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The Quality of Part-time Jobs in Australia: Towards an Assessment

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Abstract

Part-time work (for women) is often put forward as a solution to the problems of work and family imbalance. This assessment is too shallow. From a more nuanced point of view, which is able to situate the conflict between paid work and caring responsibilities in terms of labour market transitions, it is clear that the quality of the part-time job must be incorporated into any assessment. Poor quality part-time work may worsen problems of work and family imbalance rather than contribute to their solution. Good quality part-time work is the main path forward. This is a preliminary paper from a broader research project. It focuses on introducing the topic and outlining several dimensions – other than just number of hours – that are important in any assessment of part-time jobs.

1. Introduction

As part of a broader project on part-time work in Australia, we are interested in examining the claim that part-time jobs are particularly good in serving the needs of the many individuals with caring responsibilities within the family. The crucial question can be framed in different ways. Do part-time jobs in Australia help in achieving a good work and family balance? Otherwise expressed, do they assist in avoiding work and family imbalances? Are these jobs family-friendly? Are they good quality jobs in this respect?

The potential connection between part-time work and caring responsibilities is easy to see. Caring responsibilities within the family can be highly varied. They include not only parental care for dependent children but also caring responsibilities for sick, elderly and disabled relatives (and each of these broad forms can itself vary according to the specific nature of the care required). However, the general point is clear enough. Demands associated with the unpaid work of caring, especially demands in terms of time, exercise pressures on the individual’s participation in paid work. The more time needed for caring, the less that is available to be devoted to paid work. In principle, jobs with reduced hours allow people to carve out more time for caring while still continuing their participation in paid work. As such, jobs with reduced hours allow people to combine or reconcile paid work and unpaid work more easily. They appear ‘family-friendly’.

Our topic can also be framed in terms of the literature on transitional labour markets. This literature is concerned with sponsoring new forms of ‘transitional employment’ that facilitate good transitions and thereby combat the different versions of social exclusion affecting contemporary societies (Schmid, 1995, 1998). In the general typology of five different ‘interfaces’ or ‘points of transition’ (Schmid, 1998, 12), we are particularly interested in the interface between so-called ‘private work activities’ and employment. From this perspective our question can be reformulated. Do part-time jobs facilitate good transitions at this interface? How can they changed in order to facilitate better transitions?
The transitional labour market literature includes some valuable material that bears directly on the topic of part-time jobs (eg Fagan and Rubery, 1996; Fagan and O’Reilly, 1998; O’Reilly and Bothfeld, 2002; see also Fagan 1999; Fagan, 2003). It shows how the specific interface between ‘private work activities’ and employment can be vitally important – albeit in different ways – for long periods in the lives of individuals and households. For example, the caring work associated with parenting stretches well beyond the phases of childbirth and infancy to include many years of parental responsibility. It also shows how this interface can be a site of enormous pressures and tensions, in particular for women. This literature points to the complicated and ambiguous role that part-time jobs can play, eg the way in which they can represent ‘integration’, ‘maintenance’ or ‘exclusionary’ transitions (O’Reilly and Bothfeld, 2002). In particular, it stresses the crucial point that part-time jobs involve more than just reduced hours, ie (weekly) hours that are reduced below the full-time (weekly) standard. They must also be assessed in terms of dimensions such as schedules, pay rates, opportunities for training and career progression, and access to employment benefits such as paid leave.

In general, the typology of ‘transitions’ provides a valuable reminder of at least three elements of dynamism that are crucial to this topic. First, most obviously, it reminds us that analysis needs to be couched in terms of labour market flows as well as labour market stocks. In the case of the interface between ‘private work activities’ and employment, we are dealing with significant flows of individuals in and out of employment (and within employment) that are linked with efforts to reconcile paid work and caring. These movements are often complex and hard to disentangle and describe. But they are very important. There is a vast and growing volume of such movements in contemporary societies, and they are often associated with powerful risks and costs, some of which can be minimised by good policy or exacerbated by bad policy. In particular, there can be dangers associated with complete withdrawal from paid work, since this can run into barriers to re-entry and may unleash a process of cumulative disadvantage. Parenting provides a good example. Though it seems to take varied forms in different OECD societies, it is increasingly the pivot in most societies for complex labour market movements and powerful consequences, in particular for mothers.

Second, the typology of transitions reminds us that the crucial labour market flows are linked with specific stages of the individual life course or, more exactly, specific life events. In our example, we are dealing with life events such as family formation and childbirth or the increasing dependence of aged relatives. This has implications for how we view caring responsibilities and the pressures they exercise on participation in paid employment. On the one hand, we can see that decisions about caring and paid work
are not always the decisions of autonomous individuals, but are more often located in a distinct social context of households and families. On the other hand, we can see that such caring responsibilities are rarely permanent and fixed. On the contrary, they often appear and disappear, or else they expand and contract. They change in their intensity, and they can also change in their type.³ This has implications for preferences and actual behaviour. As suggested above, caring responsibilities of a certain intensity and type can lead individuals and households to desire and seek reduced hours of paid work. But such preferences should not be seen as fixed; on the contrary, they are likely to change as the caring responsibilities themselves change. Similarly, preferences for certain schedules that are synchronised with caring responsibilities are also likely to change.

