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Covid-19 Economic Policy as Double Disadvantage for Young Australian Workers

INTRODUCTION

By global comparison, Australia experienced relatively low health and mortality impacts from the Covid-19 pandemic with totals in June 2021 of 30,200 cases and 910 deaths (WHO 2021). However, the government's approach to shutting down borders and economic activity, while largely protecting Australians from the virus, also created immediate and devastating economic impacts. These impacts significantly affected young workers, with those 15–24 years old, comprising 38 percent of the 870,000 Australians who lost jobs in the early months of the crisis. Youth unemployment of 16.4 percent by June 2020 then doubled the total unemployment of 7.4 percent, with a further 19.7 percent of young people considered underemployed (ABS 2020).

This uneven impact of the Covid-19 crisis on workers relates to the pre-existing patterning of precarious employment in Australia. While casual employment comprises 25 percent of the labor market, workers between 15–19 and 20–24 years old have substantially higher casualization rates of 76 percent and 41 percent (Gilfillan 2018). Young people constitute 17 percent of the labor force, but 46 percent of the most precarious, short-term casual jobs (Gilfillan 2020). This pre-pandemic labor market reality already disadvantaged young people, since precarious work generally has poor job quality, limited entitlements, few workplace rights and low, insecure income (Dixon et al. 2014; Sharma 2020). Precarious employment also shifts economic risks from business onto individual workers (Chesters and Cuervo 2019); precariously employed workers were easily dismissed when the Covid-19 economic crisis hit.

The conservative Australian federal government intervened in the economic crisis with substantial and uncharacteristic welfare spending. Their policy response included employment subsidies, unemployment payment supplements and early access to superannuation and this shaped how the crisis was experienced by different groups. Similarly, policies intended to support economic recovery target different groups across the workforce. Recently, Prime Minister Scott Morrison has enthused about there being "more jobs in the Australian economy than there were before the pandemic" (Morrison 2021). However, recent figures indicate that young people continue to be disadvantaged. In February 2021, overall unemployment had fallen to 5.8 percent, nearing the pre-pandemic level of 5.1 percent. Meanwhile, youth unemployment was 12.9 percent, 1.4 percent higher than the year before and underemployment stood at 16 percent. While Prime Minister Morrison's claim rings true for workers over 25 years old, with 77,600 more employed than before the crisis, those 24 and under have 74,100 fewer jobs.

This article reviews key policies implemented by the federal government in Australia to address the economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. We review policies introduced during the Covid-19 crisis of 2020 and then policies to support economic recovery in the period following. Our analysis focuses on how young workers fared in these policy responses in comparison to their older counterparts. From this analysis, we conclude that young workers were more substantially impacted by the economic crisis and have been disadvantaged in both the crisis and post-crisis policy responses, where they are now understood primarily as a resource for business. In the absence

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of future policy intervention to explicitly address the question of intergenerational equity, young Australian workers will be economically disadvantaged for decades ahead.

FUNDING THROUGH THE CRISIS

JobKeeper

JobKeeper was an economic stimulus measure introduced to support workers at risk of losing employment "through no fault of their own" (Frydenberg 2020a). JobKeeper provided "a fortnightly AUD 1500 payment to part-time and full-time employees, long term casuals, sole traders and those working in the Not-for-Profit sector" (Frydenberg 2020a). This payment represented 70 percent of the median wage and was replacement income, according to national Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, "for many working in those sectors most affected, like hospitality and retail" (2020a). JobKeeper operated from March 2020 until March 2021 (Frydenberg 2020a; Australian Taxation Office 2021). Payments were made via employers who had lost more than 30 percent revenue (50 percent for large employers) to ensure these businesses could retain their workforce through the pandemic (Australian Government 2020a).

