Learning from retrenchment: 
Local textile workers redefine themselves 
after global restructuring

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the 
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Acknowledgments

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I would like to thank my two supervisors for their support. Paul James helped me to think through the theoretical framework for my ideas, structure the material I had gathered over three years and focus on the larger story. Bruce Wilson provided invaluable assistance by providing detailed, thought-provoking insights on the draft, which would significantly improve the final product.

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Maree T. Keating

April 2010
Abstract

This thesis analyses the ways in which recent changes in the global field of work have resonated in the lives of one group of retrenched workers. In order to conceptualise the relationships between changing conditions and changes in individual lives, I have drawn from the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Of particular importance to my study are his notions of the ‘habitus’, the ‘field’ and the ‘disposition’.

The research focuses on workers leaving the textile industry, in which a diversity of individual ‘dispositions’ once flourished as part of another system or work ‘habitus’. I do this in order to examine how changing conditions of work have generated specific transformative possibilities for workers at the lower end of the economy.

I ask what transformations were undergone in the lives of seventeen retrenched textile workers and how adequately their learning process was supported by vocational education and training.

In relation to the first question, I argue that, as they re-positioned themselves within the new field over three years, workers each underwent transformations in their work identities, sense of belonging and sense of themselves as learners. For many, customer focus, entrepreneurship and dispersed social networks, as well as acceptance of change and openness to learning, had come to define their working lives and identities. However, the benefits of change flowed to very few. Although they had come to inhabit new work dispositions, retrenched textile workers tended to experience higher levels of stress and lower sense of motivation at work. Exceptions to this were obvious only where particular kinds of
identity attributes and social networks supported individual transformations.

In relation to the second question, I argue that vocational education and training confirmed worker dispositions, without supporting critical learning throughout retrenched textile workers’ transformations. Whilst VET (vocational education and training) participation had numerous ad hoc and unintended impacts on individual lives, its ability to support the critical learning of retrenched workers as they moved through change was limited by tensions brought about by the socially dis-embedded constructions of skill itself and of skilful workers.

This study investigates one group of retrenched workers from one industry. However, this group shared many features with thousands of retrenched workers who are leaving the manufacturing sector and finding positions in growing service industries at the lower end of the Australian economy. The government promotes VET qualifications for such workers, on the grounds that they both increase the range of skills for work at the national level and improve work opportunities in individual lives. However, this research suggests that neither may be the case. It also suggests that social connectivity, embedded within individual enterprises, industries and training courses is a vital condition for the development of a skilful, flexible and resilient workforce as well as for positive, transformative change in the lives of retrenched manufacturing workers.
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Preamble

How do individual workers and worker communities at the local level change as they respond to the challenges of globalisation? Prior to undertaking this research, this question and others like it had featured throughout two decades of my working life as an educator, advocate and researcher. In 2005 I chose to enrol with the Globalism Research Centre in the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning at RMIT to pursue some of the answers.

My initial interest was to examine the ways in which a particular group of recently retrenched long-term textile workers had understood and responded to the major disruption in their lives brought about by retrenchment. I wanted to focus on the personal adaptations involved as individuals engaged with new forms of work, and how these impacted on their self-perceptions and social practice. In the course of working professionally in a support and advocacy role with these workers over the first twelve months after retrenchment, my research interest gained an additional focus. I also wanted to know if and how the individual learning processes, which accompanied dramatic life changes, were supported through re-skilling for work and vocational education programs.

In late 2004 I was asked by the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA) to run an information session with a group of around thirty retrenched footwear workers. For these workers, the news of retrenchment had come as a surprise – upon arriving for work on a Friday, they were advised that they did not need to come back again. They were told they would not be paid for the last week’s work as the company
had gone into liquidation. In the meeting I was to advise the group of the government’s TCF Structural Adjustment Program and the advantages to them of undertaking free vocational education and training to help them develop new skills for work. They were a mixed group of men and women, largely over fifty years old and from an Anglo-Australian background. A few had been with the company since they had left school as teenagers in the 1950s and 1960s.

Coming up for Christmas, with no pay and no thoughts of working anywhere else, this meeting at the TCFUA office was their last gathering as a group. There was an atmosphere of immense loyalty, respect, kindness, and humour, as well as a great degree of shock present in the room. There were easy jokes that hinted at lifelong bonds. What disturbed and distressed people in the room at least as much as the financial problems they faced, appeared to be that they had no idea what to do next. ‘What am I going to do when I wake up tomorrow?’ asked one of the men.

As the group spoke it became clear that its members were certain that no one in their families or existing social networks would be able to help them find answers to this question. Their suddenly ‘vanished’ work-based group was, for many, the very community that may once have assisted them to find their way. It was going to take this group of people some time to work out what to do next, how to re-position themselves in the labour market and work out whether training would make any difference to their prospects. Few believed it would.

Retrenchment brings the full impact of global restructuring and social change into retrenched textile workers’ lives. As a teacher, researcher and policy advocate closely involved in both vocational education and textile, clothing and footwear (TCF) industries, I have wondered since the early 1990s about larger changes in the lives of retrenched workers moving into different industries. I have wondered whether, in adapting to rapidly
changing notions of work, they come to carry a different sense of identity and belonging with them in their everyday interactions with the world. I have wondered what kind of learning was involved in that process, and what resistances. Dramatic changes have taken place in vocational education policy, whilst the expanding warehouse, transport and aged-care sectors have absorbed many retrenched manufacturing workers. Was vocational education generating skills for the new workforce, and providing retrenched workers with more options, as it claimed? Did it support new work identities amongst retrenched textile workers? Did changes benefit individuals in the ways they hoped or imagined? This thesis uses interviews conducted over a three-year period with one group of retrenched textile workers, to find answers to those questions.
Introduction

Changes in the Australian economy brought about by the ‘Global Financial Crisis’ saw tangible effects in early 2009 with a huge downturn in the manufacturing sector in Victoria and New South Wales. The retrenchment in March 2009 of 1,850 employees from Pacific Brands, a Victorian-based company that specialised in the production of well-known brands of textile, clothing and footwear products, became a story which ran in the Australian media for several weeks (Gillard et al. 2009).

The massive scale of the retrenchment and the end to Australian production of well-known ‘intimate’ products such as Bonds tee-shirts and Berlei bras added symbolic power to the event. The collapse of Pacific Brands’ Australian-based production was thought to herald multiple rounds of large-scale retrenchments across the country, starting in the manufacturing sector (ABC 2009).

For weeks, Pacific Brands workers were quoted in the media in their distress about the break-up of their workplaces as the loss of sites of community. When commenting on the loss they were experiencing, workers described close bonds of neighbourhood and family, which had been overlaid in the workplace (Wendt 2009). In all the public reaction and media commentary around the announcement, there was little that reflected on the implications of this element of the retrenchment. The loss of identity and sense of belonging, which potentially accompanies retrenchment from the manufacturing sector, is central to this thesis.

Textile, Clothing and Footwear retrenchment is not new to the Australian public. Waves of identical retrenchment processes have been taking place
in the Australian TCF industries for two decades, and few Australian-based places continue to exist as sites for large-scale TCF production processes. Such processes have defined working identities and provided the basis for class belonging in Australia for tens of thousands of workers since the Second World War (McMurchy et al. 1983; Capling and Galligan 1992; Jupp et al. 2007). During that time, individuals working in the TCF industries have reproduced nuanced and complex forms of work-based communities. As the sites for large-scale TCF production processes have diminished in Australia, particular kinds of embedded social relationships and community bonds, which are features of those sites, have been transformed.

This thesis explores the nature of this transformation through an examination of change in the lives of one group of workers from Feltex Carpets after a retrenchment which took place in October 2005.

The questions and the argument

Broadly, my thesis sets out to answer two questions. Firstly, what transformations are undergone in the lives of retrenched textile workers as they experience changes in their work practices and work identities? Secondly, how adequately is learning from change supported by the vocational education and training system? In order to address these questions I drew upon Bourdieu’s notions of the ‘habitus’, the ‘field’ and the ‘disposition’ in the analysis of worker narratives.

In relation to the first question, I argue that dispositional changes took place as individual workers re-positioned themselves within the new field of work. New worker dispositions incorporated key features of the new economy, including an ongoing expectation of change and uncertainty, an increased level of personal responsibility in career development and a higher degree of social fragmentation in social networks.
I argue that despite shifts occurring in individual attitude, practice and aspiration, retrenched textile workers tended to be disadvantaged in the change process, unless two conditions were at play. These were, firstly, that the worker had personal identity attributes (such as age, gender and language background) which were favoured in the particular enterprises that employed them, and secondly, that the worker had formed social networks which could facilitate mobility and advancement across their new industry of employment. New social networks were critical in the provision of advice, information and support in relation to working life, offering affirmation of changing work identity and exerting influence and support in the process of accessing new employment opportunities.

In relation to the second question, I argue that vocational education and training tended to confirm relevant worker attributes, without supporting critical learning for retrenched textile workers’ transformations. I argue that tensions running through the construction of vocational education and training, or VET, in Australia limited its capacity to respond to the complex and nuanced learning needs of retrenched workers undergoing transformation. Moreover, uneven VET approaches to social connectivity exacerbated the disjuncture workers experienced between vocational courses and work contexts in which workers were required to be flexible, resilient, self-motivated, and entrepreneurial.

At the outset, I had assumed that vocational education and training would have contributed to learning processes through which Feltex workers repositioned themselves after retrenchment. Employment opportunities at the lower end of the economy are increasingly mediated by combined recruitment and training services. The current training-for-work agenda emerges out of highly contested shifts in the field of education, particularly in relation to its role in producing skilled workers for industry and simultaneously increasing employment access for those disadvantaged in the labour market. Findings from this research suggest, however, that despite new policy alignments between industry and
education, highly motivated, determined and skilful individuals exiting the manufacturing sector are often unable to use vocational education and training in their work transformations.

This thesis draws on narratives from a group of carpet manufacturing workers who were retrenched from the Yarns Mill at the Braybrook site of Feltex Australia in October 2005. The retrenched workers held a range of roles and responsibilities and had a variety of different personal histories and standpoints with the workplace. In order to position my research with these workers, it is important to first clarify my own position as researcher, as well as the historical and material construction of the workplace from which the research subjects had recently emerged.

**Situating the research**

**Research motivations**

Over the past two decades I have had a professional involvement with the textile, clothing and footwear industries in Melbourne. Since the turn of the twentieth century, firms in these industries had operated within a highly protected domestic market. As global trade regimes restructured alongside rapid advances in technology, communication and transport in the 1970s and 1980s, Australian domestic industry protection was politically re-constructed as a ‘cost’ rather than an obligation. The ‘Button Plan’, a tariff reduction plan introduced in the late 1980s and named after the then Minister for Industry and Commerce, Senator John Button, was designed to ensure that the Australian manufacturing sector would become globally competitive or face radical reductions in size.

In 1986 my role as industry-based teacher and curriculum developer for the Melbourne College of Textiles first put me into direct relationship with the early waves of major industry restructuring. From the onset, factory-based education and training was considered by larger firms to be a
means by which workers in the industry could be introduced to new
critical ‘ways of working’. It was clear that subsidies to the TCF industry
in the form of industry grants and import tariffs would gradually fall
away in the coming decades. With the introduction of the Button Plan,
companies started to radically restructure their processes and work teams,
in order to cut the costs of local production. Some made efforts to invest in
the development of niche, high-end speciality products and markets, and
many decided to move part or all of their production to cheaper, off-shore
sites. It has been widely observed that in Australia the ‘strongest progress
towards trade liberalisation occurred in the latter part of the 1980s and
through the 1990s up to the year 2000’ (Emmery 1999, np), largely as a
result of the introduction of the Button Plan.

Government funding through the Labour Adjustment Program (LAP) in
the late 1980s to the early 1990s and the later Structural Adjustment
Program (SAP) from 2005 was designed to increase retrenched TCF
workers’ access to vocational education and training. However, in both
programs it was clear to educators and policy advocates that
implementation of these support programs was hindered by poor access
to advice and information, guidance and mentoring support. The design
logic of both programs also assumed that worker participation in
Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses would enable more
retrenched TCF workers to move into new jobs and play an active role in
the changing economy (Webber and Weller 2002; DEWR 2005c). Educators, advocates and project workers involved in elements of these
programs had a more granular view.

In 2005 I had the extraordinary opportunity of working closely with a
group of 165 workers retrenched from the Yarns Mill of Feltex Carpets in
Braybrook, a Western suburb of Melbourne. I worked with them for
twelve months as they enrolled in courses, re-imagined their futures,
made decisions, dealt with frustration and disappointment, and found
new work. Three years later I met with some of them to discuss their experiences and perceptions of change.

**The Feltex workplace**

Invicta Mills first started operations as a blanket manufacturer in the western suburb of Braybrook in Melbourne, in the 1940s. Like many TCF companies at the time, it found a large willing supply of labour from post-war Australian and new migrant communities, and it grew steadily into a large, thriving blanket and carpet manufacturing company. By the 1960s the company, still owned by the same Jewish family, employed thousands of workers who were living in the surrounding working-class western suburbs.

From the beginning, work organisation under Invicta Mills was spread across two main work sites; one at Braybrook and the other in Sunshine. In addition, warehouse operations took place in Hallam. Invicta Mills sold its blanket operations in the 1970s to specialise exclusively in carpet manufacturing until it ultimately sold to Capital Carpets in 1983. Capital Carpets combined the Braybrook and North Sunshine sites with its own Tottenham-based carpet manufacturing site (known as Redbook), leading to the reorganisation of work processes and the changing of team structures. Voluntary redundancies commenced during this period, accompanied by continuous industrial resistance, primarily from the close-knit group of unionised workers at the Tottenham site, who opposed changes resulting from the merger of Redbook and Invicta operations under Capital Carpets.

The American-based Shaw Industries bought Capital Carpets in 1988 and changed its local name to Shaw Industries Australia. It was during this period that the Button Plan was announced and significant tariff reductions commenced in the TCF industry. Recognising the need for drastic restructuring, Shaw Industries introduced multi-skilling, and commenced workforce redundancies at the Braybrook, North Sunshine,
and Tottenham sites. At this time there were 1,500 workers at the Braybrook production site. Following continuous industrial resistance as major work reorganisation was implemented, the company was soon re-sold to Feltex Australia (henceforth known in this thesis as Feltex) in 1991 and it remained Feltex-owned until 2006.

Feltex was already a huge carpet manufacturing company with a large base in both New Zealand and Australia. Established in the 1920s as Felt and Textiles Australia Ltd, it was Australia’s eighth largest manufacturing plant in the 1940s, employing 6,000 workers across sixty-five sites (Wikipedia 2010). At the time it bought Shaw Industries Australia, Feltex was one of the two largest remaining carpet manufacturers left in Victoria. The other was Godfrey Hirst.

Not long after acquiring Shaw Industries Australia, Feltex started planning for a much more radical restructure of work and worker conditions. By 1998 the Braybrook site workforce had been reduced to around 300 workers. Widespread industrial action was taken over six weeks in 2001 when most of the workers across the Tottenham, Braybrook and the North Sunshine sites closed ranks to protect conditions outlined in their existing Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (Peterson 2007).

Although it left the workplace bitterly divided, the unionised action of the Feltex workers achieved its main goal: the preservation of redundancy conditions outlined in the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement. Not long after the 2001 action, however, the Tufting Department at the North Sunshine site was closed. The North Sunshine site, a predominantly male work environment, had until then employed around eighty workers across three shifts, but this material was now mainly imported more economically than it could be made in Australia. Some of those Tufting Department workers were transferred to the Braybrook site, where the Yarns Mill and the Dye House operations took place.
By 2003, Feltex employed a total of 787 workers, organised across the following sites and production processes (Feltex Australia 2003):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Address</th>
<th>Activities Undertaken</th>
<th>Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 35-65 Paramount Road Tottenham Vic 3012 | • Nylon yarn processing  
• Tufting  
• Continuous dyeing  
• Back coating  
• Head office/Administration/Sales & Marketing | 312       |
| South Road Braybrook Vic 3019 | • Wool fibre dyeing and blending  
• Woollen yarn spinning  
• Tufting  
• Continuous dyeing  
• Back coating  
• Sales and Marketing | 372       |
| Somerville Road (Cnr Victoria Ave) Brooklyn Vic 3012 | • National Distribution Centre  
• Sample Manufacturing | 41        |
| Hallam Road Hallam Vic 3803 | • Extrusion of polypropylene carpet yarns | 17        |
| Outside Victoria | • Sales and Marketing | 45        |
| **Total Employees in Australia** | | **787** |

*Table A: Activities at Feltex sites, taken from Feltex Australia Submission to Productivity Commission 2003*

At the time of the large October 2005 retrenchment, the work at the Braybrook site was divided into numerous work activities, with over 150 workers in the Yarns Mill. Because of its size and the number of different work processes, the culture of the Braybrook site was significantly different from that of the smaller North Sunshine site.

The retrenchment in October affected 165 workers although they by no means comprised a homogenous group. The group included male supervisors and both male and female leading hands from the Braybrook Spinning Department as well as those who had moved over from the North Sunshine site several years earlier. It affected both male and female machine operators in roughly equal numbers from the spinning, beaming, tufting, twisting, winding and finishing machines. Whilst many of the operations within the factory were gender specific, the spinning, beaming...
and tufting machines were worked by both men and women equally. Some workers from other parts of the Braybrook site, such as those working in the Dye House (mainly male) or in Despatch (mainly female), also requested voluntary redundancies when the closure of the Yarns Mill was announced.

The following table indicates the predominant gender composition of the various machine operators and the range of work activities at Braybrook, as well as a comment on the general nature of the work as described by workers. The jobs targeted by the 2005 retrenchment are featured in bold:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JOB</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>NATURE OF WORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blending</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Very heavy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dye house</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Very dirty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubberiser</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Very heavy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carding</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Very heavy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back coater</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Very heavy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despatch- forklift</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Varied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Varied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaming</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Varied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tufting</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Varied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twisting</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Constant/detailed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winding and finishing</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Constant/detailed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despatch- computer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Light</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table B: Types of machines operated by workers at the Braybrook site of Feltex in 2005, compiled through discussion with Dorothy Peterson in 2006.

The Braybrook site continued to operate after the closure of the Yarns Mill, with only minimal work in the Dye House and what remained of the Tufting operations continuing. Within months, Feltex was bought out by its last remaining competitor, Godfrey Hirst, in 2006, and 600 workers from Braybrook and Tottenham in total lost their jobs over that year.

The workplace at Feltex was extremely diverse, not only in terms of the roles performed and their associated gendered and status implications, but also in terms of team culture across the different shifts and work sites. Another overlay of diversity was the extremely multi-cultural composition of the workforce. Feltex reported in 2003 that it translated key
workplace communications into sixteen different languages and had a workforce comprised of thirty-four nationalities (Feltex Australia 2003). Work was often both gender-specific and highly differentiated. For example, whilst forty per cent of the workers were women, these women performed a diverse range of jobs. Women working in the Despatch Department were doing much lighter work than machine operators, often closer in nature to office work. The machines themselves in different parts of the operation were very different. Some required regular heavy lifting, some constant watching and mending, and others were newer and required little attention.

Whilst multi-skilling was introduced in the 1990s, machine operators still tended to operate particular machines most of the time, each of which had very individual characteristics. Amongst men, supervisors and fork-lift drivers were less likely to be doing dirty work or heavy manual lifting. Other male-dominated jobs such as those in the Dye House or Tufting areas, were extremely dirty or physically demanding. Other men worked alongside women in the Yarns Mill, operating the same machines under the same conditions.

The seventeen participants interviewed for this research performed a variety of roles prior to their retrenchment from the Braybrook site. Whilst the majority were machine operators, the following table indicates the different positions and areas in which they worked. In the interviews they talked about the specific machines they were responsible for operating. Whilst they were assigned to several main machines, generally machine operators considered themselves experienced and skilled enough to be able to operate all of the machines in their area. Some prided themselves on also being able to fix their machines without having to call in the Maintenance workers.

Leading hands operated machines and loaded product, and also carried additional responsibilities which often included conflict resolution, fixing
machines, ensuring deadlines were met and representing their teams at management meetings. Supervisors had a higher level of direct accountability to senior management, managed teams of qualified tradesmen and oversaw maintenance issues. Supervisors tended to be promoted through the company from the factory floor; they were men whose English language skills were good, who were articulate and loyal to the company and who were trade qualified or similar. These men were responsible for hiring and issuing warnings to workers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Machine/area</th>
<th>Shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Florica Stoican</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Machine operator</td>
<td>Spinning</td>
<td>aft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meliame Vaati</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Machine operator</td>
<td>Spinning</td>
<td>day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vesna Karadulev</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Machine operator</td>
<td>Spinning</td>
<td>day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Bizdoaca</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Machine operator</td>
<td>Spinning</td>
<td>day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satwinder Kaur</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Machine operator</td>
<td>Tufting</td>
<td>aft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desa Ivanovic</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Machine Operator</td>
<td>Spinning</td>
<td>day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osmundo Tena</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Machine operator</td>
<td>Dye House</td>
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<td>Abdul Mussa</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Zaim Abazovic</td>
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<td>Dusan Ivanovic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jano Kolaric</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Leading hand/fitter/operator</td>
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<td>Mark Hughes</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Stan Wotiniak</td>
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<td>Levy Ramos</td>
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<td>General Hand</td>
<td>Despatch</td>
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<td>Zofia Kloss</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sorting</td>
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Table C: Gender, jobs, locations and shifts of the seventeen interview participants in this research

Australian TCF workplaces like Feltex have generated the possibilities for ways of being amongst workers and have operated as sites for specific communities of belonging. The workplace processes and ways of being in places like the Feltex Braybrook site did not develop in a social vacuum. Global restructure has had a dramatic influence on production processes and has been a catalyst for national policy shifts. Different modes of production tend to be associated with ways of thinking, social structures and value systems. The macro-level transformations in the Australian TCF
industry have brought about intended and unintended changes at the micro level, and can be seen in new social norms arising out of the values and practices of work (Greig and Little 1996). Bourdieu’s theories have been useful in my consideration of the relationships between these macro and micro-level processes.

Towards a theory of changing work identities

According to Bourdieu and Passeron, ‘the structures sociology deals with are the product of transformations which, unfolding in time, cannot be considered as reversible’ (1977, p. 88). Transformations undergone by retrenched workers at the personal level are of this order. As social structures have shifted, individual ways of being, built up through habits of practice and thought, have been re-shaped, incorporating layers of continuity and discontinuity.

Through an analysis of changing conditions of work, community and education, alongside an analysis of workers’ narratives about change, this thesis explores the iterative relationship between changes in the social conditions of work and in the individual experience of belonging. Bourdieu observed that ‘what people retrospectively discover is a number of dispositions that, because they are ceasing to be self-evident, used to be part and parcel of the conditions of the way the economy functioned’ (1990, p. 89). Just as his observations two decades ago remain relevant to studies of change on multiple levels, several of Bourdieu’s theories have been critical in the conceptual and structural design of this thesis.

The relationship between the new work habitus as a responsive system and the active realignment of individual worker dispositions within that system is represented by a mirror structure in this thesis. Part One of the thesis outlines the nature of the changing habitus of work and learning, whereas Part Two analyses the ways in which individual experiences and choices resonate with the conditions of the changing habitus and reproduce particular worker and learner dispositions within it.
The habitus is conceived by Bourdieu as a dynamic and interactive system of acquired dispositions, which arises in particular fields through a process of struggle. Through this construction of the habitus, the theoretical tension raised by locating structure and individual agency as separate processes is somewhat resolved. According to Bourdieu any social ‘field’ is constructed through a process of struggle for resources which are valued in that field. Whilst rules may govern a field, they do not absolutely determine how power or resources will be accrued, as individuals use the best strategies at their disposal to acquire ‘capital’ of a social, cultural and material nature. Within a given field, individual dispositions are necessarily enacted through a level of choice and agency.

Bourdieu likens this interactive process to a ‘game’, in which strategies are used by individual players with varying degrees of skill and aptitude. The rules of the ‘game’ favour those in dominant positions and those rules are passed on and absorbed through all formal and informal learning-processes in social life (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1990). This thesis is concerned both with the new constructions of work and skilful social practice at the lower end of the economy. In particular it interrogates the processes by which skills and practices are learned and reinforced as retrenched workers develop work dispositions.

