Minimum wage laws and wage regulation: Do changes to a minimum wage affect employment levels?

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MINIMUM WAGE LAWS AND WAGE REGULATION: DO CHANGES TO A MINIMUM WAGE AFFECT EMPLOYMENT LEVELS?

JOEL BUTLER*

Minimum wage laws are about as clear a case as one can find of a measure the effects of which are precisely the opposite of those intended by the men of good will who support it.1

I INTRODUCTION

In the recent Australian debate surrounding the Commonwealth government’s introduction of changes to the federal Workplace Relations laws2 (‘WorkChoices’), a good deal of comment centred on the issue of the minimum wage. It was argued by opponents of the changes that the creation of a national Australian Fair Pay Commission (‘AFPC’) – which is to set a federal minimum wage (‘FMW’) – would lead to general reductions in wages for workers. It was further argued by opponents of WorkChoices that there would be no offsetting benefit in the form of increased employment that would result from any reduction in wages that occurred.

This article starts by looking briefly at the arguments made on the two sides of this debate: by some of the supporters of WorkChoices that reductions in wages and wage flexibility will lead to increased employment; and, by the opponents of WorkChoices, that reductions in wages and increased (downwards) wage flexibility will not and cannot lead to increased employment.

Secondly, the article reviews the voluminous literature3 on the issue. It concludes, contrary to critics of WorkChoices, that there are very clear circumstances where the lowering of a minimum wage can lead to increased employment and, similarly, there are instances where an increase in a minimum...

* Postgraduate Fellow, Faculty of Law, Bond University. My thanks to Sam Cochrane for his assistance with this article.
2 Effected by the Workplace Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Act 2005 (Cth) that was given Royal Assent by the Governor-General on 14 December 2005 and came into operation on 27 March 2006. The outcome of a constitutional challenge to the validity of the Act in the High Court of Australia by the states is pending.
3 This article is comprehensively referenced in order to allow readers to easily access the large amount of literature in relation to this area.
wage can lead to increased unemployment. The evidence supporting these conclusions is overwhelming.

The third part of the article examines whether the conditions in Australia are such that any decrease in the FMW would be likely to lead to increased employment.

II THE DEBATE

The debate in relation to WorkChoices has been bitterly waged. Opposition is vehement. Opposition politicians, labour union officials and industrial relations academics claim that virtually nothing in the *Workplace Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Act 2005* (Cth) delivers any benefits at all. This article looks at only one of the issues in contention: whether, if WorkChoices results in a reduced FMW, this would lead to lower unemployment.

In moving the second reading speech to the Bill, Minister Kevin Andrews implied that the mechanisms in WorkChoices would lead to more jobs:

> Work Choices is not simply about raising the living standards of those Australians in jobs. It is also about getting more Australians into jobs.\(^4\)

However, critics claimed that WorkChoices would lead to reductions in workers’ wages generally and slower increases in the minimum wage:

> Forcing those who can afford it least to give up part of their wages and conditions has been a Howard obsession ever since he entered federal parliament and it is only Labor and the unions that have prevented him from achieving this appalling idea in the past ... Minimum wages will no longer be set by the independent umpire, clearing the way for them to be lower in the future.\(^5\)

Similarly, a letter written by the leader of the federal Opposition, Kim Beazley, on 5 November 2005, stated that:

> [the] Howard government’s industrial relations changes will lead to lower increases in the minimum wage which will in turn bring down the male total average weekly earnings ...\(^6\)

Comments were made that WorkChoices would ‘take an axe to the minimum wage’\(^7\) and that the intent of WorkChoices was to allow workers ‘to go below the minimums’.\(^8\)


\(^7\) Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 2 December 2005, 3 (Penny Wong).

\(^8\) Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 2 December 2005, 3 (Chris Evans).
[The Federal government] wants to be able to lower the minimum wage, which is what its bosses want. The bosses want to be able to lower their minimum wages, so that is what the government has legislated.9

Academics have also criticised the likely effects of WorkChoices. In a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Bill, prior to it passing through the parliament, a group of academics questioning the ‘implicit assumption that raising the minimum wage will affect employment outcomes’ and arguing that the ‘AFPC is implicitly premised on the controversial notion that a lower minimum wage will assist employment growth’10 stated that:

the overseas evidence suggests the proposed system of minimum wage determination is likely to result in lower minimum wage increases than would have prevailed under the AIRC, to increase income inequality and to have little effect on employment.11

They go on to argue that the links between the changes intended to be brought about by WorkChoices ‘and employment are asserted not demonstrated’ and conclude that:

The link between real wage cuts and employment is contested; if there is a link, a very substantial real wage cut may be required to produce any gains in unemployment, with serious implications for the relative value of unemployment benefits.12

These criticisms were mirrored in many other submissions to the Senate Inquiry. The Australian Council of Trade Unions, for instance, noted:

Reducing real minimum wages and conditions, it is asserted, will price more skilled workers into jobs. In theory, the effect of minimum wages on employment levels is ambiguous and cannot be deduced from theoretical first principles. The impact of any particular level of minimum wages on employment is an empirical question. The international evidence in support of this theory is decidedly lacking and in inverse proportion to the vehemence of advocacy of the proposition by its proponents.13

As will be demonstrated below, the effects of changes in minimum wage levels on employment are, in fact, far from contested or ambiguous and there is a very large body of empirical evidence that demonstrates that reduced minimum wage increases would be likely to lead to positive outcomes in employment – especially for young people, women and unskilled workers. However, prior to examining the evidence for these claims, it is appropriate to examine the ‘theoretical first principles’ in relation to the effect of minimum wages.

