

# **Student Experiences at Work and Attitudes to Unionism: A Study of Retailing and Fast Food**

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The paper discusses the results of a survey of students' perceptions of work in retailing and fast-food employment in Australia, with particular regard to their attitudes towards union membership. Our research question is: to what extent do management practices affect young people's views about joining a union? We find that low-cost labour management regimes are likely to increase employees' interest in joining a union. By contrast, more positive 'developmental' work regimes do not seem to be associated with worker attitudes to joining a union. Our findings have implications for employers, managers and unions.

## **Introduction**

The theme of this conference raises a contrast about work: 'High Road or Low Road?' On the one hand, there are highly skilled and well paid jobs that tend to be safe, secure and satisfying; on the other hand, there are low-skill, low-pay jobs that tend to be unsafe, insecure and unsatisfying. An increasingly important form of work in the early 21st Century is casual work by young people. This growth is associated with both demand and supply. Many enterprises in the service sector, for instance, are offering their customers the convenience of long opening hours, which they staff to a considerable extent with young people, many of whom are students, who are also employed on a casual basis. Most such jobs are found along the 'low road' i.e. they are low-skill, low-paying, insecure and are usually weakly protected by unions. This paper seeks to explore students' perceptions of such work in two major segments of the service sector: retailing and fast food.

We seek to shed light on the work situation of students in retailing and fast food, particularly with regard to unionisation. This is an important issue for unions; if this vital category of young workers get a favourable taste of unionisation at an early stage in their working lives, then arguably they would be more likely to be union members when they move into subsequent jobs. This paper discusses student work and unionism. It then considers employers' and managers' policies and practices with regard to unionisation. After outlining our research methods, we discuss our results, then draw conclusions.

## **Student employment in retailing and fast food**

In Australia, nearly three-quarters of full-time undergraduate students who are less than 25 years old are also in employment on a part-time basis (Long and Hayden, 2001: 100). One in five such students work as retail sales assistants - the largest bloc of university student workers (McInnis and Hartley, 2002:25). In total, 69 per cent of university students (who have entered straight from school) work in sales or as clerical workers. Female university students are more likely to be in employment than their male counterparts and more likely to work in sales or service roles. Retail and hospitality work is increasingly a part of the formative experiences of young Australian workers. It is an important period of socialisation; it is in this context that young workers first experience for themselves: an employment

tolerate high levels of managerial control (Lucas, 1997; Lucas and Ralston, 1996). Australia's system of junior wages, where workers under 21 are paid proportionately less than adults, provides employers with another incentive to hire youths.

The demand for youth labour is rising along with the growing numbers of university students who are available for casual work. Since the early 1980s, enrolments at universities have grown, but so have the costs of higher education. At the same time, income support available to students has decreased. This has increased the incentive of university students to seek employment, and to work longer hours.

Many employers see student employees as more easily trained than other young workers (Smith and Green, 2001; Curtis and Lucas, 2001). Lucas (1997) found that employers were able to take advantage of students' potential, asking them to perform duties well beyond their job descriptions. Employers often preferred students for front-line service work because they were 'better educated and more articulate than other workers' (Curtis and Lucas, 2001: 48). This 'coincidence of needs' offer employers a numerically and functionally flexible form of labour (Lucas, 1997: 607). The growth of the student labour market raises some important challenges for unions.

### **Unionism**

There is a union representation gap among young workers in Australia (Bearfield, 2003), New Zealand (Haynes et al, 2005), and the UK, Canada, and the US (Bryson et al, 2005). In all these countries, young workers are less likely to be union members than older workers. Yet many more young workers are as likely to want to be in a union, which is also the case for their older co-workers. In Australia, for example, only 16 per cent of young workers are trade union members, but 51 per cent of non-members would rather be in a union (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Representation gap in Australia: Workers aged 15-24 and 25-44**

	<b>15-24</b>	<b>25-44</b>
Union Member <sup>a</sup>	16%	26%
'I'd rather be in a union' <sup>b</sup>	51%	50%
Representation Gap	+35%	+24%