Third, the typology of transitions draws attention to broad societal models of individual (and household) participation in employment over the life course. This in turn points to ongoing historical shifts in such models (or gender regimes/ gender orders/ gender contracts/ gender settlements), including in particular the decline of what is called the ‘male breadwinner/ female homecarer’ model. The latter can be defined in terms of a male norm of relatively continuous participation in full-time employment and a female norm of participation in employment as an adult prior to marriage and childbirth followed then by complete withdrawal from the labour force. Both the male and female norms have changed over the past few decades, but in particular the female norm has moved towards a new set of patterns, strongly marked for women in couple households by continued participation in employment on the one hand and by multiple interruptions and transitions, including spells out of the labour force and spells of part-time rather than full-time employment, on the other hand. The typology of transitions is well designed to conceptualise both the new patterns and the underlying shift in the gender regime, which appears to be highly diverse and unfinished. This in turn leads into some crucial questions, which range from the descriptive and analytical (what is the situation in contemporary societies? where is the gender regime headed?) to the more evaluative (where should it be headed?). We need to ask, as Appelbaum et al (2002) ask: are the current changes merely adapting the old model so that both men and women have an equal opportunity to be the ideal worker or the ‘marginalised care giver’? Or: are they opening a path towards a new model of ‘shared work, valued care’? Given that it is women rather than men who primarily take up part-time jobs as a response to caring responsibilities, it is clear that these questions dig deeply into the topic of part-time jobs. Does part-time employment for women merely consolidate the ‘male breadwinner/ female homecarer’ model or can it be a path away from the model? Does it consolidate or undermine existing labour market divisions?

In short, the typology of transitions reminds us to examine labour market flows and life events. It points towards an analysis that situates individual decisions in relation to
households and the broader society. Such an analysis must be sensitive to the effects of gender and class divisions. In particular the analysis must be gender-sensitive and capable of untangling the effects of gender divisions on the short-term and long-term prospects for individuals. Most broadly, the typology of transitions suggests the importance of a societal perspective, which can situate its analysis in relation to broader underlying shifts such as the ongoing shift in the gender system (Fagan and O’Reilly, 1998).

The questions we pose about part-time jobs in Australia are central to labour market research and policy. Australia has a high part-time share in total employment. Part-time workers as a proportion of all workers stood at 28.6 percent in August 2004 (ABS 2004a). As recent OECD data indicates, Australia ranked second to the Netherlands in the incidence of part-time employment (first for men and equal third with Japan for women) (OECD, 2004).

The precise number of workers who are currently in part-time jobs in Australia because of a need to accommodate the time demands of caring is difficult to determine exactly. However, we can note that, as in many other countries, part-time employment is fundamentally gendered. Most part-time workers are women. Conversely, part-time work is a prominent form of employment for women, including – in contrast to the pattern for men – many women in the so-called ‘prime’ age groups (Figure 1). The body of part-time workers includes a substantial group of women with dependent children, but it does not include many men with dependent children (Table 1). Similarly, if we ask part-time workers for the main reason they are working part-time rather than full-time, a substantial group of women (35.7 percent of all women employed part-time) refer directly to caring responsibilities, compared with only a small group of men (4.2 percent of all men employed part-time) (Table 2).

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Part-time jobs are important for mothers. In June 2003, 35.5 percent of mothers with dependent children were in part-time employment (while 25.1 percent worked full-time, and the remaining 39.4 percent were out of the workforce). There is a distinct pattern
according to the age of the youngest child, with the likelihood of full-time work for women increasing as the age of the youngest child increases (Tables 2 and 3; see Campbell and Charlesworth, 2004). Though similar patterns are evident in other OECD countries, it seems that labour market transitions in relation to motherhood in Australia have distinctive features, with a much stronger impact of motherhood on employment. This impact can be seen as occurring in two ways – a strong tendency for complete withdrawal (sometimes permanently but more often just for certain phases) and a strong tendency to what we could call partial withdrawal into jobs with reduced hours (sometimes for lengthy periods and sometimes just for certain phases). Both paths have been linked with long-term costs and penalties for the mothers in question (Campbell and Charlesworth, 2004, 11-13, 51; see OECD, 2002, Whitehouse, 2003).

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Australian evidence on preferences is scattered and partial (for a recent review see Thornthwaite, 2004). However, as in many other OECD countries, there seems to be a strong reservoir of interest in jobs with reduced hours of work. This reaches out beyond the majority of those in part-time jobs to include many in full-time jobs and many not in the workforce. It includes many individuals with caring responsibilities. Interpretations of stated preferences and attitudes are tricky, largely because they are shaped by a host of background factors such as the division of labour within the household or the availability of alternatives sources of support. However, women with dependent children in part-time jobs seem on average to be happy with the reduced hours. They seem less likely than comparable women with full-time jobs to feel ‘time pressure’ and they are more likely to feel that they have enough time for family (Campbell and Charlesworth, 2004, 54-59).

Debate is just beginning in Australia on how well part-time jobs serve individuals with caring responsibilities. It is true that some commentators deny that there is any problem (and deny there is any need for alterations in the current policy stance, heavily marked by a neoliberal philosophy of avoiding state involvement in employment protection). They point to the fact that many women freely state that they want reduced hours of work in order to help in reconciling caring responsibilities and paid work, and they then point to the large number of jobs in Australia that offer reduced hours (and the large number of women with family responsibilities who are in these jobs). In this perspective, there is a good match of supply and demand. In this perspective part-time
jobs are treated as a ‘family-friendly’ measure simply by virtue of the number of hours in the job.

This view is increasingly recognised as shallow. Even most neoliberal commentators prefer to refer now to the value of ‘regular’ part-time jobs. Work/family balance is acknowledged as a complex achievement, composed of a number of elements. Conversely, part-time jobs, like all jobs, are a bundle of characteristics. Whether a better work-family balance is achieved through a specific part-time jobs rests on more than just the (reduced) number of hours in the job; it concerns other job characteristics such as good schedules, employment security and access to standard benefits such as paid leave entitlements. Specific part-time jobs may be ambiguous or contradictory in their effects, e.g. with a favourable number of hours but a problematic lack of employment security. They may have some elements that can be called ‘family friendly’ but others that are more aptly called ‘family hostile’. The answer to our questions cannot be found just by pointing to the definition of part-time; instead it is an issue for empirical investigation. This investigation must look carefully and comprehensively at what can be called the quality of part-time jobs. Several recent studies raise concerns about the poor quality of much part-time work in Australia (Buchanan and Thornthwaite, 2001; Charlesworth et al., 2002; Pocock, 2003, ch. 7; Victorian Government, 2003, 10, 22; Watson et al., 2003). They argue that reduced hours seem to be linked with reduced conditions, and that many workers in effect acquiesce to poor conditions because of the need to work reduced hours. If we are to test these arguments, it is clearly necessary to move forward to a full empirical study of part-time jobs in Australia.