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9 Commonwealth, Parliamentary Debates, Senate, 2 December 2005, 3 (Rachel Siewert). These are just a selection of the many statements made by Opposition, Democrat and Green Members and Senators in the Parliament and elsewhere that the effect of WorkChoices would not only be to decrease wages generally, but to decrease the minimum wage.


11 Ibid 15 (emphasis added).

12 Ibid 27.

V III ‘THEORETICAL FIRST PRINCIPLES’

The simplest supply and demand model of the employment effects of the minimum wage are represented in Figure 1 below. This model posits that the imposition of a minimum wage on an economy that previously operated only in response to supply and demand pressures will clearly have a ‘disemployment’ effect.

In this model, if the wage level were set by market forces, it would be $W_0$ and the number of workers employed would be $E_0$. If a minimum wage were statutorily imposed at the higher $W_m$ level employment would drop to $E_m$ – resulting in fewer people employed (equal to $E_0 - E_m$).

Researchers indicate that the decrease in employment suggested by the model above may be apparent in the form of lower employment growth (rather than a sudden jump in unemployment due to layoffs) as employers fail to replace workers who leave employment.14 Similarly, Brown, Gilroy and Cohen15 note that, while this model determines that there will be an excess of labour at the new minimum wage equal to $S_m - E_m$, the excess supply of labour will not necessarily correspond to the number of unemployed. Instead, $S_m$ represents the number of persons willing to work at $S_m$ but many of the $S_m - E_m$ who are not employed may

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decide that prospects of finding work are too dim to make actively searching for work worthwhile. As we shall see later on, research indicates that higher minimum wages most affect the employment prospects of those whose relationship with the labour market could be described as the most ‘tenuous’ – female unskilled workers and young workers. These categories of workers are just as likely to ‘opt out’ of searching for work as they are to be forced into unemployment. For instance, young people engaged in study may not bother to seek a casual or part-time job because they know that it will be almost impossible to acquire one.

More complex theoretical models on the effects of a minimum wage\textsuperscript{16} posit several variations on this simplest of models and project outcomes ranging from increases in employment in certain models resulting in increases in a minimum wage. Generally, where an employer has monopsony power or where the productivity of workers is linked to the wages paid, this simple model will not apply in such simple terms.\textsuperscript{17}

IV RESEARCH ON MINIMUM WAGE EFFECTS

There have been many hundreds of empirical studies conducted on the effects of minimum wage regimes in force across a large number of countries and, perhaps surprisingly, there is a good deal of practical research in countries other than the US – which is the jurisdiction most Australian commentators refer to in respect of evidence with regards to minimum wage effects. Below, the major research that has been conducted in the various jurisdictions is considered in relation to the major effects examined in relation to minimum wage systems.

A Empirical Evidence – Effect of a Minimum Wage Increase Generally

There are a very large number of studies in relation to the effect of the introduction of a FMW and increases in a FMW. A very significant majority of these show that a minimum wage has an adverse effect on levels of employment and clearly indicate that increases in a minimum wage will have disemployment effects. A number of studies show a significant effect, whilst others indicate either small effects or ambivalent results. Other studies examine the effects of minimum wages on different segments of the working population (these are examined in detail below) and have found more pronounced negative effects in relation to groups such as young and teenage workers, women and the low-skilled.

Although studies are less ambivalent regarding the effects of an increase in the minimum wage for more vulnerable segments of the population, they are more ambivalent in relation to the effects of a rise in the minimum wage on adult male workers. The group of studies examined by Brown et al find that the effect across

\textsuperscript{16} For a comprehensive discussion on research up to 1982, see Brown et al, above n 15, 488ff.
the economy on adult male workers of an increase in the minimum wage is small – generally less than a one percent reduction responding to an increase in the minimum wage of 10 percent.\textsuperscript{18} In some cases, a few studies have found the negative correlations to be statistically insignificant.\textsuperscript{19} There are a number of studies that have found that there are no negative effects arising from an increase in a minimum wage. Three well-known US economists, in particular, undertaking studies\textsuperscript{20} in the US fast food industry have made these findings. However, even these few studies have since been widely criticised.\textsuperscript{21} There are some studies that show positive employment effects of an increase in the minimum wage (these are also discussed below). However, the overwhelming numbers of empirical studies