Significantly, JobKeeper was not accessible to employees in short-term casual positions (fewer than 12 months with the same employer) (van Barneveld et al. 2020), a stipulation largely excluding young, casual workers from JobKeeper payments. Younger workers switch jobs more often than their older counterparts and were less likely to be in long-term working arrangements at the pandemic onset (Deutscher 2019, p. 5). Over a quarter of casually employed young people (26.4 percent) had worked for fewer than 12 months in their current job, compared with one-sixteenth (6.5 percent) of workers 25 and over. This criterion is predicted to have ensured between 950,000 and 1,100,000 casual workers were ineligible for the more generous JobKeeper payment (Cassels and Duncan 2020; Australian Government 2020b, p. 2014). Notably, Cassels and Duncan (2020) predicted that many workers in highly casualized sectors, including health care, retail and hospitality, the industries Frydenberg predicted to benefit from JobKeeper, would be ineligible for JobKeeper.

Controversially, several companies used JobKeeper income to pay dividends to shareholders. Companies including Adairs (AUD 11.3m), Nick Scali (AUD 3.9m) and 1300 Smiles (AUD 1.8m) declared shareholder dividends substantially higher than their total JobSeeker payments (Butler 2020). Ensuing public criticism saw several companies declare intentions to repay the JobKeeper funds (Hutchens 2021). Thus, JobKeeper, a key Australian Government response to the Covid-19 economic crisis, largely excluded younger workers while a proportion of the funding, ostensibly paid to business for job protection, was funneled to company shareholders.

JobSeeker

Those ineligible for JobKeeper could potentially access a lesser JobSeeker welfare supplement. This payment of AUD 550 per fortnight supplemented unemployment, parenting or student welfare allowances (Australian Government 2020c). This JobSeeker supplement commenced in March 2020, reduced to AUD 250 from September to December (O'Keeffe, Johnson and Daley 2021) when it was discontinued. While providing important support for people through the pandemic, the JobSeeker supplement was significantly less than JobKeeper and available for a much shorter period.

While the unemployed JobSeekers' mutual obligation requirements were suspended between April and July 2020 (DESE 2020a), recipients were required to remain "job-ready," enhancing their employability through education and training and contributing to their community (Australian Government 2020c). The expectation was that JobSeeker recipients must earn this payment, implying that JobSeekers are less civic-minded and less motivated to work than their JobKeeper compatriots. This assumption reflects a persistent discourse directed at young people over many decades in Australia, which constructs young workers as lazy "job snobs" (Marston et al. 2019; Marston 2008). This attitude was pointedly evident when Scott Morrison warned that continuing the JobSeeker supplement would disincentivize young people from returning to work and cause employers difficulty in recruiting workers:

> "… What we have to be worried about now is that we can't allow the JobSeeker payment to become an impediment to people going out and doing work, getting extra shifts." (Klein 2020).

This rhetoric presumes that, despite structural causes of unemployment and underemployment in Australia, particularly during the pandemic crisis and the exclusion of many workers from JobKeeper, JobSeeker recipients need punitive motivation to pursue employment. Further assumed is that JobSeekers must be compelled to act in the interests of their communities.

Superannuation Draw-Down Option

Australia's compulsory superannuation scheme has a minimum 10 percent employer contribution (which up until July 2021 was 9.5 percent), designed for Australians to achieve financial independence in retirement. Funds are inaccessible until workers reach 55–60 years old. In further response to the Covid-19 economic crisis, the government allowed people under retirement age to draw down up to AUD 10,000, twice, from their superannuation. Casual workers and sole business people—particularly those ineligible for JobKeeper—were frequently encouraged to utilize this option (Frydenberg and Morrison 2020a, 2020b; Frydenberg 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). On the radio, the Treasurer framed the offer as a generous policy shift:

> "And that's the purpose of what we're trying to do. Help casuals who may have reduced hours, or sole traders" (Frydenberg 2020b).

An estimated AUD 42 billion was drawn from superannuation accounts (O'Keeffe et al. 2021). Industry Super Australia estimates 395,000 people under 35 emptied their accounts. Canstar estimated the long-term cost of a 25-year-old withdrawing AUD 20,000 is over AUD 100,000 at retirement, compared with approximately AUD 37,000 for a 50 year-old. Young people effectively funded themselves through the financial crisis, while older workers were government supported, likely rendering themselves worse off in retirement.