According to Bourdieu a ‘logic of practice’ shapes the dispositions of individuals and groups as they respond to events. This logic emerges when current conditions are very similar to those which predominated over a long period in the past (Bourdieu 1990, p. 11). The ‘logic of practice’ is informed by all the elements which comprise individual identity, including gender, age, wealth, ethnicity, class, previous aspirations, status positions, family attitudes and learning experiences. Such identity features position individuals within different social networks which both reaffirm and extend their dispositions and their aspirations. Individuals in a given field are therefore not equally positioned, and social identities are critical to the ways in which choice is perceived and enacted. The Feltex workers’
vignettes, which appear throughout Part Two, differentiate their identities, aspirations and experiences, and show the ways in which the logic of practice results in a variety of dispositions in relation to work.

Bourdieu’s iterative construction of social field and individual agency has provided a prism through which I analyse the process of change in TCF workers’ lives. A ‘feel for the game’ enables each individual to develop a sense of the ‘yet to come’ and to live with ‘active, inventive intention’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 13). In this sense, members of ‘dominated’ groups in a given field can be groomed to accept the limitations of their positions, even as they struggle for a variety of real and imagined possibilities. They can also, theoretically, use new learning experiences to reinvent themselves in particular ways and in so doing their worker dispositions may radically shift within and in relation to the new habitus.

Stark differences in the outcomes of retrenchment in individual workers’ lives have been demonstrated through previous retrenchment studies (Lansbury and Wailes 2004; Lansbury and Hall 2005; Peetz 2005; Hall and Lansbury 2006; Weller 2007; Peeters and Bowen 2008; TCFUA 2008). Weller found that those retrenched TCF workers who were already advantaged before industry restructuring in the late 1980s and early 1990s re-entered the field of work most able to find alternative work. Post retrenchment training, they found, made some difference to others’ capacity to find work in the longer term (Webber and Weller 1999). Weller (2004) also found that motivation was the single most significant factor in career outcomes for retrenched aviation workers. The imagined future possibilities that retrenched workers carry with them are a significant contributor to the hopes, choices and practices after retrenchment. It is clear that these can and do change.

Bourdieu theorises that dispositions have ‘generative capacities’ which are acquired and socially constituted (Bourdieu 1990, p. 13). Any individual brings a wealth of historically constituted elements together through each
of his or her actions. Not only are individual dispositions historically constituted, but the social space itself, within which individuals play ‘the game’, is the product of multiple historical struggles. Therefore, understanding any particular action or set of actions, phenomena or change of conditions in the (social) world requires an understanding of the historical struggles which have created both the actors and the scene.

The study of the phenomena involved in social change is a study of changes within the system of social conditions that makes a way of being possible (Bourdieu 1990). Change in the system of social conditions for work is constituted in part by historical, political and economic processes and in part by the development of new aspirations and new imagined identities and possibilities on the part of individual workers. In this sense, new aspirations and re-imaginings of identity are part of a continuum of dispositional change as workers enter a newly defined field. What role does vocational education currently play in the changing field of work and, correspondingly, in changing individual dispositions for work?

The role of education in passing on and reproducing social conditions and in transforming them is the subject of pedagogical debate. Whilst Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) theorised once that education constitutes ‘symbolic violence’ to the extent that it reproduces structures of dominance, others have contributed significantly since then to our understanding of how and under what conditions this process occurs. Cockburn (1985) reminds us that skill is, above all, a political category. With respect to its changing role in the construction of skill, vocational education and training has often been theorised as a conduit through which gendered work aspirations and associated class and status aspirations are imparted to learners (Meijers 1998; Gee 2000; Hodkinson and Bloomer 2002; Gallacher 2002; Willis and Anderson 2006).

Warren and Webb (2007) have referred to Bourdieu in order to raise questions about adult learners and their capacity for agency in a process
which is bounded by the workings of local economies, and notions of new worker dispositions. They have set a research agenda which uses Bourdieu’s conceptual framework to examine the relationship between vocational education and learner agency. This agenda challenges neo-liberal and hegemonic discourses which ‘economise’ vocational education through the creation of the ‘responsible learner’ disposition. Through an incorporation of Bourdieu’s framework in this research, this thesis hopes to contribute towards such larger research agendas in the sociology of work and vocational education.

The research context

Since the 1980s, national governments of industrialised nations have assumed a range of positions in relation to globalisation. Since the commencement of the liberalisation project in earnest in the late 1980s, there has been a large body of research and documentation generated by economists, bureaucrats and statisticians working within large institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and the OECD, to support particular forms of structural adjustment. A proliferation of neo-liberal policies, strategies and programs in the 1980s and 1990s promoted these as critical means to increasing national competitiveness within the globalised economy (Bakker and Chappel 2002). The OECD acknowledges that developed countries are now in the midst of a global jobs crisis, and that member states, including Australia, must focus policy attention on training for skill development to increase opportunities for disadvantaged workers (OECD 2009). The personal and social ramifications of large scale unemployment have been well-documented in global and local literature, from the 1990s until the present (Webber and Campbell 1997; OECD 2009).

From the late 1990s there has been a tendency on the part of English-speaking OECD member nations towards the lightening of legislative controls around retrenchment due to the prevailing view that such control ‘impedes rapid enterprise response and restructuring’ (Evans-Klock et al.
Labour policy analysts have examined government policy responses in various late industrial countries, and questioned neo-liberal arguments for structural adjustment. Analyses of German, Scandinavian and Japanese responses to global restructure have often concurred that continued state interventions and maintenance of protective employment legislations have led to different, though not necessarily less competitive economies amongst the non-Anglo nations (Cox 1998; Thelen and Hume 1999; Thelen 2000; Hayden 2000).

Worker retrenchment in late industrial economies has been a critical aspect of trade liberalisation and global restructuring over the past two decades. Whilst the nature of various responses is debated between political economists, it is clear throughout the literature that governments of late-industrial countries have responded differently to international standards around retrenchment, such as those set out in the International Labour Organisation’s ‘International Termination of Employment Convention of 1982’ (Evans-Klock et al. 1999). The OECD has tracked the labour market strategies adopted by member countries, enabling comparison of different structural adjustment policies and programs. Many conclude, like McBride and Williams (2001), that ‘[d]espite globalization, there is a range of labour market policy choices available to states’ (McBride and Williams 2001, p. 281) and that nations maintaining legislative protections for workers and state-funded labour market supports to retrenched workers before and after retrenchment have not necessarily performed less well in the global economy as a result.

The OECD Jobs Strategy (1996a) has actively promoted amongst member states the elimination of obstacles to flexibility and entrepreneurship, and advocated wide-ranging changes to education and training systems as a labour market response (McBride and Williams 2001). Other OECD work has, however, refuted the core assumptions of the Jobs Strategy, arguing instead that stricter employment protections can lower labour market turnover and increase job stability while not affecting unemployment and
employment (OECD 1999, pp. 86-88). Indeed more recent OECD literature supports a broad range of social safety nets for vulnerable workers, including subsidised work experience (OECD 2009). These tensions at the international level are evident in the range of approaches to both trade liberalisation and retrenchment adopted by member countries.

Australia has, along with the UK and the United States, embraced rapid liberalisation from the outset more completely than most other OECD countries (McBride and Williams 2001), and has similarly restructured the fields of both education and labour to reflect a market-led approach to employment and unemployment. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the massive scale of retrenchment as a result of industry restructuring was evident across the economy. In 1991, this included 400,000 white collar professional women and 280,000 white collar professional men, and more than 350,000 blue-collar women and 249,000 blue-collar men (Cleary 1997, p. 7). Since that time, it has been observed that Australia has one of the highest rates of casualisation in the workforce and the disparity between the highest and lowest-paid workers has continued to grow (Hanrahan 1999).

Training and post retrenchment support have accompanied retrenchment in most countries. Japan introduced company-based and government-funded training for those workers most at risk of retrenchment. Others such as the United States and European countries adopted post retrenchment training subsidies for targeted groups. However, in most cases, the effectiveness of training for new industries has proven to be inconclusive at best (Evans-Klock et al. 1999).

The uneven and inconclusive relationship between training and employment outcomes for retrenched Australian workers in the late 1980s and 1990s has been discussed in several studies. Webber and Weller (1999) point out that during that period of TCF worker retrenchments there appeared to be a significant correlation between training and employment...
outcomes for those who were already advantaged in the labour market prior to retrenchment by identity factors, whereas it slowed down employment outcomes for those who were disadvantaged. Webber and Weller (2002) later indicated that employment outcomes for those who were most disadvantaged improved at the end of training.

Previous longitudinal studies on textile clothing and footwear workers, such as those conducted by Webber and Weller (2001) and Lipsig-Mumme (1997), based on retrenchments in the 1990s, showed clearly that long-term TCF workers, retrenched during the first major restructuring exercises, underwent complex adaptations in the years after retrenchment. These studies documented both the effectiveness of training and Centrelink services in assisting retrenched workers into re-employment. They found that retrenchment led the majority of those affected to either leave the labour market or accept fewer working hours with less favourable working conditions.

TCF retrenchment in the early 1990s led to a large number of negative social impacts on workers’ economic, social and emotional well-being as they engaged with poorly equipped programs and institutions such as Centrelink and labour-hire agencies. The particular challenges and obstacles facing older workers were clear, and in particular, challenges faced by older, less mobile migrant women with low levels of confidence and experience with formal learning. In Pinch’s study of retrenched UK manufacturing workers entering the labour market in buoyant economic times, he concluded that post retrenchment outcomes were significantly affected by both economic conditions and by gender (Pinch 1991).

Several other studies in the past decade have examined factors contributing to worker resilience in relation to the negative impacts of retrenchment (Modise 2000; Australian Employers Convention 2001; Webber and Weller 2002; Weller 2004; Gribble and Miller 2009). Gribble and Miller confirm earlier work in Australia (Webber and Campbell 1997)
that psychological attachment to the workplace and trauma surrounding retrenchment can have ongoing effects on employment outcomes. The importance of ongoing social networks between former co-workers in the maintenance of confidence and motivation has also been studied. Weller (2004) concluded that although the majority of retrenched Ansett employees experienced only a minor career setback, personal motivations for work were the single most significant identity factor influencing career outcomes. She noted that even this relatively advantaged, skilled cohort of retrenched workers would ‘benefit from interventions aimed at helping them to maintain support and information networks and to retain motivation and hope for the future’ (Weller 2004, p. 14).

Virgona et al. (2003) explored the ways in which displaced workers across a number of industries perceived skill and skill requirements, finding that the transfer of so-called ‘generic’ skills from one job to another is a highly nuanced process, constructed through new values and often loaded with employer biases which can work against skilful practice. Down’s study of skill transfer as a polycontextual process concluded that the key role of training was to assist in this process of transfer and that ‘we need to shift our emphasis away from [training as] the provision of information to the facilitation of the learner’s ability to pack and unpack, analyse and synthesise, and deconstruct or reconstruct his/her current learnings against existential understandings … in a different configuration’ (Down 2005, p. 6).

The language and discourse surrounding vocational education and training policy in Australia has shifted significantly in recent years to reflect and support transformations in the economic and political arena (DEST 2003; DEST 2005; DEST 2006; DEEWR 2008; DIIRD 2008a; DIIRD 2008b). This process began in the late 1980s with the conscious introduction of ‘corporatism’ and ‘managerialism’ into the education system (Hanrahan 1999). Such business-oriented approaches to education were aligned with neo-liberal economic approaches and notions of
economic rationalism, under which education relates exclusively to productivity and industry profit. Hanrahan suggests that the impact of neo-liberal frameworks on the quality of vocational education is a salient research agenda for this decade (Hanrahan 1999); others have since documented the challenges for VET in delivering skills outcomes in line with the national skills agenda (Harris et al. 2009; Buchanan et al. 2000; Buchanan et al. 2001; Karmel 2008).

The relevance of VET to ‘vocation’ as opposed to ‘jobs’ (Hanrahan 1999) or even to individual labour market outcomes (Karmel et al 2008) has been called into question by VET researchers. Buchanan and others have called for a different approach to the conception of skills, which take a highly specific approach to both enterprise and industry level skill sets. One of the advantages of this so-called ‘skills ecosystem’ approach is that it can help ‘create an environment where more accurate information on skill demand and supply can be easily communicated between stakeholders facilitating a better matching of skill supply and skill demand’ (Hall and Lansbury 2006, p. 589). Australia, as elsewhere, has found that the ‘one size fits all’ policies around skill development are inadequate in addressing the complex demands of industry (Payne 2007, p. 23).

The fundamental relationships between changing enterprise requirements and dispositional change required of workers have been called into question by adult educationalists (Warren and Webb 2007; Webb and Warren 2009). In addition, it is neither clear what role VET intentionally or unintentionally plays in bringing about dispositional change, nor what broader social implications there are in bringing about such changes at the individual level.

The literature outlined above has provided a body of research to which this thesis contributes. These studies raise questions about the factors influencing the success of individual re-engagement with the labour market after retrenchment, and about the ideologies which underpin
labour retrenchment as well as VET provision in Australia. They indicate that national policy approaches in response to globalisation play a crucial role in shaping individual lives and communities at the local level.

Previous studies do not, however, explore in any depth the interaction between changing dispositions of retrenched workers and the attributes favoured within particular industries and jobs. There is little research into the ways in which workers’ shifting sense of belonging, and changing social practices may work together to reinforce new work dispositions. There is little research into the various transformations which take place in individual lives after retrenchment, and the kind of learning processes which support them.

Tensions within VET resonate in the lives of individuals seeking to increase their resources after retrenchment. Post retrenchment training is used by national governments globally to reinforce new work practices and attitudes (Martin 2006). Some vocational education and training has the express intention of re-framing retrenched workers’ ways of knowing, so that the prima facie value once assigned to knowing how to work is re-assigned to understanding about work. Florica Stoican, one of the interview participants in this research, articulates her sense of this new approach to learning and knowing in her statement, ‘I didn’t have to understand [at Feltex], I just had to work’ (Stoican, 2008). Maria Bizdoaca confirms the transformative agenda of training in her statement, ‘It’s like, it’s [training] trying to make you higher class’ (Bizdoaca 2008).

However, observers of VET have critically discussed inherent tensions in the VET agenda (Harris et al. 1998; Crossan et al. 2003; Allison et al. 2006; Harris et al. 2009). The growing emphasis on entry-level short courses comes at a time when critical discourses surrounding the role of VET increasingly problematise its dual function of increasing social access and equity on the one hand and meeting industry skill shortages on the other (Equity Research Centre 2006). The Australian Government recognises
that VET has a critical role to play in addressing the disadvantages faced by retrenched TCF workers (Productivity Commission 2003). It is therefore important to examine how VET is perceived and experienced by those it seeks to engage.

With each wave of TCF retrenchments since 1989, workers have entered labour markets, training processes and workplace environments that have been shaped by the political and material economy of the time. Australian government policies and programs established to support retrenched TCF workers over the past twenty years have invariably focussed on re-skilling. In the early 1990s the TCF Labour Adjustment Program (LAP) was supported through a union project and workers who attended long-term general education courses were subsidised with a trainee allowance. In the years 2005-2007, the support available through the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) required retrenched workers to join Job Networks in order to undertake government-funded short courses with no living allowance (DEWR 2005a).

For those retrenched TCF workers who stay in the labour market, personal transformations of some kind are inevitable, but their responses are shaped as much by individual personal histories as the social historical conditions they navigate (Webber and Campbell 1997). In analysing the experiences of one group of retrenched workers in relation to work, belonging and education, this thesis will demonstrate that individual identities, social networks and overall work dispositions change after retrenchment, and that the critical learning which accompanies that change goes largely unsupported by VET.

**Thesis structure and flow**

This thesis is divided into two parts, designed to represent Bourdieu’s notion of the interactive and co-constitutive relationship between the field
and individual disposition. I discuss the context for change in Part One, comprised of Chapters One and Two, against which I analyse the narratives of change in Part Two, comprised of Chapters Three, Four and Five.

Part One and Part Two each, in related ways, deal with the impact of global restructuring on working identity, belonging and ways of learning. Part One sets out the layers of economic, political, policy and legislative change which have re-shaped the fields of work and education over two decades. Part Two seeks to capture the process of struggle on the part of individuals as they re-define their working identities and re-position themselves within the work ‘habitus’.

The ‘Research Methodology’ chapter outlines both the conceptual framework and the methodological approach used throughout the research process. I summarise the data collection methods I used in the period 2005 to 2009 as well as the research issues arising. I briefly discuss the process I used to code and analyse research data including interview narratives. Further demographic data on retrenched Feltex workers and responses to surveys are included as Appendices A, B, C and D. This chapter provides the theoretical grounding for my analysis of the ways in which subjectivities are constituted within the fields of work and education.

Parts One and Two are constructed as actively related to the other, through a mirroring format:

Chapter One analyses the conditions of work into which retrenched textile workers emerged in 2005, through a discussion of the social impacts of change in the system and locus of global manufacturing. Changing worker identity and sense of belonging is taking place at a time when the basis of class identification, the nature of the work contract and the standard experience of social networks in Australia have each been disrupted through changes occurring at a global level. Such contextual shifts have
also given rise to new expectations of worker practices, identities and skills. Combined, these conditions produce an altered field of work through which workers strive to meet their own material, social and cultural aspirations. As individuals engage with work, they reproduce, in various ways, changing constructions of workers. Chosen modes of belonging and subsequent access to resources through social networks are crucial to the process of re-ordering at the individual and the broader level.

Chapter Two focuses on change in the field of learning and in the re-conceptualisation of skills for work within the vocational education framework. Increasingly, resilience in a work context characterised by constant change is constituted as a fundamental attribute for workers in expanding industries. In this sense, the system of work dispositions favours those with high reflexivity about change and a highly developed set of strategies for maintaining knowledge and broad networks of influence. Chapter Two examines vocational education in Australia, highlighting the tensions arising in the field in general, the policy discourses surrounding skills, and the qualification system as it currently stands. These tensions recur in individual worker narratives on learning and position vocational education within their transformative learning processes.

The following chapters, comprising Part Two, thematically mirror the issues introduced in Part One. Chapter Three mirrors the contextual discussion of change in the textile industry, and in constructions of worker skill. It analyses workers’ narratives in relation to the repositioning of work in their lives, as well as individual re-framing of motivations for work and self-perceptions as workers. It uses analysis of narratives to draw conclusions about the interplay between disposition and the change process.
Chapter Four mirrors the discussion in the second part of Chapter One, in which kinds of belonging and social networks are linked to the acquisition of particular kinds of resources. Narratives around changes to social practices at work and to modes of belonging through work are analysed to identify where shifts had taken place in this aspect of workers’ lives. Narrative analysis is used to discover the relevance of close and loose social networks in the development of certain worker dispositions.

Chapter Five mirrors the discussion of vocational education in relation to work and worker skill in Chapter Two. It analyses workers’ narratives around learning to draw conclusions about the ways in which learner disposition and experiences of learning prior to retrenchment influenced choices. It then examines narratives around learning for work and vocational education to draw conclusions about the ways in which vocational education supported broader changes in worker dispositions.

The concluding chapter brings the argument together, summarising the key findings of the research and indicating possible future directions for policy research in relation to VET, post retrenchment support and skill formation processes at the lower end of the economy.
The research methodology

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this thesis was constructed on the basis of five main assumptions which underpin my discussion. The first is that worker identity and belonging are both subject to contextual change and at the same time consist of choices at the level of the individual. Secondly, class, ethnicity and gender construct and situate individual identities. Thirdly, notions of skill are imbued with values which are inherently classed and gendered. Fourthly, education is central to the modern constructions of worker identity, and involves the dissemination of classed and gendered notions of skill and knowledge. Finally, transformations occurring at the individual level are often accompanied by varying degrees of ambivalence. Ambivalence can be a critical sign of both resistance and struggle.

Worker identity and belonging

Bourdieu created a certain resolution to the tension of ‘structure’ versus ‘agency’ in social formation and action, through his exposition of the theory of habitus. The work habitus is created through the interaction between the historical, spatial and social conditions in which a set of working conditions has come about (the field) and the variety of values, goals, positions and identities of individuals engaged in the struggle for power within it (dispositions) (Bourdieu 1990). The iterative and constructive roles of both the field and disposition blur the distinction between agent and social conditions, privileging neither.
According to Bourdieu, workers, like any other social grouping, develop their relationships with one another in the work environment according to the possibilities of the field as they struggle for the acquisition of various forms of capital. His work has particular relevance for this thesis as it allows for an analysis of the specific, empirically examined work context within larger sets of economic and social conditions, at a point in history circumscribed by particular political and policy influences. It also allows for an understanding of individual positions within the social context of that workplace, and the variety of responses to change.

Retrenched Feltex workers occupied a range of positions, defined through their proximity to power and decision-making, both within the Feltex workplace and the broader social fields in which they moved. Retrenchment generated a need for each one of them to engage with new conditions of work and in so doing, to redefine their individual dispositions within a new work habitus.

Class and belonging

Bourdieu’s theories are useful in the examination of changing worker identities and sense of belonging. He notes that ‘belonging to a group is something you build up, negotiate and bargain over, and play for’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 75). Groups are built up within social space, and according to Bourdieu, are created and maintained through the acquisition of various kinds of capital, which defines both the proximities of people to each other and also their shared affinities. The distances between people are delineated by the capital which is of value in that field. According to Bourdieu the possession of material, symbolic and cultural capital defines the ‘probabilities of belonging to really unified groups, families, clubs or concretely constituted classes’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 75).

The capacity to acquire capital at Feltex was in part determined by the characteristics of individuals such as gender, age, education, cultural and
family background, position, shift worked, and English language fluency. In the labour market, the classroom, and in different work environments following retrenchment, however, value was re-assigned to those elements of identity, as well as the behaviours and life experiences that accompanied them. In addition, fluid notions of group membership and class formation had implications for the working identities and sense of belonging of retrenched textile workers as they adjusted their ideas, hopes and aspirations. New, ‘better’ opportunities opened up for some, whilst for others the reverse was true.

Bourdieu’s notions of agency and historicity have implications for ways of reading the formation of ‘community’, ‘class’ or any other social grouping at a point in time, and for understanding how global events can re-order the social world of work and disrupt previous ‘class’ identities.

Mike Savage (1985) in his discussion of the changes in the cotton industry at the turn of the twentieth century, notes that Bourdieu’s theories have been successful in dealing with complex theoretical questions about the relationship between class and status. Neither Marxist notions of class as the relationship between ‘exploiter’ and ‘exploited’ nor Weberian notions of class as rooted in market relationships have sufficiently dealt with the relationship between ‘status’ and ‘class’. Bourdieu proposes that distinct strategies are developed by individuals in order to succeed in the acquisition of ‘symbolic capital’, or status, as well as material and social capital (Bourdieu 1984).

Among the Feltex respondents, a new sense of belonging in the world was closely linked to individual perceptions of improved status, but their narratives indicated that the social networks associated with changing milieus were, for most, still fragile. Union membership is one badge of working-class belonging which Australian manufacturing workers largely shared until recent years. However, with the decline of unionism and the increase in casualisation, new forms of belonging are increasingly
necessary in order for lower income workers to access the advice, information and affirmation necessary to maintain employability. Tentative new forms of belonging, expressed in a variety of ways through the Feltex worker narratives, were critical to the acquisition of identity resources which would support their transformations.

**Agency and change**

Bourdieu’s notion of the ‘habitus’ enabled him to break away from the limitations of dichotomous sociological notions inherent within structuralism, in which class and social structure are established externally and imposed upon subjects who have limited personal agency. Within the workings of the habitus, by contrast, the agency of the subject and the structures within which individuals operate are mutually constitutive.

Individual dispositions result from an iterative relationship between the world of external structures and the internal ordering processes of agents. The work habitus, or system of dispositions, is reproduced through an educative process and as such education can reproduce a social order which favours dominant ideas, beliefs and behaviours. According to Bourdieu, dominated groups exercise agency within these fields through a struggle to acquire attributes and opportunities available to the dominant. Importantly, however, the fundamental power relation itself is always ‘misrecognised’ (Bourdieu 1990).

This means that the unequal power relationship between dominant and dominated groups is not understood by the individuals in the game as oppression (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). An example of this might be, for example, gender traits, which are ‘misrecognised’ as natural rather than as learned or enforced behaviours. Surveillance and social sanctions, for example, may be perceived or ‘misrecognised’ as natural consequences rather than coercive acts. In the field of work in a textile factory, the supremacy of English-speakers, or men in the workplace might also be
‘misrecognised’, not as features of a weighted and ‘symbolically violent’ power structure, but as a natural situation.

An important feature of Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus is that it allows for individuals to adjust their dispositions and also to adjust their social expectations ‘in accordance with opportunities’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 10). This theory is relevant in my exploration of change and changing identity amongst retrenched textile workers, as it assists my analysis of the ways in which individual responses to change through interaction with new conditions in the field contribute to the reproduction of a new work habitus.

