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YOUNG PEOPLE NAVIGATING WORKING LIFE IN AND BEYOND THE GIG ECONOMY

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ABOUT US

The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) is a multi-disciplinary research centre based in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. By focusing on issues that affect young people, and on developing policy and educational interventions to address youth disadvantage, CYPEP aims to identify the challenges to, and opportunities for, improved life outcomes for young people today and throughout their lives.

Our vision is for education that creates lifelong and life-wide opportunities for young people and enables them to thrive. Our mission is to connect youth research to policy and practice. We do this by working with policy-makers, educators and youth-focused organisations on research that addresses emerging needs, and that respects and includes young people. Working at the nexus of young people and policy, we raise awareness of the challenges faced by young people today and explore how education can harness the capacity of young people to contribute to thriving communities.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified conditions of uncertainty and disruption in young people's lives. When we launched the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer¹ there was an assumption that, as government responses to COVID-19 such as lockdowns and social distancing were relaxed, we would see an improvement in the outlook for young Australians. But the data we collected in 2022 indicate something more complicated. They show what Rosalyn Black and Lucas Walsh^{2,3} have previously identified and refer to as a dark or tempered optimism on one hand, and a deep anxiety on the other. This anxiety, evident in our previous discussion paper on young people's career choices,⁴ arises from a confluence of conditions that make it difficult for young people to navigate post-school pathways, which are often assumed to include conventional markers of adulthood or security. However, such pathways wind through a housing market that has become more hostile and a labour market that, while faring relatively well on measures such as unemployment, includes within it conditions of insecurity and precarity.

This paper explores the relationship of such conditions to other aspects of young people's lives. It draws on published and unpublished data collected for the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer¹ that has been reanalysed to investigate interrelations between topics. Data were collected in 2022 using a concurrent mixed-methods design. The researchers refined an original online survey first developed in 2021 that utilised a combination of closed, Likert-style questions and open-ended questions. A total of 505 young people aged 18–24 completed the survey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an additional 30 young people throughout Australia. Participant recruitment was undertaken by research consultancy Roy Morgan, who implemented the survey and scheduled the interviews. Interviews were then conducted by CYPEP researchers.

In both types of empirical investigation, we explored a range of topics including education, employment, health and wellbeing, finances, housing, relationships, and the impact of COVID-19. Our survey defined a gig job as a short-term work arrangement in which self-employed workers are

matched directly with customers through a digital platform (e.g. Uber food delivery, Airbnb). The survey asked: How often have you earned income doing 'gig jobs' through digital platforms in the last year? Participants provided their answer using a 5-point Likert-like scale of frequency (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often). We then analysed responses to questions about work participation in relation to other question responses so that we could examine interconnections in the data.

Although the gig economy features prominently in the following discussion, we are primarily interested in how the growth of insecure work in Australia reflects a long-term change to the economy and young people's participation in it. Using interviews and nationally representative survey data from the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer,¹ we present insights into the involvement of young Australians in the gig economy and explore the possible relationships between gig work and other trends, such as studying micro-credentials and the feelings of worry, anxiety and pessimism experienced by most young Australians. Nearly all young Australians experienced financial difficulties at some point during the last 12 months, and nearly one-quarter experienced food insecurity. Work identities and employment arrangements are changing, most visible in gig and other insecure forms of work. At the same time, there is a valorisation of individualised value-alignment with employers, entrepreneurialism and work flexibility. How do young Australians make sense of work and related aspects of education and their attitudes to the future? The findings are striking, with more than half of young people believing that they will be financially worse off than their parents. Yet hope and optimism persist. There is also a sense that young people are building the plane as they are flying it. They are expected to be adaptive, responsible and agile. These are not in themselves problematic, but become so in light of the structural challenges of working in the contemporary workforce. We explore these trends and tensions and attempt to unpack them using the conceptual figure of *Homo promptus* – a human who is ready, eager, and quick to react – to explore young people's tempered, or dark, optimism.

KEY FINDINGS

Interviews with young people revealed that their experiences of gig work extended beyond the common digital platforms. They discussed gig work as short-term, on-demand and insecure employment situations that were mediated by a third-party organisation or actor.

According to the Australian Youth Barometer survey, more than half (55.8%) of young Australians earned income from gig jobs through digital platforms in 2022, with 22.9% of young people declaring they did so often or very often. Young men were more likely to participate often or very often in the gig economy last year (30.8%) than were young women (16.2%) or gender diverse young people (10.1%). Similarly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were more likely to participate in the gig economy last year (36.4%) than other young Australians (20.5%); and young people with a physical disability (41%) or long-term illness (33%) were more likely to declare often or very often earning income from the gig economy than young Australians without any disability (21.1%).

WIDER CONTEXT

Gig work is the latest development in insecure work undertaken by a significant proportion of young people. In Australia, the Foundation for Young Australians estimated that there were 360,000 workers in the gig economy prior to COVID-19, representing 2.2% of the adult working population – a 340% increase in gig workers compared with 2016.⁵ Young people are disproportionately represented in the Australian gig economy, with a significant proportion of gig workers being aged between 18 and 34.⁶ The gig economy reflects increasingly emergent employment conditions characterised by greater flexibility, insecurity and, sometimes, precarity.

What is the gig economy?

