

**Constructing never-never land : Precarity and the future of work for the
young**

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In the context of increasing levels of precarious work and growing calls for ‘better work’, the Governments of advanced nations are seeking to develop targeted policy responses (OECD 2018) to inform the future of work. In this discourse, the ‘young’ often feature because they are associated with the future (Bersaglio, Enns & Keep, 2015). Attention to how they are represented can generate insights about the assumptions upon which these representations are based as well as the implicit relationship between young people and society (Jones, 2009, Brooks, 2013). We understand policy-making to be “not just a matter of finding acceptable solutions for preconceived problems [but]... also the dominant way in which modern societies regulate latent social conflicts” (Hajer 1995:2); being “concerned with ‘the future shaping of collective life’ (Kögl and Kurze 2013:63)” (Ainsworth, 2020:4).

In this paper, we explore how younger people are constructed in public debate and policy-making related to labour market futures and precarious work. We take this as our focus because precarity and its effects disproportionately impact younger workers. Precarious work has been described as insecure, uncertain and often low paid (Kalleberg 2018). Across developed countries, young workers face difficulties gaining secure career-focused jobs and risk becoming trapped in a cycle of precarious, ‘dead end’ jobs (O’Reilly et al. 2019). Illustratively, Australian workers aged 15-24 are more likely to be in precarious jobs than those aged over 25 (ABS 2020). The effects of precarious work include financial insecurity, deterioration in health, and in-work poverty (Quinlan and Bohle 2015). These effects are felt in the short term and accumulate, generating longer-term economic, social/health problems.

Drawing on a Government Inquiry conducted in Australia, we use discourse analysis to explore how younger workers are depicted in present and future labour markets, examining their experiences of insecurity, and responses constructed to address such challenges. We

explore how discourse influences the policy debate about younger workers in the contemporary and (imagined) future labour market.

The Inquiry examined the Future of Work and Workers and was held to “inquire and report on the impact of technological and other change in work and workers in Australia” (Senate 2018) including: job security, earnings, inequality, institutions and regulations. It encompasses 163 separate submissions, eight public hearings, and a final report released in 2018. We systematically analysed all material to explore knowledge claims constructed by actors and how they are discursively supported, focusing on the following questions: How are younger workers depicted in present and future labour markets? How is insecurity and related challenges portrayed among younger workers? What responses are constructed to address these challenges? What impact does this discourse have on the final report’s recommendations?

Our findings reveal overly simplistic, individualistic accounts of younger workers’ experiences of precarious work. Essentializing constructions of young people naturalize employment insecurity and there is little explicit recognition of the cumulative and interactive effects of precarious work over the life course, or their subsequent implications, including attention to the temporal dimensions of age or future older workers. Rather than problematizing and addressing precarious work, (school-based) education is depicted as the vehicle for strengthening the individual agency and decision-making that will construct future careers. Overall, our research highlights the difficulties policy-makers have in thinking through the consequences of current precarity, imagining alternatives to present arrangements, and how this could affect the prospects of younger (and future older) workers.

Much of the existing research on age, employment and organisations focus on issues related to understanding middle-aged and older workers (Ainsworth, 2020b). We contribute to scholarship on age as a category of analysis by focusing on how younger people are constructed in relation to current and future work opportunities, how this intersects with other axes of difference, and how it reflects social relations in and around work more broadly.

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