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{18} See Brown et al, above n 15, 512.
\bibitem{19} Edward Gramlich, ‘Impact of Minimum Wages on Other Wages, Employment and Family Incomes’ (1976) 2 Brookings Papers on Economic Activity 409, 438; See also Gerard Adams, ‘Increasing the Minimum Wage: The Macroeconomic Impacts’ in Economic Policy Institute, Briefing Paper (1987) which found that an increase in the minimum wage from $3.35 to $4.65 over three years would increase the unemployment rate by less than 0.1 percent.
\bibitem{21} Given the fact that these studies came to conclusions quite different to most studies ever conducted previously, there was extensive examination of the methodology and conclusions in a large number of studies since. This led to the conclusion by the Nobel winning economist Gary Becker of the University of Chicago that ‘Card-Krueger studies are flawed and cannot justify going against the accumulated evidence from many past and present studies that find sizeable negative effects of higher minimums on employment’: quoted in testimony by Bruce Bartlett (Senior Fellow, National Centre for Policy Analysis) before the US House of Representatives Committee on Small Business. For criticisms of the Card/Krueger research, see Lowell Taylor, The Employment Effect in Retail Trade of a Minimum Wage: Evidence from California (1993); David Neumark and William Wascher, ‘Employment Effects of Minimum and Subminimum Wages: Panel Data on State Minimum Wage Laws’ (1992) 46 Industrial and Labour Relations Review 55; Richard Burkhauser, Kenneth Couch and David Wittenberg, ‘Who Gets What’ from Minimum Wage Hikes: A Re-estimation of Card and Krueger’s Distributional Analysis in Myth and Measurement: The New Economics of the Minimum Wage’ (1996) 49 Industrial and Labour Relations Review 547.
\end{thebibliography}
that have been conducted do show clear negative results.22

B Empirical Evidence – Groups Most Adversely Affected by Minimum Wage

The negative impacts of a FMW are experienced the most by workers whose employment position is already tenuous – those on or close to the minimum wage, in declining industries or in regional areas.23 A 1960 study in Florida, for instance, found that, after an increase in the minimum wage unemployment increased most in the areas where wages were lowest and least in areas where wages were highest beforehand.24 This research is supported in Australia by the 2005 Commonwealth Treasury report that stated:

International evidence consistently finds that significant increases in minimum wages have a negative effect on employment. The more closely are wages linked to productivity, the better we are able to keep inflation steady and allow the economy to expand. There is strong evidence that aggregate wages growth is negatively correlated with employment: conservatively, a one per cent increase in wages is


correlated with a 0.4 per cent fall in employment. This elasticity may be higher for people of relatively low skill or who are marginally attached to the labour force.25

The Treasury minute went on to state that increasing the flexibility of working conditions and making wages more flexible are key parts of the policy menu needed to achieve employment and economic growth; that since wages are already fully flexible on the up-side, this can only mean that more flexibility is needed, according to the Treasury, on the ‘downwards side’.

C Empirical Evidence – Effect of Minimum Wage on Young Workers

There is a very large body of evidence that demonstrates that the negative effects of a minimum wage (or an increase in a minimum wage) is felt most acutely in the employment and employment prospects of young people. In a survey of over two dozen empirical studies of the effects of an increase in the minimum wage on youth employment, Brown et al found that

on balance, a 10 percent increase in the minimum wage is estimated to result in about a 1-3 percent reduction in total teenage employment. All studies find a negative employment effect for all teenagers together and the signs are almost exclusively negative for the various age-sex-race subgroups.26

It should be emphasised that almost all the studies reviewed by Brown et al found that there were only small ‘unemployment’ effects of a rise in the minimum wage, but significant ‘disemployment’ effects: in other words, although there were not necessarily many immediate layoffs consequent on the FMW increases, employers simply did not replace any workers who left. Those most vulnerable workers who were forced out of the wage-earning system by an increase in the minimum wage simply withdrew from the labour market – they ceased looking for work.27 For young adults, the empirical studies examined by Brown et al found similarly consistent negative employment effects (but only a one percent negative move in relation to a 10 percent increase in the minimum wage) but more pronounced unemployment results (in other words, young adults were more likely than teenagers to remain looking for work).

26 Brown et al, above n 15, 505.
27 Other studies have found similar results – that increases in minimum wages are likely to lead to increases in structural unemployment – see Yale Brozen, ‘Minimum Wage Rates and Household Workers’ (1962) 5 Journal of Law and Economics 103.
Most other studies\(^28\) have found significant unemployment effects for teenage workers from increases in a minimum wage. Significantly, research seems to indicate that many businesses will engage in cost-cutting measures to offset the requirement to pay higher wages—such as training or overtime payments to workers\(^29\) (see below). Similarly, other studies indicate that increases in the


minimum wage may lead to the replacement of labour with machinery\textsuperscript{30} (and this is in relation to all jobs, not simply that of young persons).