This is a preliminary paper. It begins to take up the empirical challenge of examining part-time jobs in more detail. This can be framed in terms of family friendliness or in terms of labour market transitions. Alternatively, it can be framed as an examination of the quality of part-time jobs. ‘Job quality’ is of course a contested notion, with some commentators seeking to reduce it to measures of job satisfaction (Wooden and Warren, 2004). In our broader project, we follow the more mainstream approach that incorporates the so-called objective characteristics of jobs in the definition of job quality. There is no need to review the debate in this paper (see Green, 2005 in press; Burgess, 2005, forthcoming). We use ‘job quality’ in this paper simply as a convenient shorthand term to summarise our concern with the objective characteristics of jobs and with the extent to which specific jobs facilitate good or bad transitions for individuals and households.

This paper focuses on setting out the conceptual framework. In particular, it focuses on sketching the objective dimensions of jobs that help to define whether a job can be seen as contributing to good or poor transitions. This is the essential preliminary for a subsequent paper that can examine the empirical evidence concerning such dimensions.
of part-time jobs in Australia and can outline possible policy options to improve the quality of part-time jobs.

2. What dimensions are important for the assessment of part-time jobs?

From the point of view of labour market transitions, we are interested in whether part-time jobs contribute to good transitions at the interface between private households and paid work. This section introduces several dimensions of jobs that are important for such an assessment. Most are dimensions that can be found in all jobs, but we pay particular attention to how they may appear in part-time jobs.

Our discussion of these dimensions appeals to several criteria. It is useful to start with individual workers’ preferences and needs. These are diverse, and indeed they are becoming increasingly diversified in affluent, modern societies. It is important that the employment structure should contain a range of options to meet these diverse needs, and that individual workers should have the ability to choose amongst these options. This implies commitment to a general principle of individual choice. The notion of individual choice is an elusive one, which must be carefully analysed (eg Junor, 2000; Kabeer, 2000). Certainly, our principle of choice must be distinguished from the notion of ‘choice’ invoked in neoliberal policy, which is content to multiply simple options that have little to do with individual needs and preferences. Our conception of individual choice is broader. It goes beyond pointing to the mere fact of choice (which in any case is always present to some extent in employment decisions). It is concerned to ensure that the range of available employment options corresponds to the range of individual preferences and needs and that these options are indeed accessible to individual workers.6

At the same time, a principle of individual choice, even defined in this broad way, is not enough. Individual preferences and needs are by no means clearcut. For example, a life event perspective implies the need to distinguish short-term and long-term needs. This means modifying a principle of individual choice by a subsidiary principle that short-term choices should not do lasting damage to the long-term interests of the individual. Similarly, because we are committed to choices for everyone and not just a favoured few, there is a need for an additional modifying principle that individual choices should be socially responsible and not imply damage to the choices of other individuals. In addition, as foreshadowed in the previous section, we must take into account that choices, together with the preferences and needs that support these choices in the sphere of paid and unpaid work, are not the attributes of purely autonomous individuals. They take place in a distinct social context, and they are shaped by social factors, including by the gender and class divisions that characterise households and societies. For example, a female preference for reduced hours of paid work is often a tough compromise, dependent on social conditions, including the decisions of other members of the household, gendered roles and expectations, income needs, and the availability of alternative forms of care. This carries several implications. On the one hand, it implies that preferences are contingent and can easily change if the social conditions that shape them are changed. On the other hand, it implies that preferences cannot be accepted at face value without an analysis and evaluation of these underlying social conditions.

In short, it is necessary to supplement a stress on individual preferences and needs with a societal perspective, which can accommodate an awareness of the underlying constraints and opportunities for individuals, households and societies. In this societal perspective, we appeal in particular to two general principles. Labour market efficiency is straightforward. It pays heed to the need for individual choices to avoid damaging the prosperity of the economy. While labour market efficiency incorporates the medium and long term interests of employers, it goes beyond the individual enterprise to consider the medium and long term interests of the economy in sustaining family incomes, in lessening friction associated with
labour market transitions and in eliminating waste of valuable education and skills (Charlesworth et al., 2002, 58). In addition, we stress an important principle of gender equality. In the ongoing, contested transformation of the old ‘male breadwinner’ order, we favour initiatives and choices that promote a more equitable division of labour between men and women in the spheres of both paid and unpaid work. We favour the movement towards a system of ‘equal work, valued care’ (Appelbaum et al., 2002). Gender equality (in the context of work and family) is about recognising that both men and women have a right to participate fully in caring and paid work. As Sandra Berns puts it, men and women should both have the right to be social and economic parents (Berns 2002, 195). Conversely, we should reject initiatives that cement gender divisions. An increased diversity of employment options should not used as be vehicle for discrimination.

As this discussion demonstrates, we are not trying to assess part-time jobs from the point of view of full-time jobs. Our standpoint is one that applies to all jobs. It is true that in cases where there is a clear deficit in rights and benefits, it can be useful to use full-time jobs as a point of comparison. However, this is far from reliable in many cases. Full-time jobs may lack the features that we see as important. This may occur because these features are lacking in all jobs, as in the example of many new leave arrangements to respond to caring needs. Our analysis carries implications for the assessment of both full-time and part-time jobs. Indeed, as we argue more fully below, the analysis tends to challenge the conventional distinction between ‘full-time’ and ‘part-time’.