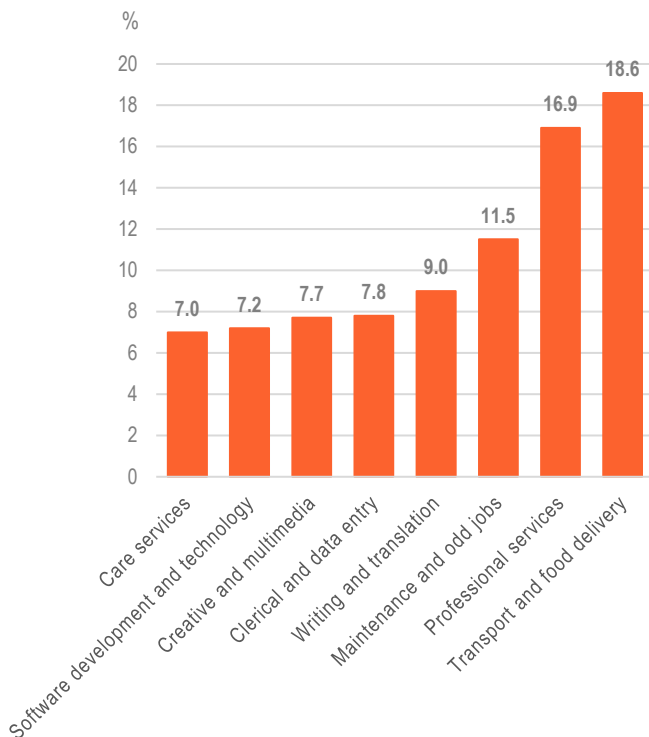
The gig economy refers to ‘a process wherein short-term tasks are advertised by companies through online platforms with workers bidding a (wage) price to undertake the job as an independent contractor, working on a series of discrete “gigs”’.^{7,p725} Work in the gig economy is typified by four basic characteristics: irregular work schedules based on customer demand; workers providing some or all capital (e. g. bikes); work being paid at a per-piece rate; and work being arranged and/or facilitated via digital online platforms.⁸ Alternative names include the sharing economy, crowd-based economy, on-demand economy and digital platform economy.⁹ Gig work can be full- or part-time and typically relies on online platforms that connect customers to the individuals who provide services (e.g. Uber).¹⁰

The International Labour Organization (ILO) describes the gig economy as comprising ‘extremely short-term jobs (gigs) in which workers are classified as independent contractors but have limited opportunities to determine the scope of their business’ and notes that ‘students looking for petty cash, stay-at-home mothers wanting home-based work and full-time workers looking to supplement their income are only some of the groups who exemplify the wide heterogeneity found within the supply of workers in online platforms.’¹⁰ This variation was evident in our data.

A large-scale survey of Australian gig workers undertaken on behalf of the Victorian government identified different types of work in the gig economy.¹¹

Platform work includes transport and food delivery, professional services work, maintenance work and odd jobs, and writing or translation work. Other services include clerical and data entry, creative and multimedia work, software development and technology, and care services (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Types of gig work undertaken in Australia, as a proportion of platform workers¹¹



Transport and food delivery workers were predominantly younger people aged 17 to 34, with older Australians more likely to be engaged in professional services, clerical work, and data entry.

In Australia, workers in the gig economy are generally deemed to be self-employed or independent contractors rather than employees.¹¹ This aspect of gig workers being independent contractors can constrain a platform's ability to directly control labour,¹² but can also make it difficult for gig workers to be covered by employment laws and regulations.¹³ This can place gig workers in an ambiguous position, in terms of both their legal and personal affordances.

Motivations to work in the gig economy

The main driver for young people to participate in the gig economy is money.^{11,14} Just under one in five (17%) of gig workers in Australia reported that money earned from gig work was their main source of income, and one-third used gig work to supplement their income.¹⁵ Many workers used gig work as a secondary source of income, which suggests that gig work offers 'new work opportunities for those with fewer employment issues'.^{6,p4} Gig work can be particularly well suited to students, as it affords them the opportunity to earn an income while still studying.^{6,15}

Another main driver is flexibility, based on the belief that 'gig work is flexible because of the way in which the work is secured and managed'.^{15,p757} This is operationalised in two ways, with workers indicating a desire to work flexibly, and a need for work that suits their existing schedules and commitments. Other identified drivers include the chance to build personal and professional skills, enjoying the available work, connecting socially with others, finding work suited to health issues or disabilities, and wanting to be one's own boss.^{5,11,12}

It may also be that young people have no choice but to engage in gig work.⁵ In the UK, 32% of young gig workers participated in the gig economy because of the absence of alternative jobs.⁷ Similarly, Australian gig workers sometimes found themselves working in these jobs because of fewer, less viable and/or poorer alternatives.¹² They work in the gig economy because they lack market power. This lack of alternatives is particularly true for migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds, some of whom hold work-restricted visas.^{5,9} In addition, well-educated gig workers with bachelor degrees or higher educational levels who are unable to secure employment in their skill area participate in the gig economy to supplement their incomes.⁵

Working conditions in the gig economy

Some participants in the gig economy highlight positive working conditions. Young gig workers in the UK see the gig economy as a useful tool for earning extra money, and found the work to be practical, convenient and flexible, with few demands on time or commitment.¹⁴ Similarly, young Australian gig workers consider a sense of autonomy to be a positive aspect of their jobs.⁹

However, most research points towards generally poor working conditions for young gig workers. Gig work can be typified by 'lack of choice and control, and experiences of disempowerment, low pay, degraded work conditions, alienation, anxiety and insecurity'.⁷ Typical struggles of gig workers revolve around working entitlements, pay, terms of work, and compensation for work-related injuries.¹⁶ Many Australian gig workers view the work as poorly paid, with a large proportion making less than the national minimum wage for casual employment.⁹

