

Addressing Structural and Cultural Workforce Issues in the Visitor and Hospitality Economies

30th November, 2022



SUBMISSION TO EMPLOYMENT WHITE PAPER – CONSULTATION

Addressing Structural and Cultural Workforce Issues in the Visitor and Hospitality Economies

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“In the spirit of reconciliation all the authors, and CAUTHE, acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today”.

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Introduction

We are delighted to put forward this Employment White Paper Submission and thus contribute to the consultation process catalysed by the National Jobs and Skills Summit on 1st and 2nd September 2022. This submission is compiled by academic experts in visitor and hospitality economy employment that are affiliated with the peak Australian scholarly body, the Council for Australasian Tourism and Hospitality Education (CAUTHE), which represents 31 tertiary institutions in Australia and New Zealand that teach and research tourism, hospitality and events. The submission is specifically focused on the visitor and hospitality economies, which combined contribute over 10% towards the national GDP, and create over a million jobs. Employment in these sectors provides unique employment (e.g., for youth) and cultural (e.g., for migrants) socialisation opportunities. Moreover, these economies serve a vital social function by facilitating leisure and wellbeing opportunities for friends, families and communities. The visitor and hospitality economies (herein V&H), globally, were the hardest hit of all sectors by the impacts of COVID-19, and alike many service sectors are now grappling with acute skills and labour shortages, compounded by a 48-year low unemployment rate in Australia.

Most of the lead authors either attended, or are institutional proxies for invitees, to the Tourism Jobs Summit, hosted by Austrade and the Minister for Trade and Tourism, Senator the Hon Don Farrell, in Canberra, 30 August 2022. The attendees welcomed the opportunity for the academic voice to be heard. They noted however, that the outcomes of the Summit, and attendant policy recommendations, were focused on short-term fixes which, for a variety of reasons, may appeal to those representing large industry associations, peak bodies and the operator voice. There is an urgent need and opportunity to engage with more sustainable, long-term and future focused actions, which will benefit and empower the V&H economy worker. In our view, the Summit's recommendations and actions were characterised by (re)mobilising international workforces and incentivising traditionally marginalised populations. In most cases these policies, though well-intentioned, are not sustainable in terms of the supply of a committed, supported, replenishing, authentic and core workforce for Australia's V&H economies.

Other issues of vital concern and of futures significance to the National Jobs and Skills Summit, for instance productivity and collaboration, received limited attention at the Tourism Jobs Summit.

This submission seeks to summarily address each of the themes outlined in the call, but in aiming for this comprehensiveness cannot delve into any detail on single issues. The overarching messaging the authors seek to convey is that many issues are interconnected, which creates spillover effects in workforce issues, but contrarily also creates opportunities in efficiencies once reforms are enacted.

Response to Scope and Themes

1. Full employment and increasing labour productivity growth and incomes, including the approach to achieving these objectives.

Full employment, in regards to underemployment, is currently undermined by the structural nature and conditions in the V&H economies, where employment is largely contingent and insecure. While the nation's all-industries average for casualisation has consistently hovered between 20-25% for several decades, for accommodation and foodservices the Australian Parliamentary Library finds the average is over 60% (Gilfillan, 2018). For the V&H post-COVID economies job security has emerged as a major issue (Sun et al., 2022).

Incomes are the all-industry lowest (accommodation and foodservices), according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022). Recent labour market supply-demand driven increases have been met with opposition by employers and peak bodies (Karp, 2022).

Productivity is fundamentally linked to traditional organisational performance measures such as worker engagement, motivation and satisfaction, which meta-analyses have consistently found to be at risk and/or lower in V&H workforces than in other industries (Kanjanakan et al., 2021; Kong et al., 2018). These factors are well-acknowledged as reliable predictors of productivity (Schaufeli, 2013).

Suggested Actions

- Provide incentives (e.g., tax relief) to employers to convert zero-hour and casual contracts to part-time and ideally full-time status.
- Productivity Commission to benchmark wages to industries and occupations that make similar contributions to GDP and community wellbeing.
- Employers to reform job security, pay and working conditions such that concomitant rises in V&H worker intrinsic motivational, engagement and job satisfaction levels and productivity are effected.

