

Guest Editorial

Participation in Work in Australia

The theme of this special issue is Participation in Work in Australia. Participation is considered in its broadest sense, and has been defined as “involvement in a life situation” [10], “a taking part, as in some action or attempt” [8], and “the action or fact of having or forming part of something; the sharing of something” [9]. In the World Health Organization’s (WHO) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), one of the areas covered by Activities and Participation is the major life area of work and employment [10]. This area covers both remunerative (self-employed, full and part-time employment) and non-remunerative aspects (e.g. volunteer or charity work), and includes work preparation (apprenticeships), and acquiring, keeping and terminating a job [10].

Work can be conceptualised broadly as Productivity and School Occupations, which have been defined as “routines, tasks and sub-tasks which are done to enable a person to provide support for self, family or community through the production of goods or provision of services” (Reed, 1986, cited in [5, p. 58]). This encompasses the ICF concept of work and employment, as well as extending it to include school work. It is this view of work that is covered by the authors in this issue.

“Everyday we are reminded that, for everybody, work is a defining feature of human existence. It is the means of sustaining life and of meeting basic needs. But it is also an activity through which individuals affirm their own identity, both to themselves and to those around them. It is crucial to individual choice, to the welfare of families and to the stability of societies” [7, pp. 5–6].

If people are unable to participate in work as the result of an injury, illness or disease, or due to environmental and societal factors, the impact on individuals, their families, employers, co-workers and society as a whole is profound. This issue focuses on various aspects of work participation across a wide range of areas within Australian society.

“High levels of social participation and social connectedness are believed to contribute to the overall well-being of individuals and their communities. Opportunities for social participation and interaction may be found through participation in paid and unpaid work, friendships and participation in culture and leisure activities” [3, p. 46].

It is this range of opportunities that are examined by authors in this issue. Others consider aspects that may limit participation due to physical, cognitive, psychosocial and environmental reasons.

Australia’s population in April 2009 was estimated as 21.7 million [4], already reaching the projections for 2011 and is calculated to increase to 28.2 million by 2051 [3].

As with all developed nations, Australia’s population is ageing. In 2007, people aged 65 years and over made up 13% of Australia’s population. By 2051 this proportion is projected to double, reaching 26%, and those aged 15–64 years are expected to decrease from 67% of the population in 2007, to 59% by 2051 [3].

Australia is a culturally diverse nation, with a quarter of the population born overseas [3]. Over the last two centuries, migrants have arrived from approximately 200 different countries, contributing to the social fabric of the nation. Of concern, however, is that “almost one in seven people born in countries other than Australia or main English-speaking countries reported that they had no source of support during a time of crisis” [3, p. 46].

With the ageing of Australia’s population, and the awareness of the potential impact that may occur when people retire from work, Caroline Howe, Lynda Matthews and Rob Heard, have explored the impact of retirement on the psychological health of a multi-cultural Australian population, comparing workers and retirees from Australian and overseas born groups.

Immigration from Asia has increased dramatically, while it has decreased from the UK and Europe. In

1997, 5.3% of the population (or 22.8% of those born overseas) were from eastern, central or southern Asia; in 2007, this had risen to 7.3% (or 29.2% of those born overseas) [3]. New South Wales (NSW) is the state with the highest proportion of its population born in this region [3]. Ev Innes, Amber Crowther, Fiona Fonti and Leonie Quayle present a description of a project focused on women of Chinese background working on market gardens in the Sydney Basin.

Australia is a highly urbanized nation, with more than two-thirds of people living in Major Cities (68%) and the remainder (32%) in Regional and Remote areas [3]. One of the major agricultural industries in regional Australia is dairy farming, which is the country's third largest rural industry [6]. "The majority of farms were owned by family-operated businesses, with around 99% of broadacre and dairy farms operated by owner-managers in 2001" [1]. With most farmers being self-employed or in small family businesses, work-related injuries are under-reported and a hidden issue. Ev Innes and Casey Walsh surveyed dairy farmers to understand the musculoskeletal discomfort they experience and how this is related to the tasks they perform.