Some argue that many of the promises of flexibility and worker autonomy are hollow. Many jobs in the gig economy feature elements of temporal, functional, and spatial control over their workers, which, coupled with a lack of economic security,

often pressures workers into 'working during certain times of the day based on market demands'.^{17,p127} Ethnographic research in the US and UK found that flexibility was often used to control workers, with managers having the power to punish workers who failed to demonstrate the requisite flexibility. Demands are made of workers to be flexible in order to fill labour shortages, rather than to empower worker autonomy. In this sense, flexibility in the gig economy was often 'a euphemism for exploitation'.^{7,p734}

These poor working conditions can be partially explained by the competitive nature of gig work. The limited numbers of available jobs heightens competition, compelling workers to undertake as many tasks as possible; consequently, they work long hours with little income.¹⁶ This is particularly the case in major cities in Australia, where there is often an oversupply of gig workers.⁵ This can create a cycle of work intensity for gig workers: because jobs are competitive it is difficult for workers to raise rates of pay, requiring them to complete more tasks and gigs, which in turn increases competition between workers.¹⁸

Based on this, gig work is often precarious and insecure. Young people surveyed by Youth Action in Australia stated that this was a frequent concern, raising issues such as having no guaranteed hours, no access to paid leave, and repeated instances of employer misconduct.¹⁹ Critics argue that within the gig economy 'an ongoing process of marginalisation accelerates the gig workers' precariousness and vulnerability by exposing them to established and emerging social harms'.^{16,p172}

The gig economy as the tip of a precarious iceberg

Participants in the gig economy do not necessarily consider themselves to be employed in the traditional sense, and do not consider themselves part of traditional labour markets. In the UK, gig workers 'notably contrasted the gig economy with a "proper job" or their eventual "actual job", a phrase laden with values of what constitutes desirable work'.^{14,p37} Further, 5% of gig workers in Australia defined themselves as unemployed, and 9% defined themselves as not being in the labour force at all.⁵ Employment status appears to be an indicator of participation in the gig economy in Australia, with the unemployed, volunteers, and students more likely to be currently engaged as gig workers, compared with those participating in traditional labour markets.¹¹

This reflects overall trends in youth employment and the difficulties faced by young people in securing work in the traditional labour market. There has been a steady decline in Australian youth employment since the 1980s, which worsened after the 2008 global financial crisis. This has created a situation where 'younger generations are arriving in a labour market in which "work" has increasingly been replaced by "gigs" and "tasks", pushing young people out of the traditional labour market'.^{20,p628}

Young people may also be turning to participation in the gig economy because transitions between education and work are taking longer: on average, 'young Australians spend five years working in various jobs, including casual and in the gig economy, before they gain full-time employment'.^{21,p3} The difficulty and uncertainty during transitions from education to work also affects young people with tertiary level qualifications.²⁰ This has created divisions within the Australian labour force. In 2021, more than half of all young people under the age of 25 worked in casual or gig-based jobs. In contrast to Australia's ageing permanent full-time workforce, 'the disposable, cheap casual workforce retains its youthful appearance'.^{22,p14}

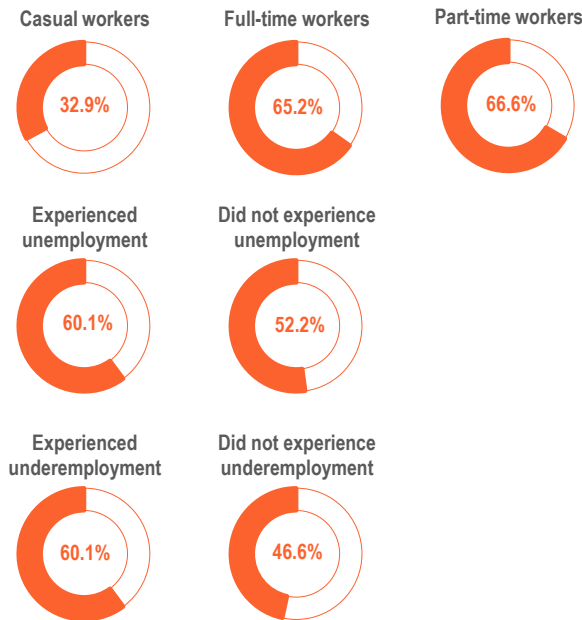
EMPLOYMENT ASPIRATIONS AND PREFERENCES

Delving more deeply into the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer data, we can see how participation in the gig economy intersects with other dimensions of young people's lives. Understanding these relationships is difficult because they can reflect other intersections with the formal labour market. These relationships might imply that young people are treating work in the gig economy as their primary employment, or that they are complementing their primary employment with work in the gig economy.

According to our survey, 41.4% of young Australians who were employed had a full-time job, 32.2% were employed part-time, 17.6% were employed as casual workers, and the remaining 8.8% had multiple employment statuses or were in-between jobs. Those who were casual workers were less likely to participate in the gig economy than those in full-time or part-time employment. Young people who declared being unemployed at some point during the last year were more likely to participate in the gig economy than those who did not experience

unemployment. Young Australians who declared experiencing underemployment (by hours) in the last year were also more likely to report participating in the gig economy than those who did not report experiencing underemployment (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Participation in the gig economy, by current employment status



