

Careers in everyday industries: Findings from research fieldwork in retail and hospitality

Erica Smith and Andy Smith, Federation University, Victor Callan and Richard Robinson, University of Queensland, and Darryn Snell, RMIT University

This paper reports on the empirical fieldwork undertaken for the research project 'Careers in Everyday Industries', whose initial findings were reported in the October 2021 edition of 'Research Today' (Smith, Robinson & Snell, 2021). The project was funded by the National Careers Institute.

The original impetus of the research was to uncover the available careers in these industries – the industries most available to young people and mature people alike in Australia. We knew that the undervaluing of these industries led to the exclusion of these major industries from career thinking for many people. While much careers focus is on young school leavers, career guidance is also important for older people, who would benefit from more information about available careers as they seek to change jobs or re-enter the workforce (Beddie et al, 2005; Callan et al, 2020).

We believed that with a better understanding of available careers, people of all ages could be better advised; and workers already in the industries would experience higher self-esteem and would be able to advance their careers.

More information about the project can be seen at <https://federation.edu.au/research-everyday-careers>

In our first [Research Today paper](#)¹ we reported the results of our analysis of available data sets (ABS Census data, the 'LSAY' [Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth] data set, and VET enrolment data from the NCVER). We found that both industries, and particularly retail, were underserved by the VET system, and that the ABS Census data showed that one-quarter of retail workers and nearly one-fifth of hospitality workers were in management roles. In this second paper, we report on the empirical research fieldwork undertaken for the project, explain the meta-analysis method we undertook to draw together the findings for the whole project, and report the policy recommendations.

Research method

A reference group for the project was established consisting of key industry and careers stakeholders. A 'critical friends' group of relevant academic experts was also set up, to comment on key documents and on the final report. In addition, an international comparative phase was undertaken in Germany and Switzerland, with government departments and academics. There were 264 participants altogether (Table 1 below).

Table 1: participants in 'Careers in Everyday Industries' project

	Respondent types	Numbers of people
Industry stakeholder interviews	Retail, hospitality, career associations, Skills Service Organisations	15
Company case studies – each head office staff and two sites	7 companies	74
Academic experts in the industry areas	4 groups	17
Career practitioner survey	National survey	54
'General public' survey	Staff at two dual-sector universities	59
Recent school leaver groups	First-year students at 3 universities	8
Tertiary student focus groups	Students at 3 universities	19
International comparison	VET experts and officials in Switzerland and Germany	6
Project reference group members	8 (six members – two left their positions and were replaced)	8
Critical friends group members		4
Total		264

¹ <https://www.avetra.org.au/resources/Documents/Research%20Today/Research%20Today%20Oct%202021%20AVETRA.pdf>

From previous page

The five main fieldwork phases are described below.

1. Stakeholder interviews

A series of interviews was undertaken with 15 stakeholders drawn from major bodies, including trade unions and employer associations in the retail and hospitality sectors; careers associations; and the then Skills Service Organisation, SkillsIQ. Career snapshots for each of the stakeholders were produced as initial illustrations of where jobs in retail and hospitality could lead. These initial interviews also helped to frame the ensuing fieldwork.

2. Surveys of career practitioners and the general public

Two surveys were administered in 2022: of career practitioners in schools and other organisations, and of the general public (staff at Federation University and Victoria University, both dual-sector universities, were used as a proxy). 54 career practitioners responded to the career practitioner survey and 59 staff members to the general public survey. We had received extensive assistance and feedback from career practitioner associations in developing the career practitioner survey. The questioning areas for career practitioners and the general public were similar, as far as was appropriate.

