

Report

**Haphazard Occupational Narratives:
the Work and Developmental Experiences of
Non-permanent Workers in Low-wage
Occupations in Singapore**

September 2015

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Published by the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL), Singapore
Research and Innovation Division
1 Kay Siang Road
Tower Block Level 6
Singapore 248922

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The Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) aims to contribute to the competitiveness of Singapore by developing an effective, innovative and responsive Continuing Education and Training (CET) sector that is able to meet the needs of industries and the workforce. It achieves this by raising capabilities, catalysing innovation, and leading research in workforce learning.

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In brief, our research employs a range of methodologies designed to deepen understanding of the ways in which contexts enhance and limit learning and development opportunities. Our approach is to engage practitioners in the research process and thus develop a community of practitioner researchers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| LIST OF TABLES & CHARTS..... | i |
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY..... | ii |
| 1.0 INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| 1.1 Non-permanent Work in Low-wage Occupations | 1 |
| 1.2 Aim, Methodology and Sampling Frame..... | 3 |
| 1.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis | 5 |
| 1.4 Structure of Report | 6 |
| 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW | 7 |
| 2.1 Clarifying Terminology..... | 7 |
| 2.2 A “Precariat” Class or “Flexi-workers”?..... | 8 |
| 2.3 Identity, Learning and Development | 11 |
| 2.4 The Singapore Developmental State..... | 14 |
| 2.5 Summary | 16 |
| 3.0 FINDINGS | 17 |
| 3.1 Overview | 17 |
| 3.2 Description of Non-permanent Work Arrangements..... | 17 |
| 3.3 Motivation for Entry into Non-permanent Work Arrangements | 18 |
| 3.4 Development of a Work Identity..... | 24 |
| 3.5 Job Design, Skills Development and Progression | 30 |
| 3.6 Attitude Towards and Opportunities for Learning | 34 |
| 3.7 Social Assistance and the Central Provident Fund..... | 36 |
| 3.8 Summary | 38 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 4.0 DISCUSSION..... | 39 |
| 4.1 Overview | 39 |
| 4.2 End of the “Low-Wage, Low-Cost” Model of Development? | 39 |
| 4.3 Effects of Casual Work on Skills Deepening, Progression and Long-term Employability | 41 |
| 4.4 Continuous Education and Training..... | 43 |
| 4.5 Work and Citizenry - the Broken Promise for the Developmental Worker ... | 44 |
| 4.7 Conclusion..... | 46 |
| 5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS | 47 |
| 5.1 Overview | 47 |
| 5.2 Recommendation: Deeper Examination of the Issues Surrounding Low- wage Permanent Work | 47 |
| 5.3 Recommendation: Deeper Understanding of the Key Factors Shaping Casual Work Arrangements | 48 |
| 5.4 Recommendation: Better CET Provisions that Acknowledge Workers’ Aspirations and take into account their Learning Preferences..... | 49 |
| 5.5 Recommendation: Facilitate non-permanent workers’ access to social goods linked to the CPF scheme..... | 49 |
| 5.6 Recommendation: Further Research on the Unique Needs of Lifestylers ... | 50 |
| 5.6 Conclusion..... | 50 |
| Appendix 1: Profile of interviewees | 1 |
| Appendix 2: Reference Group..... | 4 |
| References..... | 5 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | | |
|---------|--|----|
| Table 1 | Selection criteria of non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations..... | 4 |
| Table 2 | Metaphors of non-permanent workers..... | 8 |
| Table 3 | Key profiles of workers in low-wage occupations working full-time in non-permanent work arrangements | 18 |

LIST OF CHARTS

| | | |
|---------|---|----|
| Chart 1 | Breakdown of key profiles of respondents..... | 19 |
| Chart 2 | Supplementary job(s)..... | 25 |
| Chart 3 | Attempt(s) to access permanent job(s)..... | 26 |
| Chart 4 | Monthly income in Singapore dollars | 27 |
| Chart 5 | Initial qualifications of respondents..... | 28 |
| Chart 6 | Participation in Continuing Education & Training..... | 36 |
| Chart 7 | Social assistance..... | 36 |
| Chart 8 | CPF contributions by employee and/or employer..... | 37 |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report is the fourth in a multi-sector study by the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) on non-permanent workers in Singapore. Specifically, this report discusses the identity, learning and development of non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations in Singapore.

Using data collected from interviews with 30 non-permanent workers in three low-wage occupations (despatch rider, removalist and F&B helper), this research finds that unlike their counterparts elsewhere, non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations in Singapore have little difficulty securing permanent work but opt for non-permanent work to enjoy higher pay and greater flexibility than they would have in permanent work. They display weak occupational identity, which is linked not only to the circumstantial reasons for their entry into the occupations, but also to the design of the non-permanent jobs that place them at the periphery. In fact, we find that the work they engage in has negative effects on skills deepening, progression and long-term employability. Jobs are narrowly-scoped, making skills easy to pick up in a short period of time but leading to subsequent plateauing. The deepening of skills also suffers as casual work incentivises fast turn-around, and the workers seek to complete more job assignments for better pay. Progression into more sophisticated job tasks is difficult unless the workers accept employment to be permanent staff. However, when the workers do seek permanent work, they prefer to work in a different industry, rationalising that in the current industry, they are better off in a non-permanent work arrangement given the higher pay and greater flexibility as non-permanent workers. One alternative route for progression is to become a micropreneur or short-term contractor, but individuals in these roles typically keep jobs with higher responsibilities to themselves rather than develop their workers. The other alternative route is to move to similar entry-level jobs in other industries. The net effect is a haphazard occupational narrative that does not facilitate the development of expertise.

The research findings further distinguish these workers based on three profiles. The first is *The Enterpriser* who accesses non-permanent work as an exercise of agency to improve his or her standard of living given the higher take-home pay under non-permanent work arrangements. The second is *The Stuck* who takes on non-

permanent work as an interim measure, but is unwilling to transit into his or her desired permanent job usually due to the relatively low pay offered by employers. The last is the *Lifestyler* who opts for non-permanent work because of special lifestyle preferences or constraints such as wanting to be paid daily or because of family caring responsibilities. This group tends to have the highest visibility among policy-makers because they tend to seek social assistance. The *Enterpriser* and the *Stuck* differ from the *Lifestyler* significantly as the first two profiles access non-permanent work as an active exercise to improve their economic situation, while the latter profile chooses a non-standard work arrangement for lifestyle reasons.

The findings add a new dimension to debates in policy and academic circles on depressed wages in Singapore, in that the low-income Singaporean worker is opting out of the permanent labour market as an exercise of agency to earn more. Enterprises offer such non-permanent work arrangements as a desperate strategy to overcome a short-term shortage of workers, but they find that the arrangements can be expensive and unreliable, because it is hard to plan ahead when the workers are not in the permanent workforce.

The study also notes that non-permanent jobs in low-wage occupations are not necessarily detrimental to skills development and progression. Taking reference from an earlier phase of the study on non-permanent workers in Singapore's technical theatre industry, we found that entry-level casual jobs in technical theatre became stepping stones for some workers to move into specialised roles that enable the deepening of expertise and allowing them to command a premium for such skills. In the low-wage occupations covered in this study, however, specialised roles are available mainly on a permanent basis, but workers avoid joining the permanent workforce in these industries because of the issue of lower pay.

In addition, we find that provisions in Continuing Education and Training (CET) have not adequately addressed the needs of this group of workers, and a "sense of betrayal" permeates when their efforts to up-skill do not lead to their desired jobs. Finally, we note that work is an important exercise in citizenry in Singapore in that access to housing, healthcare and retirement funds is greatly enhanced when the employee and his or her employer participate in the Central Provident Fund (CPF) scheme – a compulsory comprehensive savings plan for citizens and permanent

residents in Singapore. The majority of our interviewees do not make or receive CPF contributions usually by choice as this would mean lower take-home pay, yet feel alienated because they do not enjoy the benefits from CPF like other Singaporeans do.

On the whole, the study has important implications in the context of Singapore's shift beyond competence to enabling the deepening of skills and expertise. It recommends the following:

- That along with looking at job redesign, government agencies look deeper into the issue of low wages for permanent work and the short- and long-term costs of non-permanent work arrangements to employers who may potentially benefit more by redistributing the expenditure to higher wages for permanent workers. It may also be useful to embark on a study of a 'tipping' point that will motivate non-permanent workers in the surveyed occupations to move into permanent work, so as to enable opportunities for deepening of expertise and improvement of productivity;
- That industry, policy-makers and union develop a more in-depth understanding of the different factors shaping the experience of non-permanent work in order to guide intervention strategies, given that different casual work arrangements on different workers in different industries and occupational settings could give rise to different effects. While aspects to look out for include job design, remuneration structure, progression opportunities, access to experts and workers' profiles, the relationship among these different factors that engenders different types of behaviour, work identities and outcomes should not be ignored;
- That the provisions of CET for this group of workers be linked more clearly to their aspirations for better wages and less rigid working conditions, particularly by providing an enabling environment for workers to demonstrate their skills and be rewarded for their performance by the employer. This requires a holistic approach that also addresses employers' ability to design 'good' jobs and developmental opportunities at good wages and conditions. The design and delivery of CET should also live up to the workers' preference of learning by doing, enabling them to access new networks and build capabilities to understand holistically the work that they do;

- That non-permanent workers' access to state instruments for delivery of social goods that include housing, medical benefits and payments be looked at more robustly, so that the worker does not lose all when he or she opts out of the mainstream labour market and thus stops receiving CPF from the employer; and
- That further research be conducted to understand the unique circumstances of the *Lifestyler* group, given that they make their employment choices based on non-economic considerations, thus rendering work intervention solutions as well as career services and job redesign less meaningful for this group than for the *Enterpriser* and *Stuck* groups.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Non-permanent Work in Low-wage Occupations

While there has been growing policy and research interest in low-wage workers and low-wage occupations in Singapore, little is known about the low-wage casual labourer. A study by Singapore's Ministry of Manpower (2014) identified a number of low-wage worker archetypes, and highlighted the casual/odd-job worker as among the specific profiles of low-wage workers that require more attention.

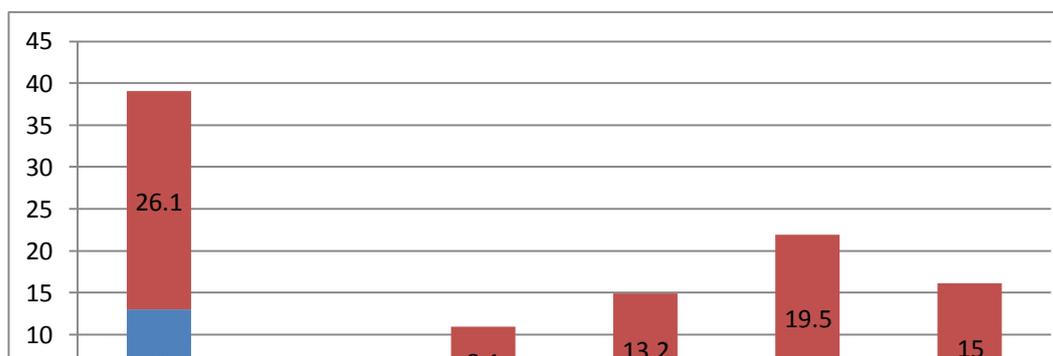
The growing interest in the plight of the low-wage workers in Singapore stems from a growing wage gap in Singapore. In 2013, the city-state registered the highest Gini coefficient globally at .4784, indicating a correspondingly high level of inequality in income distribution that has significant economic and political implications (Loh 2011; Ng 2013). A slew of measures has been introduced progressively to improve the plight of this group of workers, beginning with Workfare in 2007 as a key income supplement that included cash payouts and top-ups to the workers' Central Provident Fund. Currently, workers are eligible for Workfare if the average gross monthly income during the period worked is S\$1 900 or lower. The island-state's tightly-regulated union additionally champions the Progressive Wage Model or PWM, which was formalised in 2012. Under this model, business licensing is tied to the adoption of a tiered wage ladder that also supports workers' skills upgrading and enhanced productivity. The most extensive application of the PWM is in the cleaning industry, where a basic wage of \$1 000 is mandatory for any cleaning business to secure an operating license.

In a tight labour market where employers are screaming for permanent workers, odd-job workers form a critical pool to supplement or bridge the gap while recruitment is on-going. In industries such as F&B and retail, manpower initiatives have been introduced to tap into part-time/casual labour pool to provide enterprise flexibility, but such programmes face significant challenges in attracting and retaining such workers.

Globally, studies indicate that casual work arrangements are set to intensify in a post-Fordist environment that is characterised by shorter business cycles (Brown, Ashton and Lauder 2011; Ross 2008). The upward trend in casual work

arrangements is also reflected in MOM's data on Singapore's labour force participation. Between 2006 and 2012, the number of resident employees on short-term contracts of less than a year (including casual workers with no contracts) increased from 85 400 in 2006 (4.8% of the resident workforce) to 108 200 (5.3% of the resident workforce) in 2012. Of the 108 200 resident employees on contracts of less than one year in 2012, the median gross monthly income (excluding employer CPF) was S\$1 800 per month. Of those on contracts of less than six months, the median gross monthly income was S\$1 000 per month. This suggests that a large proportion of workers on short-term contracts were low-wage workers who earned significantly lower than the income cap of S\$1 900 under Workfare. Between the ages of 25-59, there was a positive correlation between age and those on contract terms of less than one year, suggesting plausibly deeper structural barriers to permanent forms of employment. Moreover, it is also noteworthy that the number of those on short-term contracts declined with higher educational qualifications.