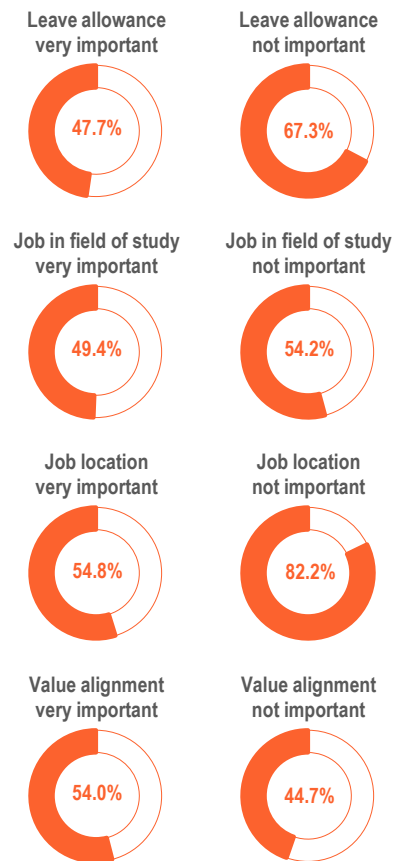
This may reflect a perspective, as a 20-year-old man from Tasmania explained, where gig work is ‘a little [side] hustle’ to cover expenses and mitigate financial pressures that can be exacerbated ‘towards the end of ... pay period[s]’. Reflecting the context above, gig work did not always provide sufficient additional financial support, as the same young man said:

[I work] a casual contract on full-time hours, and I am working for [a company], which is a household and business energy supplier, and I’m working in a call centre ... [I’m] pretty excited actually, because it seems like a nice workplace ... [But], honestly, I just want money. Like, I really just want money. I also work another job, which is setting up stages and speakers and lights for gigs and stuff, like, packing trucks, and they don’t really

give me many shifts so, you know, financial security was not really there. It’s like, I get fuck-all money from this ... I just got sick of it. I was like, no, I want money.

Seeking security and entitlements also remain important to many young people. Young Australians who thought that a generous leave allowance, a job in their field of study, and the job’s location were very important when thinking about getting a job were less likely to report participating in the gig economy than those who thought that these characteristics were not important (Figure 3). Yet, those who thought that it was very important for their values to align with their employers’ values were more likely to report participating in the gig economy than those who thought this was not important.

Figure 3: Participation in the gig economy, by what was perceived as important when thinking about getting a job



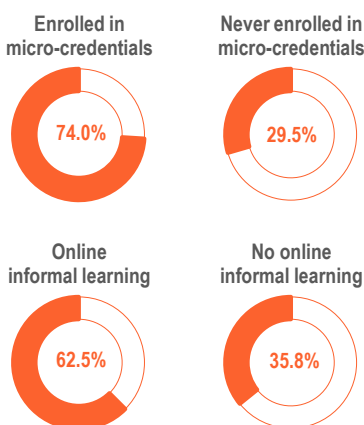
EDUCATION

A survey of Australian gig workers found that ‘those with higher levels of education (particularly bachelor or postgraduate degrees) were also more likely to work through digital platforms than respondents with lower levels of education’.^{11,p32} (These findings may be skewed by an overrepresentation of respondents with university qualifications in the survey group.) Nevertheless, gig workers in Australia are highly qualified, with 45% of men and 43% of women holding a tertiary qualification, and a significant proportion currently studying.^{15,p755} The well-educated form a substantial proportion of those engaged with the gig economy in Australia, with some in gig work because they cannot find secure employment in their area of skill, education and training.⁵

In our 2022 survey, nearly 60% of young people held, or had been enrolled in, a micro-credential, micro-degree or micro-masters (i.e. a short course offered by a university or technical and further education (TAFE) institute certifying the holder as having a particular skill). At the same time, only one in five young people aged 18–24 were studying exclusively face-to-face, and only 53% of young Australians agreed that their education prepared them for the future.

Those who declared holding or having ever been enrolled in a micro-credential, micro-degree or micro-masters were more likely to participate in the gig economy than those who did not hold or were never enrolled in these types of degrees. Similarly, those who reported having participated in some form of online informal learning (i.e. training outside school, college or university) were more likely to participate in the gig economy than those who did not participate in informal online learning (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Participation in the gig economy, by further study type

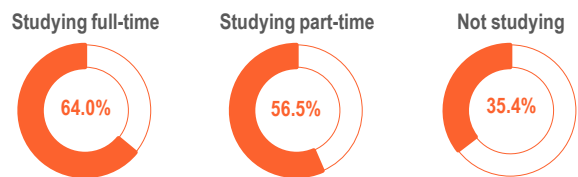


Juggling work and study is a familiar challenge that is increasingly common amongst young people in tertiary education. As a result, young people expressed the need for flexible work, as a 20-year-old woman from Queensland explained:

I am on placement [for my degree at the moment]. I've had to dramatically reduce my hours to adjust to that ... I've spoken to heaps of students who, when they're on placement, like they've had to quit their jobs and then they haven't been able to do that stuff. So, I'm really lucky that I have ... really flexible work.

In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that participation in the gig economy was more common among young Australians who were studying full-time than among those who were studying part-time or not studying (Figure 5). We found similar rates of participation in the gig economy whether students were studying online, face-to-face or in blended learning.

Figure 5: Participation in the gig economy, by study mode



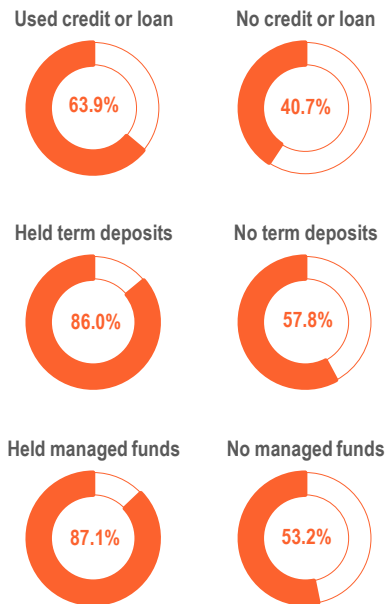
ECONOMY, HOUSING AND FINANCE

While we did not find a statistically significant relationship between participation in the gig economy and the perceived frequency of experiences of financial difficulty, young people who declared having used credit or a loan from a bank or financial institution in the last 12 months were more likely to participate in the gig economy than those who did not use credit or a loan (Figure 6). This was especially the case for those who had personal loans with a bank or agency, or payday or quick cash loans, but not for those who used buy-now-pay-later products.