The preceding discussion also helps to address one important conceptual caution. Warren (2004) points out that ‘work’ and ‘family’ are not the whole extent of people’s lives, which also incorporate factors such as health, friendships, leisure and economic situation. Too much stress on work/family balance and family-friendliness in the assessment of jobs carries a risk of imposing a narrow view of what is or should be important to people. In particular, invoking these themes in relation to part-time jobs for women could be seen as sliding towards a discriminatory perspective that implicitly accepts a reduction of women’s individual needs to their caring responsibilities. Although we invoke a notion of ‘family friendliness’ we insist on a broader individual and societal perspective. One advantage of framing the topic in terms of transitions is that it directly draws attention to this mix of individual and societal perspectives.

This section discusses ten dimensions of jobs. The first four concern working time arrangements: number of hours, schedules, flexibility in number of hours and schedules, and the ability to move between full-time and part-time hours in the one job. The remaining six dimensions cover other aspects – wages, employment benefits, employment security, access to training and career progression, employee voice, and content of work.

Number of hours

The number of hours is a pivotal dimension from the point of view of family friendliness. Time is a major constraint in people’s lives. Hours of paid work that are reduced below the full-time standard allow – at least in principle – more hours to be devoted to unpaid work, while still retaining a connection with employment and the benefits this connection offers, such as access to independent income, exercise of skills, and career development. As such, reduced hours can be a major contributor to achieving a good work/family balance.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to identify reduced hours as the be-all and end-all of family friendliness. Other dimensions also play a role, as we detail in the following sections. Moreover, even in terms of the
number of hours, a simple allusion to the prescribed number of weekly hours in the part-time job is not sufficient to establish family friendliness.

First, there is no guarantee that the number of hours in a specific part-time job actually matches a worker’s preferences and needs for reduced hours. On the contrary, the weekly hours may be too few or still too many. The conventional division between ‘full-time’ and ‘part-time’ is simplistic and can inhibit analysis. The notion of full-time is relatively straightforward (though it may be useful to distinguish a full-time standard from the long hours regimes that are emerging in some sectors in many countries). However, the residual category of ‘part-time’ is broad. As Hakim notes (1997, 23-32; see Fagan, 2003, 37), it can include weekly hours that are ‘marginal’ (1-14 hours), ‘half-time’ (15-29 hours) or ‘reduced full-time’ (30-34 hours). There is ample room here for mismatches.

Second, the definition of ‘part-time’ is couched in terms of weekly hours. But this tells us little about daily hours. The number of weekly hours may be adequate to meet needs and preferences, but the daily hours may be too few or too many. Overly long or overly short days also run into other problems. Daily hours that are so long that they endanger health and safety are normally seen as a problem confined to full-time workers. But they can also arise amongst those technically counted as ‘part-time’, when their reduced weekly hours are bunched up in one or a few days. Overly short days arise when a part-time schedule is spread over all or most days of the week. This can impose unfair burdens on the individual workers, as a result of the fixed costs (time costs and financial costs) associated with working, such as transport to and from work or childcare.

Third, the number of hours can also be counted over a longer period, for example the month or the year. From this point of view, the number of hours in a part-time job may also appear inadequate. The usual problem here is that the hours can appear too long, either because the annual schedule lacks leave entitlements such as annual leave or because specific caring responsibilities imply a need for extended time off in certain parts of the year (eg as a result of the rhythm of school holidays).

Fourth, even if the number of hours seems to match preferences and needs, it is possible to raise more general problems. The most familiar example is that of ‘marginal’ part-time work, based on just a few hours per week. Such jobs may not offer genuine opportunities to maintain skills, or they may not be substantial enough to have any genuine component of training. They may not therefore correspond to long-term individual and household needs. Marginal part-time work for women is often linked to the powerful constraints imposed by the long and irregular hours of male partners. As such it is also vulnerable to criticism on the grounds of gender equality.

Schedules

As well as the number of hours, it is also important to consider what is sometimes called the ‘position’ of these hours. This dimension concerns when hours of work are scheduled, ie during what times of the day and what days of the week. A broader perspective might include the schedule over a longer period of a month or year.

Standardised working-time arrangements for full-time workers are oriented to work during daytime hours (eg between 8am and 6 pm) from Monday to Friday. Hours outside these schedules – evening work, night work and Saturday or Sunday work – are regarded as ‘non-social’ hours. They are seen as imposing burdens and risks on workers, both physically and socially. When substantial blocks of such work have to be regularly performed, they are generally organised as shift work, but when such work is less substantial and less regular it may just take the form of additional hours (overtime). In both cases,
work in non-social hours is generally subject to careful regulatory controls and generally attracts a premium or ‘penalty’ payment as compensation to workers for the physical and social disadvantages.

Good schedules are clearly important for workers with caring responsibilities. Indeed they are probably more important than for other workers, because of the constraints imposed by these caring responsibilities. The need for synchronisation is strong. As such, the evaluation of the schedule will depend in part on how well it fits with the schedule of caring responsibilities. This synchronisation process can be diverse, but there are some broad social patterns. For example, parents often seek schedules that fit with the schedules of alternative caring arrangements for children – formal and informal child care hours for children below school age, school hours for school age children. Because these alternative caring schedules are often quite rigid, eg with penalties for picking children up from child care after 6 pm, they put extra pressure on the ability of workers to organise suitable schedules of paid work. Though many full-time workers may be able to organise around late finish times (after 6pm) or early start times (before 8am), workers in part-time jobs who are seeking to handle caring responsibilities may find this challenge harder.

Most of the disadvantages traditionally identified for full-time workers with work during non-social hours also apply to part-time workers. For example, night work can still constitute a risk to health and well-being by virtue of its familiar effects on circadian rhythms (though the precise extent may depend on the number of night hours and how these fit with other schedules). Similarly Sunday work can prevent participation in leisure and social activities scheduled during the free time of most workers. Shift work can lessen some disadvantages. However, shiftwork comes in many different forms, some of which add their own difficulties. For example split shifts, where working hours may be scheduled with periods of unpaid time in between, can function as a form of extended working hours. Workers are often severely constrained in their ability to use the periods of unpaid time, because they are too short.