The changing ways in which identity and belonging are constructed by individuals and communities are interwoven within broader social processes, in counterpoint to them. Throughout this thesis I make use of Bourdieu’s concepts of the habitus, disposition and the field to both analyse the workings of individual agency amongst retrenched Australian textile workers, and to analyse emerging tensions within the social contexts of work and learning for work.

The role of work in the formation of social identity and belonging within late-industrial capitalism has long been the subject of debate within social theory (Silverman and Yanowitch 1974; Casey 1995). According to theorists such as Touraine, thirty years ago we were ‘leaving a society of exploitation and entering a society of alienation’ (Touraine 1974). Others have found more optimistic perspectives on globalisation, arguing that there is increased potential for agency and self-determination under new material conditions (Giddens 1990; Beck 1992).

**Gender and changing worker identities**

It is necessary to consider the significant gender factors involved in the construction of changing work identities since the intensification of global restructure. Bourdieu’s notion of the ‘habitus’ has been taken up in
feminist discussions of gender and work identity. Bourdieu himself characterised genders as ‘sexually characterized habitus’ which, in studies of society and human practice, appear as ‘the grounding in nature of the arbitrary division which underlies both reality and the representation of reality’ (Bourdieu 2001, p. 3).

The literature on this subject is considerably broader than the scope of this discussion allows. Since Marx, the relationship between sexuality and capitalism has been problematised by feminist materialists, who focussed on the social production of ‘women’ as a group and indeed as a gender class. In the 1980s it was argued that a woman’s standard of living depended on her ‘serf relations’ with her husband rather than her class relationship to the proletariat, thus bringing into being the notion of gender/class relations and interests, and separating this stream of thought from Marxist feminists (Delphy 1984, p. 71). Since then, gender divisions in productive and reproductive work in the home, and the sexualised and gendered construction of paid work have been widely problematised within feminist literature and are now accepted as central to any discussions of identity, change, education and employment which fall under the broad rubric of the sociology of work (Bagguley et al. 1990; Probert and Wilson 1993; Jensen et al. 2000; Walby 2000).

Bourdieu theorises that a class or group comes into being when there are ‘agents capable of imposing themselves as authorised to speak or act officially in its place’ (Bourdieu 1977, p. 15). Class is equated with a group like any other, and the working class, in his view, is ‘a well founded historical construction’ (Bourdieu 1977, p. 9). Women are therefore positioned quite differently from one another, depending on their access to material, social and cultural capital. Armstrong notes, however, that ‘the divide between women by class does not mean that gender is becoming a redundant variable’ (Armstrong 2006, para. 1.5). Many have analysed the ways in which workers experience both classed and gendered identities and fare differently through processes of change as a
result of both (Pederson 1996; McDowell 2003; Adkins and Skeggs 2004; McNay 2004; Armstrong 2006). The experience of women and men working in the textile industry are different in many gendered ways, not only in terms of historical industrial recognition and remuneration for work but also in terms of workplace culture and social practice within the broad category of ‘working-class’ life. In constructing an interpretation of narratives from retrenched men and women from Feltex, it is critical to consider the ways in which both gender and class have informed their positions, agency, choices and dispositions as workers.

Different benefits and profits have accrued to the dominant ‘class’ through the women’s movement and through social and economic reforms over the past forty years (Coward 1999). For example, ethnicity and class continue to dominate power relations between wealthy women and female domestic labourers (Anderson 2000), an issue which now has global dimensions. Advances for women, particularly seen through the prism of work and working life, are often heralded as signifiers that class is becoming less relevant as a social grouping under emerging forms of global capitalism. However, class inequalities between women have been shown to have deepened alongside the new opportunities for ‘liberation’, as experienced by some women (Lovell 2000; Armstrong 2006).

Within the field of work, ‘femininity’ rarely acquires symbolic capital, except in tandem with class and other features of privilege. The adoption of attributes of ‘masculinity’ may have status benefits at work whilst the adoption of ‘femininity’ rarely does (Adkins and Skeggs 2004, p. 24). The persistent association of femininity with selfless caring has been said to indicate that the ‘terms of symbolic violence are constantly shifting’ (Adkins and Skeggs 2004, p. 24), in that the category of gender is constantly adjusted to changes in conditions and context (McNay 2004).
Skill and worker identity

The re-valuining of skill as manufacturing declines in the industrialised countries has reconfigured gender and class identities. Cockburn’s important study (1983) of workers in the printing industry in the UK as it was transformed into an office-based and computer-dependent industry, demonstrates that transformation of the terms of production lead to shifts in gendered concepts of skill, class and worker identity. Skills for work at the lower end of the economy have been dramatically re-constructed as these two parallel processes have taken place.

Increased consumer-demand and the promise of instant product availability combined with better health care and longer life span has led to the expansion of both the retail and aged care sectors in late industrial nations. Service of every kind and in every sphere of life is now in high demand. At the same time, the labouring and machine-operator skills in many traditional blue-collar industries have been replaced with project management, computer and small-business skills. These two shifts have had consequences for the gendering and valuing of skill. A third and critical shift complicates the changing picture of skill since global restructuring. Women and young people moving into the paid workforce at unprecedented rates, looking for casual and part-time work arrangements, have provided a willing supply of labour in the highly feminised and low-paid retail and aged care sectors.

In this thesis I analyse skill as an historical construction, which has both classed and gendered implications for worker identity. Cockburn noted that ‘skill as a political concept is more far-reaching than the class relations of capitalism – it plays an important part in the power relations between men and women’ (Cockburn 1983, p. 116). Indeed the language of work is rooted in an inseparable and constantly shifting relationship between gender and class identities, captured in notions of ‘skill, provider-hood, family wage, housewife and women’s place’ (Kessler-Harris 2002, p. 142).
Vocational education and work identities
Along with the informal learning which accompanies any socialisation process, vocational education and training acts as a conduit through which it has been argued that gendered work orientations and associated class and status aspirations are imparted to learners (Meijers 1998; Gee 2000; Gallacher 2002; Hodkinson and Bloomer 2002; Willis and Anderson 2006). As some factory workers move into training in preparation for work, they are exposed to the new parameters and possibilities of working life.

In recent years the relationship between vocational education and training and industry skill requirements has been brought into question by a number of theorists and educationalists. Whilst it has been given a privileged role as a tool in the process of labour market restructuring, its effectiveness has been called into question in Australia and elsewhere (Smith 1999; Gee 2000; Gerber 2000; Gallacher 2002; Hodkinson and Bloomer 2002; Armstrong-Stassen and Templer 2005; NCVER 2006). Sawchuck’s recent work on adult learning and technology in American working-class life draws on Bourdieu’s notions of pedagogic authority. He theorises that the construction of the new working class ‘learning habitus’ through the use of computers at home is central to the formation of new individual ‘learning identities’ (Sawchuck 2003, p. 169).

Others in the field of adult education have reflected that education plays a critical role in the process of life change. Wojecki says that people’s lives ‘are bounded by and change direction through education, labour market and workplace organisations’ (Wojecki 2007, p. 631). Discourses about the perceived value of a particular type of education in a given society represent tensions in social and economic power relations. Such tensions can be expected to be found within the aspirations, self-perceptions and social identities adopted by individuals, depending on their ‘learner dispositions’. Webb and Warren suggest that recent policy rhetoric about
equity of opportunity through education and training is challenged by social inequities. They question the extent to which vocational education has been proven to generate new dispositions in alignment with changes in the field of work (Webb and Warren 2009).

**Ambivalence and resistance in the process of change**

Disposition plays a critical role in influencing how individuals will deal with change and also the degree of critical awareness they bring to the process of identity construction. For example, Skeggs asserts that women are able to sometimes authorise their own experience of femininity, not by taking on the terms of the dominant groups but by ‘revaluing the positions we are expected to inhabit without value’ (Adkins and Skeggs 2004, p. 25).

She notes that working-class women in her study practised femininity not as a ‘pre-reflexive gendered experience based on misrecognition, but a specifically class-gendered experience of which they were highly critical and highly attuned: they strongly refused the perspectives of the powerful’ (Adkins and Skeggs 2004, p. 25).

Many women from Feltex left physical, often heavy, manual jobs to take up work in cleaning, caring or service industries. In considering the degree to which ‘the dominated’ workers from Feltex wished to inhabit the positions of ‘the dominant’ it is useful to consider Skeggs’ position that ‘identities are ... a form of cultural capital which are worked and uncomfortably inhabited’ (Adkins and Skeggs 2004, p. 29).

This thesis must somehow account for the practices of those people who have various levels of interest in reproducing the social order as they engage with new work opportunities. According to Skeggs, Bourdieu is not able to account for the nuance of practices amongst those who are classified as ‘the dominated’ because his notion of the habitus, situated exclusively in the social arena, is governed by intention and self-interest
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and therefore cannot account for the existence of psychological states such as ambivalence, contradiction and emotion (Adkins and Skeggs 2004, p. 30).

Adkins and Skeggs demonstrate that ambivalence is an indicator of individual agency at work. There is no harmonious ‘fit’ between the values of the dominant group and those who stand to lose what little ground they have as workers. Struggle and ambivalence would presumably tell the story of how that disharmony is negotiated in individual lives. The new ‘logic of practice’ which had pervaded the work habitus in 2005 would be negotiated through a process of struggle, the nature of which is explored in Part Two of this thesis.

Methodological approach

The field of sociology has long concerned itself with the development of social identity. Structural symbolic interactionists have examined the ways in which identities are built up and reinforced through social interaction (Blumer 1969; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005). Of great significance in this process is the meaning or value assigned to gestures, behaviours and practices. It is critical to this thesis that ‘humans are able to act because they have agreed on the meanings they will attach to the relevant objects in their environment’ (Denzin 2009, p. 7).

The research topic I have chosen to investigate is sociological in nature. Borrowing from Denzin’s description of the symbolic interactionist research approach, I follow four methodological principles. First, I draw links between the symbolic conceptions and interactions of the interview participants. The ways in which each individual worker made sense of their own interactions are drawn out in Part Two of this thesis. In order to write meaningfully about workers’ changing ‘sense of belonging’, I must be able to draw a link between their practices and interactions with others.
in relation to work and the meanings each individual attaches to them. Secondly, my interpretation of narratives is presented as a sociological interpretation, and is differentiated from interview participants’ self-concepts. Thirdly, I link interview participants’ self-view with their relationships and social context. Fourthly, the narratives under analysis are clearly situated in relation to particular places, times and circumstances.

As a researcher I had the opportunity to observe research participants over a prolonged period, and to see them in formal, informal, work and social contexts prior to the interview. These opportunities informed my understanding of their narratives, which were derived from one-to-one conversations about familiar topics.

The initial interview questions obliged the interviewees to think back to, and conjure up, their working and social lives at Feltex. The second set of questions asked them to explain how things are now. Then, I asked them to take me on the journey from 2005 until 2008, and to talk about the critical moments. Finally, I asked them to imagine their futures. In this way I attempt to create a moving image through their interview narratives.

I selected this kind of interview in order to generate a reflexive process. I attempt to do this by creating markers of the past, present and future and then asking for reflection on the process of change.

According to Bourdieu ‘a full and complete sociology should clearly include a history of the structures that are the product at a given moment of the whole historical process’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 42). I draw conclusions about changes taking place in the individual lives of one group of Australian workers and suggest a relationship between these and a new system of dispositions, or habitus. I also draw conclusions about the learning which has marked worker transformations.
In order to hypothesise about the changing relationships between work, identity and belonging amongst textile workers in late-industrial Australia, I first build a layer of historicity and complexity around the social field of work at the time of this research. The changing perceptions, identities and practices of individual workers in this research and the changing and complex social context of work are taken as co-constitutive and I aim to analyse them as such. I have chosen a mirror-like structure between the two parts of this thesis, but have also made efforts to integrate elements of the personal into the discussion of contextual change and vice versa. To do this I make some references to individual worker experiences throughout Part One and to broader structural change throughout Part Two.

Within this structure I analyse the changing rationale behind policies and discourses on work, the worker and learning, and how these newly constituted notions have re-positioned machine operators as both workers and learners. I then analyse narratives of seventeen retrenched textile workers, in order to show how the changing field of work was also subjectively conceived and responded to by different individuals within the group.

**Research methods**

**TCFUA telephone survey October 2006**

Exactly twelve months after the retrenchment had occurred, Dorothy Peterson and I placed telephone calls to 165 retrenched Feltex workers in October 2006. This comprehensive telephone exercise ascertained what percentage of the retrenched workers were studying, working full-time, working part-time, at home on Work Cover or retired after twelve months. The TCFUA end-of-project telephone survey was also able to provide information on the industries in which retrenched workers had gained employment. This information was mapped on a database and
The research methodology summarised in the final TCFUA project report to Feltex management. It was also used to inform policy advocacy work conducted by the TCFUA in regard to the efficacy of the Structural Adjustment Package (SAP) available to retrenched TCFUA workers. I made this information available to the TCFUA in the writing of this thesis.

**Focussed telephone survey January 2007**

The first information that I explicitly collected for this thesis was through a telephone survey of selected retrenched workers from Feltex. In January 2007 I conducted a telephone survey from my home with retrenched workers, using TCFUA project data to select a range of male, female, younger and older participants with different work histories and with different work statuses twelve months after retrenchment. I wanted to talk to a cross-section of the workers who were still in the labour market, to find out more detail about their employment experiences and their perceptions of training.

The seventy-eight retrenched workers who were found to be either working or looking for work twelve months after retrenchment were called on several different occasions, due to shift work and irregular hours. Thirty-seven of these workers could not be contacted. As a result, forty-one interviews were conducted over a two-week period.

As the TCFUA project had finished and I was contacting them in a different role, I introduced myself saying that I not calling on behalf of the TCFUA but as a researcher. I read from a prepared explanation of my thesis topic and asked if they would still be willing to talk to me as an independent researcher. I explained that the conversation should take no more than thirty minutes. All consented to take part in the survey and agreed to be contacted again in the future as my thesis progressed.

I designed the telephone survey to find out more information about work and training experiences since retrenchment. Standardised information
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about job-seeking experiences, training undertaken, number of jobs held, sources of support and views on new workplaces in the first fifteen months after retrenchment was sourced through twenty- to thirty-minute structured telephone surveys. I transcribed the discussions as they took place, using a computer and a hands-free speaker phone.

The respondents to the survey were asked a series of questions regarding their personal backgrounds (see Appendix F). They were quantitative questions about work experiences and training undertaken since leaving Feltex. They were also asked a number of qualitative questions about those experiences.

Twenty-three women and seventeen men were surveyed, and the results gleaned from typed notes were tabulated under the headings Name, Age, Country of origin, Years in Australia, Years at Feltex, Education level, Training since Feltex, Training impact, Time taken to find a job, Jobs under three months, Jobs lasting three to six months, Jobs lasting more than six months, Job at Feltex, Happiness level, Difficult things, Positive things, Mentions of support (Job Network, TCFUA, family, other), Mentions of conditions.

These surveys provided data on how many short-term work experiences various people had exposure to in the first twelve months and also the different perceptions that respondents had in relation to the role of training in assisting them to accrue skills, confidence or other benefits. There were differences between men and women in the responses. There were also differences in responses between those of different ages and with different levels of formal education and confidence in English. These results helped to shape the questions for more in-depth face-to-face interviews the following year.
Face-to-face interviews 2008

In July 2007, I left the TCFUA. Twelve months later in the middle of 2008, I approached twenty-one retrenched workers by phone, asking if I could meet them for a one-hour to ninety-minute face-to-face interview. Seventeen of these resulted in interviews.

I wanted the interviews to provide narrative material about their experiences and perceptions of change over the three years since retrenchment. The set-up process for these interviews was complex and time-consuming, as most of the participants worked irregular shifts and could not be sure when they would be free. The interviews and transcriptions were completed over a three-month period from July to September 2008.

The face-to-face interview format (Appendix G) included a brief survey of how they had prioritised their time and energy in 2005 when they last worked at Feltex and then to consider how they prioritised time and energy at the time of the interview. This established a pattern of comparing and contrasting the ‘ways things were’ at Feltex and the ‘way things were’ at the time of the interview.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed on the same day. At the end of the interview period I organised my material into three areas: the changing role of work, the changing sense of belonging, and the changing view of knowledge and learning. In the interview set-up and before the interviews themselves, I clarified again with participants that I no longer worked for the TCFUA and explained that I was writing a Ph. D.

I read out a Plain English statement and they signed consent forms saying that they understood what the project was about, that they did not have to answer questions and that I would return to them with the drafted parts of the thesis which used their words, to ensure that they were happy to
have their words quoted and their true names used. Only one asked to have his/her name changed. None asked to see the text before submission.

The participants were known to me and gave information freely in each case. The friendly and comfortable mode of interviews was made possible by the relationship formed between us during the TCFUA support project in the twelve months after the retrenchment. I included two participants who had not stayed active in the labour market but the rest were selected from the group of those who had been employed and contactable twelve months after retrenchment. By the time the interviews were conducted in 2008, two of the women had recently left the jobs they had held for twelve months or more, but were intending to look for work again. The rest were all still working in jobs they believed were ongoing and which they had held for more than twelve months.

The narratives presented later in this thesis were derived from these seventeen interviews. The interviews usually took place in the homes of interview participants and were conducted after informal conversation. I asked permission to record the interviews, and explained the purpose of the interview, asking for verbal consent. I also explained how long I thought the interview might go for and what sorts of questions I was going to ask, and explained that they had no obligation to answer questions and could stop at any time. The interviews followed a series of structured questions, which asked participants to reflect on both general and specific aspects of life when they were working at Feltex and aspects of life since then.

Methodological issues arising

The interpretation of field observations and narratives collected through interview raised methodological questions. Pierre Bourdieu asks of researchers ‘What are the particular difficulties you come up against when
you want to objectify a space in which you are included?’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 33).

Feminist theorists have also embraced this challenge and further elaborated the dilemmas in establishing a research approach from which valid and reliable conclusions can be drawn (Patai 1991; Adkins and Skeggs 2004). Research is a socially (and therefore politically and culturally) constituted act, and the researcher is situated in the process, as a social and embodied agent (Hammersley 1995). This in itself raised theoretical and methodological issues, which had to be resolved during my research, particularly in relation to the collection and analysis of my research data.

A number of methodological issues arose in relation to my data collection methods, including positioning and identification of myself in multiple roles with the research group, access to TCFUA data, the formulation of questions and question styles, choices in the selection of participants for surveys and interviews, and issues of privacy and consent. This section will include a discussion of the ways in which I examined and dealt with these issues in my research process.

**Issues in data collection**

My role as a project worker with the TCFUA enabled me to develop a personal and professional relationship with a number of the retrenched workers, to observe their interactions in co-facilitated groups and in meetings with representatives from training and employment institutions, and to directly facilitate discussions with them about the issues they were facing in the first twelve to eighteen months of retrenchment.

In my position as observer of numerous co-facilitated groups, I was able to make ethnographical notes about individual and group responses to speakers, community arts project participation, and to each other. As a classroom teacher I was able to directly trial some approaches to survey
design, which would later serve me well in the development of appropriate tools for data collection. The multiple roles I played raised some theoretical issues regarding the objectivity of research and the reliability and validity of the data I collected.

In order to address ethical considerations in delineating my multiple roles as Project Officer, teacher and finally researcher, and to ensure that participants were formally consenting to their stories being reported in different ways to the TCFUA, I asked all Feltex workers involved in the TCFUA post retrenchment advocacy and support project to sign a consent form agreeing that material collected throughout the project was owned by the TCFUA and that independent researchers could reference the data in independent research.

A range of secondary data was therefore able to be provided for this research by the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union. Some of this was provided through forms filled in by Feltex workers just after the retrenchment notification. Some was provided through the information database which was maintained throughout the twelve-month TCFUA post retrenchment support project. I was personally involved in the collection of both lots of data.

In the process of collecting data for this thesis, I have been dependent on research subjects in a range of ways for permission, access and information, and this contributed to the construction of complex power relationships. In co-facilitating the irregular social meetings and the informal weekly CGEA classes, my relationship to the retrenched workers was one of ‘outsider’. As a non-factory worker outside of the retrenched Feltex group, my expertise was sought only in relation to specific areas. I was able to observe them as they re-lived their working lives at Feltex and maintained their relationships and they were also able to observe me as the facilitator of these events.
Patai claims that attempts to break down the formal barriers between the interviewer and the interviewee can actually blur distinctions between ‘research’ and ‘personal relations’ and can lead to an unfair exchange. She writes that ‘[w]hile often shyly curious, interviewees never, in my experience, make a reciprocal exchange a condition of the interview. And researchers are almost always much less frank than they hope their subjects will be’ (Patai 1991, p. 142). The relationships which evolved between the retrenched Feltex workers and myself were constantly changing with their circumstances, and also with mine. The further away from the retrenchment they were, the less ‘practical’ our relationships became and the more reflective they could become in our discussions.

Even in my discussion of retrenched textile workers as a ‘dominated’ group within a particular social field of work relations, I am careful to qualify this and to locate agency in their responses, and to write with an awareness of their embodied knowledge, as well as their critical perceptions. My analysis focuses on the ways in which individual narratives of change resonate with, reproduce or challenge transformations in the field of work. In doing so I have made every effort not to disconnect the narratives from the complex lives out of which they emerged. Indeed it was critical to maintain the integrity of each individual’s story. In so doing, however, I am careful to construct my analysis around a sociological approach to the narratives, situating them in a broader social context, which individual workers may or may not have seen in the same way. It is my analysis and not theirs, however, which I am arguing in this thesis.

Patai asks whether giving voice to the subject is empowerment or ‘just appropriation’, likening the researcher to the capitalist ‘exploiting the raw material and transforming it into a product for which she gets recognition’ (Patai 1991, p. 142). I do not claim that my research sets out to give voice to retrenched workers, rather, it demonstrates how changes in individual identities resonate with material, social and cultural changes at work.
Research relationships can be extractive in nature, especially as they are often situated in a context wherein the researcher directly benefits from the story-telling process. Whilst I cannot say what, if any, direct benefits the research participants derived from this research, I hope to contribute to theory about the relationship between social and personal transformations in the field of work as well as the relationship between the transformations of work dispositions and vocational education in Australia. In the process I hope to have played a constructive role in providing an opportunity for this group of workers to discuss and examine the process of change taking place around them and in their lives.

The 2008 face-to-face interview questions were drafted more than two years after the retrenchment. This allowed a protracted period of time between my interactions with the retrenched workers as a project worker employed by the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union (Victorian branch), and allowed me to both sort through initial data collected from phone surveys conducted in early 2007 and to further develop the theoretical focus for this thesis. Therefore, the areas I wanted to explore were clear to me by the time the second set of survey questions and the face-to-face interview questions were drafted. Face-to-face interviews each took approximately ninety minutes and each followed a similar format, allowing for different time allocated to different sections depending on the personal story being told.

**Issues in data analysis**

Whilst use of narrative analysis enabled me to bring the rich and distinctive ‘voices’ of retrenched workers into my discussion, certain limitations were also imposed by the subjective, fluid and time-bound nature of narrative itself. It was imperative, in the analysis, to find ways of not ‘privileging’ one truth over another and not assuming that any one narrative discourse was inherently ‘stable’. Ambivalence, internal contradiction and uncertainty arising in the narrative text mirrored certain
internal positions, which were true only in particular moments in time and for a particular group of individuals. In one sense this provided a limited kind of evidence about processes of social change and the role of post-retrenchment support such as training within the change process.

Perhaps more importantly however, the narratives offered a significant body of complementary evidence to the quantitative data I collected on training, work experience and aspirations, both on the day of retrenchment and then nearly three years later. Through narratives, the retrenched Feltex workers connected a set of life history events, triggered by global and local change, in a range of different, but meaningful ways. The resulting text provided the researcher with a granular view of how the retrenchment event, alongside the experiences of work and education which followed, variously influenced individual life choices, depending on how ‘dispositions’ were situated and valued in the altered local employment market.

In this thesis, I have therefore used a diverse set of worker narratives to build a nuanced, local social story in counterpoint to the story of change in one industry, which in itself took place within the context of broader processes of economic, social, political and educational change. Without narrative, this thesis would have drawn conclusions about patterns relating to this worker demographic, the outcomes of post-retrenchment training and certain implications of workplace change at the lower end of the economy. However, the narrative analysis allowed this researcher to discuss additional matters, relating to the changing range of self-perceptions, values and expectations, and changing constructions of community itself, which accompany shifts in work and worker identities in the new economy.