There was no overall statistically significant relationship between having an investment product (such as saving accounts, real estate investment trusts (REITs), cryptocurrency or investments in superannuation funds) and participation in the gig economy. However, young people who declared

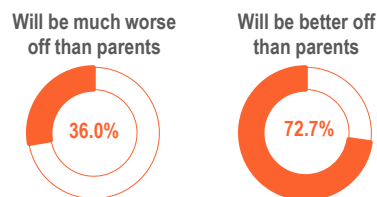
having term deposits or managed funds were more likely to participate in the gig economy than those who did not have these specific products (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Participation in the gig economy, by financial situation



Notably, those who perceived that young people today will be financially much worse off than their parents were less likely to declare participating in the gig economy than those who thought young people today will be financially much better than their parents (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Participation in the gig economy, by perception of financial future



WELLBEING AND PERSPECTIVES ABOUT THE FUTURE

Research has identified precarious employment as a possible cause of food insecurity in Australia²³ and shown that young Australians employed in

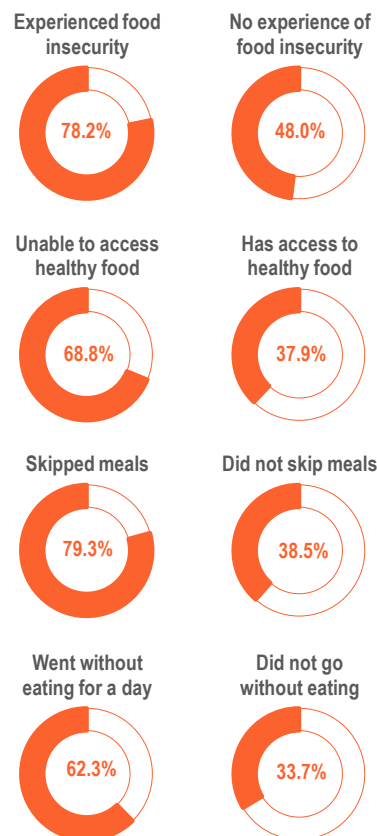
precarious work worry about their ability to afford food.²⁴ Given this, it can be reasonably assumed that young Australian gig workers, being engaged in precarious work, may experience some form of food insecurity.

In our survey, young Australians who declared experiencing food insecurity (i.e. running out of food and not being able to buy more because of lack of money) at some point during last year were more likely to participate in the gig economy than those who declared not experiencing food insecurity (Figure 8). As one 20-year-old man from Tasmania who undertook gig work explained:

[I just had to] dumpster dive ... [to find] ways around it ... [I] definitely didn't have direct access to [food], like, money-wise at times.

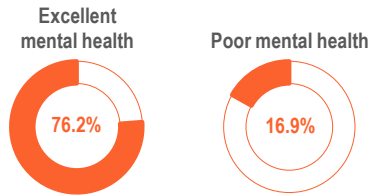
Similarly, those who reported often experiencing food insecurity in other ways, such as being unable to access healthy and nutritious food, having to skip meals or going without eating for a whole day, were more likely to declare they participated in the gig economy than those who declared never having these experiences (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Participation in the gig economy, by experiences of food insecurity



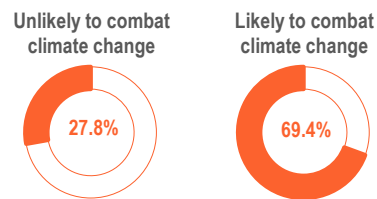
Those who reported having excellent mental health were more likely to participate in the gig economy than those who said their mental health was very poor (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Participation in the gig economy, by reported mental health



Interestingly, young Australians who thought it was extremely unlikely that we will effectively combat climate change were less likely to participate in the gig economy than those who thought it was extremely likely (Figure 10). Perhaps living in conditions of precarity heightens one's sense of a precarious future? That said, participation in the gig economy was similar among young people with different levels of overall optimism about achieving financial security and having supporting social relationships in the future.

Figure 10: Participation in the gig economy, by belief in ability to combat climate change



DISCUSSION

THE YOUNG WORKING AUSTRALIAN AS *HOMO PROMPTUS*

In this section we further unpack the data collected in 2022 in relation to the conceptual figure of *Homo promptus*. Black and Walsh³ developed the concept of *Homo promptus* to understand how young students ‘imagine and move towards imagined futures that may be subject to economic downturns, competitive, mutable labour markets and the uncertainties of the contemporary economy’ – that is, where contemporary education and labour market conditions and discourses foster a kind of permanent flexibility linked to the valorisation of an individualised and entrepreneurial self. This notion of *Homo promptus* reflects a shift from the young student as *Homo educandus*, who focus on education and learning for learning’s sake and growth, to *Homo economicus*, who behave more like consumers motivated by individual interests and economic profit.²⁵ *Homo promptus* takes this a step further to encompass dispositions and strategies students use to navigate their worlds.

[It] embodies individual responsibility, personal investment, survival and resilience in contemporary times ... [S]ome young people approach the future as an entrepreneurial activity requiring planning and enacted proactively, or in a ‘situational’ mode on the premise that the future is ‘mainly unknowable’.^{3,p508}

The pressure to become *Homo promptus* is manifest in four ways.