It is sometimes suggested that workers with caring responsibilities are more suited to schedules in non-social hours. Because of this, it is further argued that they do not need any ‘penalty rates’ when they are placed in these schedules. Such workers may be more vulnerable to this sort of treatment, but it is hard to see why they would welcome it. One reason sometimes cited is the opportunity to save on child care payments by spreading out the paid work of the two parents so that it is not concurrent. In this arrangement one parent may work a standard full-time schedule while the other works during non-social hours such as the night or weekend. The household works like a tag-team in the wrestling ring (or a relay on the track). One parent engages in paid work while the other does the unpaid work of childcare, and then they change over. It may be possible to find cases where parents declare a preference for this arrangement. However, it is clear that this is a heavily constrained preference and the arrangement comes with significant costs, eg a sacrifice not only of broad social time but also of personal time between the two parents. As such, the idea that it can offer a solution to work and family balance requires careful examination. It is usually a ‘solution’ that is only undertaken by workers in households whose income is too low to afford formal childcare and who do not have access to alternative informal sources. It may appear more egalitarian than a case where the man takes two jobs or works longer paid overtime while the woman does all the childcare. But it is still marked by gender inequality, since it is usually the woman who undertakes the work during non-social hours as the complement to the standard full-time job.

Variation/ flexibility in number of hours and schedules

So far we have considered number of hours and schedules as if they were fixed. We have pointed to some of the considerations that affect whether these fixed working-time arrangements are seen as family friendly or family hostile.
What are the implications of variation/flexibility in the number of hours and schedules? Certainly if this variation is firmly under the control of the employee, i.e., if it is ‘employee-oriented flexibility’ then it is valuable. This is true for both full-time and part-time workers, and systems such as flexi-time that have enhanced individual choice over hours (‘time sovereignty’) have generally been highly appreciated by employees. However, such control may be particularly valuable for workers with caring responsibilities. Caring responsibilities do not always entail a steady set of time demands. On the contrary, they can impose fluctuating demands and pressures. Campbell and Charlesworth (2004, 38-40) develop a useful typology of these pressures, based on their predictability, the size of their impact, and the frequency with which they recur. This in turn allows the authors to distinguish the main types of pressures experienced by workers and the types of ‘family friendly’ measures that can assist workers to cushion these pressures.

Because of these fluctuating pressures, the ability to vary the number of hours and the schedule is especially important for workers with caring responsibilities. As a result, ‘flexible working hours’ are usually the most favoured request of many workers. Standard leave arrangements such as parental leave, sick leave, and bereavement leave provide some opportunities. They can provide ‘bridges’ for workers. But there appears to be a strong demand for more comprehensive arrangements and a broader range of leave entitlements to meet the varied needs associated with caring responsibilities. Examples include the trade union claims for extended family or carers’ leave, extended maternity leave, emergency leave, and opportunities for extended paid annual leave, that are currently under consideration by a Full Bench of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission in the Family Provisions Test Case.

The more problematic case is where variation is beyond the control of the employee, e.g., in the hands of the employer. There are numerous examples of such arrangements. At the extreme, workers who are on-call have no rights to set hours or set schedules and may experience strong fluctuations both in the number of hours and in the schedules. But more moderate examples are also common. Regular workers may still not have any guarantee of a set number of hours per week. This is particularly true of part-time jobs, where the number of hours may be vulnerable to ‘flexing up’ or ‘flexing down’ according to the needs of the employer. Part-time workers may be vulnerable to expectations of additional hours (overtime) each day. Similarly, workers in part-time jobs may lack set schedules. Their starting and finishing times may be vulnerable to variation according to the needs of the employer. Their days of work may change.

It is difficult to see how such variation under the control of the employer, i.e., employer-oriented flexibility, can assist workers to balance work and family. On the contrary, such variation is likely to be highly disruptive. Far from being family friendly it is likely to be family hostile. For example, moving to a later finishing time or an earlier starting time can disrupt a household’s delicately poised childcare arrangements. It can create or aggravate working-time insecurity.

Of course, it is important to distinguish the risk of such variation from the way in which the risk turns out in practice. Moreover, where such employer-oriented variation comes with a reasonable period of notice, the extent of disruption may be less and the effect on stress levels may be alleviated. Where variation is regular and predictable, it can be more easily accommodated. The principle of notice is apparent in much regulation of variation through rotating shifts and occasional overtime. However, variation can still be a problem. For example, in rotating shift systems workers know well in advance when the change kicks in, but the change still imposes heavy burdens on the worker and his or her social relationships.

Contemporary discussion that identifies flexibility with family friendliness is hopelessly simplistic. The implications of flexibility depend on who controls the flexibility. The point has been made numerous times, and it is clear enough from the above discussion.
At the same time, we can see that a simple reference to regularity, as in the current formula of ‘regular part-time’ jobs, is also not a satisfactory answer. It is true that regularity in the sense of a fixed number of hours and a fixed schedule is preferable to a working-time arrangement in which the number of hours and schedules varies according to the needs of the employer. However, this provides no guarantee that the number of hours or the schedule does indeed match the preferences and needs of the individual. Moreover, it fails to provide room for the employee-oriented flexibility that so many workers with caring responsibilities want.

\textit{Ability to move between full-time and part-time hours in the one job}

We can assess jobs according to whether they allow the worker to alter their hours from full-time to part-time (and back again). This could be seen as just a strong example of variation in the number of hours according to employee needs. However, it is a crucial aspect, which bears directly on how we understand ‘full-time’ and ‘part-time’ jobs. Discussion of this aspect tends to lead into the very heart of research and policy on part-time work. As such, it is worth discussing in a separate sub-section.