Certain narratives contained a high level of nostalgia for elements of the past, whilst others, with the benefit of hindsight, considerably diminished both positive memories of the Feltex workplace and the anxieties which
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prevailed at the point of retrenchment. My interviews conducted with participants on the day of retrenchment and then again three months later, provided me with counter-narratives to the interview material collected two to three years later. It was generally true that those who had fulfilled a desire to transform themselves in some way or who had found unexpected success in their working lives were less likely to valorise their past working lives. However, even within these narratives, reflections were often uneven, leading individuals to draw complex conclusions about the overall benefits of change in their lives.

When analysing the research data in relation to my core questions, it was anticipated that ‘stable’ markers of personal identity such as gender and cultural background as well as those markers which have changed over time, such as age, educational exposure, affluence and skill, would influence life-experience and perceptions of choice. It was also anticipated that these identity traits would influence the ways in which individuals reflect on and use language to name their experiences and choices.

Initial data collected through post retrenchment forms and then later through telephone surveys in 2007 indicated that there were gender differences in experiences in relation to past education and employment, present mobility as well as future aspiration. Markers of identity are shown throughout the research to have a distinct bearing on processes of adaptation and survival after retrenchment. For this reason, they accompanied my discussion of their individual narratives, and were woven into the analysis of their experiences. I have not attempted to codify their narratives in relation to identity features, or to generalise from the experiences of this group to wider social groups.

The retrenched Feltex workers in general and those participating in this research in particular were not a homogenous group using any indicator. Whilst the group was responding to circumstances brought about by the same event, their personal positions and their resources to deal with the
changes were influenced by a number of factors. These resources included confidence in attitude and approach, previous experience, availability of social networks and personal support through family. These resources were, in turn, often heavily influenced by the gender, age, work-experience, cultural and language background and educational exposure of individuals. Such were the complex overlays of identity within this group, that no one feature in itself could be held responsible for particular outcomes.

The group represented over forty different nationalities, dozens of language backgrounds, and was constituted by roughly similar numbers of men and women. The ages of most of the retrenched group ranged between early thirties and early fifties. The retrenched group consisted mainly of machine-operators although it also included leading-hands and supervisors, and workers held a range of heavier and lighter jobs.

Although most had mortgages at retrenchment, their financial circumstances and approaches to financial security varied as did their family and other social networks. Whilst many had never done any job other than machine-operator at Feltex, there were those who had previous experience in business, retail and office work from twenty years previously. Some had come from rural or war-torn backgrounds and as such had very limited basic formal education, whilst others had a complement of basic or advanced formal education and an urban middle-class background, albeit located in another part of the world. Whilst most were from non-English speaking backgrounds, there were those whose grasp of English was still rudimentary or heavily influenced by first-language markers, whilst others had ‘native’ level English language proficiency.

There were also differences in the aspirations, aptitudes, remuneration and levels of responsibility undertaken in new work undertaken since Feltex. Some had wanted to stay in manufacturing and had done so for
relatively good pay. Others had moved into retail or human services for more responsible but less well-paid positions. A few stated that they had less overall responsibility but better pay and conditions in different work.

Analysis of the data did not intend to draw out similarities between those interviewed, as much as to demonstrate the intricate linkages between personal identity, past experience, future aspiration and work constructs available in different fields, which worked together to create outcomes perceived as better or worse by the individual. It was hoped that the data would indicate something about the kinds of learning which took place for individuals during this common process of re-definition, and the kinds of learning supports which proved to be useful.

**Narrative analysis**

Opening questions asked the seventeen participants to reflect upon the Feltex retrenchment, which happened nearly three years prior, and to revisit their experiences at Feltex, including the length of time they had worked there, their positions, the amount of time they had spent working and thinking about work at Feltex, and the ways in which work fitted in around changing family and home routines when they had worked at Feltex, as well as the role of union membership in their working life at Feltex. Participants were then asked to situate themselves in their current jobs, their work and life routines, and union membership now. They were then asked to talk about those aspects of their current lives.

The second part of the interview followed a similar pattern in relation to social life and relationships in the workplace, the third part focussed on work as an activity, the next about work as a place, and finally, they were asked to reflect on the impact of change in their lives since the retrenchment and on how they saw their future working lives. Each interview section was designed to last around fifteen to twenty minutes.
I had known the participants for nearly three years at the time of the one-hour interview. In that time I had spoken to them in the Feltex workplace before they left, in formal one-to-one meetings, on the telephone, at informal social occasions and in organised information sessions in the year after they left. I had also spoken to them in my twenty-minute telephone survey in January of 2007. This gave me a considerable amount of knowledge and information about individuals and their lives.

The ongoing data collected with participants followed by a one-hour interview lent itself to a version of the biographic-narrative interpretive method as outlined by Wengraf and Chamberlayne (2006). Using this approach, the interview participant speaks at length in answer to the question ‘Tell me about your life’, after which the interviewer uses fragments of the narrative to ask for more detailed accounts in a second interview. Together, the researcher asks of the two types of narrative, ‘why did the person who lived their life like this tell their story like that?’ Such analysis of individual narrative ‘supports research into the lived experience of individuals and collectives’ (Wengraf and Chamberlayne 2006).

The interviews I conducted in 2008 involved a number of retrenched Feltex workers who had taken part in meetings, classes and surveys over a three-year period. Previous narratives both informed the broad construction of the interview schedule, guided detailed decisions I made about allowing certain conversations to unfold at length during interviews and assisted me to theorise about the process of change across a very diverse set of life experiences and perceptions.

The biographical narrative system of interviewing involves the interviewer listening to the flow of the narrative without imposing upon it any system of relevance until later in the analysis stage. The interviewees themselves uncover what is relevant to them and follow their own systems of meaning in their answers. Whilst my interviews were
structured, each interview took unexpected turns and followed a path of narrative which diverted from the interview question. I considered these diversions to be critical to the larger answers I was seeking and therefore allowed them to continue until exhausted before moving to the next interview question.

My research process followed many of the processes outlined by Strauss, for developing grounded theory from empirical data (Strauss 1987 pp. 17-22). In particular, the coding and re-coding of the same data throughout the research process was critical in making comparisons, re-testing assumptions, and integrating key recurring themes. In analysing my survey and interview data, I put it through a number of different coding processes, organising the material in more and more dense ways over a period of three years, as I constructed a set of themes which linked individual worker experiences with broader social change.

Initially, narratives were coded in three broad categories. They were first coded in relation to sense of self, motivations, aspirations and experiences in relation to work at Feltex and since. Sometimes these were directly related to the influence of new work, but often changing motivations for work were seen to come from perceptions about being at different points in the life-cycle and having different financial and social circumstances. Such observations about work itself and attitudes towards work were separately coded.

Secondly, narratives on learning and on VET were explored in relation to Feltex and since. This uncovered an unexpected set of comparative learning experiences in relation to work before and after Feltex. For example, one of the interesting themes to emerge was the integrated nature of learning and group socialisation in the Feltex context, as opposed to the de-contextualised VET courses. Workplace values such as protection, solidarity, mutual defence and resistance were seamlessly woven through descriptions of learning in the Feltex workplace, whilst
learning was stripped of this dimension in the more formalised, authorised setting of VET training or in the often isolated new work contexts. Such themes were sectioned off for analysis.

Thirdly, narratives were coded for perceptions of family, friends and others in terms of post retrenchment support, and perceptions of customers, clients, fellow workers and trainees, employers and workers in the same or similar industries to provide a general picture of how individuals saw themselves ‘belonging’ in the world whilst at Feltex and then afterwards. Specific narratives around union membership and friendships at work before and after Feltex were coded separately. On analysis, these narratives indicated several striking issues for further consideration. For example, many still held unionism as a passionate ideal, even though re-joining the union had lost its compelling logic. In addition, there were newly emerging ways in which individuals conceived of viable and useful social practices for work. After coding these narrative threads, it became apparent to me that I should build the changing sense of ‘belonging’ much more deeply into my main analysis.

Each round of coding triggered a further research process, as my original categorisations became more complex. My examination of agency, for example, was influenced by the common occurrence of ambivalence and emotion in the narratives. I found that it was necessary to re-code all the narratives for themes of ambivalence, adding a fourth layer to the analysis.

One woman, for example, spent a considerable amount of time talking about the abusive nature of a supervisor and the way she had taken action to support one of her fellow workers who was affected by his behaviour. Another wanted to talk primarily about the death of her daughter which had happened very soon after the retrenchment, and the difficulty she had facing close family members and family friends afterwards. One man, who was highly ambivalent about changes in his life since retrenchment,
was unable to talk about friendship at Feltex without becoming overcome with emotion. Another, who had a highly optimistic and resilient response to his employment opportunities, nonetheless talked about the difficulties of entering a mid-life crisis in a situation where he was surrounded at work by people who did not know him well.

These personal and moving stories ultimately became as important in my analysis of personal and social change as those which more directly addressed the structured questions, as they provided a deep layer of subjectivity in the telling of the story. Emotion and emotional ambivalence, as it turned out, was a strong feature of the narratives and it ultimately became a subject for discussion and analysis in my write-up. During interviews I allowed participants to explore ambivalence. Often they would make statements in the course of the narrative which directly contradicted each other and these points are analysed in terms of the tensions they represent in their individual processes of personal change.
Conclusion

The Methodology chapter has outlined the ways by which I analyse changes in the field of work and in the lives of retrenched Feltex workers. Throughout this thesis I make use of the conceptual framework as outlined in this chapter, together with the analytical framework as provided by Bourdieu’s notions of the habitus, disposition, the field, the game and the logic of practice. The work context and the system of vocational education in Australia construct the field in which this research is positioned.

The habitus is conceived by Bourdieu as a dynamic and interactive system of acquired dispositions, which arises in particular fields through a process of struggle. The field is constructed according to the values and hierarchies favoured by those dominant interests and groups with greatest access to particular forms of capital. Bourdieu posits material (economic), symbolic (education) and cultural (social) capital as the key resources over which individuals struggle within a given field.

Within this framework, individual worker disposition is the result of all the historical, familial, personal and other struggles of which the individual has been a part. This construction of the habitus and disposition as a co-constitutive process resolves some of the theoretical tensions raised by locating structure (such as the rules and conditions of work) and individual agency (such as the worker struggling for position) as separate processes. In examining the relationship between work as a field and the individual worker disposition it is therefore possible to see changes in the work habitus and changes in worker dispositions as iterative processes.

As the disposition is responsive to experience, there is scope for major disruptions in the field of work to open up the possibilities for new
learning, new opportunities and new benefits in individual lives. Bourdieu likens the interactions of the habitus to a ‘game’, in which strategies are used by individual players with varying degrees of skill and aptitude. The rules of the ‘game’, of course, tend to favour those in dominant positions (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1990).

Given the dynamics of global restructuring, vocational education positions itself as a strategic asset for both the Australian economy at large and for individuals who struggle for a new position in that economy. The iterative construction of social field and individual agency has provided a prism through which I analyse the role of vocational education in the process of change. Whilst members of ‘dominated’ groups in a given field can be groomed to accept the limitations of their positions, they also actively struggle for a variety of real and imagined possibilities. Amongst the research group, VET was one strategy consciously used in this process.

Part One situates the experiences of Feltex workers within the broader context of changes as they occurred in the field of work and education during the period leading up to the 2005 retrenchment. Economic, political and social change has reconstructed conditions within which the system of worker dispositions, or habitus, is shaped and re-shaped.

Part Two explores the Feltex workers’ narratives to illustrate the different ways in which dispositional change shaped and influenced outcomes for individuals. The workers’ narratives were influenced by their positions within the Feltex work setting, their nationality, language background, age and length of service, their previous educational experience and self-perception, their aspirations on retrenchment and the training they completed.
PART ONE: Context of change

The changing field of work and education
Chapter 1 The changing field of work

The changing field of work

Casualization of employment is part of a mode of domination of a new kind, based on the creation of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation. To characterize this mode of domination ... a speaker here proposed the very appropriate and expressive concept of flexploitation (Bourdieu 1998, p. 85, emphasis in original).

Dramatic social changes have taken place in late-industrial societies around the world over the past two decades. The growth of jobs in ‘pink collar’ areas in the paid economy and the rapid casualisation and flexibilisation in some industries have worked together with national policy initiatives to dramatically change the demographic of workers at the lower end of the paid economy. At the same time, increased emphasis on workers taking personal responsibility for career construction and development and the advent of mobile phone and computer technology has led to another kind of shift for the growing number of white-collar workers at the upper end of the economy. Whilst the majority of Australian workers in casual jobs complain that hours are inadequate and conditions too insecure (Pocock 2005), those in professional jobs are increasingly expected to be continually available and on-call as a sign of commitment to work.

Across the late-industrial world, work and in particular paid work remains integral to individual identity (James et al. 1997; Vallas 2001; Peetz 2006). It has been observed that the construction of individual identity is responsive to modes of production, and broad social patterns of identity change reflect national transformations occurring within
capitalism (Casey 1995). Changes in the global field of work can be said to impact on workers in all areas, across all sectors and national boundaries. Bourdieu has observed some of the broad effects of recent changes in the field of work, one of which is the reduced potential for workers to mobilise against conditions which erode ‘their capacity to project themselves into the future’ (Bourdieu 1998, p. 83). This mirror effect of change in which working conditions and the possibilities for worker response simultaneously shift demonstrates the interconnectedness of the habitus and the disposition. Under new work conditions, individuals become new workers. Using Bourdieu’s analogy, this takes place in a process whereby the new rules of the ‘game’ and new strategies for gaining advantages, or ‘capital’, within it are learned, experimented with and practised by the players. Players always enter the game with particular dispositions, although a shifting of the rules brings about the possibility that these may change.

One of the most significant changes retrenched Feltex workers were to encounter immediately was the lack of certainty which had become one of the new conditions of work. In order to consider the identity shifts taking place in the individual lives of these workers, and to contextualise those changes against the broader backdrop of changes to work, this chapter will discuss conditions of change within the field of work. Chapter One sketches four elements of change relevant to the Feltex story.

Firstly, global dimensions of change in the field of work have led to fundamental shifts in the characteristics of industrial capitalism. As a result of these shifts high levels of ‘flexibility’ can produce gains for nations competing for a share of the global market. This phenomenon in turn has brought about changes in the hierarchy of worker attributes, personal identities and attitudes sought by industries and governments. New inequalities have emerged in labour markets as a result, and in Australia this has taken a particular form (Walby 2000; Timo 2001; Webber and Weller 2002).
Secondly, national policy shifts in response to the global restructuring of production have brought about new frameworks, language, social relations and values within the Australian industrial context (Sadler and Fagan 2004; Howe 2007). These shifts have supported dramatic changes in the nature of the work contract (Economic Development Committee 2004; Van Acker 1997).

Thirdly, government-funded programs of post retrenchment support to the textile, clothing and footwear industries have exemplified larger ideological, political and social tensions (Van Acker 1995; TCFUA 2006b; TCFUA 2006c; Peeters and Bowen 2008). Skills for work have moved into a dramatically different position within such programs, and the emphasis on individual entrepreneurship in the acquisition of these skills has marked more recent programs.

Finally, community and social networks operate in different ways within a more fragmented and opportunistic field of work (Bott 1957; Coleman 1988; Hsung and Lin 2009). I examine the implications of this for retrenched workers as they redefine their working identities and their sense of belonging.

Between the 1980s and 2005, new conditions had come to govern the labour market and the entire field of work. New notions and forms of individualism, community, and the work contract had come to shape the work cultures and rhetoric of the industries in which they would learn new ways of being. These critical social changes are analysed in this chapter, in order to place individual stories of change in context. Changes within the local labour and training markets have come about through policies which have gained ground in the Australian context as rational responses to changing global conditions (De Laine et al. 2000; DEST 2005; DEWR 2008a). The rationality of these responses has, however, been brought into question by many of those observing the new directions of social policy (Marginson 1997; Evans et al. 2002; Somerville 2008).
The new field of work was navigated by retrenched workers in particular ways, contingent on their newly framed positions within it. These positions were not determined by work experience and skill alone, or in some cases at all. Identity attributes, life aspirations and social networks combined to generate new sets of opportunities as they interacted with new social conditions. The new work habitus or system of dispositions has both arisen from and reproduced a new order. The new parameters of choice within this order have contained new social tensions, and these have in turn become embedded within the choices and expectations of retrenched workers.

Global dimensions of change

Globalisation has been a highly theorised phenomenon in all fields. Since the 1970s, workers in neo-liberal, post-industrial nations such as Australia have experienced a re-positioning of their role as social actors within the dramatically altered conditions of work. Beck (1992), Giddens (1990) and Bourdieu (1998) theorise about the globally interdependent field of work and the construction of social identity within the late modern, capitalist economy.

Development economists have contributed to empirical knowledge about the ways in which global trade regimes have shifted the possibilities for work. Labour historians and sociologists have examined their impacts on workers in different places (Ngai 2004). Social geographers have analysed the different interactions between people and places as the mode of production changes (Murgatroyd et al. 1985; Savage 1985; MacDonald 1997; Perrons 2004; Moss and Falconer Al-Hindi 2008). Each field of study is compelled to acknowledge both the specificity of history, place and time as well as the complex position of their subject within the global capitalist economy, which has in some ways dis-embedded individuals from those very specificities (Giddens 1990).
The decline of mass manufacturing in the West has resulted in part from the transference of large-scale production processes to other parts of the world, thereby globalising patterns of work and social class, which work has in large part defined, throughout modern industrial history (Savage 2002).

The widespread adoption of trade liberalisation policies by national governments everywhere in the 1980s and 1990s has resulted in the global phenomena of export-driven national economies with reduced government expenditure on essential services. The World Bank and the IMF have played a significant role in extending the reach and increasing the speed of this process, since their formation after the Second World War, by making lending to developing nation-states increasingly contingent on their adoption of structural adjustment policies (Perrons 2004; Williams 2004).

The process of globalisation has re-framed both national and local boundaries, just as technology and communication advances have re-framed the previous boundaries of place and time. Massey writes that ‘the social relations which constitute a locality increasingly stretch beyond its borders: less and less of these relations are contained within the place itself’ (1994, p. 162). It is well acknowledged by political scientists as well as development experts, however, that whilst free trade regimes have resulted in the spread of affluence and opportunity, uneven development has resulted in increased economic polarisation and deeper social divisions within countries (Munck 2002, p. 43; Kidder and Raworth 2004).

Women’s entry en masse into the paid workforce across the world has allowed for a multitude of studies which examine the interaction between globalisation, individual transformations and changing patterns of social inequity. For example, whilst more women have entered the paid workforce globally, the flexibilisation of jobs has done little to reduce gender segregation in the labour market, but indeed, it is argued by Elston that
the ‘restructuring of labour contracts and the altering of job boundaries … is … more likely to take place in a gender differentiated way’ (Elston 1996, p. 38). Whilst individuals have benefitted from greater access to independence and mobility, feminist economists have noted that the cost of living for the poorest people often dramatically increases with the introduction of national trade liberalisation policies, which can have the effect of reducing rather than increasing the livelihood opportunities for small farmers and small business people with the least mobility and capital. Export-oriented policies and pressure on governments to reduce domestic social spending have also arguably directly led to the increased burden of unpaid caring work falling on women who cannot afford to pay for services (Delaney 2004; Ulmer 2004; Williams 2004).

Globalisation of the trade regime has in some instances had the effect of weakening civil protections offered to citizens by the nation state. The purview of trade agreements coupled with the powers of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has sometimes worked against international conventions established to protect workers and vulnerable groups at the local level (Keating 2004; Williams 2004). For civil society organisations, trade agreements ‘now affect areas that once seemed far removed such as environmental protection, labour rights and working conditions, sustainable development, and gender equality’ (White 2004, p. 44).

National laws, policies and rhetoric, particularly in the English-speaking late-industrial states, increasingly reflect the language of liberalisation, individualisation and freedom of capital movement rather than that of social cohesion, social safety nets and social protections. These are seen as vestiges of the ‘Welfare State’, and do not reflect the ideologies that have come about to support global restructure (Mitchell 2000; Thelen 2001). Effective civil advocacy now often requires a wide understanding of the reach of trade agreements as well as international law, and their interactions with national legislative and policy development.
The changing global-national-local nexus, as outlined above, has broadened the role of employment advocates, unions, labour lawyers and workers. It has also had different implications for different individual workers. Industrial capitalism, from the later part of the twentieth century, has been said to have facilitated increasing ‘individualisation’ (Beck 1992). For those who previously benefited the most from collectivising processes at work and in communities, this process of ‘individualisation’ has required a changing set of strategies and resources. Access to the necessary social and cultural capital in the re-working of disposition differentiates the ways in which worker identities are re-positioned within the new habitus.

Changes in gendered work

Over two decades ago, Cockburn criticised workplace studies which examined labour, class and wage relations of work, ‘but ... neglected gender relations’ (Cockburn 1983, p. 5). Women have continued to execute the majority of unpaid work in the private, domestic sphere, even as their movement in and out of the public, regulated sphere of paid work changes (O’Reilly and Fagan 1998). As a result, gender significantly influences the parameters around working identities (Rubery 1998; Probert 1997).

The Australian workforce continues to reflect gender stereotypes, with women overwhelmingly dominant in care-based industries and men dominant in transport and manual labour (Baxter 1998). It has been observed that ‘who does a job depends on how it is socially constructed, valued and con-commitantly rewarded’ (McDowell 1999, p. 126). The employment outcomes for retrenched Feltex workers reflected a highly gender-segregated labour market at the lower end of the economy, with women entering service, personal care, retail and cleaning and men in general entering higher-paid work in transport, labouring, and metal manufacturing. Bourdieu attributes segregations in the labour market to ‘a
compromise between individual abilities, aptitudes and interests, the possession of credentials, including class-related attributes as well as educational contacts ... termed cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 66). Studies of social and cultural practices in the workplace have showed the ways in which women are constructed as ‘embodied’ workers, whose gender itself determines opportunities (Cockburn 1983; Bradley 1989; Cockburn 1985). In this sense, gender itself is a central identity feature which positions workers in the struggle for resources.

McDowell theorises that jobs are still created as ‘appropriate for either men or women’ and the sets of social practices that constitute and maintain them ‘embody socially sanctioned but variable characteristics of masculinity and femininity’ (McDowell 1999, p. 134). The ‘re-sexing’ of jobs therefore, is a significant part or consequence of economic restructuring, leading to highly specific local impacts on status, power and financial rewards for individuals, depending on their gender. Nonetheless, women’s jobs are often the first to be displaced by technological advancements, as the jobs designated as ‘least skilled’ are predominantly occupied by women (Appelbaum 1993, p. 71). In addition, the domestic skills of women workers are often considered to be ‘extensions of their identity as women’ (Poynton 1993, p. 85) and are therefore often invisible to both the women themselves and to potential employers.

The specificities of gendered work are always linked to wider economic processes (Halford and Savage 1995), whilst the ways in which particular workplace cultures appeal to ‘highly masculine values’, for example in the manufacturing sector, have been explored in a number of empirical studies (Collinson and Hearn 1994, p. 4).

Under a previous work habitus, working-class women have been able to create and sustain a counter-argument in relation to their self-perceived skill and value through collective reinforcement. Throughout history,
groups have been able to collectivise their perceptions and re-value their identities and the worth of their work as a counter to the dominant view. This has been a critical strategy for developing a sense of belonging, and for using that to exert influence, preserve resources and consolidate gains. For example, Schwarzkopf argues that, regardless of powerful social opinion and the dominant work hierarchy, women factory workers in the nineteenth-century Lancashire cotton industry were self-consciously articulate regarding their complex skills, and reinforced the perceptions of these skills as valuable through engagement with a like-minded community of women workers (Schwarzkopf 2004, p. 59). Similarly, Farrell (1996) discusses the ways in which one group of menders in a textile factory, valued by the company as being at the bottom of the work hierarchy, are able to collectively reinforce their own perceptions of skill through shared valuing of their work.

The powerful role of the work community at Feltex in reinforcing the value of technical skills and abilities of workers was evident in group discussions with women in the twelve months after retrenchment. However, Feltex workers all underwent a change in worker identity after retrenchment, which required a significant reassessment of their existing and potential work skills. Yarns Mill machine operators were just as likely to be men as women. Many worked the same machines for the same pay, exhibiting various skills in leadership, machine maintenance and productivity. The process of identity reconstruction in new roles in different industries required different kinds of social reinforcement and new ways of valuing their own skills.