<sup>a</sup> ABS Cat No 63100 Aug 1999, Table 20

<sup>b</sup> Bearfield, 2003: 6; survey includes young workers 18-24 years old

Analyses have shown that most of the difference in unionisation level and the representation gap can be attributed to where young people work. Young workers are more likely to work in nonunionised workplaces. This reflects the over-representation of young workers in small workplaces and in certain industries, such as retail and hospitality, which have lower levels of union membership (Haynes et al, 2005: 107). However, overseas studies have also found that a larger representation gap also exists among young workers in organised workplaces. Freeman and Diamond (2003: 44) found that young non-members had not joined because they had not been asked to. They interpreted this as evidence that unions do not appropriately target young workers (e.g. Biddle et al, 2000). This was also Cregan's (1999: 112) conclusion. But Haynes et al (2005: 110) did not find evidence of this in New Zealand.

Structural analyses of industry, workplace size, and union presence and activity cannot account for the whole representation gap. Workers' individual characteristics, such as family

background, knowledge and attitudes should be considered alongside these factors. Bryson et al (2005) propose a social experience model to explain the youth representation gap. They argue that (in economic terms) trade union membership is an ‘experience’ good. Most of the benefits of membership are intangible (i.e., they are experienced) and their value can be appreciated only after joining. This is especially so in Australia, where ‘free-riders’ can also benefit from the union wage differential. In contrast, before joining they can not have the satisfaction of having a voice via a union, or even industrial assistance with a workplace issue. Thus people must experience the benefit themselves, or have close experience of the value of membership through a family member, friend, or co-worker. Consistent with this explanation, they propose three main reasons why young workers are more likely to experience a representation gap than older workers. First, older workers, because they usually have more experience in the labour market, have greater access to information about the functions of unions in general. Second, older workers have more experience to gauge the likely success or efficacy of union members given their individual circumstances. They can assess the likely benefit of union membership more realistically. Third, older workers are more likely work in places that already have union members. Because organising a union in a non-union workplace has a much greater cost than starting a job and joining a union in an already organised workplace, young workers are more likely to accept the *status quo* of working in an unorganised workplace.

Using the model of union membership as an experience good, the period of student employment is an important stage in the socialisation of young workers. Krosnick and Alwin (1989) found that, typically, political attitudes stabilise in the 20s, coinciding with the period of student employment. Lowe and Rastin (2000) found that many young people’s attitudes toward unions are initially neutral or uncertain, but had stabilised three years after finishing full-time education. Union membership also stabilises, although over a longer period spanning the entire 20s (Elias, 1996: 181). The first two factors proposed by Bryson et al relate to knowledge. Young people are capable of learning about the workforce through their student jobs, as well as through their university studies and work experience placements. The third factor relates essentially to industry. Although young student workers are predominantly employed in low-density industries, some will move on to jobs in well-organised professional fields. Thus, there is a strong reason to conclude that the experiences of young people while working in student jobs will influence their attitudes toward unions and their future union membership patterns. We turn to considering how employer policies and practices influence those experiences.

### **Employers’ policies and practices**

Numerous studies have found that workers’ propensity to join unions is strongly influenced by managers’ policies and practices towards unionisation (e.g. Bain, 1970; Dundon, 2002). The actions of managers set the climate for unions (e.g. Holland et al., 2000, p. 6). For example, employers might formulate sophisticated human resource management (HRM) policies or cruder union-busting policies, which might include discrimination against workers who join unions. One study found about 32 per cent of workers reported that they believed that managerial attitudes were opposed to unions (Teicher et al., 2005). However, this type of discrimination is illegal in many jurisdictions and it is unlikely that such overt behaviour would be widespread.

More broadly, HR and work organisation policies may have an influence on employees’ interest in joining unions. On the one hand, managers may adopt a ‘developmental approach’ to managing labour through policies such as fair treatment of staff, team working, worker autonomy and skills development. This so-called ‘sweet stuff’ (Roy 1980; Gall, 2001) may

result in more job contentment and dissuade workers from joining unions. Firms that are famous for adopting a development or high-road approach include IBM and Hewlett Packard.