The ability to move fluidly between full-time and part-time is particularly apposite in the case of a return from parental leave, especially for women returning after a period of maternity leave. A total withdrawal as sustained by most maternity leave schemes lasts a relatively short time (though of course it is possible to extend unpaid leave for lengthy periods). However, while the child is young, many women desire a partial withdrawal in the form of reduced hours, in order to deal with responsibilities of child care while at the same time continuing to exercise their skills in their occupation, build new skills, and proceed further in a chosen career. This can be seen as an extension of the principles of maternity leave (and indeed many schemes already entail opportunities for spreading maternity leave out in conjunction with part-time work). The result is a widespread claim in many countries for a ‘right to return’ to a job on a part-time basis. Conversely, when conditions change, this entails a claim to be able to resume the job on a full-time basis. In its narrow form, the claim refers only to women returning after maternity leave. But it easily leads into a broader claim for a right for other workers to be able to move between full-time and part-time hours in the one job in response to caring responsibilities (or indeed, as in the transitional labour market proposals, in response to a variety of life events).

Full-time and part-time versions of a job will differ. The precise nature and extent of the difference is dependent on a host of economic, technical and social factors. However, the principle of fluid movement implies minimising differences, including in particular any differences that stem from discriminatory treatment. For example, in the movement from full-time to part-time, it is necessary to test that the new part-time version of the job resembles the full-time version in its responsibilities, opportunities for further development, etc.

It is often argued that some jobs are unavoidably full-time and cannot be divided up into part-time jobs. In each case the purported barriers to division need to be carefully examined. In principle we would expect all jobs to be capable of being divided up (from the point of view of workers - job sharing). This may involve some re-organisation at the workplace, but it is rare to find insuperable barriers. In almost all cases, purported barriers are not technical but are instead due to the way in which individual employers have constructed the job in order to meet their own needs. One familiar example is associated with the argument that certain jobs entail an expectation of long hours on demand. This expectation has little to do with any technical imperative, but instead primarily reflects the employer’s wish to have the labour power of the worker available for as long as possible (it may also be shaped on occasion by labour market conditions of a shortage of skills in that particular field). It is not inherent in the job. Jobs that have been organised in this way are jobs that have been organised to be ‘family hostile’.

Page 14
However, earnings a

One

Low

importance they wages, of conventional wages and from households are wages, or job, hours from money providing reduction is important to rethought.15 However, this does not affect the relevance of the other criteria, such as returns for skill and effort and fairness. Moreover, there seems no reason for concluding that the earnings of one partner are important while the earnings of the other are not. Both clearly make a contribution to the household. Even if the contribution of one is significantly less, it is important to remember that wages are not only to do with money; they are indicators of other features such as respect and dignity.

Low wages for part-time workers can be a problem for the worker (and the household), both in the short-term and in the long-term. Long-term effects on individuals can be particularly powerful, especially where households break up, and the implications for incomes and financial independence become clearer. Low wages for part-time workers can also be bad for the society, if it sets up part-time work as a pathway for cost-cutting employers. This would threaten to unleash a destructive dynamic of competition in terms of wages, reverberating back on all workers.

One conventional way of assessing wages of part-time workers is to look at hourly earnings and whether they diverge from the hourly earnings of comparable full-time workers. This is only a rough-and-ready measure, because of difficulties in measurement and difficulties in finding a comparable full-time worker. But it is useful in providing hints for further investigation. Relatively low hourly earnings for part-time workers may reflect several factors, for example, access to bonuses, performance pay and overtime earnings or discrimination in setting pay rates.

Employment benefits

Apart from direct money wages in return for effort expended, jobs have been increasingly linked with what are called ‘employment benefits’. The main type of benefit is paid leave, eg annual leave, public holidays, sick leave, bereavement leave, and long-service leave. Some forms of paid leave, such as parental leave and the new types of carer’s leave, support workers in responding to pressures of family responsibilities, and we mention them above. However, other benefits can be occupational superannuation or pensions (or, as in the case of the United States, even health insurance).
The mechanism by which these employment benefits are paid for and delivered varies from one country to the next, with most OECD nations relying on a mix of employer, state and worker contributions to support such benefits. Similarly, the coverage of the benefits in each country may also differ.

Jobs can be assessed in terms of their access to these employment benefits. In most advanced capitalist countries, all or almost all full-time workers have access to a standard set of benefits (though there may be some top-ups from particular employers). This wide coverage is due to the fact that these employment benefits have become attached to jobs as a result of the efforts of trade unions and progressive political parties. Together with other aspects such as employment security, standardised working-time arrangements and a living wage, they form part of the package that makes up the standard employment relation.

These benefits are important for part-time workers as well as full-time workers. Part-time workers, like full-time workers, need annual leave and sick leave. As argued above, some leave arrangements such as parental leave appear particularly important for workers with caring responsibilities.

We can assess part-time jobs in terms of their access to such benefits. Lack of access can be a problem for the worker. It is also closely related to low wages, and can be a problem for society in much the same way, ie in setting up a pathway for cost-cutting employers. This issue of access to benefits is a crucial part of the discussion of part-time jobs in many countries. Part-time workers have been excluded from such benefits in various ways (exemptions, hours or income thresholds, etc.), and numerous policy initiatives are currently aimed at reversing this exclusion in order to integrate part-time workers into the mainstream of social protection.

Giving part-time workers access to paid leave entitlements is relatively straightforward. Though it works in different ways (and varies from one form of leave to another), the underlying principle is generally one of *pro rata*. For example, annual leave would cover the same period as for a full-time worker, such as four weeks per year, but would be paid at the usual rate of pay for the part-time worker. Other employment benefits may throw up more problems in applying a *pro rata* principle. For example, in the case of superannuation, *pro rata* contributions for part-time workers can simply be eaten up in charges that are geared to the fixed costs of maintaining accounts. This is particularly likely in cases where part-time workers change jobs frequently or work in more than one job to ensure enough hours.