POST-CRISIS RECOVERY PLAN: JOBMAKER

While JobSeeker and JobKeeper were meant to stimulate the economy and protect workers and businesses during the Covid-19 economic crisis, JobMaker is a post-crisis vision for wide-scale economic restructuring (Morrison 2020a). The Prime Minister (Morrison 2020a) proposed that the JobMaker plan will herald a "new generation of economic success," described as:

> "Creating jobs and boosting the skills of Australians to help them get back into work is at the heart of the Government's Economic Recovery Plan for Australia. Our JobMaker Plan will boost economic growth, create jobs, invest in our future industries and skills, remove red tape, guarantee essential services and restore confidence in a stronger recovery (Australian Government 2020d, p. 4)."

The JobMaker plan hinges Australia's economic recovery in supporting people to return to work. A key element is reducing taxation for individuals ("hard working Australians"), valued at AUD 17.8 billion and even more for businesses (valued at AUD 31.6 billion) (Australian Government 2020d, pp. 18–22). The Government claims that JobMaker measures will create 100,000 jobs, based on the logic that if businesses are supported to "expand to meet the increase in demand [caused by individuals having more discretionary spending power], this grows the economy, creating more jobs" (Australian Government 2020d, p. 18). Tax cuts are described as "reward[ing] effort and improv[ing] incentives to work harder and get ahead" (Australian Government 2020d, p. 18). JobMaker is designed to support businesses (and middle-high income earners) with the logic that benefits will flow through the economy. JobMaker includes several initiatives for economic stimulus via construction (including expanding the AUD 110 billion infrastructure investment pipeline) and manufacturing (including the AUD 1.5 billion Modern Manufacturing Strategy) (Morrison 2020b). While these initiatives will certainly increase employment, primary beneficiaries are likely to be the companies that secure funding. Notably, most job creation initiatives target male-dominated industries, underscoring a gendered view of work and the workers most requiring support through the pandemic. The government's response to the crisis also reoriented education and training policy to "reset our economy for growth" (Morrison 2020a). The next sections consider four key elements of JobMaker: Hiring Credits, industrial relations reform, tertiary education reform and the JobTrainer announcement, illustrating how young people are imagined in the Australian Government's economy recovery plans, both now and into the future.

JobMaker Hiring Credits

The JobMaker Hiring Credit is a subsidy for employers. Businesses are eligible to receive payments if they employ workers for at least 20 hours a week and if these hires increase the overall employee headcount (Economics Legislation Committee 2020). As of February 2021, businesses employing a worker 16–29 years old who receive a government payment are eligible to receive an AUD 200 per week subsidy. If employing someone between 30–35, the subsidy drops to AUD 100 per week (Frydenberg 2020e). While this initiative appears to advantage young people through encouraging businesses to employ them, the money is received by business, not the young person. These new jobs would likely have been created in any case as the economy recovers, especially in areas such as retail, hospitality and tourism, which employ large proportions of young, casual workers (O'Keeffe et al. 2021). Both the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and Australian Unemployed Workers Union (AUWU) have suggested that rather than support young workers, this initiative will facilitate increased casualization, since payments are provided per head of staff (ACTU 2020; AUWU 2020). This can therefore incentivize businesses to shift toward a more casualized workforce.

Industrial Relations Reforms

The Fair Work Amendment (Supporting Australia's Jobs and Economic Recovery) Act amended the Fair Work Act 2009 to define the meaning of "casual employee" for the first time. The bill was originally conceived with a broader aim to enhance flexibility in the employment relationship to increase productivity and facilitate employment growth, which included the prospect of temporary downwards variation in longstanding terms and conditions of employment. Announcing the consultation process to develop the reforms the Prime Minister made his business commitment explicit: “The system has lost sight of its purpose – to get the workplace settings right, so the enterprise, the business can succeed, so everybody can fairly benefit from their efforts and their contributions” (Morrison,2020a). Ultimately, changes expanded the possible conversion of casual roles in limited circumstances, while limiting the possibility of legal recourse by casual employees who had worked in regular patterns of employment. Additionally, it made provisions for part-time employees to work additional hours without attracting penalty rates (Australian Government 2020e, p. 24). The net effect of these changes is to institutionalize casual employment and to further entrench the normalization of “permanent casual” employment in the industrial relations landscape (Stewart 2021; Peetz 2020).