Figure 1: Term contract employees by age (in thousands)



Source: Ministry of Manpower, Singapore (2012)

Research has suggested that non-standard employment in general creates a class of workers experiencing anxiety and uncertainty because of irregular income, reduced benefits, and unclear progression. This view is by no means conclusive, as another camp suggests that such workers are in fact the vanguard of an emerging group of flexible and motivated workers, and the direction in which entire workforces are heading (for a discussion, see Allan 2002; Evans and Gibbs 2009; Felstead and Ashton 2001; Kalleberg 2009).

Previous research by IAL in other work sectors with high non-permanent work arrangements, such as Film & TV and Adult Education, highlights that non-

permanent workers face particular challenges in terms of building career and maintaining ongoing flow of work, which permanent workers do not. This makes it valuable to understand the experiences of the low-wage, non-permanent worker as being plausibly distinct from that of the low-wage, permanent worker. The findings will be valuable in informing policy measures that target low-wage workers in Singapore in general. They will also be valuable in augmenting industry or workforce development programmes that have largely catered to workers in stable, ongoing employment.

1.2 Aim, Methodology and Sampling Frame

The focus of this study is to understand the identity, learning and development of the casual labourer in low-wage occupations. The objective is to understand what “non-traditional” work patterns mean for their occupational identities, which in turn shape the developmental opportunities of the workers. Our interest is in understanding how these non-permanent workers experience their work arrangements, how they acquire their practice-based skills, and how they progress (or lag behind) over time. We put the individual at the centre of the analysis as most of the existing tools employed in research, policy-making and pedagogical practice privilege workers in stable, permanent forms of employment. We use vocational identity as the starting point for analysis, and consider the individual in relation to the wider eco-system that is related to industry practices, production processes, job design and work norms, among others. This focus on workers’ identity is significant in piecing together a narrative that gives a voice to their experiences. Identity is not static, it is relational and is developed as a result of a social process based not only on an individual’s background but also on the environment he/she is in (Du Gay 1996).

The specific research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations in Singapore identify with their work and circumstances?
2. How do they learn and grow through their work and work-related choices?

Consistent with other sectors in IAL’s research on Singapore’s non-permanent workers, this study adopts qualitative methods to collect data, which involves semi-structured interviews with non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations (n=30).

The non-permanent workers in this study are defined as individuals employed either with no contract or on short-term contracts of less than 12 months with one or more organisation. This excludes permanent workers as well as those employed on contracts of one year or more.

We also focus only on workers who take on non-permanent work arrangements on a full-time basis. This study thus includes only those workers engaged in non-permanent work arrangements as the form of full-time employment and as the sole source of income. It excludes students, pre-NS men and retirees, as well as permanent workers taking on non-permanent work to supplement their income.

This study also intentionally avoids imposing a maximum monthly income upfront, given the expected fluctuations in income among this population. Instead, we begin from the list of low-wage occupations identified by MOM. Three low-wage occupations, namely the despatch rider, the removalist, and the F&B helper, were selected because of anecdotal evidence showing high prevalence of casual work arrangements in the industries. These occupations merely serve as the starting points, as casual workers tend to have multiple occupational roles and may also slip in and out of employment.

Table 1 lists the selection criteria for the interviewees.

Table 1: Selection criteria of non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations

| Included | Excluded |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Singapore citizens or permanent residents • Workers currently (or within the last month) working as despatch riders (n=10), removalists (n=10) or F&B helpers (n=10) • Workers who are engaged on fixed-term contracts of less than 12 months or who engage in work without formal contracts • Workers who have been working on short, fixed term contracts/no | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-Singapore citizens or non-permanent residents • Workers not currently working as despatch riders, removalists, or as F&B helpers • Permanent employees and workers whose work contract terms extend for 12 months or more; students, pre-national service men • Workers who have been working on short, fixed term contracts/no |

| Included | Excluded |
|---|--|
| contract/as casual workers for <i>at least</i> six months | contract/as casual workers for <i>less than</i> six months |

1.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The research team relied on a range of sources to secure the interviewees. Significant difficulty existed in locating these workers, as well as in gaining their trust and interest to participate in the study. To secure interviewees, we first relied on GumTree, an online free classified listing. We indicated that a \$30 shopping voucher would be given as a token of appreciation for their time. At the same time, we cast the net wide among our personal contacts. Interviews secured through personal contacts proved to be the most valuable in helping the research team gain an initial understanding of the workers. These personal contacts pointed us to “ports” where casual workers tend to congregate. For instance, despatch riders have meeting points at two coffee shops in Tanjong Pagar, among others. Removalists congregate in several ports, such as a coffee shop in Holland Drive and an alley in Sixth Avenue. These are not mere meeting points, but entire support communities where workers not only report for work or seek work, but also hang out with one another after work, accompanied by their family members at times. The research team devoted time at the different ports to introduce themselves and the research project to the workers in order to build rapport and gain their goodwill to participate in the research. Many were apathetic, and some were hostile and suspicious of our intentions. Over time, some of the workers agreed to participate, driven mainly by the recognition of the effort put in by the research team. Our interviewees also informed us that they rely on Facebook pages that advertise part-time and temporary jobs, so we advertised the call for interviewees in those pages as well. Those who responded to our online advertisements were mainly motivated by the \$30 shopping voucher. Given the time taken to build relationships and to ensure that the interviewees were sourced from a range of sources, data collection inevitably stretched from July to November 2014. A good mix mainly in terms of age and ethnicity was ensured. The profile of the 30 interviewees is shown in [Appendix 1](#).

We also sought inputs from five employers, one work supervisor, two representatives from self-help groups, and two career coaches. This data was collected through face-to-face meetings, email or phone interviews.

All data collected was subsequently analysed using the principles of analytic induction (Charmaz 1983). Interview transcripts were coded iteratively as and when new categories emerged. This process entailed repeatedly returning to earlier coded transcripts for recoding. When the categories that emerge failed to support findings in existing academic literature, another round of transcript examination was undertaken. Interpretations stemmed from our understanding of theory and research, which was developed in a process that always called for a return to the data for support.

The preliminary findings were then put up for discussion through a reference group session that was organised in January 2015, which comprised 31 representatives from the government, companies, unions, self-help groups and academia. The reference group session also discussed the implications arising from the findings, and suggested areas for intervention. The composition of the reference group is shown in [Appendix 2](#).

1.4 Structure of Report

Chapter Two reviews the relevant academic literature. Chapter Three outlines the key findings in relation to the identity, learning and development of non-permanent workers in the three low-wage occupations. Chapter Four discusses the key implications to policy and pedagogy. Chapter Five summarises the study's recommendations.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Clarifying Terminology

There is a multitude of terms and metaphors to describe workers who are the subjects of this study, as shown in [Table 2](#). At the commencement of the larger study of non-permanent work in Singapore, the research team started off by using the terms ‘contingent’ and ‘precarious’. However, as explained in the review of the literature for the whole study (see Bound, Rushbrook, Evans, Waite and Karmel 2014), ‘contingent’ and ‘precarious’ are loaded terms. ‘Contingent’ workers are perceived as those who are able to navigate the getting and keeping of work to their own advantage through the development of social and mobility capital networks as well as the management of work-life balance and permeability; they possess the capacity to maintain current workplace skill and knowledge capabilities, and competently pursue meaningful, creative and self-fulfilling work. Moreover, they possess the aptitude to earn a ‘comfortable’ income and maintain a self-selected lifestyle (Allan 2002; Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Hall 2002 and 2004; McKeown 2005). On the other hand, ‘precarious work’ offers another discursive view that originates predominantly within the disciplines of sociology, industrial politics, adult education and workplace learning; and supported by global labour organisations and social movements, where precarious work suggests that the fundamental relationship between worker and employer is one of rupture, exploitation and manifest disadvantage (Brophy 2006; Ross 2008; Kallerberg 2009).

The definition is contested, so for these reasons we coined the term ‘transmutable’ workers when referring to non-permanent workers that are the subject of this study, as they are constantly transitioning across sites, types of work, projects and communities, and are adapting or ‘mutating’ to adapt. Interestingly, however, this study of non-permanent workers in Singapore’s low-wage occupations indicates a need to further refine and develop this concept, as the findings indicate that the ‘low wage’ casual workers in this study make fewer transitions than those in the other occupations studied. We will undertake further work on this conceptual knot in an upcoming research study that will be a cross-case analysis of all the occupational groups in this study – occupations in film and television, adult educators, technical theatre occupations and low-wage occupations. For the purposes of this report, we

will avoid the use of ‘contingent’ or ‘precarious’, and will use the less loaded term ‘non-permanent work’. However, we shall keep the terminology used by the authors when discussing the literature.

Table 2: Metaphors of non-permanent workers

| Contingent workers | | Precarious workers |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| temporary labour | itinerant experts | cognitariat |
| non-standard employment | protean workers | pre-cogs |
| self-employed | contract workers | disrupted workers |
| portfolio workers | freelancers | expendable workers |
| own account employment | boundaryless workers | bulimic workers |
| part-time workers | temporary employees | ‘feast or famine’ workers |
| market-mediated employment | sole proprietors | carnival workers |
| off-shore contingent workers | just-in-time workers | exploited workers |
| self-designed careers | non-standard employment | immaterial workers |
| | | own account workers |
| | | itinerant experts |
| | | permatemps |

Source: Bound, Rushbrook, Evans, Waite and Karmel (2014)

2.2 A “Precariat” Class or “Flexi-workers”?

By and large, we observe that ‘precarity’ is articulated more clearly in relation to the experiences of low-wage, non-permanent work. Academic research, grounded mainly on the experiences of non-permanent work arrangements in the U.S., Europe and Australia, indicates that non-permanent work is more likely to occur in low-wage

occupations and industries such as retail trade and services, and has a greater chance of being non-unionised. The work is characterised by jobs that require minimum skills, lack employment certainty and offers limited career progression. Because non-permanent workers are not seen as a permanent part of the workforce, employers do not typically invest in human capital development for this group. Intermediaries, such as temporary agencies, likewise do not consider them as part of their workforce even if the workers are on their payroll. Compared to their regular counterparts, non-permanent workers are said to earn reduced wages (approximately one-third less than those of regular workers on average) and receive fewer benefits such as health insurance and pensions. They are more likely to be immigrants, people of colour and women (Kalleberg, Reskin and Hudson 2000; Kalleberg 2000).

The evidence put forth in the literature is particularly damning with regards to the effects of non-permanent work on the skills development of workers. Lautsch (2002) finds that non-permanent workers tend to be assigned to positions that have more narrowly defined tasks than regular workers. Cappeli and Keller (2012) find that non-permanent work arrangements are utilised more where jobs appear easier to monitor, have clear deliverables and are less firm-specific. This also suggests the lack of opportunities for skills deepening. Padavic (2005) surfaces complaints by temporary workers about employers' desire to "drive" them to perform under pressure, as they are extra bodies called in because of time crunch. However, many studies have highlighted that non-permanent workers display pride and professionalism in their work just as their full-time counterparts do. Standing (2011) suggests that by design, however, non-permanent work arrangements tend to undermine work ethics and standards, as workers and employers are always entering into new arrangements.

In the context of employment uncertainty, progression is especially complex for the non-permanent worker in low-wage industries. Some may aspire for permanent positions in their current industries, while others seek positions outside the industry. In addition, the nature of these work arrangements compels individuals to attempt to increase their pay by increasing their paid working hours in similar occupational areas. This limits these workers' time to search for better jobs, learn new skills, take classes or obtain credentials (Smith and Halpin 2011). Where they pick up new

skills, these tend to offer horizontal but not vertical mobility. Admittedly, horizontal mobility is a challenge linked to low-wage work in general, given the absence of clear progression structures. Consequently, Smith and Halpin (2011) argue that given the barriers to building human capital, policy-makers should focus on improving the conditions of low-wage work and the design of jobs, rather than expect workers to move out of the non-permanent labour market on their own. This necessitates a closer look at the industry structure and job design in assessing the effects of non-permanent work for the low-wage worker.

Indeed, non-permanent work arrangements fit squarely into the global discussion in academic and policy circles regarding the rise of “bad jobs”. Researchers and observers are increasingly calling for governments to look beyond job creation by also looking at the quality of jobs being created. A range of job quality indices have been proposed, but typical components include pay, skills, autonomy, contractual stability, health and safety risks and work-life balance (see Warhurst et al. (eds) 2012, for a robust discussion). Non-permanent work in low-wage occupations thus tend to be seen as a category of “bad jobs” that require urgent attention. In particular, they fall short in terms of autonomy, contractual stability, and health and safety risks.

It has been argued that the ‘precarious’ worker may be found in sites that are pay lower and require less formal education, while the ‘contingent’ worker may be found in sites that pay higher and require more formal education. The latter is said to have the capacity to develop social and mobility capital networks to negotiate work, maintain workplace skill and knowledge capabilities, and competently pursue meaningful, creative and self-fulfilling work through non-permanent work arrangements. Other research suggests a conflation of the two types of workers (Holly and Rainnie 2012; McKeown 2005; Ross 2008; Waterhouse, Wilson and Ewer 1999). In a study of Australian nurses, for instance, part-time nurses demonstrate lower levels of identity commitment and more negative career success perceptions than full-time nurses (Allen 2011). IAL’s own research study on non-permanent workers in creative sectors suggest that the workers too have difficulty mitigating income and employment risks at varying levels, even when they value non-permanent work arrangements as vital to the development of their craft (Bound et al. 2014; Karmel, Bound and Rushbrook 2014; Nur et al. 2014).