Increasing affluence and changing demographics has led to an increase in part-time and casual work for women in retail, domestic service and human care work in the industrially developed world (O’Reilly and Fagan 1998). This dual process has facilitated various points of entry for millions of women worldwide into the paid workforce, although the resulting precarious, temporary, poorly paid and casual jobs at the bottom end of
the global market incur hidden costs to workers and to their families (Elston 1996; Pearson 1988).

The restructuring of the Australian-based textile manufacturing since the late 1970s and early 1980s leaves retrenched Australian workers from the industry with highly gender-segregated sets of employment options. Traditionally, in the Australian textile industry there has been a deep gender divide between value-added, better paid jobs such as those performed by (almost exclusively) male supervisors, forklift drivers and mechanics, and machine operator jobs performed by both men and women, and which are considered ‘unskilled’ or ‘semi-skilled’ (Chataway and Sachs 1990). Since the 1980s, micro-economic reform in the Australian manufacturing sector has resulted in an increased share of white-collar ‘interactive skill’ workers in the economy. The more rapid rate of unemployment for blue-collar ‘motor skill’-reliant workers has led analysts to conclude that as highly-skilled workers account for a greater share of both employment and earnings, the prospects of workers classified as ‘lower-skilled’ in the economy have been greatly worsened (De Laine et al. 2000, p. 4).

The gendered picture of employment for ‘lower skilled’ workers in Australia is complex. In post-industrial countries the growth in part-time and casual employment over the past thirty years has taken place predominantly in what are often now known as ‘feminised’ industries such as health, retail and human care services. Rubery et al. note that in Europe the part-time nature of work has contributed to the feminisation process, and observe that the progressive engagement of women in the labour market will continue to be ‘associated with a growth in the service sector economy’ (Rubery et al. 1998, p. 285). They also suggest that the broader underutilisation of women’s skills tends to increase the level of competition they experience at the lower end of the labour market (Rubery et al. 1998, p. 291).
By comparison with other industrialised European countries, Australia has a more ‘masculinist’ gender order in the labour market and this is evidenced in the poor conditions available to the (largely feminised) casual workforce. The Australian labour market demographic has dramatically changed between 1966 and 2002, with women’s participation increasing by over nineteen per cent and men’s falling by over twelve per cent in that time, resulting overall in an increased proportion of Australians in the labour market and a demographically transformed paid workforce (Baxter 1998; Pocock 2003).

Pocock found that whilst the growth in part-time jobs since 1982 has meant that the proportion of both men and women working part-time has increased in Australia, forty-four per cent of women and only fourteen per cent of men were in part-time jobs in 2002. The majority of this part-time work is casual and a high proportion is thought to be insecure (Pocock 2003, p. 20). Murtough and Waite dispute that such a high proportion of casual workers had insecure working arrangements, finding that the majority of ‘casual employees’ had an expectation that their work would be ongoing (Murtough and Waite, 2000). However, in the Australian context an expectation of ongoing work does not necessarily produce a sense of job security amongst casual employees, as Campbell and others have demonstrated (Campbell and Chalmers 2008; Campbell and Peeters 2008; Burgess et al. 2008). Casually employed Feltex workers surveyed in this research a year after retrenchment often described their work as ongoing. Whilst there was a belief that work would continue, good relationships with management were often the critical factor in such arrangements and workers rarely had written agreements. Hours were not always regular or reliable and union membership was often seen as a threat to maintaining a fragile relationship of trust with employers.

A number of studies focussing on employment trends in Australia over the past twenty years have noted the increased number of paid and unpaid hours worked per capita, as well as the growth in travelling time
and intensification of pace and stress in work (Pocock et al. 2001; Campbell and Chalmers 2008; Campbell and Peeters 2008). Other reports have demonstrated that many workers at the lower end of the market are unable to access the hours or the reliability of hours required to earn a livelihood (Pocock 2005). Dominant notions of the primary breadwinner and the primary parent continue to determine how critical such issues are in the labour market. Gender divisions in home responsibilities affect women’s availability for part-time work in different ways under various policy regimes. Just as women’s ‘orientation’ to paid work is shaped, in part, by labour market opportunities (O’Reilly and Fagan 1998, p. 4) it is also shaped in part by the social practices which institutionalise a ‘gender order’ (O’Reilly and Fagan 1998, p. 14). Bagguley et al. suggest that changing employment patterns in which women continue to be situated in the least protected jobs is contingent upon this dominant social construction. That is, they ‘rest upon the social restructuring of mechanisms of patriarchal domination that operate through domestic divisions of labour, occupation segregation, workplace conflicts and state policies’ (Bagguley et al. 1990, p. 213).

Studies on the impact of changing work role construction and gender identity, such as that of Cynthia Cockburn’s in the print industry (Cockburn 1983) and Mike Savage’s in the earlier cotton-weaving industry (Savage 1985), demonstrate the close inter-relationships between social constructions of gender and gendered attributes and the workings of status, power and authority in particular industries in particular historical contexts. Others have highlighted the historical and gendered social constructions of work, class, work modes and work hierarchies (Murgatroyd et al. 1985; Bagguley et al. 1990; Schwarzkopf 2004). Such studies demonstrate the complex interactions between hierarchies of power in the field of work, the variable possibilities for individual transformation and the broader social context in which work takes place.
Chapter 1 The changing field of work

The Australian industrial context

Globalised trade conditions have re-positioned nation states within a chain of production and consumption, and national policies and processes have determined industry responses and influenced macro-level social patterns such as industrial, class and gender relations (Jensen 2000; Perrons 2004). This is not to downplay the profound impact of global interconnectedness and multi-scalar relationships which are in constant interplay within and between nations (Sadler and Fagan 2004). For example, whilst labour markets themselves are highly localised, labour itself has become a ‘global resource’, which can be contracted by companies from anywhere (Castells 1998, p. 93). This has opened up the field of labour relations in such a way that national boundaries and protections for the world’s most vulnerable workers have been seriously challenged.

The spatial specificity of globalisation arises from choices made within complex local contexts and the impact of globalisation is ‘correspondingly open to change and modification through human decision-making’ (Perrons 2004, p. 3). The effects of global restructuring are bounded by all the specificities of place, including the nature of government, the social histories of industries and the particular features of local communities (Bagguley et al. 1990). Globalisation has an enormous impact on both income inequality and on patterns of government expenditure in Australia as well as other OECD countries (Cornia 1999). Income inequality has arisen most sharply in English speaking OECD member states over the 1980s and 1990s. This has been attributed to trade liberalisation, relaxation of labour regulatory systems, decline in union protections, introduction of skill-biased technology and a minimal redistributive role of government through measures such as taxation reform (Cornia 1999 p.12).

The precise impact of trade liberalisation on government expenditure is sharply debated in the literature. Whilst much of the literature in the 1980s
and 1990s predicted that globalisation would result in a ‘race to the bottom’ in terms of public sector spending and an end to the Welfare State, comparative research demonstrates that the realities have been highly nuanced (Castells 2000). In Australia, for example, the public sector has seen a significant contraction of state spending in services, but an increase in expenditure related to unemployment and aged care.

The three most significant changes noted in relation to industrial change and Australian workers are job insecurity, earnings inequality and a lengthening of working hours (Wooden 2000, p. 126). Manufacturing has been the arena in which, like many other neo-liberal welfare states, Australia has focussed its restructuring efforts over the past three decades (Capling 1992). National industry and employment policies and programs since the late 1970s have resulted from ideological and political struggles, as Australia has re-positioned itself as a player within the global economy (O’Donnell 1997; Buchanan et al. 2001; Webber and Weller 2001; Leigh 2002; Sadler and Fagan 2004). It has been recognised that manufacturing workers are at a disadvantage as the economy changes, without access to focussed post retrenchment support and education (Chataway and Sachs 1990; DEWR 2005c; Productivity Commission 2005).

Long-term manufacturing workers in Australia have been at the forefront of change in the field of work since the commencement of tariff reduction policies and industry restructuring in the late 1970s. These workers have been at once highly exposed and profoundly protected in comparison to Australian workers in other sectors. Few manufacturing workplaces escaped the periodic process of retrenchments and restructurings from the 1980s onwards, leaving workers in the sector profoundly exposed to labour market uncertainties.

The conditions under which these retrenchments have occurred have been notably different. For example, unemployment in Australia was high in the late 1980s and 1990s whilst it was relatively low in 2001. In the early
years of the twenty-first century, seventy-three per cent of the working population of nine million Australians worked in the services sector whilst twenty-two per cent worked in manufacturing (Lansbury and Wailes 2004). The nature of employment had significantly changed, as the majority of new jobs created in the 1990s were casual and part-time (Burgess and Campbell 1998).

Employment relations in Australia underwent a significant set of changes over the 1980s and 1990s. The balance of power shifted significantly towards employers and away from collective bargaining power of workers (Campbell and Brosnan 1999). This has taken place as a result of changes on several fronts.

Union membership in Australia has rested at seventeen per cent of the working population since 2007 (Zappone 2009). It fell dramatically from forty-two per cent of the workforce in 1988 to twenty-three per cent in 2003 (ABS 2004). The majority of the membership decline in this period took place in blue-collar and public service industries (ACIRRT 1999, p. 57). An Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey conducted in 1995 demonstrated a decline in enterprises with unionism present from twenty per cent in 1990 to twenty-six per cent in 1995. This was considerably higher in private industry, where the number of non-unionised workplaces rose from twenty-eight to thirty-six per cent. It also showed the significance of local level organising in the maintenance of unionisation at the enterprise level (Morehead et al. 1997, pp. 139-41; Lansbury and Wailes 2004).

Union decline can be attributed to structural issues in the organisation of work at the international, national, local and enterprise levels, a break in institutional relationships between governments and employers, and to specific union responses to particular management agendas at the enterprise level. Such reasons also change depending on historical context (Peetz 1998).
Decline in union membership is not an unprecedented phenomenon in Australia. It has seen several peaks and falls from the 1940s. Unionism density fell in the mid 1950s with the burgeoning of white-collar professions in the public sector. Anti-communist, anti-union propaganda in the 1950s and 1960s also negatively affected density. It increased again as a result of agreements between unions, governments and employers to allow compulsory unionism. The banning of compulsory unionism in Queensland in 1966 led to another decline from seventy-one per cent to fifty-four per cent in 1973 (Peetz 1998, p.27). Whilst it is clear that ideology, legislative structures and responses from individual unions impact on the rise and fall of union density in a given historical period, the overall trajectory of union density continues to fall.

Whilst labour market forces have played a role in this, changes to the common Award system and to the rules surrounding compulsory industrial conciliation which started in the late 1980s, significantly eroded the industrial framework within which Australian unions had previously operated. By the end of the 1980s, there was a broad coalition of interests aiming to reduce ‘rigidities’ and enhance ‘flexibilities’ by opening up the range of agreements possible under enterprise or workplace level negotiations (Macdonald et al. 2001). The Accord and the move to Enterprise Bargaining in 1991 has, in part, been blamed for some of the declining union membership, as it has decentralised the work of unions, removing local presence from the workplace and requiring better bargaining skills on the part of organisers. Pressure has been placed on unions since then to become better at organising, rather than servicing, membership if they are to survive (Peggs and Young 2001).

Such changes and others introduced through the 2006 Work Choices legislation have not only impacted on the social relations of work, but have directly led to the deterioration of conditions for workers, and women in particular, in the lowest paid industries (Peetz 2007). It has been argued that the productivity benefits assumed as the rationale for such
reforms may not be forthcoming, as reduced certainties and conditions of work are leading to many workers becoming de-motivated (Kelly 2001; Wooden 2000).

In 2008 machine operators across blue-collar industries comprised the category of Australian workers most likely to be protected, with twenty-eight per cent of operators still registered as members of unions (Zappone 2009). Retrenched machine operators from Feltex, like others exiting more ‘protected’ workplaces in 2006, were therefore suddenly subjected to an enormous shift in conditions. The notion of ‘standard’ work hours had radically changed, with a range of social impacts becoming evident (Pocock et al. 2001; Pocock 2003). Meanwhile many older workers were finding it increasingly difficult to find work commensurate with their skills and desired hours, despite the national rhetoric about record low levels of unemployment, industry skill gaps and training deficits (Ranzjin et al. 2002; Ranzjin 2004; Mission Australia 2004).

The gradual dismantling of the industrial award system since the early 1990s, accompanied by the growing labour market share of service industries left twenty-five per cent of Australian workers covered by minimum awards only a decade later. This group has been the most vulnerable to poor levels of pay increase by comparison to workers on collective or union-involved bargaining (Watson et al. 2003; Peetz 2007).

The industrial arena into which Feltex workers exited in 2005 was defined by three different possible kinds of work contracts: collective unionised agreements, agreements subject to award increments, and individual Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs). Under the Work Choices legislation, the latter was the group to increase the most (Peetz 2007). The conditions introduced under Work Choices were extensions of changes which had been taking place in the industrial relations arena for over a decade, commencing with the introduction of enterprise bargaining in the early 90s, the introduction of the Federal Industrial Relations Reform Act in
1993, and then the *Workplace Relations and Other Legislation Amendment Act* in 1996, which finally led to the simplifying of the award system to only twenty recognised awards and allowing for non-union negotiations of the work contract. The cumulative effect of these legislative changes has been that there was, at the time of the Feltex retrenchment, greater disparity in wages, conditions and overall work contracts between workers than at any other previous time in Australian industrial history (Campbell 2005; Jupp et al. 2007).

Whilst the majority of textile workers at Feltex, both male and female, were long term and loyal members of the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union (TCFUA), their narratives suggest that their choices regarding union membership after retrenchment were shaped predominantly through their new experiences and perceptions of both working identity and belonging.

As will be discussed in Chapter Four, it was the perceived lack of relevance, potence and effectiveness of this kind of belonging within their working lives, and the lack of ‘presence’ that unions appeared to have in the workplace, which informed most individual choices not to join. The increased hostility to unions and union members in the workplace served to reinforce this decision.

Changes in the industrial arena, and specifically in relation to union decline, have been linked to gendered ways of working within unions. Feminist criticism of the Australian trade union movement has, since the early 1990s, targeted trade unions’ lack of responsiveness to the interests of working women and to the changing gender dynamics of work as ‘central to its growing marginalisation as an agent for social organisation’ (Martin and Wallace 1984). Pocock argues, however, that trade unions, whilst outmoded in a number of crucial ways, retain their relevance as ‘collective counter to unfair terms and unsafe work in paid employment’ (Pocock 1997, p. 14), and that men and women are most motivated to join
a union for the protection of their rights, rather than for the performance of a belief in unionism per se (Pocock 1997, p. 14).

Structural shifts in the pattern of employment are considered to be among the most significant factors in declining union membership in Australia, coupled with anti-union employer strategies, hostile legislation and a shift away from collective action towards an individualist approach. The changing role of work and the changing nature of working identity is also critical to the decline of unions as the less people identify with work ‘the less likely they are to identify with the … union’ (McManus 1997, p. 34).

A decade ago, Sennet proposed that the loss of workplace as a site for struggle, meaning and identity might lead to a renewed focus on community and belonging in other arenas, suggesting that ‘one of the unintended consequences of modern capitalism is that it has strengthened the value of place, aroused a longing for community’ (Sennet 1998, p. 138). Increasingly, it appears that the future for Australian trade unions now lies with strategies which can successfully entwine the work of unions with those networks of belonging which continue to thrive.

Divisions between the fields of domestic and paid work are experienced in porous and fluid ways by casual-workers, many of whom are women and migrants concentrated at the lower end of the economy and for whom protections of conditions are critical. Unions are increasingly challenged to increase their relevance to these workers if they are to retain their mobilising power (Lipsig-Mumme 1997; McManus 1997; Munck 2002). Historically, many unions have not only excluded a gender analysis from their work, but have often actively worked against women workers, where their interests are seen to potentially threaten those of men in the paid workforce. Marchant’s study of the Australian confection industry illustrates the complicity of trade unions in demarcating and devaluing the work of women (Marchant 1987).
MacDonald argues that the ‘imperatives of mobility and self creation’ have led to a reduced role for trade unions as potential agents of socialisation, representative of ‘a class community and its values’ but that work remains at the centre of democratic reinvention in Australia (MacDonald 1997, p. 75). Whilst some remain optimistic that the principles of solidarity amongst workers can be retained in such a way that national economic imperatives are not compromised, it is challenging to envisage how such principles can continue to thrive under the working conditions experienced by casual and part-time workers at the lower end of the economy.

Transformations in TCF

Retrenched Feltex workers entered a complex and rapidly shifting field of work in 2005. These shifts were due, in part, to changes in the globalised chain of production and consumption, in which restructured industry conditions enabled the emergence of new kinds of social mobility and social inequalities amongst workers world-wide. Changing social relations generated by gender-polarised casual, part-time and insecure work options at the lower end of the economy significantly impacted on the ways in which retrenched workers re-calibrated their worker identities.

The impact of globalisation on the field of work and specifically on manufacturing workers in the Australian context has been shown to have been mediated by structural approaches taken by government and industry. Changes in the Australian social, political and legislative contexts have set the parameters for localised experiences. For example, the strong history of unionism in Australia which has continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century is owed to ‘a set of political arrangements’ (Sadler and Fagan 2004, p. 28). These arose in order to ensure national economic growth through the export of primary commodities and the development of the manufacturing sector. Both tariff
protections for manufacturing industries and the system of centralised industrial dispute resolution through the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC), were central to these arrangements. They are exemplary of the ways in which collective social values were written into early Australian industrial mechanisms, built on notions of the ‘fair and reasonable wage’ and comparative wage justice, at least for men (Sadler and Fagan 2004, p. 41).

As Australia’s position in the global economy began to shift in the 1970s, the longstanding history of protection for Australian manufacturing became an increasingly controversial issue amongst pressure groups such as the agricultural lobby and mining industry. At this point, early ‘political arrangements’ about protection of the domestic economy gave way to a new discourse about the need to internationalise the Australian economy through industry efficiencies and restructuring (Weller 2007).

The Australian textile, clothing and footwear industries have held a special place within the broader Australian protectionism debate, which has led to transformations of the Australian manufacturing sector since the 1970s. They have been the subject and the site for intense struggles in the decades since then, much of which shaped the personal working histories of retrenched Feltex workers.

Since their emergence in the Australian economy in the 1870s, the TCF industries received intensive government support in the form of quotas, licences and tariffs on imports. Between 1920 and the 1970s hundreds of separate reports to Government recommended increased levels of assistance to the TCF industries (Van Acker 1997, p. 9). From the early 1970s, however, the quality of Asian imports began to improve and improvements in technology and transport eventually enabled them to present real competition. In response to global restructuring of TCF production, Australian governments started to re-position the Australian industry.
Political debates around ‘protection’ of the Australian TCF industries were formulated through a changing ideological language that framed national industry policy in relation to Australia’s need to secure its position in the global economy. In support of this shift, the nature of the employment contract moved away from a set of relations that were broadly social in nature, towards ones that served a somewhat narrower set of industry interests, and focussed on securing an optimal economic position within a global trade structure. During the 1980s and 1990s, TCF industry protection therefore increasingly came to be viewed as ‘impeding Australia’s prosperity’ (Weller 2007, p. 2) as did any industrial arrangements that interfered with economic transformations envisaged by Australia’s political leaders.

Ironically perhaps, most of the decisive moves away from protectionism for the TCF industries from the 1970s until the mid-1990s were initiated under successive Labor governments consistently embracing trade liberalisation policies and at a pace that was often ahead of those adopted in other liberalised economies (Weller 2007, p. 1). These political choices were marketed as necessary and inevitable responses to a changing global economy. However, their introduction was not achieved without significant resistance from industries, unions and workers. Whilst tariff cuts were not always the politically popular choice, their introduction conveyed both the growing influence of public institutions such as the Tariff Board and the Productivity Commission, as well as the convictions of individual politicians within successive Labor governments in relation to Australia’s position in the globalising economy (Leigh 2002).

The trajectory of social change experienced within the industries can be seen in the changing relationship between government and TCF workers. Whitlam’s Labor government introduced the first tariff cut to the TCF industries in 1973, with generous provisions for retrenched workers, in accordance with a social contract of work in which notions of a fair and reasonable field of work were inscribed. Nonetheless, tariff cuts proved a
politically unpopular move and the subsequent Liberal government under Fraser did not proceed with any further cuts between 1975 and 1983. The impact of the first tariff cut was substantial.

It has been estimated that the 1973 tariff cut led to a dramatic increase in imported clothing and a corresponding decline in employment in Australian TCF industries by twenty-five per cent or 34,000 jobs (Van Acker 1997). Tariff quotas were reapplied in 1975 and protection for the TCF industries doubled in the years to 1978. However, many TCF manufacturers had already decided to move operations off-shore, and employment in the TCF industries continued to fall from 160,000 workers in 1974 to 120,000 workers in 1977. Despite the fall in jobs, and the unpopularity of tariffs, the institutional arguments against protection had gained some ground in this period and the Industry Assistance Commission argued that the community as a whole was bearing the brunt of protectionist policies.

Under the Fraser Government in the early 1980s combined union and industry pressure resulted in a stabilisation of quotas and tariffs and a corresponding stability in TCF employment at around 117,000 workers.

The fate of the industries in the 1980s then became subject to a comprehensive shift in government policy. In 1986 the Hawke Labor Government asked the Industry Advisory Commission (IAC) to report on ways to improve efficiencies and reduce trade barriers in the TCF industries, and it was proposed that certain niche products be developed and that tariffs be reduced from 134 per cent to fifty per cent over seven years. The Government attempted to introduce new tariff cuts to the manufacturing sector in 1988, although they did not proceed, as the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union argued successfully that this would be lead to more unemployment and would be electorally unpopular. By 1989 Senator John Button successfully introduced a new TCF industry plan involving phased tariff reductions, which he defended in 1991 by
distinguishing industry policy from social welfare (Van Acker 1995, p. 534).

TCF employers were expected by government to adopt new approaches to workforce development and efficiencies in production. This new delineation of government and employer responsibilities reflected a step away from government responsibility for protection of TCF workers. Senator Button’s 1987 speech introducing the first five-year plan exhorted employers within TCF industries to take a greater level of responsibility for niche marketing, as well as training and up-skilling of the workforce, saying that ‘changes in attitudes within and towards the industries will have a greater bearing on future success than mere change in barrier protection’ (Van Acker 1997, p. 14). These changes in employer practice, except in a few notable cases, did not take place, although many companies restructured, down-sized and sometimes upgraded machinery.

In order to assist companies, government industry assistance packages were provided to TCF firms throughout each TCF restructuring plan between 1989 and 2006. These were designed to encourage management restructuring, reorientation and upgrading of technology and machinery. However, the majority of companies were either unable or unwilling to change their *modus operandi* over the ensuing decades, many instead choosing simply to continue their existing practices in cheaper offshore locations. In the period between 1987 and 1992, the textile industry alone went from a labour force of 32,500 to 27,200 and the overall reduction in employment in the TCF industries went from 107,300 employees to 80,300 nationally (ABS 1995). In the twenty-year period from 1985 to 2005, full-time employment in the Australian TCF industries fell dramatically from 104,800 to 42,800 workers (Weller 2007). Over those twenty years the implications of industry restructuring were felt most heavily by women workers, many of whom were not re-employed and did not receive social security benefits. As the less skilled and senior jobs were the primary
targets for elimination, job losses in the industry affected women’s jobs (43,400) on a larger scale than men’s (19,400) (Weller 2007).

Over this twenty-year period, an unprecedented level of change had also taken place in the Australian industrial relations arena (Pocock 1997; Buchanan et al. 2001; Jupp et al. 2007). Within the Australian context, the mass entry of migrants and women into the paid workforce had been facilitated by the manufacturing sector from the 1940s until the 1970s. Over the past thirty years, however, conditions for many workers leaving the highly unionised manufacturing sector had significantly changed and union protection for new, ‘flexible’ workers in late-industrial economies such as Australia’s had simultaneously declined (Buchanan et al. 2001; Francesconi and Garcia-Serrano 2004; Peetz 2007).