In noting the adverse effects of minimum wages on young workers, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (‘OECD’) stated that the clear policy conclusion was that:

in the current context of high and persistent unemployment in many countries it is suggested that more weight be given to the market clearing role of wages, while pursuing equity objectives through other instruments.\textsuperscript{31}

D Empirical Evidence – Other Groups Particularly Affected by a Minimum wage – Women Workers

In addition to widespread findings that a FMW has negative effects on youth employment, there are a large number of studies that have found that other groups within a country’s labour force will be negatively affected. Most of these studies have found that it is groups that would often be referred to as marginal or disadvantaged, or those who are in already tenuous employment that will be most adversely affected – women,\textsuperscript{32} workers in regional areas, migrant workers, very low skilled workers and casual and part-time workers.\textsuperscript{33}

Interestingly, many of the studies have concluded that the adverse affect on these groups corresponds with an advantage to white, male, full-time, higher wage earning workers.\textsuperscript{34} In a 1981 study, it was found that increases in the minimum wage would benefit few families with incomes below the poverty level while much of any benefit would accrue to upper income families with secondary earners, such as wives and children.\textsuperscript{35} Similarly, a 1995 study indicated that women on welfare were worse off after their minimum wages were increased.\textsuperscript{36}


\textsuperscript{33} It should also be noted that many of the first groups mentioned in this list are also disproportionately represented in the part-time, casual and low skilled categories of work; that is, there are more young people and women who are also casual or part-time workers.


Other studies have shown disproportionately negative effects for rural and remote regional areas.37

**E Empirical Evidence – Other Groups Particularly Affected by a Minimum Wage – Low Skilled Workers**

Studies have consistently found that one of the groups most adversely affected by a minimum wage is low skilled workers. Employer responses to increased wage costs include increasing training for workers (to the detriment of unskilled workers who are not employed), hiring of more full-time, qualified and trained workers (to the determinant of untrained casual and part-time workers) and attempts to multi-skill existing workers.38 Generally, if there are unemployment effects resulting from an increase in a FMW, the first workers to be affected are those who are least productive – generally those with the least skills. These employees gain a great deal from employment as it gives them the experience and skills they need to increase their ‘employability’ and are therefore doubly affected by unemployment as they are deprived of any ability to gain skills or experience.

The research also points to the fact that disemployment effects for the low skilled are magnified where the workforce is highly unionised as a result of the higher bargaining power of incumbent workers.39 Generally, the research also indicates that the imposition of a minimum wage does nothing to decrease the ‘net’ poverty in an area and may, in fact, increase it.40

**F Empirical Evidence – New Entrants and Small Business**

There is also evidence that a FMW has disproportionate effects on new entrants into the market place. A 1994 Danish study41 found that one percent of new jobs are in ‘new firms’ – firms that did not exist a year earlier and that have a larger number of low paid workers. Evidence also indicates that new businesses tend to be less productive than existing businesses and as such a higher wage cost will, in some cases, prohibit entry for companies that have the potential to

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41 Quoted in OECD, above n 31.
increase their productivity in the years after having become established in the marketplace.\textsuperscript{42}

Empirical research demonstrates that small businesses are disproportionately affected by increases in FMWs.\textsuperscript{43} It is estimated that, during 2000–1, there were 1,233,200 private sector small businesses in Australia which represented 97 per cent of all private sector businesses; these small businesses employed almost 3.6 million people, 49 per cent of all private sector employment.\textsuperscript{44} The evidence is that small businesses generally tend to have smaller profit margins and fewer strategies available to counter increases in costs that are not accompanied by increases in productivity. Some commentators\textsuperscript{45} have argued that low minimum wages or ‘leaving wages to the market’ results in more capacity for ‘inefficient’ firms to continue existing, and that this is no argument for imposing unnecessarily low wages on workers. However, there are a number of reasons why companies – especially new market entrants – may be less productive than other firms. These reasons include both the high investment costs of starting a business and the need to allow marketing to build up a company’s clientele over a few years. There is no reason why less efficient companies cannot provide worthwhile jobs in an interim period prior to increases in productivity being achieved.

G Empirical Evidence – Distributional Effects and Wage Compression

Studies have shown that there are some instances where an increase in the minimum wage will actually see an increase in employment. This is generally thought to result from an increased number of previously ‘not employed’ (not necessarily unemployed) workers entering the workforce as jobs with now higher wages are more attractive. However, there are, in these circumstances, ‘distributional effects’ resulting from the increase in a FMW. In these cases, higher skilled or qualified employees displace lower skilled employees. In some instances, the number of higher-qualified, full-time workers will increase to the detriment of low-skilled, part-time or casual employees.\textsuperscript{46}


\textsuperscript{44} Australian Bureau of Statistics, Small Business in Australia 2001, Catalogue 1321.0. Small businesses are defined by the ABS as ‘a business employing less than 20 people’. Categories of small businesses include; (1) non-employing businesses - sole proprietorships and partnerships without employees; (2) micro businesses - businesses employing less than five people, including non-employing businesses; (3) other small businesses - businesses employing five or more people, but less than 20 people. Small businesses tend to have the following management or organisational characteristics: (1) independent ownership and operations; (2) close control by owners/managers who also contribute most, if not all the operating capital; and (3) principal decision-making by the owners/managers.

\textsuperscript{45} See, eg, Peter Brosnan, Can Australia Afford Low Pay? (Unpublished article, University of Sydney, 2005).