*Employment security*

This is another crucial aspect of jobs, which has been an essential component of the standard employment relation. This is encapsulated in the fundamental notion of '"permanency', whereby a worker is protected against loss of his or her job (except in cases of misconduct or in cases where the business encounters difficulties). Indeed to a large extent employment security is the condition for many of the other features of the standard employment relation. Without a modicum of employment security, which gives the worker some certainty of staying in the job for the medium term, it would be hard to introduce the other aspects and hard for the worker to feel confident enough to claim them.

Part-time workers have just as much need for employment security as full-time workers. On-going employment provides the individual with a sense of security within which to maximise his or her full potential – both in paid employment and non-employment endeavours.

We can assess the quality of part-time jobs in terms of whether they offer standard forms of employment security. Employment security has two main aspects. First is protection against unfair dismissal. Unfairness can cover several grounds, including discrimination. As a result, protection against unfair
indirect. For example, in inappropriate increments, the minimum notice periods (and by ensuring that the worker is compensated if it must take place).

Workers with caring responsibilities have a particular need for some forms of employment security. In so far as they are more vulnerable to discrimination, they have a greater need for protection against discrimination.

Access to training and career progression

Jobs can be assessed in terms of the opportunities provided to develop new skills and progress further in an occupational career. We are used to thinking of full-time jobs in this way. But the criterion also applies to part-time jobs.

The extent of training depends on varied factors, including the nature of the occupation. It is true that such opportunities may be lessened when hours are reduced. However, it is important that opportunities for training do not dwindle to nothing. This can lead to skill insecurity. Continued access to training is vital in a fast-changing economy. It is all the more important if we keep in mind that part-time employment is often just a temporary phase in an occupational career that may be resumed on a full-time basis. Where training is not provided during a part-time phase, the cost both to the worker and to the broader economy can be large.

Similarly, career progression occurs in different ways in different occupations. In many cases it rests on training, and this is why it is convenient to bracket the two factors together. It is important that career progression is not stopped while workers are part-time. This is often justified by an argument that part-time workers are not committed enough. According to this view, part-time workers show by their part-time status that their prime loyalty is not to the organisation but to their families. This view reveals an inappropriate expectation of workers. In another approach to career progression, job promotion or pay increments are based on time served and part-time employment may be heavily discounted to take into account the lesser time on the job. But time served seems a poor criterion for career progression.

Employee voice

This exists in different forms. On the one hand we can talk about participation in the workplace, direct or indirect. Joint consultative committees or special committees to deal with occupational health and safety issues can be very important in some workplaces. However, the more common avenue for employee voice is through a trade union.

It is just as important for part-time workers as for full-time workers that their interests are represented in all channels of representation. It could be argued that fewer hours at the workplace imply a lesser stake in the debates and discussions over workplace issues. This may be true in some cases, but it would be wrong to make it a presumption for all workers. It is true that the interests of part-time workers may be different. But if anything that often implies a greater need for representation, in order to ensure that those different interests are not swamped by a majority interest.

Content of jobs

It is important not to neglect the content of jobs. This is a broad term that covers a range of features. Of particular importance are skill demands, task autonomy, social relations and work burdens.
Work burdens are particularly important and refer to the health and safety aspects of work. Full-time and part-time workers share a common need for a safe and healthy working environment. In some cases work burdens may be less for part-time workers, eg in exposure levels for toxic substances. On the other side, part-time workers are endangered when their reduced time at the workplace is used as an excuse for a lesser degree of attention to good job design. We can single out intensity of work from other work burdens. Often reduced hours are a vehicle of intensification. As in the case of wages, this can set out an unfortunate dynamic that reverberates back on full-time work.

Discussion of the content of part-time jobs can be difficult. We can either investigate the issue directly or appeal to a comparison with comparable full-time jobs. However, even in the latter case, the issue can be blurred when a reduction of hours is used as an excuse to reduce the value of the job and to redefine its content, eg by removing responsibilities and offering fewer opportunities for the exercise of skills.

3. Summary

The preceding sections seek to lay the foundation for an assessment of the quality of part-time jobs in Australia. Our topic can be framed in different ways, each of which has its disadvantages as well as its advantages. In addition to the theme of job quality, it is possible to talk of ‘work and family balance’ or ‘family friendliness’. One of the most useful ways of framing the topic is terms of labour market transitions. From this point of view, we are interested in the extent to which part-time jobs in Australia facilitate good transitions at the interface between ‘private work activities’ and paid employment. This approach has several clear advantages, including its ability to combine individual, household and societal perspectives.

We identify ten dimensions that are relevant to an assessment of the quality of part-time jobs. Our list of ten dimensions overlaps with other analyses. The first four dimensions concern working-time patterns, and they could be fruitfully used in analyses of ‘time wealth’ or ‘time poverty’ (Warren, 2003). Similarly, some of what we say could be organised in terms of an analysis of different forms of labour insecurity (Standing, 1999). This in turn could be linked with the discussion of ‘precariousness’ (Burgess and Campbell, 1998).

We remain at the start of a full assessment of the quality of part-time jobs in Australia. It is necessary to go on both to assemble the empirical evidence that relates to these dimensions and to intervene more directly in the ongoing policy debates on employment options.