At the local and personal levels, these changes have had a particularly powerful effect on women and in particular migrant workers in the TCF industries over the past two decades. During the 1990s, changes in technology and focus in the manufacturing sector led employers to set higher base-line levels of communication and language skills for new workers than they had previously. Alternative jobs in the growing service industry, along with cleaning and catering were now the ones which attracted immigrant workers with poor English and few recognised qualifications. In contrast with the 1980s, when workplaces in the Australian manufacturing sector provided many vulnerable workers with ongoing, secure and union-protected employment, jobs in service and related industries had the lowest levels of union involvement, wage increase, bargaining power, and secure employment in the country. The consequences for increased wage disparity and inequity of opportunity in the labour market were enormous. Bertone says of them, ‘with the recent enactment of the Work Choices legislation, these developments set the context for some of the greatest threats to social cohesion we are likely to experience in the 21st century’ (Bertone 2007, p. 137).
The Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA) has weathered dramatic changes in the two decades since the decline of large-scale Australian manufacturing began. In 1992 the TCFUA claimed a total of 44,732 members, of whom over half were textile and footwear workers. (TCFUA 1992, p. 29) by 2007, the total membership was reported to be around 8,300 (Peterson 2007). In a separate telephone-based sample research conducted in 2006 with 110 retrenched TCFUA members across Melbourne one year after retrenchment, the Union found that only five per cent had re-joined a union after gaining employment (TCFUA 2006c). Similar figures emerged from the TCFUA telephone survey conducted with retrenched Feltex workers twelve months after retrenchment. The changed structure of work, increasingly comprised of insecure, part-time and intermittent hours, has presented overwhelming challenges to trade unions in terms of their potential to act as representatives and advocates for workers (Lipsig-Mumme 1997, p. 119).

According to Giddens the collective powerlessness experienced by workers in response to the increasing pace and rate of change is not so much a failure of individual capacity but of institutions. It would appear true that we need to ‘reconstruct those we have, or create new ones’ (Giddens 1999). There is increasing evidence to show that neo-liberal economic theories and attendant labour market and employment regimes continue to lead to increased inequalities and burdens upon the working poor (George 1999).

Institutional re-construction in Australia is the site for intense struggle, as political parties and trade unions consider ways to re-cast their public appeal in the field of work. It is as yet unclear how workers can contribute to the rebuilding of relevant democratic institutions in relation to work.

**Post retrenchment programs**

The process of struggle in the TCF policy arena was clearly one with global dimensions, but one shaped by shifts in the workings of local and
national conditions. One such shift can be seen in the new parameters set out in the recent TCF structural adjustment package in terms of the delivery of post retrenchment worker education, training and employment support.

As the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system has come to play an increasingly central role in the ‘re-skilling for work’ agenda over the past two decades, rules surrounding access to this support as well as the content of the support itself have changed (Di Pietro 1999; DEWR 2005b). These changes have revealed an increasing emphasis on workers’ individual acquisition of new technical qualifications rather than the obligations of employers and governments towards retrenched TCF workers.

The ‘individualisation’ process which, as Beck would argue, ‘liberates’ workers to ‘narrate their own biographies’ within a context of unstable employment (Beck 1992), has different implications amongst worker groups. Whilst the changing economy may have opened new possibilities for some, it has also placed a set of new burdens on those re-entering work at the lower end. Success in the field of work now requires that individual workers invest in learning more than the technical skills involved in their immediate jobs. They must also invest in learning new strategies for staying employable.

In the three years between 2004 and 2007, the TCFUA (Victorian branch) tracked over 2,000 textile, clothing and footwear factory retrenchments in Victoria. About a third of these long-term workers were from the textile industry (TCFUA 2006c). Long-term TCF workers exiting the industries in 2005 did so with nominal access to a program of funded employment and training support through the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). Such a program had not been available in any form to retrenched TCF workers over the previous ten years. The assistance available to retrenched TCF workers through the TCF SAP scheme announced in 2005, compared to
that offered in the 1989–95 Labour Adjustment Program (LAP), reflected a major set of transformations in social attitudes, public discourses on work, and relationships between government, employer, union and workers as social actors (TCFUA 2005b).

The un-targeted support available to retrenched TCF workers through the 2005 SAP reflected a highly bureaucratic shift in relation to the delivery of training and employment support, and required a high level of knowledge, persistence and self-advocacy from those hoping to access the support.

**The TCF LAP**

Under the first five years of the Button Plan from 1989–1994, retrenched workers were exiting the TCF industries at a time of recession, but had been able to access a range of retraining and other supports through the TCF Labour Adjustment Program (LAP). For a period of four years, after the introduction of the Button Plan, the Federal LAP funded retrenched TCF workers to receive broad educational support through ESL and vocational courses tailored to their specific needs. From 1991 until 1995 broad-based full-time courses provided a meeting place for (predominantly female) retrenched TCF workers, incorporating language training with practical study skills and social opportunities from community venues for up to two years.

One of the outstanding features of the program was that a training allowance was paid to participants, making it possible for married women to take up full-time training without having to sacrifice an income. After the first, relatively unsuccessful year of the program, the TCFUA successfully advocated to play a major role in assisting retrenched workers to access the LAP training programs. From that point, the program was extremely well utilised by middle-aged, migrant retrenched women from the clothing industry (Van Acker 1995; Webber and Weller 2001; Webber and Weller 2002; TCFUA 2005b; Weller 2007).
Studies of workers retrenched from the TCF industries during this earlier period demonstrate that, regardless of the other benefits of the LAP program, re-employment for retrenched textile clothing and footwear workers was low, with one-third never working again, and one-third only able to secure casual, insecure employment (Webber and Weller 2001). English language, transport and geographic barriers as well as a culture of ‘unhelpfulness’ at key institutions such as Centrelink were cited as some of the reasons for the high rates of long-term unemployment experienced by both men and women retrenched from the industry (Lipsig-Mumme 2003). Broader conditions such as the economic downturn and recession were also cited (Webber and Weller 2001).

The LAP program was, however, widely applauded in the community development and adult education sectors as successfully easing retrenched older workers back into community life, sustaining their social networks and assisting with a range of emotional and health adjustments, as well as improving basic language and social literacy skills, and increasing self-confidence to learn and take up new activities (TCFUA 2005c). According to Webber and Weller’s study, 28,000 people were retrenched from the industry between 1989 and 1996 and 5,397 LAP funded training programs were undertaken at an average cost of $5,555 per person trained (Webber and Weller 2002, p. 135).

One of the beneficial elements of LAP was that it maintained worker communities for up to two years after retrenchment, thus building upon existing relationships whilst retrenched workers learned to deal with a major life transition, navigate unfamiliar social and community services effectively, maintain optimism and confidence and learn new vocational skills (TCFUA 2005b). The LAP program is well remembered by people who worked in the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) and the adult education field as a highly innovative phenomenon, wherein thousands of mainly migrant women gathered en masse in community
centres to develop their skills and confidence after twenty years of working in Australian TCF factories (TCFUA 2005a).

Acker describes public policy on protection of the TCF industries during the 1980s and early ‘90s as ‘multifarious and contradictory’ (Van Acker 1995, p. 539). She suggests that several conflicting policy approaches worked chaotically together and that women retrenched from the TCF industry bore the brunt of policy confusions (Van Acker 1995). The economic rationalist approach of the Labor party, which refused to intervene at the micro-economic level and preferred to leave industry outcomes to the market, was coupled with a welfare approach that targeted national TCF re-training schemes and adjustment packages to benefit older women emerging from the sector with few re-employment opportunities. In the meantime, TCF businesses generally had resisted both award restructuring and new work practices, despite the grant incentives to do so.

Citing poor levels of re-employment as a sign of the program’s failure, the LAP program was deemed ineffective by the Howard government and disbanded in 1996. For the following ten years there was no targeted federal government support or assistance available to retrenched TCF workers to offset the impact of retrenchment, to assist them into re-training or to prepare them for work in other industries.

**The TCF SAP**

Tariff reductions for the TCF industry were resumed in 2005, and were scheduled to continue falling until they reach the same levels as other manufacturing industries in 2015 (Weller 2007). In June 2005, a new federal scheme of funded support was announced (Productivity Commission 2003) to address the impact of industry restructuring. This Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) made funding available over a ten-year period to offset the negative impact of retrenchment on ‘workers, communities and on companies’ (DEWR 2005c).
The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) was originally set up to implement the recommendation of the Productivity Commission to give ‘primacy to the need to minimise the potential for disruptive adjustment’ (2003), and to offset the impact of retrenchment on individual workers and on communities in which TCF workers comprised a large proportion of the population.

The support available through SAP to retrenched workers was highly inaccessible and defined so narrowly that its impact on individual workers and their overall work outcomes was negligible. Between 1 July 2005 and 1 July 2006, 337 retrenched workers were registered with Job Networks as eligible for the TCF SAP (TCFUA 2006a). The TCFUA independently documented the progress of these retrenched Victorian workers as they attempted to access training and employment support through Job Networks and found that, without consistent external support from TCFUA, most were unable to access either training or employment support. Most of the 337 registered with Job Networks had been directly supported by the union to do so (TCFUA 2006a).

Project officers in the TCFUA provided information in the workplace to workers who had been notified of retrenchment to ensure they knew about support available through SAP and the Job Networks. Without advocates and advisers to assist them through the maze of rules and options, very few were able to access either training or employment support through the Job Networks.

In the first few years of its operation, the Structural Adjustment Program failed to deliver tangible support for individual retrenched workers for several reasons. Many of the unqualified jobs available through Job Network are at the low end of the economy and are temporary. Although training may enhance job seekers’ options beyond these jobs, training is often deemed too expensive and time consuming and must be argued for effectively. Job Network expenditure on training or employment support
must be justified through its direct anticipated relationship to the client’s ongoing employment. However, direct links between any piece of training and ongoing employment are difficult to demonstrate or predict. It was particularly difficult for retrenched workers to argue the merits of funding being used to complete multiple industry-based short courses for the purpose of gaining confidence and insight into their vocational options. On the other hand, foundation skills courses, which can build social contacts and new learning skills, may fail to provide essential technical qualifications to impress prospective employers.

Retrenched TCF workers accessing Job Networks are supposed to be ‘fast tracked’ into a higher level of support than that which is usually available for job seekers who have been unemployed for less than twelve months. ‘Customised Assistance’, normally only available after twelve months, involves a case manager meeting with the job seekers to construct a résumé and ascertain preferred areas of work.

One of the distinguishing features of the SAP was that, unlike its predecessor, it also provided no social security payments to those who chose to undergo training. As a result, retrenched workers had to choose between undergoing any negotiated training without pay or accepting the first short-term employment opportunity they were offered (TCFUA 2006b).

At the introduction of the new Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) and afterwards, the TCFUA continued to lobby for a new model of federal government support to retrenched TCF workers. In 2005 the TCFUA unsuccessfully advocated to DEWR and the Minister for Industry for an integrated post retrenchment employment and training support to TCF workers displaced from the industry, to be provided through a union, training provider and Job Network partnership (TCFUA 2005c). The resolute refusal of the Coalition government to consider union involvement in such a partnership was indicative of its ideological
position with regard to unions. It also indicated how deeply disadvantaged and isolated retrenched workers would be with regard to accessing advice, VET qualifications or work experience.

In answer to questions asked of Australian Parliament in October 2006, the Government revealed that there had been only eighteen employment outcomes lasting longer than twenty-six weeks as a result of the SAP funding in the first year of operation. The other 253 employment outcomes lasted less than twenty-six weeks. A total of only $46,469 was reported as spent through job seeker accounts on the 337 registered job seekers (TCFUA 2006a). TCFUA telephone surveys of workers retrenched from the industry in 2005–2006 revealed that the majority of those who did register with Job Networks after retrenchment received no assistance in accessing employment or training, and those who had found work eventually did so through their own social contacts or family networks (TCFUA 2006a).

The difference between the highly guarded SAP and the earlier LAP illustrates the shift in power dynamics and social relationships between government, employers, education providers and unions. The fact that TCF firms had so successfully applied for grant funding under a package designed to assist retrenched workers, whilst retrenched workers had been so unsuccessful at using the same scheme to offset their disadvantage in the labour market, is testimony to the impoverishment of the social contract between governments and workers since the implementation of LAP in 1995. The marginalised role of the union and the adult community education sector in the delivery of training and advisory support to the workers was reflective of a broader change in the field of education and training for work (Evans and Rainbird 2002; Rainbird 2002).

Theorists such as Beck posit that as modern capitalism progresses, social inequality in relation to work will reflect how individuals are positioned
in the chain of information and technology, rather than the chain of production (Beck et al. 1997). In relation to post retrenchment support, retrenched TCF workers were not well positioned in 2005. Success in finding and maintaining work relied on the individual workers’ knowledge of the system, connections to experts and close personal networks of support. Support in the development of this knowledge and these networks was no longer perceived to be the social responsibility of government, employers or community-based organisations.

**New constructions of skills for work**

Over the past two decades, global restructuring has required manufacturers, service providers and workers at all levels to increase their responsiveness to consumer demand and their focus on change itself. This has led to a re-definition of essential work skills and has also changed employer perceptions of essential worker attributes. The implication for machine operator-level workers leaving manufacturing industries is that skills acquired over their working lives have been re-interpreted in terms of value and marketability. For many older migrant manufacturing workers leaving the TCF industries, this has resulted in premature retirement, insecure, or under-employment for the rest of their working lives (Lipsig-Mumme 2003).

Work can be defined as ‘a social practice that makes a difference to the world’ (James et al. 1997, p. 311). As a social practice, work is both critical to social identity and involves the exercise of skill. However, both the exercise of skill and the practice of social identity have fundamentally changed, particularly for manual workers.

Rifkin, in his discussion of the introduction of new technologies in production process within the Textiles and Automotive industries, predicted that the ‘blue-collar’ worker will pass from history and that dire social consequences would result from the under-employment and de-skilling of those at the low-wage end of the production chain’ (Rifkin
Reich conceptualised three core high-value, high-turnover enterprises for the future. In his framework for the future of work, Reich (1991) suggested that all employment would be divided into three main types of work. At the bottom is ‘routine production services’, comprised of standard blue-collar production roles, supervisory roles and data entry roles. These job roles will be the most vulnerable to change. Loyalty and reliability are critical aptitudes in these roles. At the next tier is ‘in-person services’, consisting of retail, aged care and child care service personnel, skilled information service providers and more highly skilled providers of health, education and legal services. These jobs remain face-to-face and are therefore least affected by global changes. They require a high level of inter-personal skill. At the top of the chain are ‘symbolic analysts’, consisting of professional information analysts and technicians. Using this typology, most of the retrenched Feltex workers were either moving back into lower or second tier routine production work, or into the lower rungs of in-person services.

Despite greater levels of wealth, freedoms and mobility over the past three decades within late-industrial states, ‘relative inequalities endure’ (Tonkiss 2006, p. 156), and have been demonstrated as remaining stable or indeed worsening for those who are remotely positioned in relation to social and economic resources. According to Lash, ‘life chances’ and class inequality now depend on an individual’s place in and access to the ‘mode of information’ rather than the ‘mode of production’. Information societies, whilst decreasingly ‘class conscious’ are simultaneously ‘class polarised’ (Beck et al. 1997, p. 121). Individual access to information, however, is not sufficient to address this divide. Rather, access to social networks which facilitate mobility through new modes of belonging have become critical for workers (Beck 1992, p. 92).

For those exiting the TCF industries, work alternatives and training requirements varied depending on aptitudes and technical skills they were deemed to have had by the mediators of the labour market-
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recruitment companies and employers. It is recognised in the literature that there is often a gap between employers’ stated requirements and actual employment practices. Employers, for example, may claim to be seeking qualities such as punctuality, reliability and commitment in prospective workers and yet still be averse to recruiting older, experienced workers most likely to have such qualities (Ranzjin et al. 2002). In this sense, identity features such as age, accent, appearance and gender play a critical role in an employer assessment of individual suitability.

The importance of identity in accessing work after retrenchment from a blue-collar job is critical. Some observers argue that the parameters around recognition and valuing of social skills have now left working-class men with fewer options than women. Linda McDowell, for example, argues that the proliferation of service industries, occupations and functions in capitalist societies and the corresponding increase in service industry employment has had a great impact on the types of jobs available and working conditions within them as well as on who is getting the work (McDowell 2003). This pattern is also true in Australia, with the service sector being the fastest-growing sector (Lipsig-Mumme 1997). McDowell says of the British labour market: ‘The types of work that most … had walked into in 1977 – unskilled manufacturing work with relatively good rates of pay and some prospect of security – had virtually disappeared by 1999’ (McDowell 2003 p. 2). She argues that it is now ‘feminised’ identity traits such as sympathetic listening and empathy which are favoured in the growing service sector, working against the interests of unqualified male workers for whom ‘masculine’ personal characteristics and attributes identified with manual labour have become an integral aspect of their gender identity.

The new demographic of the Australian labour market has not come about simply through shifts in global production, but is a product of substantial legislative and policy change. Social policy in late-industrial countries have been instrumental in bringing about a critical new labour supply to
fuel the growing service industries (Probert and Wilson 1993). Rubery describes the ways in which a plentiful supply of part-time and casual labour came about through policy choices in the UK. Downsizing of the public sector has meant that retrenched professional public sector workers became government consultants, retirees have been enabled to make additional income on the side, school age children are offered youth traineeships with industry whilst working part-time, qualified experienced adults re-train through adult traineeships, and women with children are required to work whilst they look after school-aged children (Rubery 1998, p. 31). Others have detailed the interconnectedness of social policy and the constructions of gender relations which underpin the altered field of work (Hewitt 1993; Jensen 2000; Walby 2000).

The policy arena since the 1990s has created an environment in which TCF workers are expected to use training and support to move into new occupations. Yet, whilst Australian government rhetoric about attracting mature-aged and other ‘disadvantaged’ workers back into training and the workplace continues, the barriers to retrenched workers finding full-time ongoing work are still extremely high. The Productivity Commission notes that one quarter of all Australians will be aged over 65 years by 2044–45 (Productivity Commission 2004). Mission Australia (2004) has conducted detailed research into the impact of retrenchment and job loss on older workers, who are unable to access re-employment primarily because of employer attitudes and practices. Policy discussions in relation to the ageing Australian demographic have drawn attention to both the need to entice older workers back into employment and also the discriminatory environment in which older job seekers compete for work (Kennedy and Da Costa 2006).

Skills for work are mired in new structures of disadvantage. Casual jobs at the lower end of the economy are often based on an ‘on call’ arrangement, where days of work and shifts are not known by the workers until twenty-four hours in advance. Several studies have documented the negative
effects of these uncertain work schedules on family and social life as well as working relationships (Pocock et al. 2001; Campbell and Charlesworth 2004; Charlesworth and Macdonald 2007). Changes in the structure of advantage and in standard work hours can interfere with the maintenance of employment and social networks (Hewitt 1993; Pocock 2002). Skills for work have come to include aptitudes for negotiating these new demands.

Belonging in a changing social field

Paradoxically, some theorists of global change have argued that increased inter-connectedness of social institutions and social networks has led to a decrease in both ‘social thinking’ and self-reliance among those whose allegiances and sense of ‘belonging’ have become fragmented. An example of such a process can be seen in ex-Feltex worker Zofia Kloss’ description of the relationships she now has with other casual aged-care workers providing homecare in her local council area. She says: ‘We see each other maybe at staff meeting or Christmas party but this is nothing. We don’t know each other’ (Kloss 2008).

Zofia has no bounded, or embodied set of relationships with her workmates, despite being one of hundreds of employees. She has no sense of other workers’ daily working conditions, problems or experiences, despite sharing the same job description. Her allegiances are not to coworkers, a workplace or an employer, but to the ‘clients’ she serves. However, the clients can change continually. Her role in their lives is quite limited and she must ensure she does not become too ‘involved’. In addition, her employer is a labour-hire firm rather than the council from whom the clients contract services, adding yet another link in the chain of employment relationships. Social relations within her work are set up so that her capacity to effect changes in the service, the conditions of the job, or the employment contract itself is extremely limited. It is no longer rational for Zofia to associate herself, her identity or her values too closely
with her work. She limits her engagement with the field of work to the hours in which she is face-to-face with her clients.

Decreased ‘self-reliance’ in terms of organising power and capacity of individuals to collectivise experiences in the realm of work may have increased dependence on both close family networks, and large institutions and expert advisors. The ‘community’, once a trustworthy source of advice, information, affirmation and reinforcement, has become less available as a social resource to workers like Zofia.

Late modernity has created social conditions in which ontological security and existential anxiety can sometimes be seen to ‘coexist in ambivalence’ (Giddens 1990, p. 139). The ‘unstable or mutable character’ of social conditions within a given field is, according to Giddens, reproduced through individuals’ rapid consumption of information (Giddens 1990, p. 45) In similar ways, the conditions surrounding work such as uncertainty, anxiety, ambivalence and high levels of atomisation of worker communities are reproduced by individuals through their responsiveness to the customer rather than fellow workers, their focus on securing new work rather than consolidating conditions and their re-framed experience of learning as an individual rather than a collective process.

Beck argues that this process has led to a growing incompetence, and a loss of what he calls cognitive sovereignty (Beck 1992, p. 53). Beck’s theory of ‘risk society’ and the type of individualisation it has generated, raises questions about how ‘belonging’ is negotiated by workers in the globalised economy who have access to neither local nor global networks in their employment. Class relationships cannot easily provide a ‘context orientation’ for aged-care workers like Zofia, or the thousands of others in Australia who work under new hybrid forms of temporary, part-time and periodic employment/unemployment (Beck 1992).

Beck also argues that for the sake of economic survival, ‘individuals are now compelled to make themselves the centre of their own life plans …
and indeed to be the “reflexive” authors of their own biographies in every field of endeavour’ (Beck 1992, p. 92). In the field of work, however, authorship of one’s own biography is constrained by the system of values in which identity attributes and social networks assume weight and significance. Modes of work at Feltex provided opportunities for workers to form communities comprised of close networks and foster the practices to maintain them. These communities fostered a sense of belonging and provided routine incentives for identifying as a group. Unifying identity principles such as age, race and gender do not automatically bring workers together or provide either a reason or a means for mobilising. In addition, the organising vehicle of trade unions enabled collective worker responses at Feltex as well as opportunities for information exchange about matters such as workplace rights and industry standards. In the absence of this vehicle, individuals working at the lower end of the economy become increasingly reliant upon family networks or formal relationships with expert civil advocates, advisers and lawyers for both gleaning information about and asserting influence over the conditions of work.

Implications of belonging for retrenched workers

Changes in the field of work at the macro level have manifested in changes at the level of local communities and families. In response, the ways in which individuals experience and enact the processes of ‘belonging’ have shifted, as have the ways in which social networks are overlaid across individual working lives.

Individuals leaving a close-knit workplace within a manufacturing environment after decades of continuous service face several challenges. They are abruptly separated from a community of fellow workers within which social networks followed norms and fostered values, beliefs and behaviours designed to protect the collective assets of the members. These networks provided significant support and resources for their members,
and allowed collective and individual gains to accrue through group action, identity reinforcement, mentoring, advice and social contact. Much has been written about the immediate shock and trauma of retrenchment for long-term TCF workers, as well as the loss of work-based social relationships and the support they provide (Webber and Weller 2001; Lipsig-Mumme 2003).

For most textile workers, success after retrenchment requires rapid assimilation of information and the consolidation of new circles of influence amongst personal contacts, and professional experts. It requires individuals to develop a new understanding of their identities, both as ex-manufacturing workers and potential workers in other fields. Support from family and social networks are critical in helping workers to reinforce and value their new identity. After a new job is found and maintained over time, retrenched textile workers must maintain constant readiness for change and uncertainty in their working hours, their jobs and even the industries in which they work. In entering new industries, they often face the imperative to develop new social networks, and also use their existing social networks in new ways.

The cultivation of social networks, and knowing how best to use them depends, at least initially, upon individuals first re-defining their ‘sense of belonging’. The communities to which individuals in the late-industrial world belong and from which they gain influence are not always based on face-to-face relationships, sustained over time and bounded in space and time as they were at Feltex. Communities of belonging are increasingly comprised of more abstracted networks, sustained through transient connections and formed around immediate issues and needs. For many retrenched textile workers, change, insecurity and planning for re-employment became a new and ongoing expectation of working life. The need to be well connected in a constantly changing field thus quickly overtook the need to build and maintain conditions shared with a stable group of fellow workers. Under altered conditions, the ways in which
social networks could enhance outcomes for individual workers had also altered.

Social theorists since Marx have recognised the relationship between the construction of ‘self’ and the social relations within which individuals are enmeshed. Marx remarked that the ‘human essence is no abstraction inherent in each individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations’ (Marx 1845, para VI). Whilst the study of self has been a focus of much sociological theory, and the transformations of self in late modernity have been a feature of much cultural theory, the connections between changing conceptions of ‘self’ and changes in the social field of work are rarely pursued in detailed empirical research (Casey 1995, p. 23).