- Consider further initiatives to smooth out peak seasons, for example staggered school calendars.
2. The future of work and labour market implications of structural change, with a focus on:

2.1 Building a sustainable care economy in the context of an ageing population and other drivers of demand for care services.

A sustainable care economy, ironically, will be enhanced by the mobility of workers out of V&H as occurred amid-COVID. The transferable skills in roles like cooking, cleaning and caring are well-suited to the aged care and allied health sectors. An ageing population and declining birth rates (Mizen, 2021) will progressively deprive the V&H sectors of its youthful lifeblood of workers.

Suggested Actions

- Promote the V&H economies as vibrant and exciting sectors to work in with affordances such as mobility, real-world and relationship anchored (due to COVID's virtual norms) and the development of transferable skills.
- Publicise the lifestyle and locational benefits of V&H work as a strategy to counter the flight of workers to the care and other sectors.
- Ensure positive workforce experiences such that word of mouth generates a positive 'industry-of-choice' image, particularly for youth and alternative labour markets.

2.2 The energy transition and tackling climate change to achieve net zero.

Tackling climate change is a key V&H workforce issue as research shows that sustainability behaviours are seriously challenged in the leisured environments. While many sustainability challenges can be overcome by engineering, a significant proportion require direct human interventions and choice (e.g., leaving or changing towels in hotel rooms) (Zientara & Zamojska, 2018).

Suggested Actions

- Acknowledge the skills, training and instilled mindset required to ensure the V&H workforce is on board with essential climate change initiatives.
- Promote the V&H economies as industries in which employees can make daily and meaningful sustainability impacts.

2.3 The transformation associated with digitalisation and emerging technologies.

Digitalisation and emerging technologies have traditionally been a nemesis for the V&H economies, which are notorious slow adopters of technology. Recent research highlights that employees are suspicious of AI and other technologies, which they perceive as a threat to their jobs and create anxieties regarding working alongside or with technologies (Kellogg et al., 2022). Nonetheless, as evidenced during COVID digital and technological applications did allow businesses to stay open, both enabling and improving worker opportunities, and somewhat closing the 'big-firm-small firm' gap in adoption and capabilities.

Suggested Actions

- Involve end-users (employees) in decision making regarding adoption of technologies, allow them to trial and evaluate tools and ensure workers retain a sense of autonomy as they work with and alongside these technologies.
- Organisations embrace technologies (e.g., AI and wearables) specifically designed to enhance employee wellbeing.

2.4 Building more resilient supply chains in a changing geopolitical landscape.

Supply chains of complexity in the V&H economies have long existed. Labour hire (group training) agencies and independent contractors pose risks in managing fair and decent work (Knox, 2010), as they effectively create third parties. It should also be noted that labour supply chains extend beyond national borders and the V&H economies have been (on occasions unwittingly) been implicated in trafficking and human rights abuses (Robinson, 2013).

Changing geopolitical landscapes are certainly a threat to the V&H economies' workforces. Australia must be

aware that the exercising of soft power by regional neighbours could diminish the flow of certain labour markets, for example international students from China.

Suggested Actions

- Policy and legislation ensure that all contractors be subjected, and adhere, to standard awards and workplace relations.
- Encourage the value, in terms of quality and secure labour supply, of in-house rather than agency staffing.
- The V&H economies proactively invest in local markets to hedge against the risks (also outlined elsewhere) of dependencies on international labour markets.

2.5 The adaptability of our workforce to meet the needs of emerging industries and areas of traditional economic strength.

The V&H economies have consistently demonstrated remarkable resilience and powers of recovery to a range of financial, climate and weather-related and biological shocks. A key lesson learnt during COVID was the ability of businesses to pivot from international to domestic markets (Robinson et al., 2021). Economic stimuli such as active labour market policies (ALMPs) (e.g., JobKeeper) and other demand-side incentives had positive impacts and the V&H economies adapted by rapidly embracing various virtual and digital solutions. Foodservices adopted food delivery, although this often had confounding labour market effects in terms of the conditions and insecurity gig workers endure (Riordan et al., 2022).