\textsuperscript{46} See OECD, above n 31.
Research into the effect of the introduction of a FMW in the United Kingdom (that occurred in April 1999) indicated that there were a number of strategies adopted by employers in response to the increased labour costs they faced as a result of the introduction of the FMW – these strategies included replacing several part-time employees with a single full-time employee.47

Some studies have shown that an increase in minimum wages will not necessarily lead to unemployment or disemployment but will, instead, lead to wage compression. As a result of increases in a FMW, although there will be more workers who were previously earning less but who will be earning more as a result of a FMW increase, other workers who were previously earning above the minimum wage will not gain increases in their wages, but will move downwards and closer to the minimum wage in their earnings. Over time, it can be expected that the average wage of workers will be ‘dragged down’ towards the minimum wage.48

**H Empirical Evidence – Other Employer Strategies in Response to FMW**

Other strategies adopted by employers in response to the introduction of or increases in a national minimum wage include those that are ‘positive’ in response to labour management (but negative in relation to employment levels) and those that are negative in relation to both labour management and employment levels. In the latter case, some increases in minimum wages have lead to increased capitalisation and mechanisation by employers and to moving production offshore where labour is cheaper.49 One of the positive responses to increases in minimum wages by employers is to increase employee training.50

However, increased emphasis on training has the inevitable effect of not only leading to disemployment results for the low-skilled, but also making it even harder for them to enter employment as the skills-gap widens, with fewer jobs available for unskilled and untrained entrants in the jobs market.51 This response by employers results in similarly negative distributional outcomes as discussed above.

Increases in a FMW also lead employers to adopt other means of attempting to increase productivity – including increasing oversight and supervision of workers,52 ‘simply expecting everyone to work twice as hard’53 and reducing

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49 See Lucas and Langlois, above n 47, 45-6.
51 See also Neumark and Wascher, ‘Panel Data on State Minimum Wage Laws’, above n 21, 557ff.
52 See Arrowsmith et al, above n 43, 446. However, classical economic theory would suggest that lower wages also increase the need for supervision of employees as they are more indifferent to whether or not they retain their job and therefore are less willing to expend effort ensuring that they do so. See Andrew Weiss, *Efficiency Wages: Models of Unemployment, Layoffs and Wage Dispersion* (1991) 5.
employees’ work hours (including imposing reductions in overtime). Research in Canada seems to indicate that these responses (sometimes referred to as ‘shock effects’) might offset some of the disemployment effects of a minimum wage (or a rise in the minimum wage) but not all of those effects.

1 Empirical Evidence – Where there is Non-universal Coverage

Where part of the sector is covered by a minimum wage and part is not, the workforce as a whole reacts to the minimum wage as it would if coverage were universal. This is relevant in the Australian context as there will not be heterogeneous coverage of all workers by a single FMW. Indeed, it can be expected, based on the current rhetoric of state governments, that the state minimum wages for workers who remain covered by the state systems will be higher for employees covered by the FMW. This would suggest that (all other things being equal) demand for state system jobs in any sector will be higher than for federal system jobs. The research indicates that this fact leads to a ‘levelling-out’ of the system as a whole, in which ‘[w]orkers displaced by the minimum wage migrate’ to the uncovered sector, shifting supply there outward. As a result, wages fall and employment increases in the uncovered sector.

In the Australian context, however, there is no ‘uncovered’ system; instead, there will be two ‘covered’ systems. This would tend to imply – in simple terms – that, if there is a larger supply of workers in the state systems (with higher low wages), there will be an impetus for employers to offer lower wages (closer to the state minimum wage) and the number of workers in the state system earning over the minimum wage would be reduced. That is, there will be more workers in the state systems working at the state minimum wage than there were before the introduction of a lower federal minimum wage. This theoretical model would also suggest that there would be some impetus for employers in the federal system to offer wages above the federal minimum wage and closer to or better than the state minimum wage in order to attract (or ensure they retain) low wage employees who are likely to migrate to the (higher-paid) state systems.

53 See Arrowsmith et al, above n 43, 447.
54 See Machin et al, above n 48, 175; Eriksson and Pytlíková, ‘Minimum Wage Increases in the Czech and Slovak Republics’, above n 22, 95; Jason Heyes and Alex Gray, ‘The Impact of the National Minimum Wage on the Textiles and Clothing Industry’ (2001) 22 Policy Studies 83, who found that overtime was cut and the number of tasks undertaken by workers increased after an increase in the FMW.
55 See Brown et al, above n 15, 489-90.
57 Brown et al, above n 15, 490-493.
58 The federal workplace relations regime will cover only those employers that are engaged in interstate trade, that are Commonwealth public sector employers, that are constitutional corporations or are employers in a few other limited categories. All in all, it is expected that coverage will amount to more than three quarters of all employers within three years.
59 Brown et al, above n 15, 490.
In order to understand the likely effects of a lower FMW in Australia, it is necessary to have some idea of the nature of the Australian workforce, as well as the place of the FMW in Australia, in relation to those overseas countries where the bulk of the research above occurred. Australia is not alone in the world in having in place a statutory national minimum wage. There are more than 20 OECD countries with statutory national minimum wage regimes in place, with the OECD average minimum wage being approximately 42 per cent of the median wage. The range of the minimum wage as a percentage of the average wage varied significantly, ranging from 19 per cent in Mexico to approximately 60 per cent in France. Australia has the second highest minimum wage as a percentage of the median wage at approximately 58 per cent.60 In the 2005 Annual Safety Net Review, the AIRC noted that Australia had a traditionally high minimum wage when the wage was expressed as a percentage of median wages:

Some parties relied on international material relating to comparisons between the minimum wage and earnings. In particular it was submitted by the Commonwealth that "Australia now has the highest minimum wage compared with median earnings ... in the OECD". The Commonwealth produced OECD comparative data for the period since 1985. While we have not seen any objective validation of the OECD comparisons, they show that for most of the 19-year period Australia has had the highest minimum wage compared with median earnings in the OECD. The suggestion that this is a recent development, on the data provided, is wrong. More importantly, according to those data ... the relationship between the minimum wage and median earnings has been in decline since 1996.61

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The AIRC’s data is reproduced in Table 1 below:

**TABLE 1: MINIMUM WAGE AND MEDIAN EARNINGS MINIMUM WAGE (C14)/MEDIAN WAGES PERCENTAGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>60.6</td>
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<td>1997</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The national, seasonally-adjusted, annual, weekly, adult, ordinary-time wage in Australia in November 2005 was $1026 – ranging between $996 for the private sector and $1131 for the public sector. The statutory national minimum wage in Australia (which, until the Work Choices changes to the federal industrial relations regime, was set in Annual National Wage cases by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission) is currently $484.40 a week (or $12.75 per hour). The average hourly earnings for all full-time adult non-managerial employees in 2004 were $23.20.

According to classical economic theory, those workers whose after-FMW-increase-wages are higher than what would have been paid to them ‘at market’ will be affected by increases in the FMW. Those whose after-FMW-increase-earnings remain higher than the new FMW will not be directly affected (although they may be affected by broad changes in the labour market) because employers will presumably still be willing to offer them the same wage rate – a rate that, both before and after the FMW increase, was higher than the FMW. The Australian workers most affected by FMW increases are, therefore, those on the FMW or close to it. It is difficult to determine how many Australian workers are currently paid the minimum wage but some conclusions can be drawn about low wage workers generally – low paid workers are more likely to be employed in small firms than large and are more likely to be women or young workers; low paid work is found in some industries more than others; and low paid workers are more likely to be part-time workers.

Australian statistics pinpoint some industry sectors where wages of workers are low, and highlight the differences in wages between junior workers and adult

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64 A similar difficulty exists internationally See OECD, above n 31.
workers. The average weekly total earnings for full-time non-managerial employees across broad industry sectors are outlined in Table 2 below.

As the table shows, although no category of adult employment has average earnings below the federal minimum wage, there are a large number of categories of junior employment – both male and female – where the average weekly earnings fall below the FMW – with junior females earning on average below the minimum wage in every industry category and junior males earning below the minimum wage in 11 of 16 industry categories (69 per cent). In one category – ‘Personal and Other services’ – the female junior average wage is 65 per cent of the FMW.

Of all employees in the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004 survey, full-time employees accounted for 65.7 per cent of all employees and part-time employees 34.3 per cent, with non-managerial full-time employees accounting for 55.7 per cent of all employees and part-time non-managerial employees being 33.2 per cent.

Of the 55.7 per cent of full-time non-managerial employees, 53.8 per cent were adult employees and only 1.9 per cent junior employees; whereas, in the part-time category, adult part-time non-managerial employees accounted for 28.6 per cent of all employees and part-time employees in this category accounted for 4.6 per cent.

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66 The national wage setting procedures allow for junior rates of pay to be inserted into federal awards. Usually an award will allow junior pay rates as a percentage of full adult wages based on the number of years in age an employee is below 20. The Award Simplification Decision in December of 1997 (Print P7500) allowed for non-office juniors to be paid at: 17 years of age and under – 70 per cent of the adult wage; 18 years of age – 80 per cent of the adult wage; 19 years of age – 90 per cent of the adult wage and 20 years of age – full adult rate. Applying this typical pattern (junior wages were generally to be determined on an award-by-award basis) to the current federal minimum wage would result in ‘youth minimums’ of: 17 yrs - $339.08; 18 yrs – $387.50; 19 yrs – $435.96.