1. Young people are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and strategic. Their lives are viewed as projects requiring ongoing curation and strategic self-management to ‘create a meaningful life-trajectory in a complex world with a wide range of possibilities’.^{26,p422} Such curation and an entrepreneurial approach promote the idea that young people need, in an ongoing way, to acquire ‘portable’ skills: qualifications and networks to succeed at work. Work experience, traineeships, internships and work placements, for example, are seen to boost employability.
2. While many young people seek to keep uncertainty at bay, the uncertainty of future work appears to require planning adaptively while living

life in the short-term. Plans could change as circumstances change. As Dan Woodman has shown in his youth research, young people seek to shape their future while keeping their options open.²⁷

3. Being portable and strategic requires mobility. Young people are not tethered to a single place—be it virtual or physical (or both), young people are encouraged to go to where the work is.
4. As milestones of adulthood, such as secure work, home ownership and starting a family, are pushed out to later in life (or deemed unachievable), young people live in ‘waitthood’ of what is perceived to be the next stage of adulthood as they ‘negotiat[e] personal identity and financial independence’.^{28,p33}

We would like to illustrate these characteristics by bringing data collected for the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer into conversation with the broader literature.

Young Australians are entrepreneurial and strategic

The types and meanings of work, along with the behaviours and dispositions deemed necessary for contemporary employment, are seen to require an entrepreneurial approach to acquiring skills, professional experiences, qualifications and networks. The orientation towards work, study and volunteering is one of strategic self-management to create a meaningful life-trajectory in an uncertain world with a variety of possibilities.²⁶

What is evident in our research are clusters of activities pursued to open such possibilities, such as volunteering and shorter types of study, alongside gig work. Volunteering, for example, is perceived by some to be a way of gaining skills for work and building a résumé.²⁹ Our survey estimates that young Australians who declared volunteering and completing a short certificate with the intention of getting a job were more likely to participate in the gig economy than those who did not volunteer or complete a short certificate (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Participation in the gig economy, by activities undertaken to build work experience and skills



Some respondents bring to mind what Italian sociologist Carmen Leccardi refers to as a ‘hyper-activist individual’, where they express ‘the desire and the determination not to be overwhelmed by events, to keep uncertainty at bay’ and embrace unpredictability ‘to conquer new spaces of freedom and experimentation’.^{30,p49} Unsurprisingly, some had multiple jobs, reflecting broader national trends where Australians aged 25–29 held the highest number of jobs in 2019–2020.³¹ For example, in our interviews, a 24-year-old man in Victoria who worked in a supermarket, explained that to achieve his ideal job in a different field, he felt compelled to develop experience in the field:

[By taking on a] summer contract and some volunteer work, I have been able to get that experience and make contacts within those jobs. Having those contacts now ... will really help me gain an ongoing position in the future.

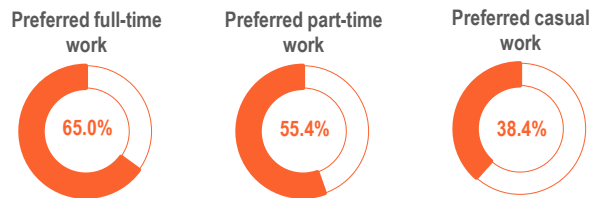
Such work may be flexible and have some immediate value, but it is not an end in itself. Rather, it is undertaken for strategic purposes, as reinforced by a 20-year-old woman in New South Wales:

It’s quite flexible so it means I can do the job while I’m studying, and so I suspect I’ll probably stay here until I finish my degree, but it’s probably not where I want to end up kind of in the long term.

Where *Homo promptus* seeks to be responsive and entrepreneurial, creating plans for the future where circumstances allow, the future is seen to be mainly unknowable. This arises chiefly from the uncertainty attached to changing labour markets. Those who

preferred full-time work, if they had a choice, were more likely to participate in the gig economy than those who preferred casual or part-time work (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Participation in the gig economy, by employment preferences



This might show that young people are using gig work to supplement their casual or part-time work to complete their full-time work preference, but it could also mean that young people are seeing gig work as a viable alternative to fulfil their aspirations of working full-time. For example, a 22-year-old non-binary person from Western Australia said in relation to their employment status:

I’m self-employed, so the position I occupy is on my own terms because it varies, but I do also take contract work. Work comes and goes at odd times, and it’s usually a case of you don’t get paid for a long time and then you get a lump sum from a project, and then you have a period of no work again ... It’s a little bit all over the place.

However, they explained that working in a conventional job would not be feasible. They felt that employers would not be willing to hire them and work around their schedule, as it would not be cost-effective. This led them to be entrepreneurial and seek opportunities, grants and income streams from multiple different sources:

I never know how to describe it when I fill out ... the [Australian] census and they ask about work, and I never know how to explain things because it doesn’t really follow that very traditional structure of, you have the employer and the employee. When I take contract work, I’m technically an employee, but I don’t have a boss as such. I’m brought on as an external person.

For some young people, gig work is a way of navigating the uncertainty of these labour markets, which in turn affects their ability to plan.