In the final analysis, it is necessary to move beyond rigid conceptualisation of the non-permanent worker as either 'precarious' or 'contingent'. The evidence in the academic literature suggests that the experience of non-permanent work in low-wage sectors is experienced differently by different workers. For some, non-permanent work is seen as inferior to full-time, permanent employment, which becomes a "marker of success" and even a "adult status" (Barker 1998; Newman 1999:Chap. 4). Consequently, the workers in such arrangements are said to have a "spoiled identity" (Henson 1996). In interviews with temporary workers, Padavic (2005) notes that many in effect experience isolation. Some display themselves to their current employers with a view to being re-contracted into a permanent position, the opportunities for which were typically not forthcoming. Others see it as an interim arrangement while they seek for their dream job in another industry. However, not all have negative experiences of non-permanent work arrangements in low-wage occupations. There is also evidence that some workers opt for such arrangements for reasons like the need for flexible hours because of caring responsibilities, or a general preference for jobs with lower accountability. While the understanding of the nature of the job and working conditions is valuable, it is equally crucial to understand how workers view themselves and their work, as this shapes their agency in terms of learning and development. It is important to understand their vocational identity formation because such identity is fundamental to the "how" and "why" of workplace practice.

2.3 Identity, Learning and Development

The relationship between identity and learning is relational, dynamic and provisional (Fenwick 2004; Fenwick 2000). Learning, identity and what is generally referred to as 'context' (situated and wider contexts) are embedded within one another. Agency for learning is mediated by individual sense-making of the context, as the context is mediated by the actions of individuals and groups, informing "ways of knowing, doing, and feeling", or in other words, "a way of being" (Edwards and Usher 1996). Any identity is "relational to its conditions of existence; any change in the latter is bound to affect the former" (Du Gay 1996, p.184).

Identification with an occupation can take different forms and has multiple facets. It is largely dependent not only on the individual but on the context, and can include

visible and invisible aspects, flexible and resistant forms (Kirpal, Brown and Diff 2007); it can be negotiated by employees contributing to, reinforcing, or perhaps changing corporate and/or vocational practices. The ways in which people forge identities, individually and collectively, within and through their practices are well-captured by Kirpal (2011). Cases drawn from IT professions and nursing, in particular, radiate different senses of themselves as particular kinds of workers as well as people with particular personal interests and commitments. These senses of self are thus multi-dimensional, and represent the variety of ways in which people position themselves in relation to their employment, professional development and other purposeful activities that constitute work. All forms of work contribute to identities, which are realised through unpaid as well as paid work, whether at home, in the family or community.

Much literature emphasise the importance of identity “realisation” through undertaking different roles (see “Identity Theory”) and developing identities through doing work tasks competently (Stryker 1980; Brockmann 2012). Wenger argues that we produce our identities through the practices we engage in (and we also define ourselves by those we do not engage in) (Wenger 1998, p.164). Felstead, Fuller, Jewson, and Unwin (2009) emphasise that occupational/work identities are always performed. The role of individual agency and co-participation are important in the development of occupational identities through doing the work (Billett 2001).

Unlike permanent workers, non-permanent workers move across organisations, work with different teams and undertake different aspects of work within their field of expertise. Permanent workers have opportunities to align their goals and search for personal meaning within the cultural norms and forms of conduct of the company they work for (Du Gay 1996). Non-permanent workers, however, may stand apart from these norms, including aspects of identity such as individual responsibility and personal accountability (Cote 2006; Gotski et al. 2010).

As non-permanent workers move between sites of practice, they think and feel their ways in occupational and social identities, necessitating different modes of knowledge recontextualisation and a capacity to develop and maintain “mobility capital” or an ability to transition from one job to another (Forrier, Sels and Styne 2009). Knowledge recontextualisation, including attitudes, values and beliefs, lead to

longer term and ongoing recontextualisation in the learner/ adult professional (Evans, Guile and Harris 2009).

Some argue that non-permanent workers are denied the opportunity to develop cohesive work-based identities because these workers are not part of workplace interaction in the same ways that more permanent workers are. Richard Sennett has argued that 'flexible capitalism', with its concomitant turn towards short-term, contractual work, has corroded the capacity of individuals to form meaningful and coherent identities and has promoted social anomie (social instability and alienation) (Sennett 1998). In a similar vein, Guy Standing argues that "those in the precariat lack a work-based identity... The precariat does not feel part of a solidaristic labour community. This intensifies a sense of alienation and instrumentality in what they have to do." (Standing 2011, p. 12). According to Standing, labour flexibility also hinders peer group interaction and has negative impact on work ethics which become "constantly contestable and opportunistic". (Standing 2011, p. 23). Winson and Leach argue that non-permanent work in Canada has disrupted communities and has undermined "sustained organisational contexts in which workers often develop cohesive relationships, even long-term friendships, and collective support." (Winson and Leach 2003, as cited in Fenwick 2012 p. 597). According to Boswell et al., contractor employees may feel like lesser employees or "second-class citizens" relative to standard employees of a company or organisation (Boswell et al., 2012, p.456). In keeping with "social exchange theory" (Blau 1964; Homans 1958, as cited in Boswell et al. 2012, p. 456), which maintains that individuals exchange their contributions for certain inducements provided by an organisation, non-permanent work may lead to individuals expressing less "affective commitment" to the organisation in question. However, Perrons (2003) cautions against assuming that non-permanent employment inevitably creates social fragmentation, and draws attention to the potential for communal and affective ties to be fostered through the development of new working arrangements.

This contested terrain of identity formation among non-permanent workers arises because of the many different forms of engagement of these workers. It is valuable to understand how non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations in Singapore see themselves and identify with the people they work with. By understanding the motivations the nature of the work relationships and the social interactions and

practices of the workers, we develop a better understanding of how they grow, develop and constantly evolve in their identities as they constantly move across organisations, teams and roles, including their expectations in different working environments.

2.4 The Singapore Developmental State

A very important context in understanding vocational identity-formation of the low-wage worker is the nation-state, and this is especially so in Singapore which has been conceptualised as a “developmental state” in the political economy literature. A “developmental state” refers to a state that actively intervenes in both the economic and social spheres to organise activities that drive economic growth (Doner, Richie and Slater 2004; Sung 2011). Research conducted in Singapore suggests that globalisation and economic restructuring have contributed to widening income inequality and stagnating wages for low-skilled occupations (Lim and Lee 2010; Yeoh 2007 in Ng 2013). Some analysts go further to suggest that the stagnating wages is a residue of Singapore’s earlier successes as a developmental state in the 1980s, which was built on an export-oriented growth based on low costs and low wages. The local workforce participated significantly in the activities, and low-skilled foreign labour was brought in to “supplement” the local workforce. On balance, this had the effect of raising wages across the board and through sustained economic growth. The 2000s saw Singapore shifting to more knowledge-extensive activities, but it did not close the floodgates to low-skilled foreign workers who now are said to have “supplanted” the local workforce, leading to depressed wages (Tan 2012; Thum in Low and Vendaketh 2014). Although by no means conclusive, this analysis suggests that the foreign labour policy of the Singapore developmental state may contribute in no small ways to the deterioration of the plight of the Singaporean low-wage worker.

Ng (2013) specifically identifies the emergence of low-earning families in Singapore who cannot sustain their livelihoods without a helping hand. To this, the government has responded with various social policies and short-term financial assistance schemes that emphasise movement into employment. Ng, however, found this to be insufficient because of the complexities among Singapore’s “working poor” that require solutions beyond short-term financial assistance and training that functions

mainly as a means to reduce barriers to employment. Based on a survey of 466 Work Support Program (WSP) recipients, Ng found that the mean household earnings of recipients was \$942, that 1.34% had polytechnic or above education (compared to 33% of individuals in a comparable age range) while 41% had only a primary education or below. 58% of the respondents were working, with 6.9% having husbands and wives working fewer than three out of every six months. Non-economic stressors such as divorce and health issues were found to be higher for this group compared to national rates (e.g. divorce rate of 17% compared to general divorce rate of 0.75%; 19% with prison experience; 40% with a chronic health condition that limited work performance; 39% had generalised anxiety disorder; 21% had child-related problems).

Like the above-mentioned study on WSP recipients, research in low-wage work in Singapore often includes non-permanent workers. However, there has been no dedicated study focusing solely on the experiences of these non-permanent workers. IAL's earlier study on non-permanent workers in the technical theatre industry (Nur et al. 2014) suggests that a marked distinction may exist between the low-wage permanent and non-permanent worker that will make zooming in on the experiences of the latter valuable in informing policy and academic debates on low-wage work in Singapore. Our study found that in the context of stagnating or declining real wages, the worker with limited qualifications engages in non-permanent work arrangements as he or she can potentially earn more in such jobs than the permanent jobs he or she is eligible for. This finding may put the experience of the Singapore's low-wage, non-permanent workers as fundamentally different from their counterparts in the advanced economies. We aim to deepen this finding in this study of non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations in Singapore. The omission of maximum income in the design of this study is driven by this purpose.

At another level, academic literature indicates that, as a means to instil broad-based labour discipline and incentivise workers' participation in the state's economic activities, the developmental state delivers broad social security payments as opposed to narrow payments to specific labour sectors, (Doner, Richie and Slater 2004). In Singapore, this is done through the Central Provident Fund (CPF), whereby forced compulsory savings is mandated through employers (Sung 2011). Through the CPF, workers' access to basic needs such as housing and retirement are greatly

enhanced. Because non-permanent work tends not to include CPF contributions, taking on such work arrangements has far-reaching consequences in the exercise of citizenry in ways beyond the employment rights discussed in Western-based academic literature.

2.5 Summary

In summary, academic literature that captures the experiences of workers in the West tend to conceptualise non-permanent arrangements in low-wage work as leading to precarity, given that workers tend to be paid less, experience poorer working conditions, and are limited in their ability to develop their skills and progress at work. The extent to which this concept applies to the non-permanent workers in Singapore's low-wage occupations deserves closer examination. Research on Singapore's low-wage workers tends to focus on the trend of stagnating wages, and the effects of non-economic stressors on this group of workers. They typically do not put the spotlight on the casual workers, who might experience low-wage work differently. We surface here an important conceptual tool of vocational identity-formation to enable a more holistic understanding of the worker in his or her context. The context does not relate only to the workers' personal context and workplace practices in non-permanent work, but also to the nation-state of Singapore as a developmental state with strong intervention in various economic and social spheres. We shall present the main findings of this study in the next chapter.

3.0 FINDINGS

3.1 Overview

We present here our key findings in relation to the identity, learning and development of non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations. The findings are summarised across the following areas:

- Descriptions of non-permanent work arrangements
- Motivations for entry into non-permanent work arrangements
- Development of a work identity
- Skills development and progression opportunities
- Attitude to and opportunities for learning
- Social assistance and the Central Provident Fund (CPF)

3.2 Description of Non-permanent Work Arrangements

How workers describe their work arrangements offer one lens to gain understanding of how they see themselves and their work. In our interviews, the most popular terminology that the workers use is “part-time”, even as they go on to elaborate that they work from Mondays to Fridays and from 9am to 5.30pm. The next popular term is “freelance”. Other terms used are “temporary”, “casual”, “sub-con(tracting)” or “commission-based.” One interviewee shares that he proactively checked his employment status with Ministry for Manpower (MOM), and was given the term “self-employed.” The five employers we spoke to likewise use the terms “part-time”, “temporary”, and “casual”.

While the terms that the workers use tend to evoke some sense of impermanence, their actual description of the work arrangements suggests otherwise. As one F&B worker puts it, “this is permanent...every day work, every day money...either I want or don’t want [sic]”. This may suggest that non-permanent work in the occupations surveyed is taken up by the workers on a full-time basis, and they have the flexibility to take it on and reject it at will. This mirrors the complaints by employers that these workers “come and go”. It appears to suggest that it is the workers that have the upper hand in these arrangements, and that they do not experience the kind of employment uncertainty illustrated in the academic literature discussed in the

preceding chapter. We will investigate this difference further in this chapter. Because of the lack of consistent terminology used by both interviewees and employers, we will use the term ‘non-permanent’ when describing the work arrangements broadly, and employ the specific terms used by the workers when they describe their own work.

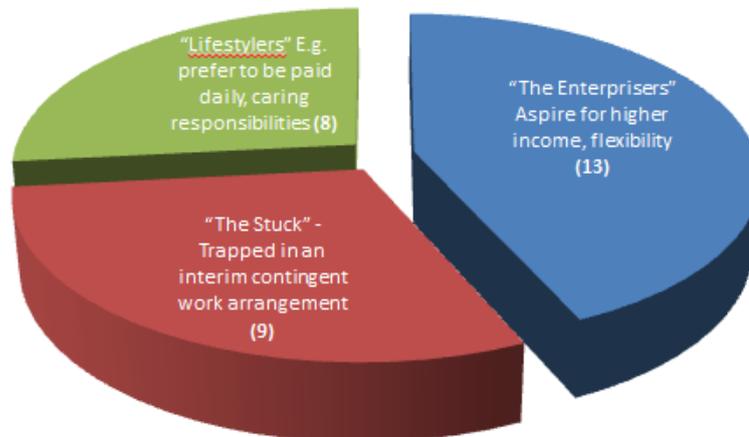
3.3 Motivation for Entry into Non-permanent Work Arrangements

It is easy to enter the low-wage sectors in Singapore and elsewhere, and this is even more so for non-permanent work. For despatch or delivery jobs, a riding or driving license is the main requirement for entry. In F&B, the National Environment Agency (NEA) requires workers to undertake a 7.5 hours of WSQ’s Follow Food and Beverage Safety and Hygiene Policies and Procedures course. Beyond these national-level requirements, there is practically very little requirement at the firm level beyond a demonstration of the individual’s willingness to work. Low-wage sectors thus attract a range of non-permanent workers. From our interviews with the 30 non-permanent workers, we identify three distinct profiles that give an insight into the workers’ motivations for entering non-permanent work, which in turn shape their work identities considerably. The profiles are summarised in [Table 3](#) and [Chart 1](#).