On the other hand, management may employ a ‘low-cost’ regime or a ‘fear-stuff’ approach to managing work and labour. The low-cost regime entails a focus on minimising wage costs, for example, through unpaid overtime or working through breaks. This approach can also be associated with a regime where workers are ‘hustled’ to work harder and may be subject to harsh treatment at work. The fast food industry is often portrayed as typifying such a management ‘bleak-house’ (Sisson, 1993) approach to cost-minimisation. However, in reality there is not always a clear distinction between the types of firm and types of managerial regimes (Dundon, 2002).

To what extent do such labour management regimes tend to influence young people’s views about joining a union? For instance, would workers be less inclined to join a union if management adopted a developmental approach? Conversely, would a low-cost management approach induce employees’ interest in joining a union? We investigate these questions below.

### Research Methods

We devised a survey instrument to explore the work experiences of young people in fast food and retailing. We piloted our instrument on students with experience of fast-food retailing. We developed the fast food survey into a more general instrument to include retailing. We then surveyed university students in 2001 and 2002.

We mainly surveyed large first year classes. We gained permission to administer the survey before the start of lectures. We surveyed students currently working in fast food or retailing as well as students who no longer worked in fast food or retailing, but had done so in the past. There were 526 useable responses from the students we surveyed at Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology campuses in Queensland. The majority of students surveyed were studying business or engineering.

**Table 2. Demographic Features of the Main Student Sample (n=411)**

Item		Total (%)
<b>Age</b>	18 years	34
	19 years	26
	20 years	12
	21-24 years	28
<b>Employment Status</b>	Casual	83
	Permanent Full-time	4
	Permanent Part-time	12
<b>Gender</b>	Male	37
	Female	63
<b>Union Membership</b>	Yes	12
	No	70
	Don’t know	19

Table 2 displayed on the previous page provides demographic details of our respondents. The sample comprised twice as many females as males, which approximates the casual or part-

time fast-food/retail workforce. The majority of respondents were 18 or 19 years of age. The vast majority of respondents were working on a casual employment basis. Few of them (12 per cent) said they were members of a union.

We devised our questions after reviewing others' research (e.g. Barron and Maxwell, 1998; Lucas and Ralston, 1996; Lucas, 1997). We asked students a series of questions about their experiences at work. We designed questions covering many of the issues that might affect students in their jobs in retailing or fast food.

To better delineate the underlying constructs in our survey, we used exploratory factor analysis. We used a varimax rotation in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) with principal axis factoring. We began the factor analysis using 24 questionnaire items that explored different aspects of students' experience at work. The analysis included 411 cases. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.8, indicating that the items were factorable. We checked the sampling adequacy of the individual variables. The initial examination of the scree plot suggested a two-factor solution. We chose this solution because it could be interpreted theoretically and because it had a clearly defined and simple structure. We eliminated items that loaded at below 0.38 and items that were strongly cross-loaded. This reduced the items from 24 to 11.

The factor analysis identified two underlying constructs (Table 3). Construct 1 exemplified the more positive aspects of a developmental labour management regime. Construct 2 pertained to negative experiences associated with a low-cost approach to labour management.

As a cross-check, we ran a separate factor analysis of the dataset, which included all those of 18 years and older (n=536). Again, we identified a two-factor structure with almost exactly the same question loading as for the analysis on students aged 18 to 25 years. This second factor analysis indicated that the two underlying constructs were robust.

**Table 3. Factor Loadings**

	Factor	
	1 Developmental	2 Low-cost
I like working in fast food/retail.	0.707	-0.276
I have learnt valuable career skills from working in fast food/retail.	0.648	-0.073
I am given a lot of responsibility in my job.	0.457	0.022
I find fast food/retail work boring.	-0.644	0.305
I enjoy being nice and smiling when dealing with customers.	0.443	-0.106
I like working in teams.	0.386	-0.009
Managers 'hustle' us at work to make us go faster in our jobs.	-0.080	0.569
Fast food/retail managers and supervisors treat me fairly at work.	0.358	-0.540
When business is slow, managers send staff home, without pay, before their shifts are due to end.	-0.130	0.523
I am always allowed to take my scheduled breaks and rest periods.	0.088	-0.508
I work extra hours and do not get paid for this work.	0.036	0.401

The two factors accounted for some 44 per cent of the total variance and 32 per cent of the common variance. The mean, standard deviation and Cronbach's alpha for each factor and factor inter-correlations are shown in Table 4 below. The scale reliability reported in the Cronbach's alpha for the low cost approach factor is slightly low.

**Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alpha and Inter-correlations for Main Factors.**

Factor	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha	1	2
1. Developmental Approach	3.49	0.69	0.74	1	-0.316
2. Low-cost Approach	2.82	0.79	0.65		

To explore the relationship between propensity to join a union and characteristics of the work experience, we conducted multiple regressions. The principal method of analysis used was ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. We devised the following equation:

$$\text{INTEREST IN JOINING A UNION} = b_0 + \text{LOW-COST REGIME} + \text{DEVELOPMENTAL REGIME} + \text{AGE} + \text{LENGTH OF SERVICE} + \text{SEX} + e$$

The interest in joining a union was the dependent variable measured by the question 'As a fast food/retail worker, I want to be a member of a union'. The independent variables included the two scales we constructed using factor analysis: low-cost regime and developmental regime. To control for other variables, we included in the equation age, sex and length of service. The variables  $b_0$  and  $e$  represent the constant and error components respectively. The results of the regression analysis are shown in Table 5.

Positive work experiences associated with a developmental management approach did not influence student interest in joining a union. However, the low-cost work regime was associated with increasing employees' interest in joining a union. This is our major finding.

**Table 5. Regression of Student Work Experiences and Interest in joining a Union**

	Unstandardised Coefficients B	Standard Error	Significance
(Constant)	1.027	.703	.145
Low-cost Regime	.322	.069	.000
Developmental Regime	-.086	.080	.285
Sex (female =0, male=1)	-.254	.112	.024
Age	.065	.030	.029
Length of service (years)	.003	.002	.073

$R^2 = 0.09$ ;  $n = 399$ .

Our results indicate that female students indicated an interest in joining a union more so than men. While the propensity for unionisation was not related to length of service, it was related to age (these two variables were not correlated). These are our subsidiary findings.

## Discussion

The relatively high levels of interest in union representation among young workers challenge traditional assumptions that young workers are more individualistic and anti-union (e.g. ACIRRT 1999). Our results are in line with Dekker et al (1998)'s hypothesis that interest in unionisation among student workers would be influenced by their working conditions, such as quality of supervision and job quality. These are two factors that previous research had shown influenced attitudes towards unions in adult workers (Barling et al 1992). Our findings suggest that the relationship of negative workplace conditions and attitudes toward unions may be generalisable to student workers after all.

There seems to be a gap between research findings, including ours, and the practical experiences of unions. Union organisers attempting to recruit student workers report that it is difficult to convince them that they should join a union and '[fight] for basic rights, such as award pay and fair notification of rosters' (O'Malley, 2005). Among the variables considered in this model, dissatisfaction with the enforcement of employment rights, as well as management practices, are the workplace factors that most predicted pro-union sentiment. However, the model explains only 9 per cent of the variance and does not include variables measuring perceived union performance or workers' ideological beliefs, key variables to explaining propensity for union membership (Charlwood, 2002; Haynes et al, 2005).

From this finding, it would seem that student workers are aware that one of the aims of unions is to advance the dignity of the worker. In this regard, the high turnover of student labour might suggest that students pursue 'exit' rather than 'voice' options. A desire for both exit and voice is usually seen as mutually exclusive, although as Haynes et al (2005: 112) imply, young people tend to select the option with the smaller apparent cost (exit). However, university students in practice might have relatively lengthy tenure often remaining in the same job since high school (Curtis and Lucas, 2001: 48; McInnis and Hartley, 2002). Perhaps a more likely explanation is job insecurity. The casualisation of the workforce in general has depressed union membership. Compared with the workforce in general, an even greater proportion of the student workforce is casual – 83 per cent of our sample – and many university students are under tremendous financial pressure (Long and Hayden, 2001). University students do care about how they are treated by their employers. Although the results are encouraging for unions, we would recommend further investigation of what young people know about unions and what they expect from unions. Bryson et al (2005) proposed that the cost (not the price) of union membership was higher for young workers because of the greater uncertainty they faced. The benefits of joining a union while working in a low-density workplace during a transitional life phase are uncertain for student workers. And the cost of union membership for some university student members may also involve a greater risk, since they generally have little job security.