Suggested Actions

- Government policy settings should be in place for further ALMPs and market incentives in times of crisis.
- More policy proactivity, learning lessons from abroad sooner, will ensure that fast moving changes in the workplace (e.g., the gig economy) are afforded adequate work relations protections.

3. Job security, fair pay and conditions, including the role of workplace relations.

Job security issues were amplified by COVID. Yet V&H employment is characterised by contingent, seasonal, casual/part-time, contract and increasingly gig-type work. Lack of job security is a major factor driving the well-acknowledged precarity of V&H work, which manifests beyond the workplace into precarious lives (Robinson et al., 2019).

Fair pay has come under intense scrutiny. A raft of recent research shows that hospitality workers in particular are at grave risk of wage theft. This research shows the many creative ways in which employers steal wages (Ferris & Ross, 2022), the socialised complicity for workers in their own wage theft (Robinson & Brenner, 2021), and more importantly evidence that shows that wage theft is not isolated to a few 'rogue operators' but rather an institutionalised norm (Cole et al., 2022).

Conditions complete this triumvirate of misery for many V&H workers. Recent research, replicated in Ireland, Scotland, Norway, Greece and New Zealand, reported that the rate of workers who experienced and witnessed sexual, racial and/or harassment and bullying was 60% and 70%, respectively (Robinson et al., 2022).

Workplace relations in the V&H economies is fraught with complexities, exemplified by a confusing award system that differs across various industry sectors, yet for the same roles. While unionisation in Australia is low, the V&H industries fall below the average (Hospo Voice, 2020) thus compromising the representation of workers. In the case of platform workers, in transport (e.g., Uber, Lyft) and food delivery (e.g., Uber Eats, Door Dash), they are offered virtually no protections, as evidenced by the recent withdrawal of Deliveroo instantly rendering 15,000 contractors without (at least some) work (7News, 2022) - or recourse. Acknowledgement of the value of the volunteer workforce, and measures to ensure their workplace rights, is critical - timely in the context of the 2032 Brisbane Olympics and Paralympics and long-term declines in rates of volunteering in Australia (Holmes et al., 2022).

Suggested Actions

- Policy makers, peak bodies and industry associations and employers need to acknowledge the overwhelming evidence and dispose of a culture of denial regarding fair and decent work in V&H economies.
- Best practice employers should be identified and showcased in case studies that can be widely shared with government agencies, peak bodies, educators, unions, job actives.

- Loop holes whereby contractors (e.g., Uber) abrogate all their responsibilities to their workforce need to be closed, specifically appropriate entitlements, superannuation and workers compensation liability.
 - Fair Work Ombudsman to hold wage theft transgressors to account should be increased, while resources produced and widely circulated to educate on the many forms that it takes.
 - Organisations should promote and prosecute a zero-tolerance for managerial and co-worker mistreatment and of customer incivility.
 - Ensure volunteers', who often work along side paid staff, rights are equally upheld.
4. Pay equity, including the gender pay gap, equal opportunities for women and the benefits of a more inclusive workforce.

Women continue to dominate the lowest paid, worst treated and least securely employed cohorts in the V&H economies, and global evidence shows that COVID disproportionately negatively impacted women (and youth) workers (Sun et al., 2022). Consistent evidence across many V&H occupations shows women are subject to sexual violence from managers, work colleagues and clients (e.g., Frost et al., 2022).

Suggested Actions

- Ensure gender wage parity irrespective of role or occupation must be a policy and organisational priority. Occupations (e.g., housekeeping) should not have lower pay settings due to their feminisation.
 - Transitioning to secure and contracted employment (rather than contingent work) will disproportionately benefit women in terms of underemployment.
 - The current focus on domestic violence that has captured the public's imagination and fostered a low threshold of tolerance need to be translated to industrial contexts, via policy, organisational commitments and education to eliminate misogynistic workplace cultures.
5. Labour force participation, labour supply and improving employment opportunities.

