), unemployment benefits and/or the welfare system in the long run. It further suggests these respondents appear to consider 'work' when their immediate needs call for it, and display limited interest in that aspect of their extended future.

4. Overview

The research report to the AGDE comprised discussions of other aspects not included or discussed here, other than to say they were no major surprises within:

- job seekers' information sources, beliefs, opinions and influences about work and jobs
- job seekers' belief about employer perceptions of themselves

The primary conclusion found in the detailed report is the response patterns reflected a substantial amount of diversity with respect to aspects of their living conditions (household arrangements, training, education, access to vehicles), and aspirations and attitudes towards specific work opportunities that exist in their regions of residence. A detailed analysis of the methodology and the research tool can be found in Appendix A of the main report (with AGDE). The analysis provides compelling grounds for hypothesizing that young job seekers differ significantly from each other in terms of their ability and readiness to 'engage with work', and that this systematically explains the responses they provided and the choices they make. From our analysis, we ultimately conjecture there is a meaningful, yet under-researched, association between:

- the readiness (capability and explicit motivations) of various young job seekers to sustainably engage with work
- their past exposure to work (for instance prior to end of schooling) and the significance of work in their immediate family and peer environments
- their ability to articulate well-defined work or professional aspirations (including the requirements for, and strategies that would allow them to reach those aspirations)
- their ability to link the costs and benefits of seasonal or casual work to potential long-term work aspirations
- their efforts to learn about various work options, about employers or specific industries' perceptions, and the nature of attributes that would make them 'employable'
- their level of confidence and autonomy to address existing barriers to short-term employability linked with their living environments (access to transport, access to training and completion, living conditions supporting self-determination vis-à-vis arising opportunities; and,
- their likelihood of consenting to participate in research corroborating their views on all the topics above

An analytical framework to undertake future research interacting directly with job seekers is proposed in the main report provided to the AGDE, as well as directions for future research.