67 Australian Bureau of Statistics, above n 63.
TABLE 2 – AVERAGE WEEKLY TOTAL EARNINGS, ADULT AND JUNIOR NON-MANAGERIAL FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES – MAY 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Female Adult</th>
<th>Female Junior</th>
<th>Male Adult</th>
<th>Male Junior</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>1,157.10</td>
<td>np</td>
<td>1,584.20</td>
<td>558.60</td>
<td>1,522.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>772.50</td>
<td>529.60</td>
<td>971.50</td>
<td>410.80</td>
<td>913.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
<td>928.00</td>
<td>np</td>
<td>1,211.30</td>
<td>488.40</td>
<td>1,144.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>781.80</td>
<td>366.00</td>
<td>1,025.40</td>
<td>372.70</td>
<td>960.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale trade</td>
<td>769.90</td>
<td>428.40</td>
<td>880.10</td>
<td>439.50</td>
<td>841.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>647.40</td>
<td>405.60</td>
<td>730.50</td>
<td>393.80</td>
<td>669.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation, café’s &amp; restaurants</td>
<td>697.40</td>
<td>403.70</td>
<td>708.60</td>
<td>341.90</td>
<td>673.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport &amp; storage</td>
<td>804.80</td>
<td>419.50</td>
<td>993.10</td>
<td>590.20</td>
<td>931.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications services</td>
<td>857.70</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,079.90</td>
<td>376.40</td>
<td>996.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance &amp; insurance</td>
<td>883.60</td>
<td>438.40</td>
<td>1,167.20</td>
<td>381.20</td>
<td>1,005.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property &amp; business services</td>
<td>834.10</td>
<td>388.80</td>
<td>996.30</td>
<td>424.40</td>
<td>906.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt Administration &amp; defence</td>
<td>896.60</td>
<td>401.30</td>
<td>951.30</td>
<td>395.10</td>
<td>924.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>961.40</td>
<td>343.20</td>
<td>1,047.20</td>
<td>408.10</td>
<td>980.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Community services</td>
<td>826.20</td>
<td>396.30</td>
<td>1,010.30</td>
<td>436.90</td>
<td>869.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural and recreational services</td>
<td>845.00</td>
<td>475.30</td>
<td>921.20</td>
<td>488.50</td>
<td>881.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal &amp; Other services</td>
<td>770.60</td>
<td>317.00</td>
<td>1,017.40</td>
<td>523.00</td>
<td>868.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Industries</strong></td>
<td><strong>828.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>395.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>974.90</strong></td>
<td><strong>410</strong></td>
<td><strong>898.20</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minimum Wage</strong></td>
<td><strong>484.40</strong></td>
<td><strong>484.40</strong></td>
<td><strong>484.40</strong></td>
<td><strong>484.40</strong></td>
<td><strong>484.40</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*np – not published*

There is a clear difference in the number of females in all categories between full-time and part-time employees as evidenced by the following table:

TABLE 3 – MALE AND FEMALE FULL-TIME AND PART-TIME NON-MANAGERIAL EMPLOYEES AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL PERSONS EMPLOYED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full-time Adult</th>
<th>Full-time junior</th>
<th>Part-time Adult</th>
<th>Part-time junior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As is apparent, females are disproportionately represented in the part-time employment category.

VI  CONSEQUENCES OF INCREASES IN THE NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE IN AUSTRALIA

If the empirical evidence above is applied to Australia, it clearly demonstrates that the national minimum wage in Australia has probably resulted in disemployment and unemployment in the same way that it has in every other country in the world where it has been studied. There is no reason to consider that Australia is a special or different case.

Similarly, it should be expected that these unemployment and disemployment effects will be disproportionately experienced by workers who are young, female or low skilled. At a simplistic level, based on the figures illustrated above, it appears that this outcome could also be expected to be reinforced by the disproportionate numbers of women and young workers (and especially young women workers) who are in low income employment in low income industries.

In classical economic theory, the introduction of a minimum wage or an increase in a FMW will only result in those unemployment or disemployment effects if the resultant wage is greater than the marginal product of the worker in question – that is, if, as a result of the increase in wages, the worker costs (or starts to cost) an employer more to employ than the worker creates in value. As we have seen above, however, employers engage in a number of strategies to attempt to respond to increases in wages, including ‘getting employees to work harder’, passing on costs (where possible) to consumers of the employer’s goods or services, cutting overtime or a wide range of other strategies that eliminate the need to reduce the number of employees. Additionally, it is often the case that employers are willing to simply absorb some of the additional wage costs and, therefore, accept lower profits possibly because it is difficult to accurately price the value of any one employee’s actual contribution to production precisely. Firm labour expense is viewed on a collective or ‘sectional’ basis so, for instance, the ‘human resources office’ is seen as contributing a certain value, the ‘sales staff’ another and the shop floor employees another, rather than trying to ascertain worker value on a worker-by-worker basis. Employment value assumptions within a firm can lead to some circumstances where employees are retained even though their marginal product is actually less than their labour cost.

Increases in the FMW could only be expected to affect unemployment or disemployment across the economy where the wage is set above what employers would otherwise offer to workers, and above the level that workers would otherwise accept from employers as a wage. It is, of course, very difficult to evaluate whether wages are, in fact, currently above the market clearing rate and, if so, in what industry sectors. However, one can assume that, given Australia’s high level of FMW to average wage, there are at least some employees who would be willing to accept lower wages for a job, and some employers who would be willing to offer them.
It should not be assumed that, if Australia were to abolish the FMW, then wages would immediately drop. Other than there being structural reasons why this would be difficult, there are many reasons why an employer would offer above (or significantly above) the ‘market rate’.68 Indeed, this must be the case in Australia at the moment because most employees are currently earning well above the FMW – at least partially as a result of market pressures69 (see Table 2 above).

Having assumed, therefore, that the FMW is at least for some sectors above the market clearing rate, it can also be safely assumed, based on the very significant empirical evidence summarised above, that there are currently unemployment and disemployment effects exerted by the FMW. It can also be safely assumed that these effects are mostly being experienced by unskilled, young and female workers.

It follows that, if it were the case that the operation of the new AFPC were to result in a lower FMW or slower increases in the FMW, there would be positive effects for employment. This fact is uncontroversial. What is controversial – and untestable at this point in time – is the extent of the effect that any reduction in the FMW would have.