5.1 *Reducing barriers and disincentives to work, including the role of childcare, social security settings and employment services.*

Barriers and disincentives to work are topped by housing and rental (in)affordability and the (un)availability and in regional destinations sub-standard infrastructure, for example public transport. This is especially challenging for those working in the night-time economy. There is mounting evidence of the deleterious economic, social and environmental impacts of the sharing economy (e.g., Cheng et al., 2022). A caution should be added that the so-called policy setting of welfare conditionality (as a lever to incentivise workforce participation) has shown to be a wholesale failure, further disadvantaging the most vulnerable (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Suggested Actions

- Work in consort with all housing stakeholders and governments at all levels to ensure an adequate supply and standard of housing for V&H workers, especially in regional destinations.
- Adjust settings for second homes as well as Airbnb lets to ensure adequate supply of affordable accommodation for V&H economy workers.
- Regulate the short-term platform and rental economies, in particular AirBnB and similar distribution channels.
- Increase employer duty of care for workers on late shifts etc. and safe home transport.

5.2 *Improving labour market outcomes for those who face challenges in employment, including First Nations people, those who live in rural and remote areas, younger and older Australians, people with disability, and those who may experience discrimination.*

Improving labour market outcomes is the most effective pathway out of disadvantage for most marginalised groups (McLachlan et al., 2013). Self-determination through V&H sector employment for First Nations peoples is augmented by the unique and authentic experiences their involvement and leadership delivers. The workforce inclusion of persons with disability has broader economic as well as community and individual benefits. The inter-relational and social characteristics of the V&H economies recommend them as a fertile context to play a positive function in this regard. On the evidence however, these sectors often further marginalise disadvantaged populations therefore compounding their precarity. Recent research shows the disconnect between what managers think and employees experience regarding diversity, equity and inclusion (Tracy et al., 2022). Disability discrimination seriously impedes organisational inclusiveness (Darcy et al., 2016), while at the

same time opportunities and education for self-employment and entrepreneurship for the group are also exclusionary (Darcy et al., 2022).

Suggested Actions

- An integrated multi-stakeholder approach needs embracing such that agencies and actors that support cohorts in the population who face challenges in employment, especially First Nations and disability persons, work alongside organisations and employer groups to ensure smooth and sustainable transitions.
- Be mindful of the unique circumstances of these disadvantaged groups, in particular in the development of bespoke and ongoing supports.

5.3 Skills, education and training, upskilling and reskilling, including in transitioning sectors and regions.

Skills are fraught with ambiguity in V&H employment. Many skills enshrined in national training packages transcend many occupations and many sectors. Emphasis on the soft and low skills of V&H workers devalue (and arguably feminise) (Alcalde-González et al., 2021) the intuition and intelligence exercised by these employees in emotional and embodied labour and the intangible value of these attributes in the value-chain.

Education and training specifically for the V&H economies is fractured and inconsistent across vocational and higher and private and public sectors. In the workplace V&H employers are notorious training avoiders (Lashley, 2011). Industry has also argued that formal education and training is not nimble enough in timely job-readiness.

Suggested Actions

- There is an urgent need to review and relationalise the vocational, higher education and short-course environment with a focus on clearly mapping skill requirements with industry needs.
- Microcredentialling and similar accreditations, especially in consort with raising the bar to business entry, should be reviewed to help meet industry skill needs.

5.4 Migration settings as a complement to the domestic workforce.

International labour markets comprise an important and flexible option for the V&H economies. However, dependence on this labour is a risk as we have seen during COVID and unlimited migration can have political repercussions. As exemplified in the gig economy, and mentioned elsewhere in this submission, migrant workers are often the most exploited (Joppe, 2012).

Suggested Actions

- Caution should be exercised in the over-investment (e.g., creation of new visa classes) in international labour markets to meet short-term sectoral skills and labour changes.
- A default position should be to make the V&H economies attractive and sustainable sectors to work in for domestic labour markets.