Table 3: Key profiles of workers in low-wage occupations working full-time in non-permanent work arrangements

| Type | Description |
|------------------------|--|
| <i>The Enterpriser</i> | Workers who assess that they can earn more and enjoy greater autonomy if they are in a non-permanent work arrangement |
| <i>The Stuck</i> | Workers who take on non-permanent work as an interim arrangement, but are unwilling to transit into their desired permanent jobs |
| <i>The Lifestyler</i> | Workers who opt for non-permanent work because of lifestyle needs or preferences (e.g. preference to get daily wages or less demanding work scope, those with caring responsibilities) |

Chart 1: Breakdown of key profiles of respondents



Profile 1 - The Enterpriser

Lai Ming, 38, started work at the age of 14 in a range of casual F&B jobs immediately after completing his Primary 8 education. After National Service, he worked as a despatch rider in a permanent position for four years before opting to work on a commission basis. He made the switch because "it pays better". "You work more, [you] earn more." The pay for permanent work, on the other hand, never increases, he says. Freelancing also offers greater flexibility or "freedom" as he calls it. Once he completes his work, he can head home, and this is difficult to do for permanent work. He laments the lack of CPF contributions and medical benefits in his current work. He puts in some contributions into his Medisave account, but is unable to save more. For these reasons, he is thinking of securing a permanent job as a delivery man driving a "big lorry", but only if the pay is right.

Kamal, 51, amassed 20 years of experience in the hotel industry, but was laid off as part of his company's cost-cutting measures. His attempt at finding a similar job as a bell captain was met with little success. Employers wanted him to begin all over again as a bell boy drawing a pay of \$1 400-\$1 500. This was unacceptable to him as his children were moving into higher education. He took on two despatch jobs, a main position to deliver letters on a commission basis, and a part-time position in a fast-food outlet. This currently nets him \$3 500 a month in total, much higher than the \$2 000 pay that he drew as a bell captain. Having checked with MOM that he is identified as "self-employed", he makes sure that he has insurance coverage, and makes self-contributions to CPF. It has been 10 years since he moved to the despatch position. From time to time, he would try to apply for permanent jobs (e.g. as a tower crane operator) when he

gets tired of the hours and income uncertainty in his current position. However, the generally higher income and greater flexibility as a non-permanent worker remain compelling.

Khairi, 45, was working as a storeman earning \$1 000+ when he heard from his despatch rider friends that they earned much more. That motivated him to join a courier company as a despatch rider, drawing an income on a commission basis. Inspired by his boss, whom he said became a millionaire through the delivery service, he decided to get his own contracts. It was tough initially, but soon his business took off. He began recruiting despatch riders to assist him, and currently has 4 such staff whom he employs on a permanent basis. He draws a monthly income of \$4 000 for around six hours of work each day, excluding additional profits he might make in a financial year. On whether he plans to scale up his business, he says he lacked capital as well as “flowery language” that would help him net more lucrative contracts. Given his educational qualifications as a VITB graduate, he says he is pretty contented with the current arrangement.

The Enterprisers have, first and foremost, determined that they have weak economic worth in society because of their perceived low level of educational qualifications. They tend to have undertaken permanent work previously but reach a barrier in progression. They make the best of their situation by opting for non-permanent work arrangements to enjoy better pay and a higher level of flexibility. Both Lai Ming and Khairi deliberately left permanent work to take on non-permanent work in the same industry. Their experience thus stands in sharp contrast to those surfaced in literature on non-permanent work arrangements in advanced industrial economies, in which non-permanent work was accessed because permanent jobs were hard to get. The *Enterprisers* note that the higher pay excludes important benefits like CPF contributions, bonuses and medical leave. However, because of the potential to scale their income to double or triple what they would have earned in permanent work, they opt to take the risk. Kamal is highly unusual in how he plans his finances through self-contributions to CPF. Some are like Lai Ming who puts in a small amount into the Medisave Account. However, by and large, our interviewees say that many of their peers do not even do this bare minimum, and in fact tend to ask for advance pay. There is a segment displaying entrepreneurial spirit like Khairi,

who moves on to open a micro-business securing contracts and maintaining a pool of staff. From time to time, the long hours and lack of benefits prompt *The Enterprisers* to seek out permanent positions. Having assessed that they are better off in a non-permanent work arrangement in the industry they are in, they tend to look outside of their industry when seeking permanent work, leading to fragmentation in their occupational narratives. Kamal, for instance, has taken up courses as a tower crane operator. Another *Enterpriser*, Jefri, a removalist, applied to be a cleaning supervisor which was his last permanent job, even though he had left the industry 30 years ago. That they seek out opportunities outside the industry they are in has important implications on their identification with their work, a point which we will discuss in the next section.

Profile 2 - *The Stuck*

Faris, 32, was working in the security line before he left to take up a work-cum-study position to pursue a diploma in the construction industry. The job did not materialise when his new employer opted to retain him as a worker at a lower pay, and did not send him for studies. As an interim measure, he took on a despatch job with a subcontractor that provided delivery services to a restaurant chain, while applying for permanent positions. However, most jobs offered less than \$1 500 which is unacceptable to him. The very restaurant chain that he supports offered him a full-time position at \$1 100-1 200, which also comes with wider responsibilities as he has to cover island-wide delivery. Securing a job with a higher basic is important to him as he is trying to apply for a HDB loan for his flat. It has been almost a year since he started his job search, and his current interim job adds little to his resume, as employers even ask if he might moonlight as a despatch rider if they were to take him. He is worried about his job prospects, as he is "already 32" and no one employs him.

Tisha, 26, has been working in the banquet industry for three years as a casual worker. She holds this job while looking for a permanent one. She has Secondary 3 qualifications, and 10 years of experience in a range of administrative contract positions. Her last contract position ended just as she was about to deliver her first child. Upon re-entry into the job market, she has had little luck in securing similar administrative positions, which she prefers because of childcare responsibilities. She sought the assistance of the Community Development Council (CDC) that arranged for her to go for interviews, but she was unsuccessful in her job applications. As an interim measure, she signed up with a job agency as F&B server. Under this arrangement, she is given a list of hotels and timing slots, and she moves across hotels throughout the week. The CDC stopped helping when they knew that she was drawing an income based on CPF contribution records. Although she now works as a casual worker six times a week, she does not want a permanent position in the industry because of the long hours. She continues to apply for permanent positions in administration as and when she comes across them.

Those who are stuck have troubles navigating the employment terrain to seek their preferred jobs. In our interviewee pool, they may be young people in their 20s and 30s, and usually have O-levels or ITE certification but have difficulty finding their preferred permanent jobs. They may also be older workers, who have been laid off and are still trying to secure their desired permanent work. They may also be ex-offenders. Typically, low pay is an issue. Zainal, who fits in the “Stuck” profile, is currently working in F&B company as a kitchen helper. He has had 30 years of experience as a forklift driver, and left his long-time job because of cost-cutting measures. He currently helps out in a relative’s *satay* stall in the interim. He recounts that he “laughed” when he was offered a permanent job as a forklift driver for \$1 400 during his job search. Faris has the same complaint. Employers offered him a salary of less than \$1 400, which was much reduced from the \$1 800 that he had been drawing previously. This is unacceptable to him as he requires a higher basic income to secure a HDB loan. Aside from these, the “Stuck” may also perceive other barriers to employment. Tisha is not alone in citing ethnicity as an issue, as employers are said to prefer Mandarin-speaking staffs. On the whole, their non-presence in

the industry they are seeking employment in is detrimental to their employability. Faris, for instance, was asked by employers if he might moonlight as a despatch rider if he were offered a permanent position. Tisha's chances of securing an administrative job are further dimmed now, since she has worked in another industry for three years. We note that this group are not adverse to seek training and re-training, but the jobs they are interested in value recent work experiences as opposed to skills qualifications. As grudging participants in non-permanent work arrangements, their motivation for entry impacts the development of a vocational identity in the industry they work in.

Profile 3 - The Lifestyler

De Wei, 58, has been working in daily-rated positions in the shipping industry for most of his working life. He was first an electrician and then did plumbing and fitting because "the pay was higher". He honed his skills by learning from others, and also has a series of licenses. He claims that the entry of foreign workers into the shipping industry in the 1990s affected the job opportunities for Singaporeans in terms of availability of jobs, pay, and job scope. He left the industry and has since been working in a range of casual positions such as F&B helper, flyer distributor and removalist. He is unhappy as the "pay is low and the bosses' demands are high". He claims that he can get a permanent job for \$2 000, but it might lead to him losing his rental flat, which is more valuable to him. He also prefers to be paid daily, because it is easier to manage his finances that way. For these reasons, casual jobs continue to appeal to him.

Natalie, 27, worked in the retail sector until her grandmother fell ill and required dialysis. This means that she needs a job with more flexible hours. She first worked part-time in F&B before taking on an hourly-rated assignment as a sales and marketing executive in a mover company, where she also doubles as a removalist. She values the flexibility, and also notes that she could earn as much in her current job as before by working similar hours but on a schedule that fits her caring responsibilities.

De Wei and Natalie make their employment choices based on lifestyle preferences or constraints. For De Wei, being paid daily was important as he was unable or unwilling to plan out his finances over longer stretches of time. Those like De Wei tend to be on some form of government support, usually through the rental flat scheme. They may drift in and out of both permanent and non-permanent work

arrangements, not staying long in jobs. De Wei for instance claims that he can easily secure a permanent job that will pay him \$2 000 a month, but he avoids such jobs as he may then lose his rental flat. Jobs, he says, are “never permanent”. The case of Natalie points to the need to offer more flexi-work arrangements in the context of caregiving for an ageing population. Again, it is circumstances that motivate the workers’ entry into the non-permanent work industry.

3.4 Development of a Work Identity

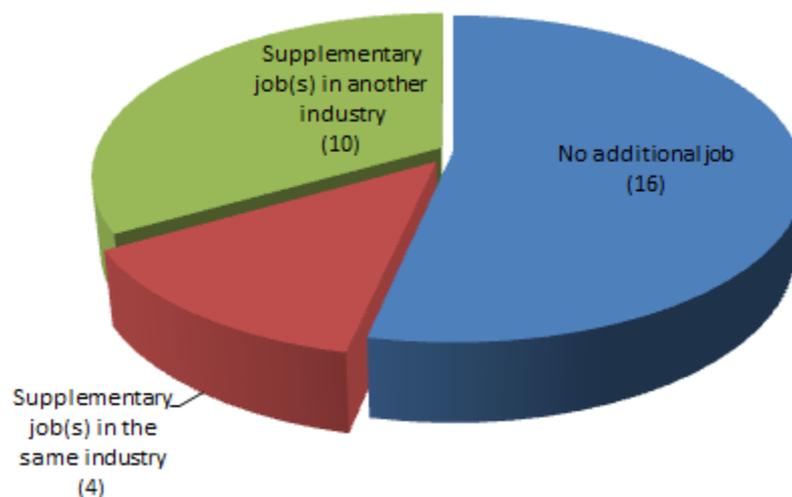
In analysing the workers’ motivations for opting for non-permanent work arrangements in low-wage occupations, it becomes valuable to contrast their experiences with the non-permanent workers in professional sectors like the creative industries or adult education which were covered by IAL’s earlier phases of study (see Bound et al. 2014; Karmel, Bound and Rushbrook 2014; Nur et al. 2014). For non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations, their entry into the industry is motivated by personal circumstances such as low initial qualifications, retrenchment or caring responsibilities. Freelance or casual work gives them access to higher income, fits their lifestyle better or functions as an interim measure. It is not fundamental to craft development, as they would prefer a permanent job if their needs or wants are met. This motivation for entry stands in sharp contrast to the “way of being” for most freelancers in professional sectors who value non-permanent work arrangement as a means to access diverse jobs and experiences that are vital to honing their craft.

Correspondingly, while the “way of being” of freelancers in professional sectors values access to multiple employers, casual workers tend to demonstrate loyalty to one or a few employers at any one time in order to secure a steady stream of work. In the moving industry for instance, casual workers have official polo T-shirts from a few mover companies, and don them just like their permanent counterpart. The difference, one supervisor tells us, is insidious. The casual worker tends to bend the rules such as tucking out his T-shirt or donning long hair. Permanent employees, however, have to abide by strict dress code of tucked-in polo T-shirts and neatly-groomed hair. That the workers value demonstrating their worth to one or a few employers but openly flaunt company’s rules and regulations suggest the upper hand that they have in the context of the tight employment market, in which the

demand for such workers is high and the supply is short. Employers opine that it is not easy to get them as they “choose and pick their work and pay”. The demand situation is exacerbated when others or players in the same industry recruit from the same pool of casual workers.