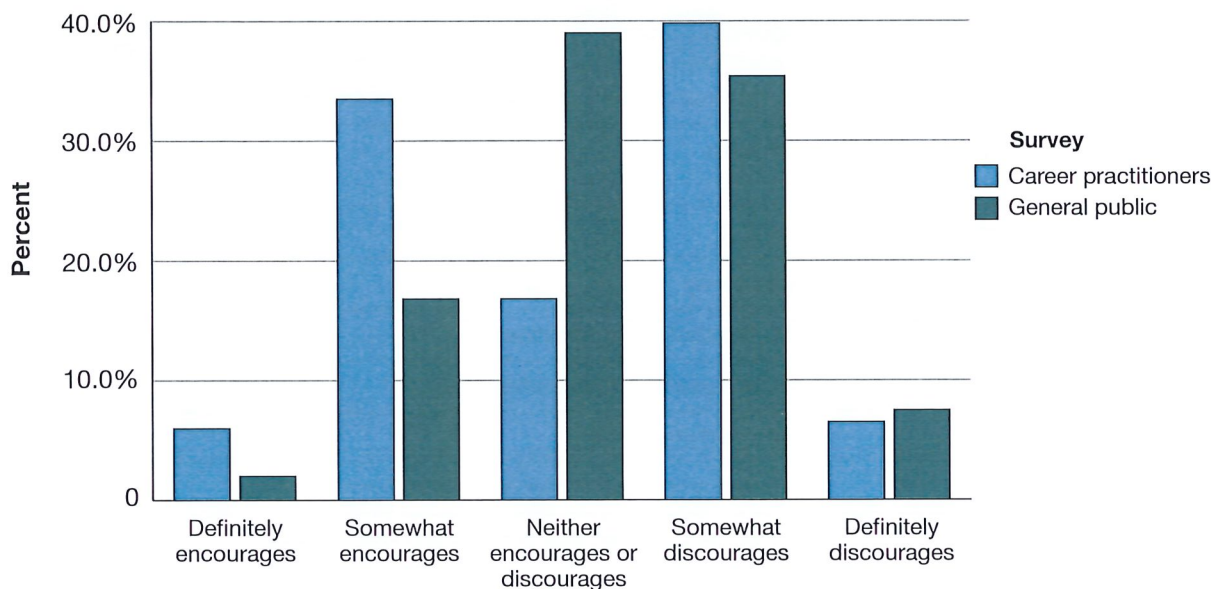
We asked about people’s knowledge about, and perceptions of, each industry and their views about career opportunities and training. We found that over 70% of both groups had worked in retail and only slightly fewer in hospitality. Yet their knowledge of the industries was not extensive; for example over half underestimated the salary

of managers in the industries. Less than 20% rated the industries as having good career prospects. Many detailed responses, which are still being analysed, were obtained to the qualitative questions in the two surveys.

As well as analysing the findings by a range of variables we also compared responses of career practitioners and the ‘general public’. Figure 1 below shows one example of such a comparison, in this instance showing that career practitioners are more likely than the general public to think that part-time working in retail and hospitality as a student encourages young people to think about a career in the industries.

3. Company case studies

Seven company case studies were carried out; three in retail, three in hospitality and one in fast food (quick service restaurants). In each company, interviews were carried out with a small number of headquarters senior staff and a mix of management and non-management staff at two operational locations. The case studies showed the breadth and depth of career opportunities that are available in both industries. Staff were often fast-tracked at an early age into senior and responsible roles. Companies tended to recruit for cultural fit into their organisations rather than on the basis of prior experience or qualifications. Poor public perceptions about the desirability of the industries for long-term careers often led to recruitment difficulties. For each case study, we also extracted three ‘career snapshots’: for a head office senior manager, a manager at an operational site, and an established non-management worker at an operational site.



Do you think that part-time working in retail and hospitality while at school and/or university encourages or discourages young people from imagining long-term careers in those industries?

Figure 1

Continued on following page >

From previous page

4. Young people focus groups and interviews

The aim of these focus groups was to gather data on young people's perceptions of career opportunities in the retail and hospitality industries and how these perceptions are acquired. Two sets of groups and interviews were carried out: recent school leavers (as schools were not allowing access for research), and business students enrolled in higher education and TAFE business courses. Business students were chosen on the basis that these students were less likely to be committed to specific occupations (as opposed to, for example, nursing or teaching) students and therefore may be more open to considering careers in retail and hospitality. Both cohorts shared somewhat negative perceptions of these industries even though many had direct experiences of employment. There was evidence that parents, community and media were reinforcers of these views in their roles as key influencers. In particular, the young people were unable to articulate the depth and breadth of career opportunities retail and hospitality afforded, most defaulting to the frontline roles they had experience of as archetypal jobs. However, many appreciated the experiences and skills developed from working in the industries.

5. Academic expert focus groups

Two focus group were held with academics researching and teaching in the hospitality area and two interviews (one focus group and one single interview) with three academics in the retail area. It emerged that specialist degrees in retail management were no longer offered. In hospitality, all of the academics had industry experience and brought this experience into their teaching. Their students were seen be very vocationally focused, aiming firstly at a full-time job and then at a management career.

Meta-analysis

As with other major research projects, the amount of data generated was immense. But we were determined to distil it as rapidly and accurately as possible, since our aim, as well as writing a report, was to produce advice documents for use in policy and practice by five target groups: Career seekers; Career practitioners; Family, community and other career influencers; Retail and hospitality businesses; and policy makers.