The social relations and discourses of production in late-industrial capitalism are, as Casey suggests, ‘co-constitutive of the production and transformation of self’ (Casey 1995, p. 23). Textile workers moving into different kinds of work undergo a transition into a different formulation of capitalism, under which the social relations of work are reflective of the newly valued attributes of work and workers. It is widely acknowledged that the experience of belonging to community is also crucial in mental health and wellbeing (Mulligan et al. 2006; Mulligan et al. 2009), in adjustment and recovery from trauma (Miller, 2009) and in enhancement of all kinds of social outcomes for individuals (Coleman 1988). The social roles and structures of ‘community’ and the individual experiences of belonging in Australia have been strongly defined by the migration experience, race, gender, locality, class and occupation. For textile workers, they have also been strongly defined by the values and structures arising out of the factory environment. Giddens suggests that new forms of social organisation retain elements of the previous modes and structures as modernity progresses (Giddens 1990). In this sense, notions of belonging and identity evolve at various rates in different places and at different points in individual lives.
Within the Feltex worker community in 2005, there was the trademark closeness of a bounded community underlying a complex set of overlaid social identities and networks. Union members at Feltex included workers across shifts, age, race, gender and sections. They had been able to actively mobilise within the workplace to achieve and protect a set of working conditions throughout the 1990s to the 2000s. Groups of workers provided social and emotional support to each other and their families outside of the workplace through fishing and camping holidays. Workers were often neighbours and close family friends. In interviews conducted for this research, both Stan and Osmundo mentioned that other Feltex workers were godparents to their children. Dusan and Desa were supported by other Feltex workers after the death of their daughter. Husbands, wives, sons, daughters and other relatives were brought by each other into the workplace, creating an overlay of family networks across the factory. Groups of women working together crossed ethnic and cultural differences to share intimate family information and provide mutual counsel about family problems. Others sought out the company of workers from their own ethnic groups for social exchange and travelling holidays outside of work.

Internally, the Feltex work community had changed significantly over the decades leading up to retrenchment, from one in which work teams had remained relatively stable, to one in which working conditions underwent regular change, with a reduced workforce and downsized, collapsed and closed worksites. Under these changed conditions, workers joined forces through the union to take industrial action. According to James, whilst localised modern communities tend to overlap and overlay each other within the one spatial area, traditional communities ‘by contrast, tend to be grounded in embodied places’ (James 2009).

After retrenchment, the social networks formed through work in the lives of individuals were looser. Workplaces were located in far away suburbs, friendships were difficult to develop, workers carried out their duties in
isolation and without a sense of obligation to other workers. I argue that workers’ sense of belonging changed so that they no longer ‘belonged’ to particular workplaces and groups of fellow workers. In addition, the resources they required for success was contingent on new, fragile forms of belonging.

The worker community formed in post-war years at Invicta Carpets in the western suburbs of Melbourne, was comprised in part by young working-class men and women who had grown up in the local area and young, newly arrived migrants from Europe. Over the following decades the composition of the community changed, both ethnically and in terms of the age and gender of workers. Social networks overlaid in the worker community were of a religious, ethnic, age-based and gendered nature. They also reflected levels in the work hierarchy, with male leading-hands, supervisors and mechanics often socialising as a group outside of work.

It has been demonstrated that strike participation is closely related to the strength of worker networks at particular points in production (Dixon and Roscigno, 2003, p. 1301). Union belonging and action became a widespread feature of working life at Feltex starting from the early 1990s, when industrial change began to shift the focus of work. Membership strengthened further when trusted union leadership on the factory floor emerged. Successful strike action in 2001 guaranteed the workers at Feltex reasonable retrenchment conditions, which in turn allowed a buffer for many of the 165 retrenched workers in 2005 to consider undertaking a measured process of preparation, training and investigating work alternatives, or take a holiday. Such strike action won a critical set of conditions for this group of workers, but was made possible through a specific set of social conditions, relationships and social values at work.

**Networks as affirmation of identity**

Analysis of social networks and the resources they generate for workers has been undertaken by theorists since the early 1970s, predominantly in
the context of the United States (Granovetter 1983; Granovetter 1973; Granovetter 1974; Coleman 1988; Lin 1999; Hsung et al. 2009). Other work has since explored the ways in which these processes are classed, gendered and racially defined, and also how they influence outcomes for particular groups of people in education, health care, and in legal and financial matters (Cornwell and Cornwell 2008; McDonald et al. 2009).

Elizabeth Bott first introduced the idea that the types of social networks to which individuals belong influence behaviour within the family and, in turn, works to facilitate the reproduction of social stratification (Bott 1957). Her research opened the path for detailed sociological research into the role of social networks in the reproduction of social opportunities and inequalities at micro and macro levels.

Bott’s overall finding was that the level of role segregation at home was directly related to the closeness or looseness of the couple’s social networks outside the home. Couples with close networks maintained a more rigid approach to the separation of conjugal roles and similarly those with loose social networks were more likely to be take ‘joint’ responsibility for a range of home duties. Bott theorised that with a close network, members of a couple were able to draw a high level of support from outside the relationship in the performance of their domestic duties, and were therefore able to maintain a rigid separation of their conjugal roles. Men were supported by other men in their family and work network to perform traditionally ‘masculine’ activities whilst women were supported by female family members and neighbours to perform traditionally ‘feminine’ duties such as cleaning and childcare.

‘Close networks’ were comprised entirely or substantially of family members who were often also neighbours and workmates. Friends outside the family were often also neighbours and workmates, and often functioned as family members. In the course of her research, Bott established some important foundations for future research on social networks. Importantly for this thesis, these contributed to an
Chapter 1 The changing field of work

understanding of how micro-level shifts occurring within individual belonging to communities and networks relate to and reinforce shifts at the macro level of society.

Bott makes a distinction between an ‘organised group’, in which all members are interdependent, and ‘social networks’, which do not share a common boundary (Bott 1957, p. 58). Using this distinction, it can be said that the Feltex workplace in general was a community in which most individual members shared a number of social networks. Immediate families, neighbours, relatives, newly arrived ethnic groups and neighbours worked together, socialised together and supported one another in numerous ways within the Feltex community. However, union membership and union action also united a sub-group of the workers as an ‘organised group’. Bott described groups in which there was a high level of inter-connectedness between members as ‘close-knit’ and those in which the members did not meet independently and know one another’s friends as ‘loose-knit’. Loose networks, she found, were more fragmented, allowing fewer social controls and greater diversity in ‘norms’ but also affording less mutual support.

Bott also found that there were families who inhabited intermediate categories, who were leaving behind ‘close networks’ and increasingly defining their community life in terms of friends, family members, colleagues and neighbours with whom they did not share most of their other networks, and whose other networks were not known to them. Loose networks such as these were more common to families experiencing higher levels of mobility, particularly in terms of the husband’s occupation, and also, often correspondingly, those who moved away from geographic locations in which family members and established neighbours and friends lived. Social mobility, in other words, was connected to the diminishing of close networks and the rising importance of loose networks. It was also connected to higher expectations of
domestic interdependency within the conjugal relationship, and an increased blurring of domestic role distinctions.

The retrenchment process at Feltex in 2005 threw a group of textile workers into a new level of mobility for which they were variously prepared and equipped. The ways in which their existing networks and families assisted them in the ensuing months and years varied depending on gender, age, personality and aspiration, among other factors. For some, the re-definition of ‘belonging’ had simply reduced the social resources available to them beyond their family, and for others tentative beginnings were evident in the development of new kinds of loose networks.

The resources that retrenched workers were able to generate through their existing social networks assisted them in various ways after retrenchment. Support through close family networks was mentioned in surveys fifteen months after retrenchment, as critical in both finding new work and maintaining confidence and optimism.

Three years after retrenchment, a smaller group of seventeen retrenched workers reported in interviews that, whilst deeply attached to family, and variously attached to religious, ethnic and neighbourhood groups and networks, they no longer belonged to work-based groups which were able to mobilise collective action for industrial outcomes or networks which could generate social activities or friendships. In addition, few amongst the research group had established new social networks outside the family to increase their chances at responding to ongoing job insecurity. Those who had made new kinds of social networks in relation to work conveyed a sense of fragility and uncertainty. After three years, Osmundo’s distress at still not understanding the dynamics in his work relationships, Stan’s uncertainty about establishing trust and authority within his work team, and Maria’s confusion about how to find work again in the retail industry appear to reflect a tenuous sense of belonging that retrenched workers had formed within those new networks.
Resources that are ‘embedded’ in social relations and social networks such as those to which Feltex workers belonged, enable the flow of information, exert influence, increase social credentials and provide social reinforcement for the individuals in the group (Lin 1999). Lin argues that the collective assets of a group such as culture, norms and trust, facilitate relational exchanges which build ‘social capital’. The term ‘social capital’ is used in the Bourdieuan sense throughout this thesis, wherein social attributes do not function as ‘capital’ except when they are ‘inserted into the objective relations set up between the system of economic production and the system producing the producers (which is itself constituted by the relationship between the educational system and the family)’ (Bourdieu 1980, p. 124).

Using this interpretation, Lin is right to draw attention to the notion that dense kinds of networks protect certain interests better than others. She says that for ‘preserving or maintaining resources … denser networks may have a relative advantage … On the other hand, for searching and obtaining resources not presently possessed … such as looking for a job or better job … accessing and extending bridges in the social network should be more useful’ (Lin 1999, p. 34).

Changes taking place in social relationships, personal identity and labour market opportunities interacted closely as retrenched Feltex workers made choices and responded to the restructuring of work. Lin’s notions of the functionality of different kinds of networks are also important, as most of the retrenched workers involved in this research had moved into work situations wherein they were routinely searching for new resources and opportunities rather than consolidating the resources they had. This demanded new kinds of networks and new ways of conceptualising the value of casual acquaintances and ties.

It has been argued that increased individual sense of community, defined as ‘feelings of attachment and belonging that an individual has towards a
community’ (Pooley et al. 2005, p. 72) leads to increased access to social capital. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986) membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs and shared emotional connections build a ‘sense of community’. Retrenched Feltex workers had felt strongly that they were members of a worker community in the workplace. For those interviewed, this sense of belonging no longer attached itself to fellow workers at new workplaces, but instead had increased in relation to family, neighbours, ethnic or religious groups, and often included a stronger sense of obligation and connection to the ‘customer’ and the ‘client’ than to fellow workers. This changing attachment, which encompassed a field of social relations at work outside of fellow workers, supervisors and bosses, entailed a new work identity and opened the possibility for a new set of social networks.

In the 1950s, Bott found that the kinds of networks that men and women established were qualitatively different, particularly within less mobile and more ‘traditional’ structures common to working class families. Women were more likely to draw support from family and less likely to draw it from friends. More recently, research into domestic organisation after a large-scale male redundancy from a Welsh steel processing site found that men’s ongoing engagement in informal male social networks played a critical role in their access to job information. Men’s engagement with these social networks, whilst essential in finding alternative employment after retrenchment, tended to simultaneously reinforce, through social consensus, rigid views on the domestic division of labour (Morris 1985). For Feltex workers, as well, the ways in which men and women responded to re-skilling and job searching after retrenchment showed marked differences, possibly reflecting the ways in which social networks work differently for men and women seeking to re-enter jobs at the lower end of the economy.
Networks as bridges

A study of re-employment after retrenchment in New York, found that job leads relied heavily on social networks (Granovetter 1974). In this study it was argued that the degree of overlap between two people’s networks determines the strength of their ties to one another, and also that weak ties in particular play a critical role in the wide dissemination of information which is useful for job seekers. In an effort to build a link between the detailed workings of small groups to macro-level patterns in broader society, Granovetter argued that strong ties, which involve investments of time, and reciprocal help, do not necessarily act as effective ‘bridges’ into new networks, because the networks are likely to overlap considerably. Instead, ‘weak ties’ with others are sometimes able to act as bridges into new networks and facilitate better flows of information (Granovetter 1973, p. 1364). Bridging ties work both to bring information to the individual through a diffuse set of connections and to allow the individual to source information as required.

The same study furthermore found that ‘weak ties are an important resource in making possible mobility opportunity’ (Granovetter 1973, p.1373). Ties most likely to lead to employment opportunities were weak ties, or acquaintances, who could act as bridges by being, themselves, closely connected to the source of the job opportunity. Close networks which appear coherent and effective at close range can be seen to be fragmented when taking an ‘aerial view’ at the macroscopic social level. Networks built entirely on only close ties do not necessarily facilitate collective action, as they disallow bridges which can only come about through weak ties. Bridges, which allow for the spread of information and influence, and which can bring in support from outside, are also critical in the effectiveness of direct action. Granovetter concludes that, paradoxically, weak ties are critical to opportunities and strong ties can lead to overall social fragmentation whilst maintaining an appearance of local cohesion.
Coser took this theory further in concluding that strong ties can lead to individuals having no need to imagine themselves in the shoes of the other, or to develop more sophisticated forms of communication which result from engaging with the realities of others different from themselves (Coser 1975). She concluded that weak ties may facilitate the complex role set required with the rise of individualism and the need for constant self-direction.

As Feltex workers moved into the labour market and renegotiated their identities as workers, they came to rely on new networks within the fields they were entering, to act as ‘bridges’. In the narratives of retrenched Feltex workers such as Abdul Musser and Zaim Abazovic, whilst the original contact into the transport industry was through family members, the value of developing weak ties with customers and clients was seen as a key element in learning new ways of being and in building ‘capital’ as future workers.

Research in the area of social networks has demonstrated that the ways in which social ties work in employment opportunities is also bound by class of job and level of education, and that weak ties amongst people in a lower socio-economic group are not likely to provide information or influence which would constitute a ‘real broadening of opportunity’ (Granovetter 1983, p. 208) Granovetter also concludes that for those who face a high probability of future unemployment it makes more sense to invest in the stability of strong ties (Granovetter 1983, p. 212).

Chapters Three and Four of this thesis explore the gradations of experience in relation to these themes for the seventeen retrenched Feltex workers. The process of personal transformations which took place as retrenched textile workers engaged with the new field of work, involved critical changes in their sense of belonging, along with the new understandings of community and social networks. The micro-level processes taking place in the lives of individual workers reflected broader
social processes, and inequalities between them were either maintained, intensified or transformed under new work conditions, dependent on where in the hierarchy of social relations of work they had come to belong.

Feltex workers made various instantaneous and considered decisions regarding how they would maximise their labour market chances after their retrenchment in 2005. Some were convinced that formal learning would provide new opportunities, networks and confidence. Some were confident that their personal attributes such as age and attitude to work were sufficient to ensure their employability. All made estimations regarding their best options in developing and finding their desired work options. For those retrenched workers like Maria Bizdoaca, Levy Ramos and Satwinder Kaur, who had crafted aspirations far beyond the factory worker ‘milieu’, transformations would prove difficult to effect without developing the requisite ‘bridges’ into new kinds of social networks. As migrant women with limited networks that could usefully connect them to office, retail and library-based employment, their potential to mobilise the relevant social capital was tenuous at best. For others, like Jano Kolaric and Vesna Karadulev, whose working identities remained firmly attached to the manufacturing sector three years later, different kinds of adjustments were required. The work communities they entered were experienced as qualitatively different from Feltex, lacking in the sense of ‘family’, mutual obligation and support, as well as the diverse yet interconnected networks and trusted leadership which had made possible industrial mobilisation and solidarity.

Social citizenship in Australia, once closely connected with trade union membership and identification with locale, now often relies on different types of membership and association. With rapidly changing workplace relations and eroded union influence, there are now fewer ways available for workers to influence their working conditions, and this in turn leaves Australian workers less empowered in general to both create communities and participate in civic life. According to Hearn and Lansbury,
'reconstituting meaningful social citizenship in an individualised economic and social system requires adaptation to the fractious diversity of an enterprise culture’ (Hearn and Lansbury 2006, p. 85). Feltex workers, as active union members, were once fully engaged in the process of negotiating their workplace conditions. They took responsibility for outcomes of those negotiations and shared a commitment to individual participation in the collective life of the workplace. Such notions of social citizenship did not continue into their working lives after retrenchment. Their adaptations to newly constituted work communities and new conditions of work required a re-working of their notions of belonging and participation.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrates four major ways that global restructure has shaped a new work habitus in which retrenched Feltex workers struggle for position. Changes in the nature of global production, in the focus of Australian industry policy, in focus of post retrenchment support to TCF workers and in the workings of social networks are of critical importance to the changes and process undergone within the lives of individual workers.

Global changes have facilitated the restructuring of work at both ends of the economy. Expanding work opportunities have been located in both the high-skilled, highly-paid and in the insecure and poorly-paid lower ends of the economy. The literature suggests that changes in national policies and laws, such as reductions in the industrial protections for workers and in government regulations around industrial relationships, have facilitated the rapid increase of job casualisation in Australia and elsewhere, and have led to increased income disparities between workers at the two ends of the economy.
Changes in other areas of social policy in late-industrial countries have facilitated the movement of greater numbers of women into both full-time and other modes of paid work over the past twenty years. Research has repeatedly confirmed that women workers at the lower end of the economy have been less favourably positioned than their male co-workers in relation to industrial protection, wages and conditions. Other identity elements characterise the process of increasing social polarisation. It has been argued that migrant workers moving out of full-time, highly unionised manufacturing workplaces into casual, highly unprotected industries experience generally higher levels of vulnerability at work than previously. Research strongly suggests that, despite policy formulations aiming to keep workers in the work-force for longer, older workers are the group most prone to long periods of unemployment.

Identity attributes such as gender, age and language background clearly limit opportunities and generate new challenges for individuals within the new habitus. Social policy emphasis in response to the process of global restructuring has been an important factor in the construction of new individual opportunities and new social disparities across the population.

Changes in Australian industrial and regulatory frameworks over the past twenty years have re-shaped the previous institutions and obligations critical to constructions of work in Australia. The new work contract has enshrined reduced obligations of governments and firms, the reduced role of trade unions in the bargaining process, and the increased obligations of individual workers. Social patterns suggest that this has further entrenched the polarity between types of workers in the economy, leaving casual, part-time and poorly-paid workers with even fewer resources with which to bargain, resist and organise around the conditions of their working lives.

Changes in the Australian economy have placed the textile, clothing and footwear industries at the centre of industry policy change over the past
two decades and, as a result, workers in these industries have been actively engaged in particular forms of struggle and resistance. Changes in national constructions of work and workers can be seen in changing post retrenchment support available to retrenched TCF workers. Critical to these re-constructions have been the promotion of particular notions of worker aptitude and skill. These are increasingly framed in relation to formal learning outcomes and individual capacity to develop, learn and change.

Finally, this chapter outlines the changing role of social networks as a feature of the new habitus. Belonging within networks and communities is integral to the process of forging individual values, identities and social practices. As the mode of capitalism has shifted, so too have modes of belonging. With the demise of unions, and the increasing importance of mobility, flexibility and responsiveness to opportunities at work, the literature on social networks suggests that Feltex workers would need to belong in new ways in order to generate the resources for survival and advancement. In contrast to the close interconnected social networks which functioned to provide advice, information and affirmation under old conditions, workers in the new economy would need to belong to looser networks, capable of providing support to their transformations.

Individual ways of working and belonging have been disrupted through changes to the global, national and local field of work. The next chapter outlines the ways in which vocational learning has aligned with these changes, and the tensions which define its potential to address transformations in the economy and within the lives of individual workers.
Chapter 2 The changing field of education

The worker’s ability to learn and adapt becomes more important than his past training. A worker’s tacit understanding of a particular machine or set of processes is more important than his general education and knowledge (Casey et al. 2002, p. 43).

‘Flexible working conditions’ have allowed some retrenched manufacturing workers to explore new areas of potential and pursue new aspirations, but for many, there are new disadvantages to negotiate. These come with the uncertainties of work, and the social relationships and attitudes accompanying new work modes (Gee et al 1996; O’Reilly and Fagan 1998). As workers adapt their strategies for new conditions, they engage in a constant process of learning. Learning can be supported in a range of ways, and these have also shifted over the past two decades, as learning has been re-framed as an individual rather than a social process.

In exploring the ways in which learning itself is re-defined and re-positioned, and the consequences of this for workers in the years following retrenchment, it is important to know how learning identities and learner attributes have been re-positioned in the field of work. Shifting discourses around skills for work articulate particular notions of learning for late-industrial capitalism, encompassing the learner dispositions required of workers as well as the possibilities for change in learner dispositions. This chapter provides a discussion of how learning and the learner have been framed to support Australian policy focus. It forms a framework for my later analysis of retrenched workers’ learning experiences, as discussed in Chapter Five.
Bourdieu argues that individual dispositions, shaped through active interaction with the habitus, reproduce the hierarchies and values which shape the field. Within the work habitus, peripheral culture, marked by resistance and ‘borderland discourses’ thrive amongst marginalised workers (Billett and Somerville 2004; O’Connor 2004). Experiences with vocational education and training can have the effect of reinforcing marginalisation or of supporting transformation. Changes in outlook and expectations brought about by work experiences are in themselves learning processes, which affect identity and ideas of class-belonging (Sawchuck 2003; Crossan et al. 2003). The ways in which learning re-shapes individual lives are, however, neither uniform nor inevitable, but result from the interplay between social and individual factors (Casey 1995; Casey et al. 2002; Webb and Warren 2009).

This chapter introduces the ways in which vocational education has incorporated changing and often contradictory constructions of knowing and learning for work in the Australian context. It outlines the tensions inherent in the vocation education and training (VET) system, which define the field of learning for retrenched workers.

Whilst changes in VET have had a variety of impacts on both the process of learning and the learner, it also increasingly reflects a re-positioning of workers at the lower end of the economy. In the case of workers retrenched from the Textile, Clothing and Footwear industries in Victoria, participation in employment support or vocational training after retrenchment remains extremely low. Less than $200,000 had been spent from the TCF Structural Adjustment Package on training for displaced workers in the first three years of the program’s operation, from 2005 until 2008 (Peeters and Bowen 2008). It is not known how those workers who accessed training have benefited, changed or learned from it.

Whilst formal vocational education currently reflects economic policy requirements which have come about through global transformations in
the field of work, it has not necessarily supported social transformations taking place at the local and the individual level. At the individual level, retrenched workers have experienced dramatic transformations in their worker identities which impact upon their sense of belonging. Whilst VET may be well placed to respond to a ‘fuller understanding of competence which is suited to times of change and uncertainty’ (Velde 1999, p. 443), there is powerful evidence to suggest that in practice, Australian VET courses at industry entry level still focus on narrow notions of skill and competence. This has implications for its ability to genuinely support the transformations of experienced workers from previously ‘protected’ industries as they re-enter the labour market.

The vital learning that retrenched workers undergo as they enter the new field of work equips them to access critical resources for their futures. This learning is not limited to new technical skills, but also incorporates new internalised conceptions of themselves, of work and of the social practices integral to working life.

Global dimensions of change

The relationships between vocational education and training, the skill requirements of industry and the learning requirements of workers remain full of tensions. It is clear that vocational education and training systems across the developed world have been charged with the role of supporting late-industrial modes of production through a focus on producing workers with new skill sets (OECD 1996a). These skill sets have been distilled through government, VET and industry consultations, to capture the dispositions which will be favoured in the new work habitus. Such distillation processes have been taking place at the national level in OECD countries over the past two decades (Allen Consulting Group 1999, The UIECE 2000, NCVER 2006).
Concepts of new ‘skills’, ‘aptitudes’ and ‘literacies’ for work are variously defined in the vocational education literature, whilst both communication and technical skills for work are often presented in generalised or abstract ways. In the UK definitions of ‘employability skills’ have ranged from the skills for ‘getting and keeping work’ to skills necessary to ‘move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment’ (Hillage and Pollard 1998, p. 2).

A recent Australian review of the literature on generic employability skills defined employability as signalling ‘a connection to the world of work that is dynamic and long-term in nature. Employability implies qualities of resourcefulness, adaptability and flexibility, and therefore also signals some of the qualities needed for success in work and life as a whole’ (Curtis and Mackenzie 2002, p. 2). After reviewing the OECD countries’ progress in relation to employability skills since the early 1990s, Curtis and Mackenzie recommended that the Australian Government adopt a more refined set of employability skills than those initially laid out in the 1992 Mayer Report (Australian Education Council 1992a, 1992b). These include a set of personal attitudes towards learning such as openness to learning, being prepared to acknowledge the need to learn, and being prepared to invest in learning. Their table of skill requirements is reproduced below.