Planning adaptively for the future while living life in the short-term

Researchers have previously noted the ‘diminished citizenship’ of young people in precarious employment, predicated on a belief that ‘young people are not entitled to state support to ensure their financial survival. They must get themselves through the financial difficulties associated with precarious employment’.^{32,p82} Combined with continued erosion of stable work and home ownership opportunities, the contemporary world does not favour opportunities for planning. Young people, however, still try to shape and care about their future and as a result are required to plan for their future ‘in new ways, primarily by keeping options open’.^{27,p125} However, trying to plan for the future can be challenged by young people’s work, life and study pressures in the short-term, as a 23-year-old woman from New South Wales explained:

So, paying rent, living, you know, paying bills, all the responsibilities that are associated with living out of home ... [makes future career planning] really, really challenging. For example, I've got ... six months' worth of placement in my degree, which is unpaid, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and I've got to work to pay my current bills. I've also had to get a second and a third job to help save up for when I go on placement, and that makes it really difficult ... One is [foreign language] tutoring, and the other is, I work in market research ... they're not many hours per week, either.

Additionally, young people who thought it was unlikely that they would be able to afford a comfortable place to live in the next 12 months were less likely to participate in the gig economy than those who thought it was likely they would be able to afford a comfortable place to live (Figure 13). This need to balance remaining open to future opportunities while living life in the short term, reflects the challenges of gig work and insecure employment more widely.

Figure 13: Participation in the gig economy, by expectations of housing affordability



Young people’s diminished citizenship arises when precarious employment compels them to live life in the short term – living from gig to gig limits their ability to plan.²² In a similar way, young people undertaking short courses and micro-credentials could be seen as an example of the ongoing assemblage of their life plans in short segments rather than longer trajectories. Canadian-based academics, Leesa Wheelahan and Gavin Moodie, observe that ‘micro-credentials are gig credentials for the gig economy’,^{33,p1280} as such credentials present an on-demand form of qualification that reflects the erosion of conventional career paths and occupations alongside the growing precarity of the labour force.³³ Done well, micro-credentials can allow workers to adapt when commencing new jobs and to quickly learn and document their proficiency with new skills and abilities.^{34,35} However, the prevalence of micro-credentials may also increase the precarity of working in the gig economy by reinforcing discourses of speculation and on-demand work.³⁶ Further, micro-credentials redefine the relationship between formal education and work by emphasising the need for workers to build a profile to access work.³⁷ Wheelahan and Moodie argue that micro-credentials require students to “second-guess” the requirements of the labour market so that they have the “right” skills needed at the right time for the right job’,^{33,p1280} rather than building skills over the long term that match their desired career goals.

Young people are not tethered to place

Linked to these notions of trying to plan for the future while living in the short-term, our findings also highlight that young people are not necessarily tethered to one place. In particular, our interview data provides insights into how geographic mobility is linked to higher education and the search for secure employment. As a 20-year-old woman from Queensland explained:

I’m doing social work. I’m doing ... community development and so that’s not necessarily like a high paying field and the state of our housing market right now, it’s not giving a lot of faith ... [So] I’m open to moving to where the jobs are ... [A]ccording to one of my supervisors on placement, they said there’s going to be booming community development jobs towards the end of this year, in the north side, like, more inner city, Brisbane areas, which I’m like, ‘Awesome. That’s great. We’ll see if that actually happens, and if I can land any of those jobs.’

In other words, young people may envisage changing housing through both choice and necessity in order to work towards certain longer-term study and employment goals, as a 20-year-old non-binary person from Queensland reflected:

With the medical science job, a lot of the entry positions for that, that's probably twice as much as I'm earning now if I go full-time ... some of [the programs] even have, like, contracts where you'll study, you'll learn, you'll do a year of training in a city lab, and then into multidisciplinary stuff, then you can go out to a rural or remote lab and you get paid a lot for doing that sort of thing. I'm even considering maybe if I, towards the end of my degree, I might be able to get into a programme like that ... spend a certain amount of time working remote and building up some savings and then trying to move back into a closer lab which, whether or not that pays the same more or less, because if I've moved up in positions, or if I'm still fairly low down, it should be enough to get by comfortably ... I'm hoping.

Lives in waithood

There is a sense from our data that young people as *Homo promptus* are *in between* things: in between jobs, juggling work with study, in a state of continued transition. This period of waithood reflects a prolongation of youth at a time when young people are 'negotiating personal identity and financial independence'.^{28,p23} Precarious work and unattainable life milestones such as buying a home extend this prolongation. This can, in the words of a 24-year-old man from Victoria, 'make things tricky for people wanting to, who are very determined ... [but] they just have to wait for things ... to be in place'. The extension of this transition, though, is not necessarily a 'failed transition, a form of deviance, or a pathology from which young people suffer'; for many it can also be 'a period of experimentation, of improvisation and of great creativity'.^{28,p35} It is for these reasons that we see the tensions of *Homo promptus* as perhaps explaining the tempered or dark optimism evident in young Australians' attitudes.

THE DARK OPTIMISM OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

By examining these four key pressures to become *Homo promptus*, we can begin to understand young people's views on the gig economy as encompassing

a combination of hope, senses of possibility and pessimism as they "walk against the wind" of uncertainty'.^{2,p151} Take, for example, the relationships between gig work and young people's wellbeing. On one hand, young people may enjoy the freedom afforded by gig work, which allows them to be flexible around study commitments and prevents them from getting bored, while also helping develop their work and social skills.¹⁹ Gig work may also have social benefits which young people 'generally [view] as positive and [leading] to feelings of camaraderie'.^{9,p514} On the other hand, the precarious nature of gig work left young people feeling trapped, with the reduced sense of autonomy being particularly detrimental to their mental health and wellbeing.³² Gig work's reliance on customer ratings can also negatively impact gig workers' mental wellbeing and experiences of distress¹⁶ along with the perception that their work is not considered important,³⁸ feelings of anxiety or distress about their volatile income,³⁹ career uncertainty⁴⁰ and job insecurity.⁴¹