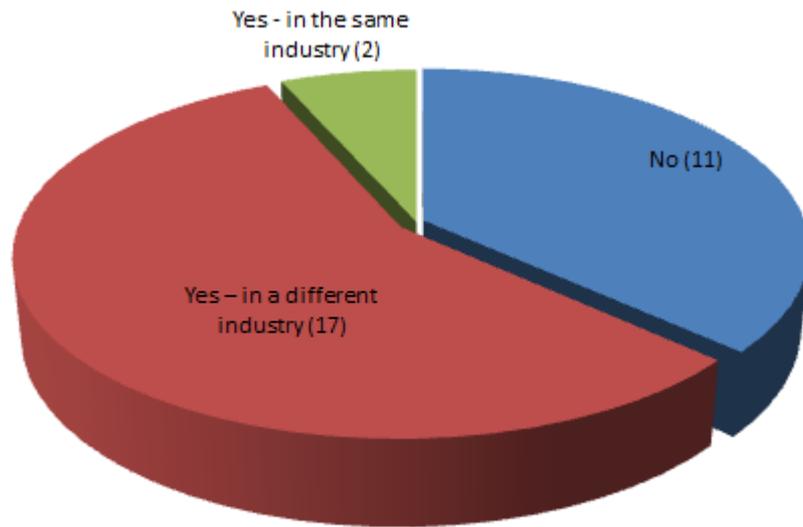
Indeed, while freelancers in professional sectors stay in their industry to hone their craft, the casual workers are open to moving across industries to another casual job. Tisha, 32, is employed by a manpower agency to work as F&B casual worker across a range of hotels. From time to time, she will take up other casual work assignments such as stock-taking for supermarkets. Nazri is a freelance mover during weekdays, and a F&B casual during weekends. Chart 2 shows that one-third of our interviewees have a supplementary job outside the main industry that they are in.

Chart 2: Supplementary job(s)



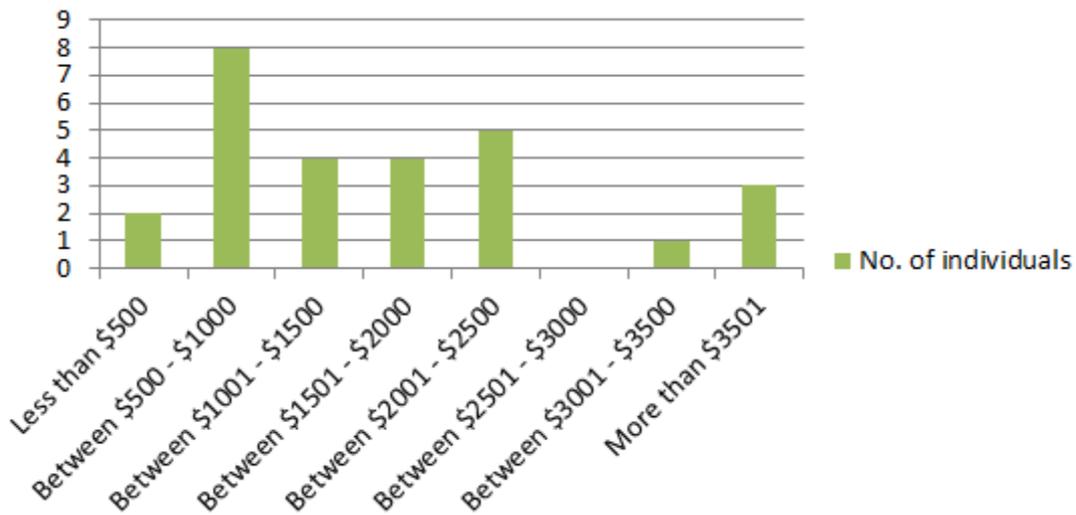
If the casual workers are to seek permanent work, they will opt for opportunities outside the industry they are in, having rationalised at the onset that permanent positions in the industry they are in are not worth it. Our data suggests that more than half of our interviewees are in fact attempting or have recently attempted to access permanent jobs outside the industry they are currently in (Chart 3).

Chart 3: Attempt(s) to access permanent jobs



The *raison d'être* for engaging in casual work is thus linked more to wider structural issues related to pay and other forms of labour market inflexibility, rather than craft development. During our interviews, the casual workers speak widely of their perceived barriers to seeking permanent employment. The most oft-cited reason is low pay that is insufficient to keep up with rising costs of living. Many lament that employers offer unrealistic pay at under \$1 500, which means a lower take-home pay because of CPF contributions. Non-permanent work offers the promise of much higher pay, and comes with greater autonomy. Some interviewees share that they can earn as high as \$6 000 a month and it is this possibility that keeps many going. The reality is that the median monthly income of the workers interviewed is between \$1 001-\$1 500 a month (see [Chart 4](#)). However, because they do not pay employee CPF contributions, their take home pay is higher than if they were to settle for permanent jobs.

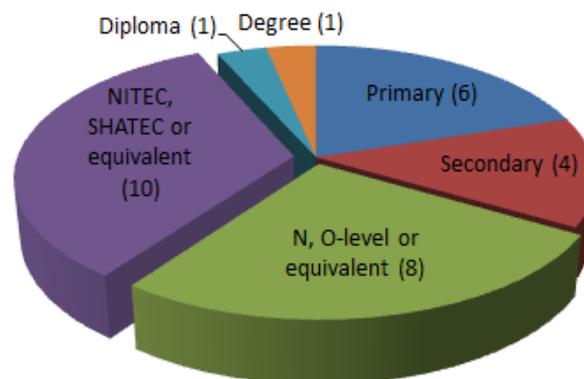
Chart 4: Monthly income in Singapore dollars



As noted in the preceding chapter, wage depression and the role of foreign labour policy are recurring themes within the academic and policy circles in Singapore. For the non-permanent workers interviewed, they typically do not speak about the influx of foreign workers as driving down wages, but rather as unfairly altering job scopes and work norms. Interviewees explain that employers have unfair demands that a Singaporean will not comply with, but a foreign worker will because of fear of repatriation or other penalties. De Wei says that where previously a server's job was to serve, with the entry of foreign workers, the server now has to do three roles of serving, helping out in the kitchen, and cleaning – all at the same pay. This may be viewed by the employer as increasing labour productivity, and may not necessarily be linked to the influx of foreign workers, but is articulated by the Singaporean worker as exploitation because the remuneration remains unchanged. Chee Hwee, currently a freelance despatch rider, similarly talks about the difficulties in his old job in construction, from which he left after the industry started employing more foreign workers. As a Singaporean, he had objected when bosses made unreasonable work requests that posed safety risks. Foreign workers were unable to make the same objection, which made them more desirable to employers. It appears that it is this change in work norms that drives the Singaporean worker away and leads him or her to seek alternative work, only to get frustrated by the low wages offered by other employers.

Low educational qualifications have also been cited as a barrier to employment. Our data, however, suggests that more than half of the workers interviewed have O-level qualifications and beyond, but the qualification is insufficient to net a permanent job at their desired pay (see Chart 5).

Chart 5: Initial educational qualifications of respondents



Ageist practices have also been cited as barriers to entry into permanent jobs, but a closer examination demonstrates that the main barrier is employers' unwillingness to pay for accumulated skills and experience. Zainal, who has 30 years of experience as a forklift driver, does not have difficulty securing another job as a forklift driver, but the offered pay of \$1 400 is unacceptable to him. He appears to have a passion for his work in the logistics industry, but is now compelled to look elsewhere for more attractive job opportunities. He recounts with pride how his old boss relied on him for difficult jobs in the warehouse, which could not be done by less experienced forklift drivers. New potential employers will not be able to "experience" the skills he has, which he believes may help him justify a higher pay. Kamal, a bell captain turned despatch rider, is a similar example of a veteran having to start at the base all over again despite his strong interest and long years of experience in the hotel industry. Making Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) more widely accessible may have been valuable in keeping them in the same industry, provided that employers not only recognise such certifications but are willing to pay for the accumulated skills and experience.

In addition to higher wages, the workers highlight to us that casual work offers greater autonomy for them in terms of flexibility in timing. For some, the work hours demanded of them becomes shorter than if they had been in permanent work. Both

Lai Ming and Khairi say their work starts at 10am, and finish by 3pm on most days. Kamal says that he has to perform shift work even on weekends when he was working full-time as a bell captain. His current full-time job as a despatch rider on a commission basis only requires him to work from 9am to 5pm, Mondays to Fridays. He is so bored after work, so he works on a part-time position as a fast-food delivery rider. One permanent supervisor in the removalist industry likewise relates that non-permanent movers prefer such arrangements as they can go back home once they finish their work. On the other hand, the permanent staff has to report back to the operational department to wait for the next assignment. Again, such experiences stand in sharp contrast with academic literature regarding the experiences in Western economies where casual workers are compelled to put in long hours to boost their income, which come in the way of their job search (Smith and Halpin 2011).

On the whole, the development of a vocational identity is weak for the casual worker in low-wage occupation, who also tends to have a haphazard occupational narrative as a consequence of navigating across industries in search of his or her preferred job. Their work identity is first and foremost linked to their desire for a more comfortable standard of living for themselves and their families, or to the special lifestyle preferences or constraints, rather than to a passion for the vocation or craft as is the case for most non-permanent workers in the creative and adult education sectors. This does not mean that the casual workers do not talk about their work with pride. Like the interviewees of Pavlavi (2005), a sizeable number of workers we interviewed speak extensively about how they put in their best for their work, and give rich descriptions of the tasks they undertake. We note, however, that vocational identity is shaped not just by personal motivations but also by the workers' interactions with the wider environment. As Section 3.4 shows, there are limits to how the workers can hone their craft in the context of the design of casual work arrangements. The way they are fitted into the production process and the lack of progression routes limit vocational identity formation, and this is exacerbated by their circumstantial motivations for entering the sector.

3.5 Job Design, Skills Development and Progression

By and large, while our interviewees can give rich description of the tasks they undertake, they have difficulty articulating their specific occupations. Esther, who works as a casual worker serving beer, describes her occupation simply as “pour beer”. Borhan, aged 50, states that his previous permanent occupations were as moneychanger and retail assistant. Currently, he runs a *kebab* stall for his boss. Responsible for preparing and cutting the meat, he calls it an art to be mastered and even dons a chef apron. However, he is reluctant to call himself a chef, and insists on the term “run the show” as he says that is essentially what he does. Even those displaying the entrepreneurial spirit do not regard themselves as the boss of the pool of staff they manage – rather, they tend to identify themselves as “the coordinator” even though they are essentially the pay-master. Their work identity is thus conceived in terms of tasks, as opposed to job role or occupation that entails a broader sense of self and purpose. This in effect limits agency in terms of self-development, as the worker is unable to see the whole in terms of his contributions, which narrows his options.

Skills-wise, the interviewees indicate that there are challenges when one starts the job, but it becomes simple once the worker masters the routine. Kamal’s job as a fast-food despatch rider entails knowing which food item to deliver, preparing the paperwork, planning his route, navigating weather and traffic conditions, looking out for his personal safety, and managing difficult clients. A range of skills is required, but this is picked up quite quickly. Consequently, he describes his job in very simple terms:

“Three magic words – ‘good morning/afternoon’, ‘thank you’, ‘enjoy your meal.’. Take the money, go back to the (restaurant), and send again. That’s all.”

Kamal’s experience suggests that there is likely to be a steep learning curve for casual work at the onset, but skills are picked up very quickly. Stagnation sets in because of the absence of opportunities for developmental learning and challenge linked to the way jobs are designed. Most challenges are recurring and are associated with the weather (e.g. rain) or rising costs such as the government’s tax of owning a vehicle or Certificate of Entitlement (COE). The situation here thus

mirrors that observed in non-permanent work arrangements in low-wage sectors in the West, which similarly entail a narrowly defined range of tasks that workers pick up easily with time. This same situation is also observed in the removalist industry. Jefri, a freelance mover who supervises a team, talks about the recurring challenge of managing difficult or fussy clients who do not trust the “professionalism” of his team to handle their precious belongings. Problems, however, are handed over to the “office” where a permanent employee takes over to manage the unreasonable customers. His main challenge is to protect his interest and that of his team in order to ensure that clients do not make wild claims such as his team has damaged their property, which would entail a penalty to the team. This is not to say that the casual workers do not present themselves as responsible professionals. Many do, and they take pride of their work. However, the job requirements in non-permanent work are defined narrowly for easy outsourcing. As one employer explains:

“Casual workers are assigned to take up much simpler tasks and jobs that may not require relevant experience, knowledge or skill set. They are extra pair of hands to aid the company especially for short-term assignments.”

Indeed, narrowly-defined job tasks are characteristic of most low-wage jobs, but the above quote suggests that non-permanent jobs in low-wage occupations are even more narrowly-defined. In addition, the context of casual work arrangements poses a unique challenge to the deepening of skills in ways not experienced by the permanent worker. Bakar, a permanent quality surveyor in a leading removalist firm, explains:

“I spend more time doing QC (Quality Control) on jobs assigned to freelance movers. They are paid by day, so it is in their interest to finish a job quickly, so that they can do more jobs. Quality suffers. Permanent workers tend to take longer time to complete their jobs, but the quality is there.”

The comments from Nazri, a freelance removalist, echo Bakar’s observation. While Nazri articulates the importance of being attentive to details and being tactful in handling clients, he also highlights “momentum” in terms of how fast the team can complete a job, which Bakar says comes in the way of quality. This suggests that a

non-permanent work arrangement may disincentivise skills development, because short-cuts pay better as workers can then move on to the next assignment. This mirrors the observation by Standing (2011) on the negative impact of non-permanent work arrangements on the development of work ethics and standards that becomes constantly contestable.

