‘Missing Workers: Retaining mature age women workers to ensure future labour security’

The project, funded by ARC Discovery Grant DP110102728 and administered through Curtin University of Technology was conducted between 2011 and 2013. Its chief investigators were Associate Professors Siobhan Austen, Rachel Ong and Therese Jefferson from Curtin University, Professor Gill Lewin from Curtin University and Silver Chain, and Professor Rhonda Sharp from the University of South Australia. Dr Valerie Adams was a research associate on the project. This report briefly summarises the project and its outputs through to the end of 2013.

Project description

The context for the project is ageing populations and its consequences for future labour supply. Women aged 45+ are a crucial component of Australia’s future labour supply, and an understanding of the barriers to their retention in the workforce is necessary for the development of policy to ensure that critical community needs, such as aged care, can be met.

The project addressed the following research questions:

- What are the key aspects of the physical and social circumstances of mature age women, and the institutional environment in which they operate that influence their decisions either to maintain or leave employment in the aged care sector?

- How do mature age women’s paid and unpaid roles and circumstances interact to determine their ability/willingness to remain in paid work in the aged care sector?

- What are the implications for policy on the retention of mature age women in Australia’s aged care sector?

Results and outcomes

Drawing on emerging themes in feminist economics, the ‘missing workers’ project contributed a new model of employment decision-making by mature age women. It also generated an innovative longitudinal set of quantitative and qualitative data, enabling international comparisons of the factors affecting mature age women’s employment in aged care.

The outcomes of the project thus far include an important contribution to literature in the field, as evidenced by the numerous publications shown in project outputs listed below. In several instances, presentations of the project’s findings have been made to industry participants, supporting its goal of contributing to the design of policies and practices that will foster the retention of mature age women in the aged care sector.

• A mixed methods approach to investigating the employment decisions of aged care workers, *Handbook of Research Methods and Applications in Heterodox Economics*, (publisher) Edward Elgar (eds) by Frederic S. Lee and Bruce Cronin (forthcoming).


• Jefferson, Therese; Austen, Siobhan; Sharp, Rhonda; Ong, Rachel; Lewin, Gill and Adams, Valerie (2013), ‘Planning and implementing a mixed methods research project: A study of aged care workers’ employment retention, Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ) 27th Conference Work, Employment and Employment Relations in an Uneven Patchwork World, 6-8 February, Fremantle, WA.

• Austen, Siobhan; Jefferson, Therese; Sharp, Rhonda; Ong, Rachel and Lewin, Gill (2013), ‘Misrecognition and Maldistribution: The Case of Aged Care Workers’, 12th
Reflected in the content of these papers is new theoretical and methodological knowledge relevant to the analysis of employment decision-making by mature age women. The project identified the relevance of new sets of factors that promote or hinder mature age women’s retention in paid work. These include factors linked to the visibility of the women’s contribution to the social project and which impact directly and indirectly (through wages) on the motivation to continue in particular paid work roles. The project also trialled, and documented its experience with a novel mixed methods approach to economic inquiry.

The theoretical contributions of the project include its analysis of recognition. The concept of recognition is evident in early economic literature (especially in Adam Smith’s, ‘Theory of
Moral Sentiments’). However, it fell from sight as economic theory evolved and self-interest was adopted as the key explanation for human behaviour and social order. The project demonstrated how the concept of recognition is relevant for any analysis of the pay and working conditions of aged care workers.

The project also identified new relationships between dirty and dangerous work and pay. Standard economic models predict a compensating wage differential for dirty or dangerous work. Data collected in the project challenge this assumption by showing an inverse correlation between the incidence of dirty and dangerous work and pay outcomes. Analyses developed in the project indicate that factors relating to the feminised characteristic of aged care work, and the relative invisibility of the work, affect the ability of workers to address the dirty and dangerous aspects of their work roles.

New patterns of relationships between informal care roles and employment retention were highlighted in the results of the project. Previous research has tended to assume that higher informal care roles will translate into lower employment retention. However, research conducted as part of the project showed, first, that the workplace environment can mediate these effects. Importantly, the project’s research showed that women employed in full-time roles find it relatively difficult to retain employment when their informal care roles increase. The research conducted as part of the project also showed that the impacts of informal care roles on employment retention varies between women according to their economic situation. Importantly, the project identified a positive link between increased care roles and employment retention for women whose economic situation is poor. These results highlight the need for tailored policies and other interventions aimed at minimising the impacts of increased informal care roles.

Overall, the results from the project indicate that the employment decisions made by mature age women reflect a complex interplay of economic, physical and social circumstances and are affected by the particular institutional environment in which they operate. In aged care, this environment is highly gendered and sometimes assumes a virtue ethic on the part of caregivers - that they will provide care to those in need, even in the absence of financial or other reward. This can lead to patterns of employment outcomes that contrast those predicted by standard economic models. For example, labour supply is commonly presumed to be available despite very low wages; workers engage in dirty and disagreeable work without apparent compensation; and the work’s high emotional demands are not clearly reflected in the pattern of wage outcomes. However, a ‘strategy’ of relying on virtue or care to achieve the provision of future aged care needs is highly problematic. Low wages are a key source of discontent amongst the workers that were surveyed in this project; and, for many, the low wages convey a lack of social recognition for the contribution they make to the social project. Low wages are also a key factor hindering the retention of mature-age workers in the aged care sector. They may also undermine the quality of aged care and are the key issue for future policy to address. The results of this project indicate that policy development for the sector will need to draw on a broader concept of productive work than is conventionally utilised in economic analysis.

The project’s results also show that the physical demands of aged care work, as it is currently configured, negatively impact on the retention of staff, as do poor management. The number of high-need clients in aged care is increasing and this is resulting in higher physical demands, and creating difficulties for some aged care workers. Organisational responses, relating to the configuration of work and staff ratios, are warranted.
The project has contributed a large and detailed set of survey data on mature age women in the aged care sector: The Mature Age Women in Aged Care (MAWAC) data. Indeed, it is now the largest dedicated set of data on mature age Australian women. The data is also integrated with a comprehensive set of interview data. Both sets of data will be available to organisations and researchers to explore the issues and circumstances affecting the sector. Summaries of the survey data are also available on the project website, providing new perspectives on patterns of employment outcomes amongst mature age women in aged care.