Young workers are another group where there are large discrepancies between work-related injuries sustained and those reported through workers' compensation systems. Young men under 25 had the highest incidence rates (number of injuries per 1000 people) for work-related injuries and illnesses of any age group [2, 3]. Many of these injuries are associated with manual handling. The potential long-term impact on work participation of these injuries in this group is significant. Ev Innes and Megan Hardwick investigated whether young men were aware of how much they thought they could lift and their actual ability.

One potential long term consequence of musculoskeletal injuries is the development of chronic pain. Coralie Wales, Lynda Matthews and Michelle Donnelly consider aspects of current rehabilitation approaches to managing chronic pain and how contextual factors may affect participation at work for those with chronic pain.

Another largely hidden group are people who volunteer, providing services that would otherwise have to be paid for or left undone. In 2006, 35% of the Australian population volunteered at least once in a 12 month period, and 21% aged 18 years and over volunteered at least once a fortnight [3]. "The value of the work contributed by volunteers to non-profit institutions in 1999–2000 was estimated to be AUD \$8.9 billion" [3, p. 42]. One of the iconic groups of volunteers in Australia is surf lifesavers. Ruth Erby, Rob

Heard and Kate O'Loughlin report on a trial reporting system to document and record injuries sustained by this group of volunteers.

Volunteering is an important work role for many people, enabling them to contribute to the social group through the provision of services. Judy Ranka and Christine Chapparo describe how an ecologically valid assessment (Perceive, Recall, Plan and Perform (PRPP) System of Task Analysis) was used to assist with program planning for an individual with HIV associated neurocognitive disorder (HAND) who wished to participate in work activities by becoming a volunteer grocery shopper for others in his shared household.

An important aspect of participating in work is acquiring and keeping a job. Several articles investigate these aspects of work participation. Kylie Bootes and Christine Chapparo present a case study that presents the views of a person who returned to work following a mild traumatic brain injury, along with the views of his employer. Identification of discrepancies between the client's and employer's perceptions of cognitive difficulties with job performance can then be a basis for developing strategies that support workers in keeping their jobs.

People with a disability have greater difficulty in acquiring jobs. In 2006, only 19% of people (15–64 years) who required assistance (i.e. needed assistance with self-care, mobility and/or communication) participated in the labour force, and of these 86% were in paid employment [3]. In contrast, 77% of people of the same age without a need for assistance participated in the labour force [3]. Involvement of an employment support provider is often suggested to facilitate job acquisition for people with disabilities. Michelle Donnelly and Fiona Given, through the use of a case study, provide a provocative examination of how employment services may be hindering, rather than helping people with disabilities to obtain work.

In contrast to formal structures, informal networks that support people with intellectual disabilities to engage and prepare for work are the focus of a study by Michelle Donnelly, Anne Hillman, Roger Stancliffe, Marie Knox, Louise Whitaker and Trevor Parmenter.

In 2006, people aged 25–44 years who had a need for assistance were twice as likely to be living in a group household as people without a need for assistance (9% compared with 4%) [3]. This includes group home accommodation with supervision by residential care workers, to promote opportunities for people with disabilities to live independently in the community. The role of the residential care worker can be confusing,

however, and Christine Chapparo and Belinda Shepherd describe the contextual and organisational influences on the decisions residential care workers make, and when and how they see themselves as being a “house person” or “hospital person”.

Finally, we consider the work of children at school. In 2003, 13% of families in Australia with children aged 0–14 years had a child with a disability, including 7% with a child with a profound/severe disability; 6% of families had a child with a restriction in schooling or employment [3]. Being able to participate in work roles at school is a critical aspect of school success. Susan Lowe and Christine Chapparo describe core elements of participation in work that are commonly perceived as crucial by teachers and parents.

This issue presents a wide and varied exploration of participation in work from an Australian perspective, ranging from paid work to volunteering, from school-aged children, adults of working age and those retiring from paid employment, from acquiring to retaining jobs, and the impact of musculoskeletal injuries as well as cognitive impairments. The perspectives of a wide range of groups are also reported, providing readers with different views of the world of work.

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