Another limitation of non-permanent work arrangements is that work is organised around homophilious (networks of similar people) informal networks. Nazri worked in the nightlife industry for 10 years as a permanent staff managing security in a nightclub. Personal circumstances compelled him to leave his permanent job, and he took on a freelance mover job that he has performed for two years. He was able to share in great detail the different career opportunities in the nightclub industry, and spoke fondly of being recognised by his big bosses who are key people in the industry. The highlight of his career then was being a finalist for an industry award. In his current capacity, Nazri appears to apply the same work ethics and describes in detail the high quality of customer service he strives to provide to the clients in his current job. However, he lacks information on the range of job opportunities in the removalist industry, and is unable to name the key people in the industry other than his immediate supervisor. Because non-permanent workers are employed as a team, they typically lack access to experts other than their immediate peers.

At another level, non-permanent work arrangements impede progression because such opportunities are open only to those in permanent work. For Omar, an ex-offender, his dream job is to become “the quotation guy” who goes to the site, assesses the items and draws up a quotation for customers. This, however, is a permanent position, and he can move to such a position, only if he is first employed as a mover on a permanent position. The low take-home pay is a huge deterrent in this case. He says:

“They offer me \$1 200 to work on permanent basis with them. After CPF deduction, it is too low.”

By not opting for permanent work, Omar is also kept out from higher-skilled work such as removalist jobs for data centres, which are entrusted only to permanent staff.

Employers in the removalist industry we spoke to lament the fragmentation of the industry, and the effects on professional standards resulting from these daily hires. One employer says that he takes pains to explain to workers the benefits of full-time employment over the long-term, but many remain attracted to the higher daily pay. The situation in Singapore thus stands in sharp contrast to that in advanced industrial economies, where seeking permanent work is difficult. However, the much higher wages enjoyed by non-permanent workers with a lower set of responsibilities suggest some form of structural imbalance in the design of the remuneration structure of permanent work.

This is not to say that progression is totally absent in non-permanent work for low-wage occupations. Borhan, who runs a *kebab* stall for his boss, progressed from the entry-level job of chopping vegetables to his current capacity as the person “running the show”. This demonstrates that job enlargement is possible for non-permanent work. However, such opportunities are few and dependent on the employer’s business model. Unlike the “coordinators” in the despatch rider industry who see themselves as part of the team and keep jobs with higher responsibilities for themselves, Borhan’s boss relies on him to run the business which provides opportunities for him to stretch himself in new ways. It is noted however, that Borhan’s current capacity mimics more of an employer-employee relationship as he sticks to one boss. If he is to move to another employer, he will have to prove himself all over again.

At this point, it is valuable to contrast between the experiences of non-permanent workers in the low-wage occupations surveyed here, and those in the local technical theatre industry. Technical theatre not only attracts workers who enter the industry because of a passion for the arts, but also opportunistic workers with profiles similar to our non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations who take on such work in technical theatre because it pays better than the permanent jobs they are eligible for (Nur et al. 2014). However, some of these opportunistic workers have been able to evolve their careers meaningfully in ways not possible for workers in the low-wage occupations surveyed here. There is a lot of informal mentoring in technical theatre when the opportunistic worker encounters experts as part of work assignments, which is absent for non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations that rely solely on homophilious networks. Borhan, for instance, may have an enlarged job role but

works with similarly less-skilled peers with limited prospects to encounter trained chefs from whom he can pick up the technique of cutting meat, among others. Freelance workers in technical theatre can also move up to take on more sophisticated job roles. For instance, a freelance technical theatre worker may start off in an entry-level position as a loader, and move on to specialise and become a rigger, or a lighting operator specialising in certain consoles. Such opportunities are absent for non-permanent workers in low-wage occupations unless they join a company as permanent staff.

3.6 Attitude Towards and Opportunities for Learning

A consistent theme in the narratives of the 30 non-permanent workers we interviewed is their poor experiences at school. Some bluntly say they are “stupid”, while others describe school as but a rite of passage to go through as a young person in Singapore. Some went through a two- or three-year VITB or ITE course only to avoid the industry they were trained for. Faris was trained in precision engineering, and found a job soon after graduating but lasted barely a week. He says his hands were too sweaty to deal with metal. Benyamin took two ITE courses in Office Skills and Electrical Engineering, but could not find a suitable job in either job role at the pay he wanted. He ends up working as a freelance despatch for a fast-food restaurant, and is now pursuing a diploma programme in Mass Communications as an exercise of agency to get his preferred job.

Their poor school experiences may have influenced their subsequent attitude to learning as adults. Most workers surveyed are not averse to taking on learning opportunities (see [Chart 6](#) for a breakdown of their participation in Continuous Education and Training [CET]). However, they see CET mainly in instrumental, immediate terms. They will be willing to invest their time and money to take on qualifications that give them entry to a desired job, but they do not see a need to acquire skills for the purposes of building their own employability. For instance, the lack of proficiency in English has been cited by many interviewees as a barrier to good jobs, but they have developed localised coping strategies that they are happy to continue with. Khairi laments that he lacks “flowery language” to access higher value contracts, but does not see a need to build the skills himself. Instead, he relies on his wife to write his business pitch documents. Borhan took up Security and F&B

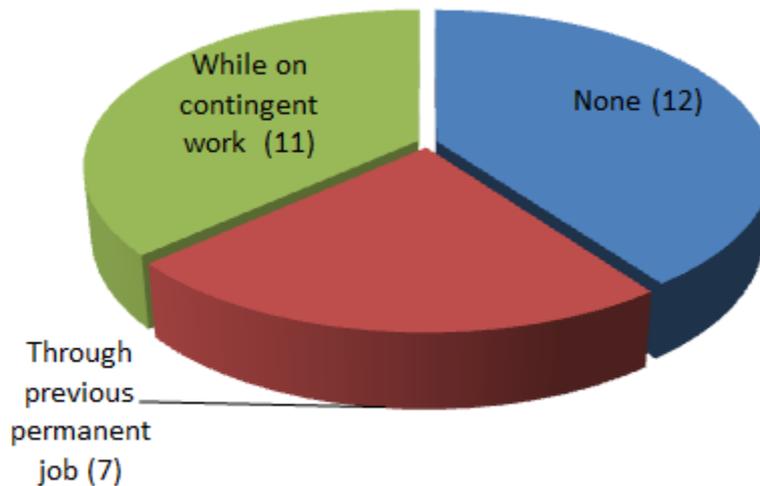
WSQ courses to get jobs in these sectors. He gets his current trade skills as a *kebab*-stall helper through a one-day training by his boss, by observing other stallholders and through experimenting on his own. Learning by doing, including observing others on the job, is a consistent narrative by the workers when describing how they pick up their skills. Borhan is keen to start a business running his own *kebab* stall but sees no need to pick up additional skills. He says he has tried striking out on his own but failed to make money. We observe that he appears to lack numeracy skills as he struggles to calculate his pay on a monthly basis when asked by the research team. This suggests possible challenges for him in managing cash flow in a business. However, all that matters to him in business are “location” and “luck”.

For those like Omera who have gone the extra mile to take on CET opportunities, they feel disillusioned that the trainings have not led them to jobs. They complain that CET certificates mean little to employers, unless it is entry-level qualifications mandated by regulatory agencies such as F&B Hygiene WSQ. Omera, aged 32 and a single mother of two, is on the government’s home ownership-cum-education scheme or HOPE that targets low-income families. Three years ago, she utilised the funds set aside for training to take up a call-centre course. She has not had the opportunity to gain entry into the industry, and is currently working as a part-time banquet waitress in a hotel. Zainal, who helps out at as F&B helper, is a lot sharper in his criticism:

“If I come to attend these courses, [will] they employ this old man to work? Maybe they employ also [sic], but [we] cannot get the salary [we expect].”

A “sense of betrayal” is thus real for this segment of workers who despite their poor school experiences, is putting in the effort to improve their employability through taking up CET but are seeing limited outcomes. Indeed, government agencies can take heart that these workers appear to be fully aware of the ease of access to CET in Singapore. It is the limited outcomes from CET programmes as they are currently designed and delivered, which appears to frustrate them or make them dismissive of CET.

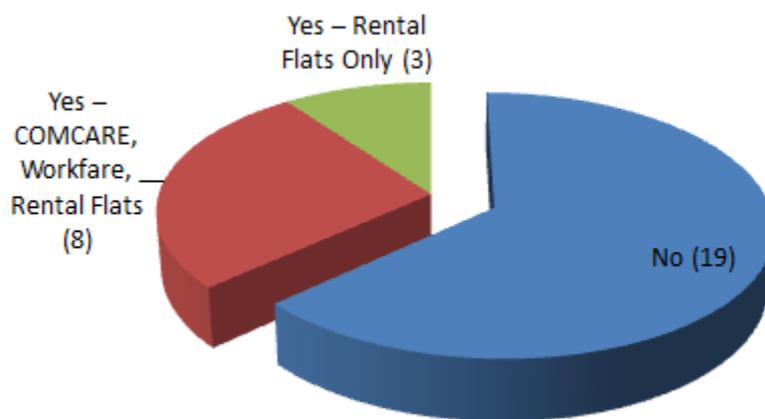
Chart 6: Participation in Continuing Education & Training



3.7 Social Assistance and the Central Provident Fund

Our interviewees are, by and large, self-reliant. About eight interviewees are or have been on social assistance and related government schemes, and an additional three are on the rental flat scheme only (Chart 7). This does not mean that the workers do not need support, but rather they have relied on their own resources to meet their needs. More than half of the interviewees do not own a flat, opting to stay with parents or relatives.

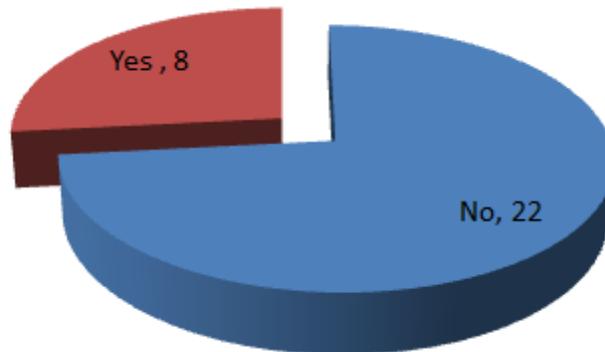
Chart 7: Social assistance



As highlighted in the preceding chapter, through CPF, workers' access to medical, housing and retirement funds are greatly enhanced. In recent times, Singapore's social spending has become more narrowly targeted at lower-income citizens through means-testing such as Workfare, but the main instrument deployed remains

to be CPF. This is a problem for our interviewees as the majority of them do not have CPF contributions (see [Chart 8](#)).

Chart 8: CPF contributions by employee and/or employer



Under the CPF Act, employers must contribute to CPF if their employees earn more than \$50 a month, regardless of the terms of the employees' employment arrangement. This includes those who are working casually, part-time as well as those without employment contracts (MOM, 2015). The law excludes those hired on contracts for service or are self-employed. The experiences of our interviewees suggest that work arrangements are not so clear-cut. Kamal, for instance, was initially hired on a contract of service by a leading fast-food chain as a part-timer, but was subsequently offered a contract for service at almost 100% more but without CPF contributions and medical benefits. He did his calculations and took up the offer. He shares that there is no change in his job scope. Most of the movers do not get CPF contributions as daily hires of independent contractors hired on a contract for service. Despatch riders have the option to work either on a permanent or commission basis, and they are considered self-employed if they opt for the latter. Again the job scope remains the same. The extent to which organisations have the flexibility to offer contracts for service or hire individuals on a self-employed basis, even though the work relationship mimics an employer-employee relationship, is something that requires closer examination by regulatory agencies. At the same time, we note that there are workers who agree to no CPF contributions so as to enjoy higher daily pay.

It is not a simple case of beefing up enforcement, or making the law more stringent to ensure that a de-facto employee-employer relationship is not being passed off as a contract for service, or the label "self-employed" is imposed on the worker without

him or her fully appreciating the extent of the responsibility of being self-employed. As our findings show, there is a demand for casual work because it promises to pay better, at least in the short-term, in order to help workers achieve a more comfortable standard of daily living. Low pay thus leads workers to opt for non-permanent work arrangement and out of the CPF scheme. That is, these workers are making the decision to prioritise income over employment security and other employment-related benefits. It is this aspiration that we need to be mindful of.

3.8 Summary

In summary, the research finds that unlike their counterparts in advanced industrial economies, the low-wage workers in Singapore have little difficulty securing permanent work but opt for non-permanent work to enjoy higher pay and greater flexibility than they would in permanent work. They display weak occupational identity, linked not only to the circumstantial reasons for their entry into the occupations, but also to the design of the casual jobs that tend to place them at the periphery. In fact, we find that the work that they are engaged in has negative effects on the deepening of skills, progression and the workers' long-term employability. Progression into more sophisticated job tasks is difficult unless the workers accept employment as permanent staffs. However, they prefer to take on permanent work in a different industry, having rationalised that they are better off in a non-permanent work arrangement in the current industry. One alternative route for progression is to become a micropreneur or short-term contractor, but individuals in these roles typically keep jobs with higher responsibilities to themselves rather than develop their workers. The other alternative route is to move to casual jobs in other industries. The net effect is a haphazard occupational narrative that does not enable development of skills and expertise.