Job Ready Graduates Package and JobTrainer

The Higher Education Support Amendment (JobReady Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Act 2020 was proposed in June 2020 amidst the pandemic crisis. The proposal reframed university education as primarily for job training, presenting amendments as supporting young people to make study decisions that would lead to future employment. On young people, the Minister for Education urged, “if we can harness them and their energy as we come out of this pandemic, I know that we can get our economy back to where it was before and put it in an even stronger position.” (Tehan 2020a).

A major change was the funding contribution arrangements between students and government for domestic student places. Degrees determined by government to have higher job readiness had student fees reduced, while others increased substantially (DESE 2021a). Government contributions decreased dramatically for courses including law, economics, communications, environmental studies and “society and culture.” Government contributions increased for courses aligned with the government’s “JobReady” frame, including education, clinical psychology and mathematics. The changes assumed that students would respond to “price signals” (course cost) in selecting a course of study. The education minister explained,

“… incentivizing students to go into those areas where we are going to need the skills of the future. This is the biggest economic shock that this nation has faced since the Great Depression, so we want to make sure that our students have the right skills to grab the jobs that will be there and that’s what this package is designed to do.” (Tehan 2020b).

Analysis concludes that the changes had political-ideological underpinnings rather than realistic considerations of the post-pandemic labor market. No labor market projections accompanied the decisions to justify courses selected for increases or decreases in student charges (Warburton 2020; Daly and Lewis 2020). While there was reference to disciplines as a proportion of future employment, for example, “STEM knowledge was associated with 75 percent of the fastest growing occupations, innovations and wage premiums” (DESE 2020b, p. 14), the “future jobs” rationale was thinly supported with retrospective analysis and operationalized through simplistic associations between a course of study and future possible employment. Calderon (2020) analyzed the changes as constituting a net reduction of funding to the university sector and Warburton (2020) estimated savings to government outlays of AUD 1.3 billion annually. While deferred repayment loans are available to young people, the effect of the amendment was to cost-shift current savings onto the future income of students commencing university study starting in 2021.

Along with changes in Higher Education funding, JobTrainer is a federal-state partnership providing funding for “low fee or free training places in areas of skills need.” (DESE 2021b). While official announcements signal this initiative as being for young people 17–24, eligibility is not age restricted. Similar to the Job Ready Graduates Package, JobTrainer encourages people to complete vocational training in areas of projected workforce need rather than in their preferred career areas.

CONCLUSION

Young workers were disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 economic crisis in Australia. Many were not eligible for JobKeeper, the most generous government support and ended up in demanding unemployment schemes or funded themselves through the crisis by withdrawing superannuation funds, an action with enduring financial penalty. The federal government framed this option as generous and beneficial for casual workers, but it ultimately saw many young, casual workers depleting their superannuation accounts to stimulate economic recovery.

Following the crisis, young people are envisioned in government policy as a resource to fuel economic recovery, as providing skills and education that business needs and being a source of cheap and flexible labor, which business is incentivized to employ. Young people are valued as a resource for business and the economy, not as citizens with rights to pursue their own hopes and dreams. Those on JobSeeker are compelled to accept any available work or face financial penalties. Higher Education and training are constrained to direct young people toward perceived work-ready options, pressing young people to prioritize business’s preferences over their own.

These policies introduced during Covid-19 held political-ideological underpinnings rather than realistic considerations of the post-pandemic labor market. Rather than supporting young people negatively impacted by the pandemic, the Australian Government has opportunistically used the crisis to stimulate investment and financial growth of business and to further entrench and normalize casual employment, without concern for negative economic impacts upon young people in Australia.

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