6. The role of collaborative partnerships between governments, industry, unions, civil society groups and communities, including place-based approaches.

The V&H economies are notorious for their complexity, which bears out in the vast array of products and experiences, sector associations, dominance of micro to small businesses and the diversity of the workforce. Arguably, notwithstanding the excellent work of bodies like the Queensland Tourism Industry Council who lobbied relentlessly for government supports during COVID for instance, the V&H industries have not always provided a united voice to government and consequently not been afforded the benefits of other industries with more coherent messaging.

Suggested Actions

- Formation of an independent multilateral V&H workforce body with membership drawn from government, wide-ranging industry and peak associations, micro to small business (including regional), unions, job actives and support organisations, various lobby and community groups and of vital importance employee representation.
- This body's charter should be to seek resolution on work relations and broader employment issues - strategic and small.

7. Other relevant topics and approaches.

Mental health and wellbeing (MH&W) – persistent evidence shows that (especially hospitality) employees suffer from sector high drug and alcohol abuse and related conditions (Bush & Lipari, 2015) and significantly higher suicide rates (Burnett et al., 2022; Peterson et al., 2018). While RU OK? and other agencies have developed bespoke industry packages and resources this is an urgent priority.

Suggested Actions

- A wellbeing course should be included in all V&H-related national training packages, and V&H economy related higher education programs.
- Government should be encouraged to fund MH&W awareness campaigns and industry specific resources, and incentivise organisational participation.

The informal/grey/shadow economy proliferates in certain sectors of the V&H economies, for example inbound package tours, foodservice and retail, where the exploitation of (mostly migrant and visa) workers is routine (Clibborn, 2015). The grey economy sullies the reputation of the V&H economies as places to work and creates an unlevel playing field.

Suggested Actions

- Governments proactively work with a two-pronged approach of education and punitive legislation to eradicate the grey economy, as successfully achieved in Scandinavian countries.

Summary of Recommendations

Below are summarised key recommendations, however, what should already be apparent is that various cultural and structural workforce issues in the V&H economies are highly interconnected. While indeed problematic, the positive perspective is that enacting remedial policy and practice reforms will have a domino effect – forever hastening the speed at which the V&H employment space improves for the benefit of all stakeholders.

- Implement policy and legislation to safeguard fair pay regimes, harmonising awards across various sectors as much as is practical.
- Revisit industrial relations and award conditions such that a fair balance is struck between organisational and employee definitions of flexibility – design policy such that secure full-time or part-time contracts become the industry norm.
- Ensure multi-employer bargaining, annualised wage arrangements and other work relations settings are calibrated evenly such that employees and employers benefit equally – especially in micro to small businesses.
- Address working conditions via policy and education – work towards a zero tolerance of all forms of sexual and racial abuse and bullying and harassment.
- Legislate harsh penalties for customer incivility.
- Ensure workers are aware of and free to exercise collectivism and join unions thus effecting fair representation for V&H economy workers.
- Raise the bar for business ownership in the V&H economies - low- and non-accredited market entry for businesses create consistently more supply than market demand, thus spreading a slender labour force even more thinly.
- Eradicate the informal economy, whose operators create an unlevel playing field in employment and the V&H economies' supply chains.
- Regulate the disruptors.
- Collaborate broadly with government and agencies to ensure access to affordable housing and essential services.
- Prioritise local talent pools over unsustainable mobile and temporary international labour markets.
- Fund campaigns to showcase the myriad careers and entrepreneurial opportunities in the V&H economies.
- Ensure policies and programs are in place to offer sustained and equitable support to disadvantaged populations (e.g., women, First Nations, disability, migrants etc).
- Consistently support training and education at all levels to effect the professionalising of V&H workplaces.

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Suggested citation: Robinson, R.N.S., Dale, N., Richardson, S. & Solnet, D. et al., with Baum, T. (2022). Addressing Structural and Cultural Workforce Issues in the Visitor and Hospitality Economies, Submission to National Jobs Summit Employment White Paper, Brisbane: CAUTHE.