However, a few informed guesses can be made and some of the policy considerations that might be taken into account by the AFPC in its task of minimum wage setting can also be suggested.

First, since the Australian FMW is currently at a very high proportion of the average wage, any reduction is likely to have a larger positive employment effect than would otherwise be the case. This effect would be experienced most by those who are most disadvantaged in the labour market.

If the operations of the AFPC results in a lower FMW, but this happens only gradually and in small movements, then, as a result of the lag effects demonstrated in the research outlined above, any positive effect would be expected to occur slowly and be evident only after time – the AFPC is precluded from making any immediate downwards adjustments to the FMW by the operation of the Act.70 It is very unlikely that the operations of the AFPC will result in any major decline in the FMW except in the long term and, therefore, initially it is unlikely that there will be any radical improvement for large numbers of workers previously excluded from labour market participation because of the FMW. However, this does not discount that there may be some immediate positive employment effects, especially in some industry sectors.

Because the new Act allows for junior pay rates, disabled pay rates, special pay rates and trainee pay rates that are differentiated from the FMW71 (and will presumably always be lower than the FMW) then the negative employment effects of the FMW will be tempered for those most disadvantaged groups because ‘their’ minimum wage is lower than the FMW.

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68 See Junankar, above n 17, 93-94.
69 Although it is also clearly the case that collective wage bargaining structures and award setting mechanisms have also contributed to wages possibly above what would also be ‘offered at market’.
70 See Workplace Relations Act 1996 (Cth) ss 190-193.
71 See Workplace Relations Act 1996 (Cth) pt 7, div 2, subdiv B.
The effect of other labour market regulation measures in combination with the effect of the FMW will help determine whether reductions in the FMW will have positive employment results. Research has shown that, in countries with low levels of employment protection and active labour market policies, minimum wage effects are predominately negative and those with restrictive labour standards will experience even more marked effects. With countries that have less restrictive labour standards, the effects are even more marked. The current federal government is generally accepted as moving from a system that has more restrictive labour standards to less restrictive ones, and therefore from a system where the FMW has less of an effect (although still a negative one) to more of an effect.\textsuperscript{72} This research would tend to support a contention that other labour market flexibility changes being implemented by the Australian Federal government would complement any positive results occurring as a reduction in the FMW.

At times of high employment, it can be assumed that more employees are paid at rates in excess of a FMW than occurs in times of high unemployment. This is because in times of high unemployment there are more workers who are seeking work and there is a high probability that at least some of those at least would be willing to work for less, resulting in downwards pressure on wages. Currently, Australia is experiencing relatively high levels of employment\textsuperscript{73} and, therefore, one would expect that, as a general principle, any negative employment effects of a FMW would be less pronounced than in a time of high unemployment. This principle, it is suggested, is one that the AFPC needs to take into account: upward changes in times of high or rising unemployment will have much more significant unemployment and disemployment effects.

There is evidence that increases in a FMW will result in inflation as employers will attempt, where this is feasible, to pass on any increases in labour costs as higher prices. Lower increases in the FMW will mean slower increases in inflation. Again, it is difficult to estimate the actual effects of this outcome which may be quite slight.

\section*{VII CONCLUSION}

There is no doubt that the FMW has disemployment and unemployment effects in Australia and that these effects are largely experienced by the most vulnerable categories of worker. The actual extent of the effects is difficult to estimate and there is no extant research on the effects of the FMW on the Australian labour market. However, despite any clear indication of the extent of the negative effects, it is beyond dispute that future increases in the FMW would have negative effects on the likelihood that some Australians will have jobs in the future. If, as some commentators suggest, the operations of the AFPC will

\textsuperscript{72} See Neumark and Wascher, above n 60, 243.
\textsuperscript{73} Unemployment is currently at 5.2 per cent. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, \textit{Labour Force Australia – February 2006} (2006).
necessarily result in lower minimum wages (although it is difficult to understand why this assumption has been made), this would result in more jobs.

The research above shows that a FMW does little to alleviate poverty – if anything, it sometimes acts to increase it. The main effect of a FMW is to protect certain segments of a workforce (those in jobs) to the detriment of others (those who would be willing to work for less than the FMW). Those ‘others’ – generally women, migrants, young people and the unskilled – are thereby deprived of the experience, training and other opportunities (in addition to a wage) that a job provides. The evidence shows that increases in a FMW tend to increase any disadvantage already suffered by these groups as responses by employers to FMW increases often include worker training and multi-skilling which widen the employability gap that these groups suffer.

The research supports an argument that the FMW is not a useful social justice policy tool with which to alleviate poverty. Nor is there any evidence that it achieves any useful labour market outcome other than increasing the income of some at the expense of others. It is undoubtedly arguable that wages policy is not a place where it is appropriate, efficient or useful to attempt to achieve legitimate social justice policy outcomes, but if it is, the best social justice outcomes are actually achieved by reducing or eliminating a FMW because ‘[t]here is widespread agreement amongst economists that holding down real wages would offer great hope for significantly lower unemployment’74

Commentators have assumed that the AFPC would act to lower the FMW and, based on the empirical evidence presented above, this is an entirely appropriate and desirable outcome.

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