4.0 DISCUSSION

4.1 Overview

This section discusses the implications from the findings presented in the preceding chapter. It brings in discussion points raised at a reference group session held on 23 January 2015 that was convened to review the findings ([see Appendix 2](#)).

4.2 End of the “Low-Wage, Low-Cost” Model of Development?

The set of findings in the preceding section suggests that Singapore may have reached the limits of its “low-wage, low-cost” model of development that relies heavily on foreign labour to achieve high economic growth. Given our findings that Singaporean workers are exercising agency to undertake jobs outside of the permanent labour market as an attempt to enjoy a more comfortable standard of living for themselves and their families, the discussion in academic and policy circles on the extent to which the influx of low-skilled and semi-skilled foreign workers have artificially depressed wages of low-income Singaporeans takes on a new dimension. Non-permanent work means higher take-home pay and greater flexibility. In principle, it allows low-wage workers to move closer to the social inclusion level of income, provided that they are disciplined enough to regularly seek work. It is this potential, alongside the flexibility that non-permanent work offers, that makes such work attractive. The workers’ experiences clearly indicate that they have little difficulty seeking permanent work but are deterred by the low pay on offer. Their motivation for engaging in non-permanent work is thus an aberration from the findings in international academic literature which is based on the experiences of low-wage, non-permanent workers in advanced industrial economies in the West. The latter tend to indicate that they earn less in casual work arrangements and have difficulty securing permanent work.

At our reference group session, social workers and employers were surprised to learn that workers in the *Enterpriser* and *Stuck* profiles tend to display a higher level of commitment to work. These reference group members indicated that they were more familiar with the *Lifestylers* group who tend to drift from job to job, or are reluctant to commit to full-time work because of caring responsibilities. It is unsurprising that the *Lifestylers* are more visible to the policy-makers given that they

tend to actively seek out social assistance or are already on some form of social assistance. Because the delivery of social services is tied to a demonstration of the applicants' effort to seek work, social and career services officers are most familiar with this group. Employers relying on government-run career services tend to get referrals that fall under the profile of the *Lifestyler*. Based on our findings, the *Enterpriser* group is unlikely to access social services as they tend to take self-responsibility in providing for their families very seriously. However, they may access WDA's career services for training in entry-level qualifications as in the case of Kamal. The *Stuck* group may attempt to seek social and unemployment assistance at the onset, but as they are drawing salary from casual jobs, they are usually assessed as ineligible. Tisha, for instance, was on social assistance while working part-time as a waitress and trying to get a permanent job as an administrative staff. When the temporary manpower agency that recruited her began paying CPF, her case officer informed her that her case would be considered closed. The surprise expressed by social workers and employers regarding the findings on the *Enterpriser* and the *Stuck* raises the question of whether social and career programmes and services in Singapore have overly-catered to a segment of workers at the expense of other segments. One career coach, for instance, informs us that 80 per cent of his clients are referrals from the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF). One employer who has been relying on referrals for workers from WDA says he is heartened to learn that there are self-motivated workers out there, and wishes to reach out to the workers directly at the ports.

Unlike the West where companies offer non-permanent work arrangements primarily to enjoy enterprise flexibility, the experience here shows that companies are compelled to offer such arrangements primarily as a strategy to overcome a shortage of workers. A career coach shares that one manager is willing to relent by paying a worker daily instead of monthly, if this is what it takes to get a worker. Employers share that the shortage is affecting their ability to maintain daily operations and grow their business. At one of the ports, we saw the supervisor of a removalist company holding a paper listing 20 daily-rated mover positions. However, he could only recruit 14 individuals before the start of the work day. He shared that he would inform his office of the shortage, and they would try to recruit workers from other sources. Employers inform us that relying on casual workers can be expensive

and unreliable. For some, engaging temporary manpower agencies may mean high fees for the company. For others, the quality of work from short-term contractors may be inferior to that of permanent workers. When we shared our findings that there were indeed self-motivated workers who wished to take up permanent jobs but were deterred by the low pay, employers were quick to point out that they paid “market rates”. They also highlighted the slew of benefits they provided, including CPF contributions, medical and annual leave entitlements. The short-term versus long-term costs to employers of hiring casual workers deserve closer examination. Could the direct and indirect costs of offering non-permanent work arrangements be redistributed to enable higher salaries for permanent work?

Members of the reference group session also considered the value of introducing minimum wage in Singapore. One thread of discussion was that minimum wage had been typically set low, and was not meaningful for motivated workers seeking to improve their work situation as was the case for most of the workers we interviewed. NTUC’s Progressive Wage Model (PWM) appears more promising, since it promises wage increases tied to higher productivity. Members in the reference group session thus asked for PWM to be introduced to more sectors. We think this may be more viable, and welcome especially the Sectoral Manpower Plan announced by the government to coordinate efforts to effect sectoral transformation through job redesign. This has the potential to go beyond simple increments, which has been the complaint about the PWM. Section 4.4 also suggests an extended work-study arrangement that can help tip workers over to better jobs.

4.3 Effects of Casual Work on Skills Deepening, Progression and Long-term Employability

Members of the reference group session additionally questioned if the policy focus in Singapore to get non-permanent workers into permanent work is desirable, as workers are already earning more and enjoying higher flexibility in casual work arrangements. Some suggested that casual employment be acknowledged as an alternative and legitimate employment system, and workers be channelled into such jobs accordingly.

The case of the technical theatre industry discussed in the preceding chapter suggests that casual work can lead to skills specialisation and progression. Workers,

regardless of their educational qualifications, can enter the industry and move into specialised roles and command a premium for their skills. We note that this is not possible for the low-wage occupations covered in this study, because the jobs do not demand craft development. The logistics and transport industries, and most F&B establishments in Singapore, are built on providing a standardised level of service. Such standards are developed at the firm level, not at a professional/vocational/craft level. Workers get inducted to comply with firm-level standards at the level of the firm, not on the vocation. Non-permanent work arrangements in these occupations inadvertently do not facilitate deep expertise because of both the design of the job and the contractual arrangement. Completing an assignment as fast as possible poses quality issues, but it means workers can move on to other jobs and scale up their income. There may thus be a structural barrier to skills development. We also note earlier that, unlike the case in technical theatre, casual workers are recruited from and work within homophilious networks with little opportunities for learning from experts during their work assignments.

Progression routes are also difficult for casual workers as a specialised or wider-scoped jobs could be accessed only by joining as permanent staff. The alternative for workers is to move horizontally to access casual jobs in other industries, but this will chop up their occupational narrative further. Workers may also take the route to become a micropreneur, but they typically reproduce the cycle by offering work opportunities that do not develop their own workers.

At another level, the casual worker's employability suffers over time. As the jobs they are engaged in tend to be physically demanding, growing older means that they may not be as fit to take on the jobs over time. This is a worry expressed by many in the *Enterpriser* group.

On the whole, the findings in this study suggest that non-permanent work in certain low-wage occupations impedes skills development and progression, but that there are also other low-wage casual jobs that may be stepping stones to specialised skills. The recommendation here is for a deeper understanding of the effects of different casual work arrangements on different workers in different industries and occupational settings. While aspects to look out for include job design, remuneration structure, progression opportunities, access to experts and workers' profiles, it is

also the relationship among these different factors that is valuable in understanding the interaction that engenders different types of behaviour and effects. An enhanced understanding of the different permutations in non-permanent work will assist industry and policy-makers to calibrate and prioritise intervention strategies accordingly, and understand which lever of change will produce which and/or the most effective outcomes. For instance, in technical theatre, entry-level casual jobs may be narrowly-defined and may benefit from job redesign, but efforts are more well-placed if they focus on fast-tracking workers' progression into more specialised job roles that are in high demand in the industry but which workers find difficult to access on their own. For the low-wage occupations surveyed here, both workers' and employers benefit more by minimising non-permanent arrangements through redesigning permanent jobs to make them more attractive in terms of higher pay and less rigid working conditions.

4.4 Continuous Education and Training

Members at the reference group session discussed extensively the need to continuously encourage the workers to undergo CET to enhance their employability. At the same time, those working on the ground could relate to the "sense of betrayal" highlighted in this study when undertaking CET does not lead these workers to their desired jobs.

At the core, the workers are not averse to seeking learning opportunities and training. While they may take instrumental attitude to CET, seeing it as a route to better jobs and pay, such an attitude is not unique to this segment of workers. Their openness to CET should be harnessed, and CET solutions should be made relevant to their needs.

Under the Singapore Government's latest budget for 2015, new initiatives have been rolled out under the broad banner of SkillsFuture to give greater empowerment to workers to take charge of their own training and upgrading. This includes the SkillsFuture Credit and the Individual Learning Portfolio. Our prognosis is that such empowerment is likely to have limited real impact on the casual worker in these low-wage occupations. An example is the interviewee discussed in the preceding chapter, who took on courses for call centre-related jobs under the HOPE programme but has not had the chance to enter the industry. Unless the CET

programme is twinned with jobs deemed as desirable by workers, it may lead to a spending spree on courses with no employment outcomes for the workers. One training provider likewise shared that she was increasingly seeing trainees who had specific industries and CET courses in mind and went on to take courses in these areas, but subsequently were unable to transit into their desired industry.

As noted in the preceding section, workers wish they have the chance to demonstrate their skills to potential employers to justify a higher pay. Employers we speak to also appear open to pay more, if the workers are able to demonstrate their work capabilities. An extended work-study programme may be one possible model with built-in key performance indicators (KPI), such that workers can eventually command higher pay if they achieve the KPIs. A work-study programme also plays to the learning preferences of this group of workers who thrive on learning by doing and by observing others. One pedagogical aspect to give attention to is how such work-study programmes can enable “boundary-crossing” for higher learning potential (Akkerman and Bakker 2011). This will assist the low-wage worker to go beyond his or her homophilious networks and access new networks. At its simplest, this may take the form of informal mentors based on the workers’ aspirations. Another “boundary-crossing” programme could be an IT programme that helps workers go online to search out learning opportunities. Aside from these, there is also a need for these workers to shift their perception of focusing / naming of their work by tasks, and develop ability to describe what they do in ways that build confidence and widen horizons. This should be a capability development outcome built into the CET opportunities for these workers.

4.5 Work and Citizenry - the Broken Promise for the Developmental Worker

Members at the reference group session also discussed if workers should be counselled to take a more long-term view of their life and career, and take on permanent work at a lower pay with CPF and medical benefits so as to get the opportunities to build assets in terms of housing and retirement funds, and enjoy career progression down the road. As described in academic literature, this is the developmental worker who is willing to forgo current benefits for future gains.

The problem is that many of these workers have participated in the permanent labour market only to find that the system does not deliver as promised. We were surprised to find in our interviews that the workers' identification as Singaporean is exceptionally strong compared to our interviewees in PME occupations. There is a sense of bitterness that they are kept out of the benefits of citizenship articulated in terms of CPF, Medisave and housing, which they find difficult to access as non-permanent workers. For the *Enterprisers*, the trade-offs are too high. Because this group tend to be highly motivated, they tend to earn a lot more in non-permanent work which makes a return to lower-paid permanent work difficult. For the *Stuck*, they remain hopeful to secure permanent work at a higher pay. Faris, for instance, says he needs a higher basic income to qualify for a HDB loan to fund his desired 4-room flat for his wife and three daughters. In frustration, he says he may not take on a job with CPF in the future, as his accumulated CPF savings in all his years as permanent worker were still insufficient to get him his desired flat. The *Lifestylers* likewise see mainstream aspirations such as asset-building as beyond their reach. One tells us upfront that he does not see a need for CPF, as he intends to stay in a rental flat permanently.

It is beyond the scope of this study to recommend if Singapore should diversify the safety nets for citizens, and what forms they should take. Currently, the system is a take-all or lose-all for workers. When workers opt out of permanent work, they lose big. Even Workfare that is targeted to assist low-income workers requires participation through the CPF system.

At another level, the workers' strong sense of their rights as Singaporean is also expressed in relation to their interactions with foreign workers. Faris talks about his unhappiness at being supervised by a foreign national who he says, has barked orders at him. This, he says, is not the "Singapore way". Employers we speak to, on the other hand, are putting in efforts to make the foreign workers stay longer with them. One shares an example of a PRC staff who was sponsored for studies, and is now in a supervisory position. Will the future challenge be having low-skilled foreign workers staying on in companies, developing their skills and progressing to higher positions, while the low-wage Singaporean worker moves across casual jobs in an attempt to earn a more comfortable living?

4.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings suggest that the low-wage worker in Singapore faces perplexing dilemmas in terms of the best way to improve his or her living conditions. Permanent work offers employment security and benefits, but at wages difficult for him or her to enjoy a standard of living closer to the median level of income. Non-permanent work offers the promise of higher wages with greater flexibility that appears real and tangible. However, the worker loses out on other benefits including access to housing and retirement funds through CPF. What is disheartening is that in exercising agency to take on non-permanent work to improve his or her living conditions, the self-motivated individual also inadvertently compromises his capacity to deepen his expertise, to progress and maintain long-term employability when taking non-permanent work in the low-wage occupations surveyed. In the final analysis, intervention strategies cannot focus solely on the individual non-permanent worker. Instead, a holistic approach is required that also addresses employers' ability to design 'good' jobs and developmental opportunities at good wages and conditions.

We note too that while work intervention strategies may work for the workers under the *Enterpriser* and the *Stuck* profiles, they are less likely to be effective for the *Lifestylers* who tend to make their employment decisions based on non-economic considerations. This necessitates a deeper understanding of the priorities of the *Lifestylers*, and the solutions for them are likely to go beyond work intervention.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Overview

This section summarises the key recommendations arising from the discussion in the preceding chapter.