'At a glance' documents

Each advice document was 3-4 pages long, and included a background section, a 'key messages' section listing the main project findings, and a section suggesting future actions for the target group (A 'What next?' section). We called these advice documents 'At a glance' documents after those produced by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

The key messages for the documents were summarised under six headings:

- A. Occupational opportunities in the industries
- B. Career paths
- C. Qualifications
- D. What companies are doing
- E. What career practitioners and other career influencers think
- F. What the general public thinks

Since the research team consisted of five researchers in differing discipline areas and with working experience across the main industry areas covered, we devised a method which allowed each to contribute individually to documents which were then finalised collectively. For the key messages, each researcher contributed a separate set of 6-8 dot points under each of the above headings, based on their own interpretations of the project's findings and significance. These points were then consolidated for discussion and distilled into a final set of dot points for each heading. One example follows (Box 1).

Box 1: About the industries: Career paths (Section B)

- Many senior executives in retail and hospitality, and also in other industries and sectors, started out in entry-level roles and worked their way up well-defined career paths into highly desirable and well-remunerated positions.
- Large companies in retail and hospitality offer significant geographical mobility and variety within Australia, and many offer international experience and career paths.
- They offer extensive staff development programs at all levels. It is not necessary to have a qualification to enter the industries.
- There are specialist and supervisory paths in operational sites, and roles in regional and head offices. Some companies offer assistance to employees to purchase franchises. The range of career paths in retail and hospitality is not well-understood by most people outside the industries.
- Many people enter the retail and hospitality workforces as young people, but do not stay to create a career. This high labour turnover can be a significant career advantage for those that do stay, opening up promotion roles.
- There are a large number of management and senior roles in both industries. For example, ABS census data show that 20% of all retail workers are retail managers.
- The ease with which young people gain jobs in retail and hospitality can create a negative impression, as the jobs in these industries are seen as something a person does until they find a "proper job".

Continued on following page >

From previous page

Policy recommendations

We then followed a similar method to produce a list of suggested actions for each of the five target groups, to bring about meaningful change. Box 2 shows the list we produced for policy makers.

'At a glance' documents were produced for each of the five target groups, adapting the content and language as appropriate. These documents will be further customised for implementation, in consultation with people from the relevant industries and the careers industry, with the support of members of the project's reference group, and will also be posted on the project web site. The current drafts are available from Erica Smith, the project leader.

Box 2: What next for policy makers?

Policy makers must consider the following ideas and actions to support and guide the future growth of both industries as among our major employers in Australia:

1. **Policy makers must work more closely with the retail and hospitality industries** to improve public perceptions about the industries and market the industries more effectively for employment prospects. A taskforce should be formed with retail and hospitality leaders, and leaders in careers practice, to find better ways to highlight careers in these industries to career practitioners and others in schools and the tertiary sector.
2. **Public perceptions continue to be negatively influenced by persistent cultural and structural issues in both industries.** In particular, perceptions of the long-term and often prestigious careers in these industries are poorly understood by many people who consider the waiter and shop assistant as archetypal industry roles. These must be consciously countered.
3. **Governments must support appropriate actions taken by the industries** to recover from the closures and major job losses during the COVID 19 pandemic.
4. **Policy makers should consider highlighting the benefits of working in the retail and hospitality sectors**, such as long-term career paths and rewards via websites and in careers literature. The 'Australian Jobs' publication is particularly deficient, with an impoverished representation of the industries. These industries should not have to counter reinforcement of negative stereotypes provided by government publications.
5. In pronouncements and publicity about jobs and training. **Governments should use depictions of, and stories from, retail and hospitality.** These industries are rarely featured. Stories could highlight technological innovation and also people interactions
6. **Policy makers in the jobs, skills and training fields need to inform themselves about the industries;** most have little knowledge, or only memories of working in the industries as young people.
7. **There is a need for review of the formal training and education arrangements (VET & higher education) for these industries.** Currently the industries are under-served by qualifications.
8. **Commonwealth and state governments should restore appropriate funding for retail and hospitality qualifications**, so that training providers can resume offering these qualifications, including more jobs from the industries in 'free VET' course lists and consider new apprenticeship arrangements in the industries.
9. **Classifications on ANZSCO need improving** to better recognise job roles within these industries.
10. **Steps are required by Government to support these industries to develop better workforce strategies.** There is a need for more promotion, and greater enforcement, of good employment practices in these industries to ensure that Award and Enterprise Agreement conditions are upheld. Robust action would help to combat public distrust.

Conclusion

An important conclusion was that there was work to be done by all of the target groups: not just policy makers, but also retail and hospitality employers, career practitioners and career influencers (including families), in order to improve understanding of careers in these two key industries. Employers need to consider ways to improve the attractiveness of the industry, and many examples were identified the research. The ultimate beneficiaries will be career seekers, who will be more attuned to available careers, and to how, and in what types of companies, to pursue them.

A methodological outcome of the project was our meta-analysis method, which would be useful for any large-scale research project, especially those that include researchers from a range of discipline backgrounds. ■

Continued on following page >