Focus groups of young people identified a critical gap in knowledge about the function of unions. It is vital for unions to make their role in protecting award entitlements clear, as well as their capacity to improve conditions at the workplace level. The challenge for unions is not only to persuade young people of the benefits of unionism but also 'to assist them to see that unions can have an important role in *their* working lives rather than *other* people's' (Biddle et al, 2000: 40). Unions should also be open to learning from young people, especially about the way that they are seeking to manage their own career trajectories (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). In the case of student workers, this means finding a way to balance two competing union-related interests of young people: obtaining long-term career-related advice from professional unions, with enforcement of more immediate employment rights (and not much more) from retail and fast food unions. Unions need to find a way to promote these two messages together, and reach more potential members in the process. In other words, unions could look to creative

solutions to overcome the problem of attribution identified by Bryson et al (2005) in their model of union membership as an experience good.

For these young workers, a favourable attitude toward union membership is positively related to age, but not to length of service. At first sight this may seem to counter established theory, but the explanation probably lies in young peoples' economic socialisation. Knowledge about unions comes from a range of sources: family and friends' experiences, what they learn in educational institutions and from the media, and young peoples' own experiences at work. Because the majority of young people work in non-union workplaces, length of service does not affect propensity for unionisation. However, as young people age they learn more about unions from other sources. This represents a challenge to socialisation theory, as what is normally considered tertiary socialisation (socialisation into work roles) may be occurring simultaneously with secondary socialisation in school (Juredini and Poole, 200: 144-146) and before young people have a full understanding of fundamental economic and industrial relations concepts (Furnham and Stacey, 1991). But it also means that young student workers are closing the 'information gap' about work and unions that Bryson et al (2005) argue is one of the reasons for the larger representation gap among young workers.

## **Conclusions**

Students are increasingly engaging in part-time employment, not least because, in comparison with an earlier cohort, they have to pay higher fees at universities. Although most students do not envisage long-term careers in retailing or hospitality, they appear to value such work experience. They value the income and the independence it brings. They value the social interaction. Casual work in retailing and hospitality also offers flexible hours of work. But the current generation of young people are also aware that work experience, even in low-skill jobs, is critical to improving post-study employment prospects. Most unions find it particularly hard to recruit student workers. They are predominantly working part-time hours, on a casual basis and it appears that they do not have much voice in terms of union representation. Attitudes towards unions are not generational, but are more likely to reflect their socialisation and circumstances. For example, lots of student workers are employed by small and medium sized firms, many of which would be anti-union.

One implication of our findings for unions is that if they are to reverse the decline, it is crucial for unions to focus recruiting efforts on new entrants to the workforce such as student workers. In one sense our findings are encouraging for unions, for we found a higher than expected degree of pro-union attitudes among young people. However, one caveat is that there may be a gap between intentions and actual behaviour. Reasons for not following through on intentions to join a union may include the high cost for students, relative to their income earning capacity and actual or perceived management opposition to unions.

One implication for employers is that managers' low cost work regimes may have an unintended consequence of encouraging such workers' interest in joining a union. This might induce managers to think more carefully about how their behaviour is perceived by employees, especially by young ones.

Our paper has sought to examine student workers and preferences for union membership, from the perspective of union membership as an experience good. In our discussion, we identified that the student worker phenomenon may offer opportunities for unions to overcome two causes of the higher representation gap among younger workers: information asymmetry and attribution as a non-member. However, the student worker may experience

even more uncertainties and risks in regard to union membership than other young workers. This aspect of the representation gap will be more difficult for unions to overcome.

It is possible that our methods and sample selection might have precipitated these particular findings. Hence we would propose testing our results by using different methods and samples. Our study was conducted in 'low-road' contexts, which usually have tight profit margins and cost-cutting mindsets. Perhaps students would have different expectations of jobs in 'high-road' contexts. In the latter, they could have higher expectations of 'developmental' managerial practices. Therefore, if such workers are disappointed with such factors, such disappointment could precipitate their wanting to join a union. Thus it is conceivable that the findings would be different in 'high-road' contexts. Accordingly we would propose that it would be worth testing our findings also in 'high-road' work contexts as well as in other 'low-road' contexts.

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