5.2 Recommendation: Deeper Examination of the Issues Surrounding Low-wage Permanent Work

This study finds that many workers opt for non-permanent work arrangements as an exercise of agency to enjoy higher pay. They also enjoy greater flexibility from such arrangements. However, the experiences of the workers in the occupations covered in this study suggest that non-permanent work correlates negatively to the development of skills and expertise, progression and long-term employability. Unless the workers move into micropreneurship, fatigue from the physically-demanding work prompts even the *Enterprisers* to seek out permanent work (though in another industry) from time to time. Consequently, we urge policy-makers to examine the issues of low wages and rigid work conditions in greater depth, including the short- and long-term cost of non-permanent work arrangements to employers who may potentially benefit more by redistributing the expenditure to higher wages for permanent workers. A study of the ‘tipping point’ that will motivate non-permanent workers in the abovementioned occupations to move into permanent work may also be valuable. On the whole, the requirement is a holistic approach that addresses employers’ ability to design ‘good’ jobs and developmental opportunities at good wages and conditions that not only meet employees’ aspirations, but also meet employers’ needs which include increasing productivity and reducing the pressure arising from labour shortage.

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| Suggested Action by: | Relevant industry development agencies Ministry of Manpower Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) |
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5.3 Recommendation: Deeper Understanding of the Key Factors Shaping Casual Work Arrangements

The study also finds that not all casual jobs are necessarily detrimental to skills development and progression. Taking reference from an earlier phase of the study on non-permanent workers in Singapore's technical theatre industry, casual work arrangements can lead to specialised skills with workers also commanding a premium for such skills. This may be because technical theatre is also an industry where specialised job roles are available on a casual or freelance basis. In the context of the global trend towards greater casualization of jobs, developing a deeper understanding of the decisive factors shaping the experience of non-permanent work is valuable to assist industry and policy-makers to calibrate and prioritise intervention strategies accordingly. Some aspects include job design, remuneration structure, progression opportunities within the industry, access to experts and workers' profiles, but it is also the interaction among these factors that is important. Different casual work arrangements on different workers in different industries and occupational settings give rise to different behaviour and outcomes. A deeper understanding of the experience of non-permanent work will help support the objectives under the Sectoral Manpower Plan (SMP), which includes being cognisant of the needs of special workforce segments like the non-permanent workers in order to effect sectoral transformation of key industries. A deeper understanding of non-permanent work may also assist regulatory agencies in enforcing the CPF Act in instances where Contracts for Service or self-employed terms are offered even though the working arrangements mimic an employee-employer relationship. We also recommend that more data collection be undertaken to deepen understanding of the true population of the casual workers across different industries, including their different profiles.

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| Suggested Action by: | Ministry of Manpower Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) |
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5.4 Recommendation: Better CET Provisions that Acknowledge Workers' Aspirations and take into account their Learning Preferences

The study finds that the workers are not averse to CET and learning opportunities, but that CET provisions have not adequately met their needs and aspirations. A “sense of betrayal” is evident when their efforts to up-skill do not lead to their desired jobs. The provision of CET for this group of workers should be linked more clearly to better jobs and wages, particularly by providing an enabling environment for workers to demonstrate their skills and be rewarded for their performance by the employer. This may take the form of an extended work-study programme with built-in key performance indicators (KPIs), such that the workers get higher pay or other incentives upon meeting the KPIs. The workers would also need to receive income at a sustainable level while undertaking structured learning opportunities. The design and delivery of CET should also address the workers' preference of learning by doing, and enable them to access new networks. At another level, CET should build the capabilities of the workers to understand their work holistically, as this will broaden their understanding of the opportunities available to them over time.

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| Suggested Action by: | Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) Institute for Technical Education Polytechnics |
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5.5 Recommendation: Facilitate non-permanent workers' access to social goods linked to the CPF scheme

The study finds that work in Singapore is an important exercise in citizenry as workers' access to social goods that are linked to housing, healthcare and retirement funds are greatly facilitated through workers' participation in the Central Provident Fund (CPF) scheme. New targeted measures for low-income families such as WorkFare are also delivered through CPF. The majority of our interviewees, however, do not enjoy CPF contributions usually by choice, as it would mean lower take-home pay. Low pay thus leads workers to opt for non-permanent work arrangement and out of the CPF scheme. Part of the problem is enforcement, and the other part is that CPF is not mandated for contract for service terms. Yet work

arrangements are not so clear-cut for low-wage, non-permanent work, and the same job may be offered under both contract of service and contract for service terms. The CPF scheme may need to be tweaked to be more inclusive in respect of the employment arrangements of non-permanent workers.

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| Suggested Action by: | Ministry for Manpower |
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5.6 Recommendation: Further Research on the Unique Needs of Lifestylers

Work intervention solutions including job redesign and CET opportunities are meaningful for the *Enterpriser* and *Stuck* groups, but are less meaningful for most in the *Lifestyler* group. This is because they make their employment choices based on non-economic considerations such as preference to get daily pay or jobs with lower level of responsibility. Consistent with the research by Ng (2013) which found high incidence of non-economic stressors on the profiles of Work Support Programme recipients, we find that these non-economic issues, such as personal finance skills, addiction and mental health, need to be dealt with before any proposed work solutions can be meaningful.

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| Suggested Action by: | Ministry for Social and Family Development |
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5.6 Conclusion

This study has proposed a range of recommendations for further deliberation by different agencies to better address the working situation of the low-wage non-permanent worker. The work trajectories of non-permanent, low-wage workers are shaped iteratively by their work motivations and the occupational settings they are in. In the next phase of this IAL’s research project, we will undertake a systematic analysis of non-permanent workers in all the sectors to develop a more in-depth understanding of the different factors shaping the experience of non-permanent work in Singapore, including motivation, job design, and access to CET.

Appendix 1: Profile of interviewees

A total of 30 non-permanent workers in three low-wage occupations, namely despatch rider, removalists and F&B helper, were interviewed for this study.

Interviewees were recruited from five sources, namely (a) GumTree advertisements; (b) Facebook page advertisements on part-time or temporary jobs; (c) ports where casual workers congregate; (d) research team’s own contacts; and (e) referrals from interviewees. Attempts to recruit workers through social workers, career coaches and employers were met with little success because of confidentiality issues and the lack of interest from the workers.

Purposive sampling was employed to obtain a range of profiles in terms of occupation, ethnicity and age. We then collected more information from the interviewees in relation to their educational qualifications, income, participation in Continuing Education and Training and access to social assistance, among others. Charts 1 – 7 provide the breakdown of the key demographics.

Chart 1: By source of recruitment for interviews

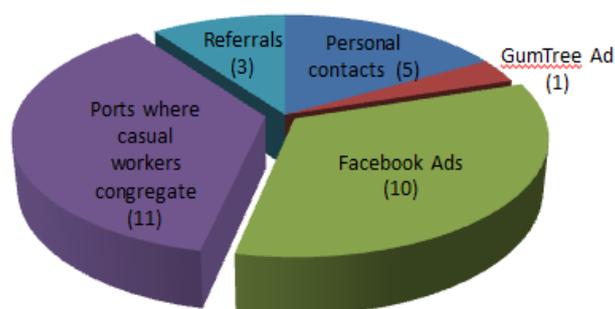


Chart 2: By occupation

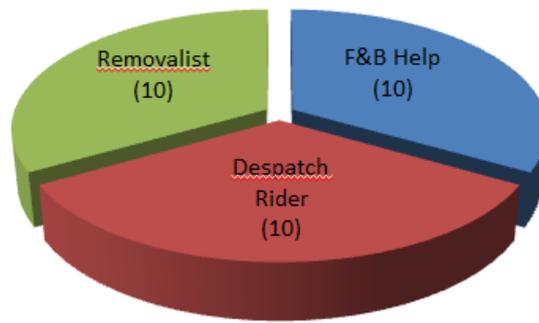


Chart 3: By age in years

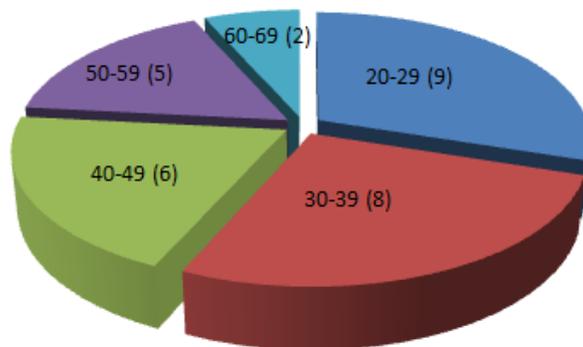


Chart 4: By gender

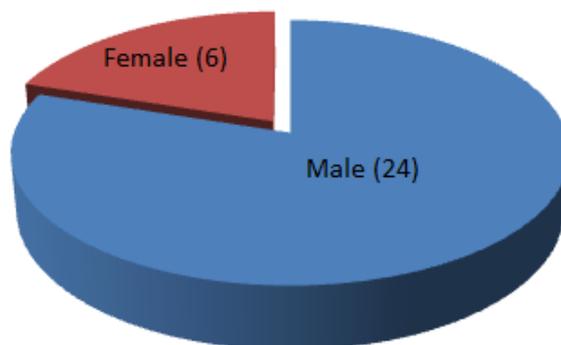


Chart 5: By ethnicity

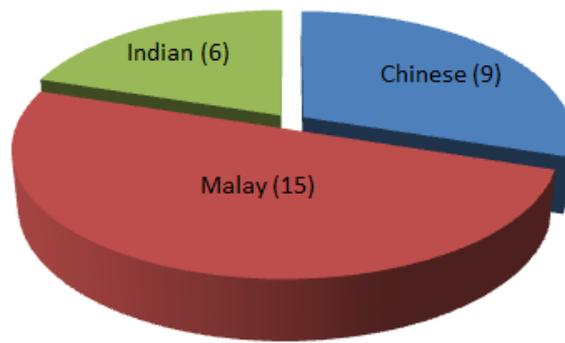


Chart 6: By initial educational qualifications

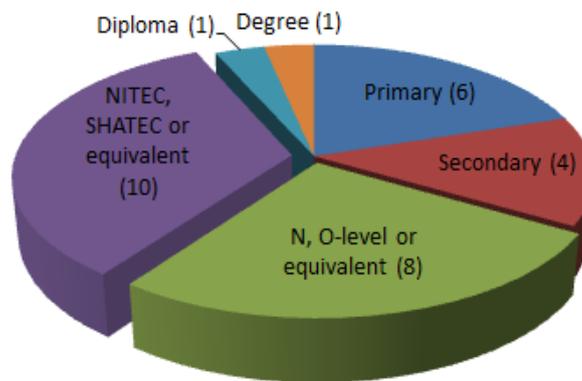
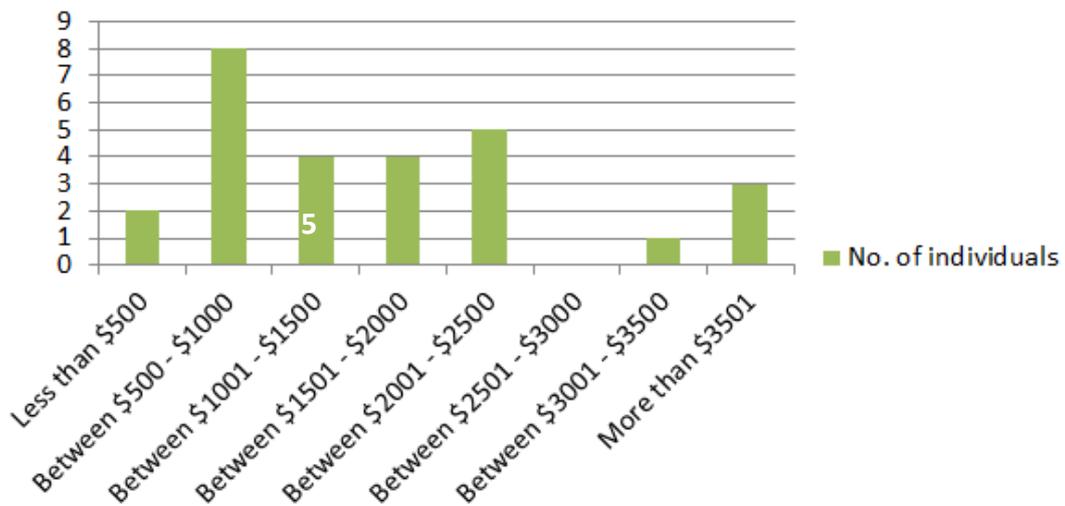


Chart 7: By monthly income (S\$)



Appendix 2: Reference Group

A reference group session with stakeholders was organised on Friday, 23 January 2015, to discuss the preliminary findings, identify implications from the findings, and brainstorm on recommendations. Thirty-one representatives from 11 organisations participated in the session. They were comprised of policy-makers, employers, social workers, personnel from self-help groups, unionists, training providers and members of academia.

The list of participating organisations* is as follows (in alphabetical order):

- Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC)
- Employment and Employability Institute (E2I)
- Institute for Adult Learning (IAL)
- Mendaki Sense
- Ministry for Manpower (MOM)
- Ministry for Social and Family Development (MSF)
- National Trades Union Congress (NTUC)
- National University of Singapore (NUS)
- Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA)

**The identity of two companies that participated in the reference group session is kept confidential.*

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