These experiences shape young people's work identities and young people may normalise these detrimental effects. They have grown up in precarious times in which it is taken as commonplace for them as individuals to navigate an uncertain labour market.³² *Homo promptus* requires someone to adopt an identity and to 'construct a coherent discourse that accommodates the trade-offs that their occupation involves'.^{42,p550} That is, young people seek to rationalise employment uncertainty and insecurity as a normal part of life in an attempt to chart a meaningful path through precarity. Such self-narratives enable gig workers to transform their experiences into a temporary episode, in which gig work 'was not really who they were and did not represent their main goal'.^{42,p562}

Such through lines are seen in both our survey and interview data. Take, for example, the testimony from the 20-year-old Tasmanian man. For him, gig work packing trucks at music concerts was a necessary side hustle to mitigate financial pressures at the end of his pay cycle. Such gig work was poorly paid and as a consequence this young man's 'direct access to [food was limited] ... money-wise'. Yet he was optimistic about this work because of his desire 'to make it in the music industry' and he felt that such work would help him develop skills 'to be versatile as a musician'. These types of experiences may help to contextualise some of the 'darker' and 'optimistic' relationships seen in the survey data and show that they are not binary but entangled. For example, gig

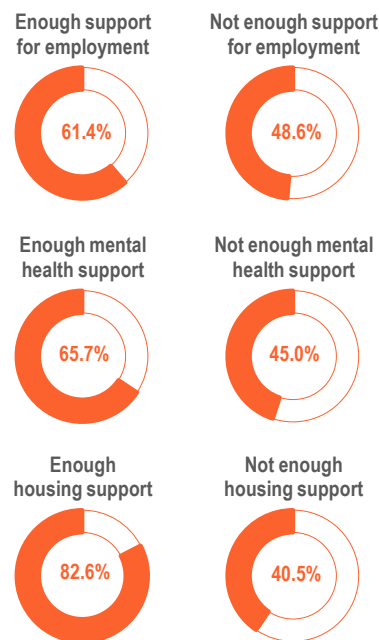
work was more common among those experiencing under/unemployment, while also seen to be positive for those seeking alignment between their values, their employers' values and their work.

As another example, take the 24-year-old Victorian man and the 20-year-old woman in New South Wales. For them, contract and gig work were seen as a flexible way to 'get that experience and make contacts ... [that] will really help me gain an ongoing position in the future' (24-year-old man, Victoria), but was 'not [work young people] ... want to end up ... [doing] in the long term' (20-year-old woman, NSW). This was also evident in the survey data, where gig work was more common among those studying full-time, holding micro-degrees or volunteering with the intention to get a job, as well as those who sought full-time employment when looking for future work. These narratives may allow young gig workers to dissociate themselves from their current situation, and to make sense of their experiences of precariousness and ambiguity surrounding their work.

RESPONDING TO *HOMO PROMPTUS*

What is the role of government in response to *Homo promptus*? What do young people think it could be? Young people's experiences of work highlight the need for an interconnected policy response as opposed to a siloed approach to labour market policy. Such a response must include young people's nuanced views about whether or how government support can help. For example, those who thought there was enough government support for young people in employment, mental health and housing were more likely to participate in the gig economy, in comparison with young people who thought there was not enough support in these areas (Figure 14). This could relate to the entrepreneurial and individualised spirit of *Homo promptus*, who might eschew government support and feel that they can only rely on themselves to make their own way in life.

Figure 14: Participation in the gig economy, by perceptions of government support



CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the relationship of work to other aspects of young people's lives with a particular focus on workforce insecurity. We are navigating uncertain territory in terms of the attitudes that young people express and the material realities that they face; that is, wider feelings of pessimism can have their own effect on the attitudes of young people. While the gig economy may afford young people greater flexibility and access to work, it raises questions about 'to what end?' and 'at what cost?'

Our research suggests that these are aspects and questions that young people themselves are aware of. Young people weigh the benefits of flexibility with the precarity of contemporary work, exhibiting a tempered 'dark optimism'. Coupled with a sense of fatalism, they have adopted various coping strategies to make sense of their situation. Such fatalism, a key ingredient of dark optimism, can also extend beyond gig work into young people's views of the wider labour market, where the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to amplify and accelerate conditions of uncertainty and precarity. This paper also suggests that growing participation in the gig economy intersects with broader trends that are bound up with education, finance, civic participation and young people's perspectives about the future.

Drawing on the conceptual lens of *Homo promptus*, we have argued that young people view these connections with a combination of scepticism and deep concern about their present and a tempered optimism about their ability to navigate these struggles into the future.

Young people view 'ongoing security as necessary for their future' and 'the autonomy to effectively reduce future ambiguity through their own direct control'.^{17,p123-124} However, it is clear that the gig economy does not provide these conditions. This can be seen in the current legal discussions around whether gig workers are independent contractors or whether they are employees protected by existing employment laws and entitled to superannuation and other employee benefits.⁴³

We see the gig economy as being the tip of the iceberg. The pressures on young people in gig, contract-based and precarious work may reflect a broader loss of control that young people face in society. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argued, 'the present-day newcomers to adult life confront expectations falling – and much too steeply and abruptly for any hope for a gentle descent'.^{44,p6} Given this, the main aspiration for young gig workers is to secure more stable employment in order to attain a sense of control over their lives and their future aspirations – neither of which are available within the precarious conditions of the gig economy specifically, and within the wider context of youth labour in general. This leads us to understand that the deep, structural changes currently occurring in the labour market do not work in favour of young people. The question must then be asked: do such changes mean that being young is itself a form of disadvantage? Or do these changes reflect the emergence of *Homo promptus* as a fixture of the contemporary workforce?

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