ENDNOTES

REFERENCES


Figure 1: Employment rates, part-time and total by sex and age, Australia, August 2004

Source: ABS - Labour Force Survey data cubes
## Table 1: Part-time workers aged 15-64 by sex, educational status, presence of dependent children* and age, August 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Part-time workers (‘000)</th>
<th>Proportion of part-time workers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘000</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time students, aged 15-24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women</td>
<td>296.0</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>men</td>
<td>228.1</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with dependent children, aged 25-34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>235.1</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with dependent children, aged 35-44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>388.6</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with dependent children, aged 45-54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>107.9</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in full-time education, aged 15-24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women</td>
<td>147.2</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>men</td>
<td>100.3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women without dependent children, aged 25-54**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>518.3</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men, aged 25-54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>293.2</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women, aged 55-64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>224.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men, aged 55-64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>109.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2648.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS- Labour Force Survey Data Cubes  
* dependent children are children under the age of 15  
** includes 44,600 women whose family status is not recorded
Table 2: Main reason employed persons working less than 35 hours per week work part-time hours rather than full-time


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main reason</th>
<th>Male No</th>
<th>Male %</th>
<th>Female No</th>
<th>Female %</th>
<th>Total No</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own illness or disability</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for children</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for disabled or elderly relatives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other personal or family responsibilities</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to school, college, university</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could not find full-time work</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer part-time work</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in voluntary work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attracted to pay premium attached to part-time/casual work</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare payments or pension may be affected by working full-</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting business established</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer job &amp; part-time hours are a requirement of the job</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>749</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>2638</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Employment rates of mothers* by age of youngest dependent child, Australia, 1985 to 2003 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment status</th>
<th>1985 (July)</th>
<th>1995 (June)</th>
<th>2000 (June)</th>
<th>2003 (June)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>Employed part-time</td>
<td>All Employed</td>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 (July)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (inc dependents aged 15-20)</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* lone mothers and mothers in opposite sex couples

Source: ABS, Labour Force Status and Other characteristics of Families, Australia (Cat No. 6224.0) and Data Cubes 6291.0.55.001
Figure 2: Employment rates for couple and lone mothers by age of youngest child, Australia, 2001 (%)

Employment Rates for Couple Mothers by Age of Youngest Child

Employment Rates for Lone Mothers by Age of Youngest Child


1 This paper stems from a current ARC-funded project entitled ‘The Quality of Part-Time Employment in Australia: Dimensions, Prospects and Policy’ (2004-2006). The project is located at the Centre for Applied Social Research (CASR) at RMIT University, where it is being conducted by Iain Campbell, Jenny Chalmers and Sara Charlesworth. The project draws on some of the ideas of transitional labour markets. It can be seen as following up on Fagan and Lallement’s points (2000, 44-45, 54) about the pivotal importance of part-time employment and the need to expand the research agenda by mapping
existing labour market flows, examining the quality of the jobs, and adopting a cross-national perspective.

2 The notion of life events invokes contingency and thereby helps to avoid any suggestion that we are talking about necessary stages of the life course that every individual must follow. However, we do not wish to suggest that such events are mere incidents. A life event such as the need to care for an aging parent should have effects that can last for many years.

3 At the same time, the link to specific life events usefully reminds us that the scope of the topic of paid work and caring responsibilities is wide. It affects a (large) minority of persons at any one time, but it can be expected to affect almost all individuals at one point or another.

4 This is a measure of part-time workers. Though it represents an under-estimate of the share of part-time jobs (Burgess, 2005 forthcoming), it is adequate for our purposes here.

5 Recent research however cautions against any simplistic time accounting of paid and unpaid work in the different time pressures experienced by mothers working full or part-time in the paid work force (Bittman and Brown, 2005).

6 A simple choice between standard full-time employment and non-employment is clearly too narrow. Such a choice may only be illusory if neither employment option bears much relation to the individual’s needs. Adding in part-time jobs expands the number of options and thereby enhances opportunities for individual choice. However, much will depend on the precise range of the options within the broad category of ‘part-time’ and the quality of each option.

7 For remarks on the way in which transitional labour markets can represent a new gender contract see Schmid, 2001.

8 It is important to stress that ‘full-time’ is itself a social convention, which has altered over the years and is still undergoing important changes. The fact that some jobs are ‘full-time’ is not a result of natural law but of job design. From the point of view of a hypothetical robot working 24 hours a day, seven days a week and throughout the entire year, the human notion of ‘full-time’ – even in its long hours version – is just another type of part-time work!

9 Control over hours may be double-edged when there is no control of workloads. It may simply involve the ‘freedom’ to work longer hours at all times of the day. This dilemma is most apparent when the control over hours is informal, as in the case of many professional and managerial workers. But it also emerges under formal flexitime systems such as time bank systems which sometimes need to be redesigned to handle the problem.

10 As well as notice, regulation generally insists on a standard, limits in the scope of variation from the standard, agreement (either with individual or with work group) and compensation. These controls are all crucial in determining the quality of the arrangement.

11 Government officials and employer representatives in Australia often try to suggest that all flexible work arrangements are family friendly. For example, one official report from the federal government’s
Work and Family Unit (WFU, 1999) sought to bolster an argument about greater family-friendliness in workplaces by appealing to evidence of more provisions for flexible hours in the text of awards and agreements. Whitehouse and Zetlin (1999, 223) rightly point out that ‘hours flexibility… may assist with the combination of work and family responsibilities if based on employee autonomy over start and finish times, but be inimical to this goal if it involves irregular shifts or unpredictable hours’.

Awareness of this fundamental point seems to be slowly spreading. A recent OECD report on Australia (and Denmark and the Netherlands) notes that ‘flexibility in hours is not always in the interests of parents if it means them sometimes being required to work hours which do not fit with family responsibilities’ (OECD, 2002b, 182; see Gray and Tudball, 2002, 3; DfaCS/DEWR, 2002, 68).

Nor can it be seen as inherent in the regulatory notion of a ‘standard employment relation’ (SER). On the contrary, this carried an assumption of standardised working-time arrangements that effectively protected individual workers against employer expectations of long hours on demand. There is an ongoing debate about the extent to which the regulatory notion of the SER is tainted by association with a ‘male breadwinner model’ and how it might be adapted to the new circumstances of the current period. However, it is important to distinguish the regulatory notion from the empirical examples of full-time work that are often completely outside the constraints of regulation.

We do not attempt to address this issue here. However, it is worth noting that the idea of a living wage is not just to do with an income quantum but also concerns the regularity of the income. In assessing the adequacy of wages in a part-time job, it remains important to consider the regularity of the earnings. Income security can be just as important for part-time workers as for full-time workers.