Whilst it has been widely agreed at the level of OECD governments that vocational education has a critical role to play in the generation of ‘soft’ skills such as those that fall within the ‘personal attributes’ column, it is not clear how such worker attributes would be ‘taught’ or ‘assessed’. It is also a stated goal that these employability skills will be ‘generic’ and therefore taught/learned in such a way that they are transferable between different contexts in life and across different working contexts (Curtis and Mackenzie 2002, p. 6). It is assumed that transferability of such attributes is a straight-forward matter, and not contingent on the highly localised culture of the workplace. It also appears to be assumed that employers
have a desire to foster work cultures that would sustain and develop such personal attributes. Certainly it is the learner who carries the primary responsibility for developing the foundation skills, the intellectual skills and the personal attributes for employability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic skills</th>
<th>Intellectual Abilities</th>
<th>Personal Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foundation skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Thinking skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Continuous learning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listens and understands and speaks clearly and directly</td>
<td>Able to make decisions</td>
<td>Acknowledges the need to learn in order to accommodate change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands written documents and writes clearly</td>
<td>Capable problem-solver</td>
<td>Open to new ideas and techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands tables of figures, able to interpret graphs, able to calculate</td>
<td>Innovative – adapts to new situations</td>
<td>Is prepared to invest time and effort in learning new skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information and communications technology skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Contextual understanding</strong></td>
<td><strong>Personal attributes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is aware of and willing to use a range of technologies</td>
<td>Knows own role in the work situation</td>
<td>Has positive self esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses technology to seek, process, and present information</td>
<td>Understands interrelationships among workplace processes and systems</td>
<td>Understands that own actions influence others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can diagnose systems (process) deficiencies*</td>
<td>Is a self-manager, resourceful, shows initiative and effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can design, implement, and monitor corrective actions*</td>
<td>Displays sense of ethics including integrity and honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organisational skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Interpersonal skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Communicates goals and targets, engages and enthuses subordinates towards a shared vision</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is able to manage own time and to seek needed resources to complete set tasks</td>
<td>Shows cultural sensitivity</td>
<td>Shows leadership*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets goals and engages others in achieving those goals</td>
<td>Committed to client service</td>
<td>Can develop a strategic vision, set goals, and monitor performance*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishes clear project goals and deliverables*</td>
<td>Able to negotiate</td>
<td>Communicates goals and targets, engages and enthuses subordinates towards a shared vision*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocates people and other resources (e.g. budgets, materials, space) to tasks*</td>
<td>Works well with others, individually and in teams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets time lines and coordinates sub-tasks*</td>
<td>Shows leadership*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is able to adapt resource allocations to cope with contingencies*</td>
<td>Can develop a strategic vision, set goals, and monitor performance*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table D: List of worker skills and attributes taken from Curtis and Mackenzie 2002, p. 51 (* indicates skills expected of an experienced worker).

The Australian Government has overtly emphasised self-motivated and self-funded learning in its Lifelong Learning policies over the past ten
years, whilst also claiming that participation in learning should be universal. However, it has been noted that the ‘emphasis [that] the lifelong learning policy agenda places on individuals’ co financing of their own learning contradicts its stress on lifelong learning as a remedy for social exclusion’ (Watson 2003). This is becoming particularly evident with the widening earnings gap between those at the upper and lower ends of the paid employment spectrum.

The notion of ‘lifelong learning’ has been central to the re-definition of adult and vocational education as a policy tool for achieving the dual purpose of promoting social inclusion and addressing skill shortages since the 1990s. The OECD report *Lifelong Learning for All* (1996b) made the link between lifelong learning and economic productivity, whilst UNESCO (Delors 1996) made the link between lifelong learning and social stability at around the same time. Since then, numerous Australian policy documents have referred to the central principle of lifelong learning (Watson 2003). Whilst it is acknowledged that disadvantaged learners are most commonly motivated to undertake VET in order ‘to upgrade job skills’ (AAACE 1995), studies have found that learners most commonly regarded social and personal factors as the most positive features of learning, regardless of their attitudes towards formal education (ANTA 2000). Lifelong learning has been promoted through policy literature as valuable in itself rather than as a means to an end, partly in order not to build unrealistic expectations and also in recognition that personal and social factors can work as motivations and barriers to VET participation (Watson 2003).

Lifelong learning and continual skill development are considered by the Australian Government to be critical because high-end ‘knowledge workers’ are required for industries which are seen to be expanding, technology is rapidly transforming the workplace, and low levels of education are linked to high rates of unemployment (Watson 2003, p. 13). Yet the overall picture of Australian workers is not necessarily one
wherein there are fewer people working in lower-skilled jobs. Whilst there is a growing number of skilled workers in social and productive services, there is also a growing number of workers in distributive services, primarily retail, and most of these lower-skilled jobs are part-time (ABS 2000).

Watson (2003) points out that those in part-time and casual employment are least likely to have training provided or paid for by their employers, and that workers in the lowest-paid jobs are more likely to pay for their own training. Despite this, VET and lifelong learning policy rhetoric often serves to situate the blame for ‘skill shortages’ at the bottom end of the labour market onto individuals who cannot perform new requisite ‘literacies’ or more generally on the shortfall between industry requirements and numbers of those who possess the qualifications (Black 2004). Indeed, it has been suggested that VET is now ‘positioned within a punitive framework’ that blames learners for the social conditions in which they find themselves (Kell 2006).

The changing discourse on knowledge, skill and literacies for work at the lower end of the economy has contributed to new constructions of worker identity. As identity factors such as age, appearance, ethnicity and gender, as well as attributes such as flexibility, communication skills and eagerness to undergo training are increasingly perceived as critical components of individual job suitability, the VET sector is constructed to play a role in grooming trainees in matters of identity as well as industry knowledge.

For textile workers, the learning which follows from retrenchment incorporates framing new motivations and aspirations for work and accommodating new modes of working, as well as finding new ways of belonging and engaging in new kinds of social relationships. These micro-level identity changes feed into social transformations at the local level, through the reproduction of the work habitus, or system of dispositions.
However, policy agendas shape the potential of vocational education and training to support individual transformative processes. Social inequalities between workers are often further entrenched under new work conditions as new inequalities have come into existence. If VET is to play its role in promoting social inclusion then it must find ways to address such inequalities (TCFUA 2005b; ERC 2006).

The ambivalence of retrenched textile workers towards the current vocational training available, which is further explored in Chapter Five, is not surprising. They are often affected by tensions in the social policy agendas, which determine the relevance of vocational training in their working lives. The VET system attempts to meet changing industry skill requirements of workers on the one hand and increase access to and engagement with learning for disadvantaged groups on the other. Within the context of a competitive system of training delivery, the length, structure, content and effectiveness of courses in terms of skill development and employment outcomes can vary enormously.

Much of the available vocational training promises to provide retrenched older workers with a platform for change, whilst failing to support longer-term strategies for building new social practices, strategies or networks for maintaining employability in an uncertain employment context. As a result, many mature aged workers undergoing high-risk transformations at the most vulnerable end of the ‘new work order’ can often fail to benefit significantly from the VET courses they undergo, despite targeted policy attention to re-skilling (ATEC 2002; Armstrong-Stassen and Templer 2005; TCFUA 2006c).

**New alignments between employment and education**

Chapter One has illustrated that changes in the late-industrial work habitus are both contingent upon, and are brought about through, changes in notions of skills for work. Knowledge, particularly reflexive knowledge is, in a Bourdieuian analysis, the ‘cultural capital’, which is acquired,
recognised and rewarded through hierarchy, status and remuneration in the field of work (Bourdieu et al. 1991). It is one of the key types of capital over which individuals struggle, in order to gain power, status and position as workers. The increasing value placed on vocational education and training combined with the decreasing value attached to the low-skilled jobs they prepare workers for has altered the field in which retrenched textile workers enact this struggle. Additionally, the expense of self-funded training in relation to the remuneration and training support possible in low-skilled industries exacerbates the level of inequality between workers in the new field of work.

Touraine concluded, rightly or wrongly, several decades ago that knowledge would replace capital as a determinant of class structure (Touraine 1971), but it was not predicted that the disjunctions arising within the field of work would result in such a dramatic restructuring of the field of education, as it re-aligned itself with work in the context of an increasingly responsive and fragmented economy (Webb and Wareen 2009).

The knowledge deemed to be of value in the labour market is increasingly enshrined and codified within national education and training policy and qualification frameworks in late-industrial states around the world. Efforts to align the fields of education and work have themselves been frustrated by a number of disjunctions (Evans 2002). Governments have attempted to facilitate a central role for industry in the design of national qualification frameworks and in VET delivery (Evans 2002; Harris et al. 2009). In Australia, Industry Skills Councils and Industry Training Boards advise all levels of government on the content and structure of recognised vocational qualifications. National Training Qualification Frameworks have been developed in many countries, including Australia, in efforts to address differential quality of outcomes arising from multifarious training delivery modes, approaches and course structures (Lankshear 1998).
The framework is designed to enable articulation into higher qualifications in a given field and across into new ones. However, there remain a number of unresolved tensions in both VET policy and national qualification frameworks as they exist (Auerbach 1994; ALNARC 2002). These are critical to the experiences of retrenched, experienced workers at the lower-end of the economy, most of whom exit workplaces without formal qualifications and whose transformations as new workers involve multi-layered and highly social learning processes.

A central argument of this thesis is that current VET policies and programs in Australia do not support the transformative learning processes experienced by many retrenched textile workers as they move out of low-skilled manufacturing jobs. It has been established that there are very real material and social barriers to workers at the lower end of the economy participating in vocational education. For those who do, through programs such as the TCFUA post retrenchment support project, many find little or no connection between their changing work identities and the education and training opportunities available, or between the qualifications they complete and the challenges they face in their new working lives.

Most important of these challenges is the need to become connected to new sources of information, experience, advice and opportunity which are able to support learning and change in an ongoing way. Whilst education and employment policy has focussed on increasing the pool of individual workers in lower paid jobs who can offer industry their flexibility and mobility, vocational training programs have tended to focus on short-term, economic outcomes and have supported those with particular personal attributes, rather than focussing on and supporting the social practices integral to jobs and vocations within the changing economy (Engstrom 2001).
One of the challenges for the VET system is in creating partnerships with industry and enterprises to enable exposure to work practices and work cultures. Fee-for-service training available in certificate-level courses often provides the minimal hours possible. Some courses provide work experience alongside these hours but most do not. The work experience provided may or may not provide trainees with industry connections and relevant skill development. Others must find their own work experience in order to complete their courses, despite the evidence that work experience provides invaluable contextual learning (Boud and Garrick 1999; Guile and Griffiths 2001).

VET policy discourses claim that skill shortages in economies, industries and workplaces have arisen as a result of new knowledge requirements across the economy (DEST 2005; DEEWR 2008; DIIRD 2008b). They assume that these can be addressed through the implementation of a massive increase in post-compulsory education, resulting in an increased number of individuals holding formal qualifications. However, the connection between training, qualifications and relevant skill development for work is by no means clear. This is especially so in relation to retrenched workers emerging from a manufacturing industry and re-entering the growing service sector at the lower-skill end of the economy. The advanced work experience and employability skills of such workers often go unrecognised in the Certificate II and III-level industry qualifications they can access. At the same time, the new learning most critical to their employment outcomes is often inadequate or non-existent within such training courses (Armstrong-Stassen 2005; TCFUA 2006c).

Social inequalities, including those related to connectedness and social networks, together with VET policy which is focussed on the short-term economic needs of industry and employer biases against older workers can render industry qualifications irrelevant for such workers (Cully et al. 2000; Billett and Somerville 2004; Gringart et al. 2005). At the same time,
policy rhetoric continues to imply that the failures of the economy and of workers are the result of skill and qualification deficits.

It has been demonstrated through national training policies and approaches in Europe that the focus of learning and its outcomes in the labour market are greatly influenced by the relational positioning of individual workers, employers, education and training organisations, governments and unions in vocational education and training arrangements. Social partnerships around VET can increase the effectiveness of learning processes, and skill assessment and peer validation of learning outcomes can increase the relevance of qualifications (Young 2002).

In Australia, social partnership approaches to VET are still exceptions found more often in youth and NESB pathways programs than in courses offered to retrenched workers (ERC 2006). Best practice programs in TAFE youth or migrant education, such as those in which social skills, practical knowledge and work experience are combined to maximise employment outcomes, are rarely available to retrenched workers (AMES 2008a; AMES 2008b). Instead, they access entry-level industry courses which typically offer neither recognition of their existing skill base nor support to their specific learning requirements for new work conditions (Catts and Gerbner 2003).

Learner dispositions evolve as individuals navigate their engagement with the new work habitus through practice, and the learning context plays a significant role in shaping the transformative potential for individuals. The learning which takes place in the work environment itself is a critical component of this process. Often what is learned most deeply through formative post retrenchment experiences have a negative and de-motivating effect on workers. Casey (1999) suggests, for example, that globalism has generated ways of working in which a greater level of surveillance is internalised and learned by workers, and that the changed
mindset which comes from this, including a lack of spontaneity and creativity, cannot easily be ‘unlearned’. The ways in which existing learner dispositions, skills and practices are acknowledged and valued within the labour market and in the workplace determine the relevance of training and qualifications.

The potential for workers to transfer their skills from one social context to another depends as much on what knowledge practices are valued in the work context, as they do on individual skill in re-framing their knowledge for the new context. National industry bodies meet regularly with the VET sector to determine the content of industry training packages and to ensure that standards are set in relation to technical skills. Yet there are few policy efforts directed towards the transformation of work cultures at the company level to ensure that responsive and successful learning cultures thrive (Hall et al. 2000).

At the company level, lack of skilfulness often arises when elements within learning cultures work against quality practices and outcomes. Skilful outputs emerge as a result of social thinking and practices at work rather than as a result of individual performance (Gerber 2000; Engstrom 2001). Whilst vocational training may have a role to play in skill development, social thinking is reinforced through social systems. Systems of practice within work teams, companies and whole industries promote particular kinds of work outcomes (Gee 2000; Gerber and Lankshear 2000).

Workplaces and education and training cultures reproduce particular learner dispositions (Colley 2003; Billet and Somerville 2004). Ways of knowing and learning are intrinsically connected to new identity formation and ways of being amongst trainees. In relation to work, learning and knowing are embedded in context-specific social practices, many of which have been subject to the destabilising influence of globalisation.
Skills for work are increasingly constructed in education policy and implementation discourses as abstracted attributes that can be attained and carried around from workplace to workplace by individuals and made available for purchase in the training marketplace. This construction has led to an often fractured relationship between training and employment. In recent years, the increasing need to establish effective learning partnerships between employers, training providers and governments within a competitive framework has presented a conundrum for VET policy makers, employers and educators (Allison et al. 2006).

Skills for work are promoted through the burgeoning education and training market. However, the gap between what is required in the workplace, what employers expect their roles to be in relation to learning, and what can be attained through formal education and training continues to grow (Marginson 1997). As a result, the campaign for ‘lifelong learning’ goes largely ignored by most retrenched manufacturing workers, with qualifications perceived not as a tool which could support strategies for transformation, but as an irrelevance in their engagement with the labour market (TCFUA 2006c).

As skills training is positioned to play a critical role in shaping the ‘vocational habitus’ of workers in the late-industrial economies, the relationships between work, learning and the development of new work dispositions have become the subject of much debate and discussion within the field of education over the past fifteen years. The stalemate regarding the roles of government, industry bodies, training organisations, employers and individuals in supporting skill transformations has entrenched the work/learning disjunction (Harris and Simons 2006). This has had the effect of reinforcing social inequalities between workers in local economies rather than opening up transformative opportunities for individuals or indeed addressing skill shortages.
For many retrenched workers, transformations after retrenchment may actually involve learning to de-skill rather than becoming ‘knowledge workers’ in the new economy (Kalantzis and Harvey 2002). Options for many may be more limited than ever before.

**Defining skill as an identity attribute**

Being smart for post-industrial work will not last long if people are not smart for life as well (Gerber and Lankshear 2000, p. 35).

It is argued that ‘responsive organisations’ are more successful in remaining competitive in the rapidly shifting global economy, and to achieve this, more responsive individuals must be developed for the labour market (Du Gay 2000). The achievement of corporate success within the global marketplace requires a particular suite of practices from workers; practices which are akin to those required in small business, including taking control of ongoing personal learning and career development, time management, regular evaluation and updating of skills in relation to the changing marketplace, self motivation, competitive, drive and self promotion (Gee and Lankshear 1997). Several issues emerge as national education policies, discourses, qualification frameworks and implementation structures incorporate and reflect these definitions of desirable worker skill-sets. Firstly, the intensification of focus on such skills also intensifies the divide between those who already have the advantage of having attained them and those who have not. Secondly, the social reinforcements and supports are not in place for encouragement of these skills amongst those who are disadvantaged. Finally, there is a tendency for those with the fewest resources to support their learning and their change processes to be positioned as those responsible for the failures of the economy and their own worsened circumstances.

Contemporary society can, in every field, be characterised in terms of attempts to shift the balance of risk ‘from the state to the individual, from a social responsibility of risk to an individual one’ (Webb and Warren
2009). VET is no exception to this. The focus on skills as personal attributes rather than social practices supports the establishment of new worker hierarchies at the lower end of the economy based increasingly on fixed personal identity features, which cannot be acquired or which are acquired through informal rather than formal learning. Even where they can be acquired, constructions of skill as personal attributes and aptitudes are reflected in the re-positioning of learning as an individualised process rather than a social practice. Whilst skill development is increasingly constructed as an individual responsibility rather than one shared by work communities, employers, educational organisations and governments collectively, learning processes are likely to favour those whose personality, gender, age, culture and appearance create the immediate impressions which are considered suitable to low-skilled work in distributive or social services.

At present many recently retrenched manufacturing workers are unable to re-enter the manufacturing sector despite their employability skills, industry knowledge and experience in manufacturing work environments. Of 110 Melbourne-based retrenched TCF workers interviewed in a TCFUA survey in 2006, most were looking for work back in the familiar territory of the manufacturing sector, and of those nearly half had been unsuccessful in securing an interview. Most put this down to employer perceptions of their English language skills and lack of specific product experience (TCFUA 2006c, p. 22). Increasingly, employers put a higher premium on specific product knowledge and experience with the particular company or work system, than on ‘generic’ work skills, which would previously have been considered ‘transferable’ (NCVER 2006). The challenge for the VET sector is in determining what, other than attitude and identity, are the core skills that training can usefully impart under these conditions.

Lifelong learning has been an important tool for the promotion of ‘return to learning’ amongst groups of ‘disengaged learners’ and of the benefits of
re-training to both maintain employability and further personal
development (Crossan et al. 2003). The common experience of many
retrenched Feltex workers was that the skills, knowledge and aptitudes
they had were devalued at retrenchment. Re-training to gain low-level
qualifications in the social services sector, in jobs such as retail assistant,
security guard, aged care attendant, cleaner, small business operator or
taxi driver provided many with immediate alternatives, although pay and
conditions were often worse and there fewer options for full-time or
regular working hours.

If ‘skills for life’ are conceptualised along the same continuum as ‘skills for
work’ then literacy and lifelong learning funds might focus on generating
skills for greater civic participation. The process of learning would
‘increase the physical spaces available for people and groups to
meet/exchange ideas/display/perform’ (Hamilton 2002, p. 14). To the
contrary, lifelong learning discourses serve narrowly defined economic
policy objectives, focussing on the domain of work as a discrete field and
on ‘outcomes’ determined by industry regulators and employers. The
literacy skills required for lifelong learning and for work have therefore
been the subject of intensifying educational debate (Farrell 1999; Luke et
al. 2000).

According to the Australian Council for Adult Learning (ACAL) ‘For an
advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is active literacy
that allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think,
create and question in order to participate effectively in society’ (Suda
2002, p. 9). This definition, which grew out of the workplace literacy
movement in the early 1990s, reflects an underlying goal of broad social
participation and engagement, rather than the acquisition of a narrow set
of functional reading and writing skills.

Many of the conceptual battles in relation to learning for work over the
past two decades have been fought within the field of adult literacy and
further education, where educators have considered deeply the kinds of learning and learning support required for individuals to overcome social disadvantage. Both Luke and Castleton distinguish between ‘learning’ and ‘acquisition’ in the process of becoming ‘literate’. Acquisition involves the process of picking things up, subconsciously developing the skill of doing, whilst learning is a more conscious and critical process of reflecting on what is being acquired. According to Luke, both are core skills, as the subject of literacy education will constantly change whilst learning to ‘become literate’ involves mastery of ‘a repertoire of practices’ (Luke et al. 2000, p. 13). Castleton goes further, in saying that this mastery involves ‘not just the need for basic skills, but also an ongoing capability to acquire, extend, merge and exchange these skills throughout a lifetime’ (Castleton 2002, p. 4). ‘Learning to learn’ has become the key subject underpinning foundation education programs, targeting chronically marginalised groups with low labour market participation, such as Indigenous youth, refugee new arrivals, socio-economically deprived and those returning to work after long disengagement from work or formal learning (ERC 2006).

Learning to learn, however, is essentially a social process. New literacies for work, for example, often include familiarities with computerised and electronic processes, but a focus on the social practices around such new technologies is more likely to generate a ‘smart’ workforce. Policy-makers have not distinguished between mastery of technology and ‘the secondary discourses surrounding it, which culminate in efficient and quality outcomes’ (Lankshear 2000, p. 103). Similarly, Farrell reminds us that social practices surrounding new technology require language and ways of using language, in that ‘the contemporary workplace is marked by new social technologies and these … demand new language practices’ (Farrell 2001, p. 5). Whilst the evidence in relation to most part-time, casual and temporary workers suggests that the ‘transformative capacity of the new technologies … has been vastly exaggerated’ (Young 2002, p. 56), and that the main growth industries do not have high training requirements, it is
also true that workers in low-skill jobs who also lack the confidence in moving from one computerised system to another face additional disadvantages.

Increasingly, the field of further education has been charged with the role of re-engaging certain groups with formal education through lifelong learning, in order to enable their ongoing participation in the labour market. The ‘knowledge poor’ are dependent on a re-orientation to learning itself in order to engage with the new work habitus (Gallacher and Crossan 2002, p. 495). Successful re-orientations of this sort are assumed to rest on the ‘repertoire of practices’ referred to by Luke, which learners can re-apply or ‘transfer’ to new learning contexts.

The definition of literacy has widened significantly within adult education and further education programs to incorporate and affirm the multiple ways in which individuals can and do increase their effectiveness in various kinds of social encounters, contexts, and hierarchies. Recent community partnership approaches within further education and vocational education departments in the Victorian TAFE sector have acknowledged the central role of ‘social capital’, including networks and context specific experience in particular industries, in transforming learning experiences into employment opportunities (Allison et al. 2006).

Discourses around ‘core skills’ ‘learning practices’ and ‘literacies’ in relation to work often fail to acknowledge the localised, social contexts in which services, products and ideas are exchanged, valued and created. Lankshear argues that relevant kinds of ‘literacy’ for work need to be deconstructed in relation to the ‘bottom line’ objectives. He argues that workers may have mastered a significant repertoire of ‘secondary discourses’ in becoming highly effective and skilled in their previous work contexts. Introducing new forms of literacy into work places or job roles does not always make workers more effective, although they can often re-define skilful workers as insufficiently ‘skilled’ to do jobs they have done
well for twenty years (Lankshear 2000). On the other hand, whilst learner competence must be demonstrated at the end of a training course, this may still fail to address the core skill requirements for an individual enterprise.

One of the common features of ‘rationalist competency training’ is the view that attributes such as ‘communication skills’ can operate, develop and be assessed independently of the contexts in which they are required (Sandberg 2000, p. 50). Such rationalist approaches neither take individual experience and perception of work into account, nor do they acknowledge the context as part of the equation, and are therefore incapable of ‘capturing the central features of competence’ (Sandberg 2000, p. 50).

Sandberg uses examples of workplaces to demonstrate the ways in which determinations of work competence arise, not from individual attributes in abstraction, but rather on worker understanding of the nature of the work itself. In a work culture that has learning at its core, individual understandings of work are aligned with the shared culture of the enterprise to create increased efficiencies and quality (Sandberg 2000, p. 59). Given the importance of workers’ understandings of the nature of work in the development of collective competence, vocational education might best add value to the skilfulness of work practices through its capacity to engender greater reflexivity amongst employers and workers alike.

If competency for work is constructed as a social rather than an individual attribute, the core skills for work would also be constructed and supported as social in nature. The taxi driver, like one of the retrenched workers, Abdul Mussa, who sees customer relations as the key to his success, will have a different kind of competence than the one who sees only speed and street knowledge. The steel worker, like retrenched Feltex worker John Aleksovic, who sees client expectations as part of the production chain, will have a different kind of competence to the one who
is only concerned with doing his part of the process. The retail employee like retrenched Feltex worker Maria Bizdoaca who understands recruitment, training and networking practices in the local industry, will find it easier to carry her qualifications and life experience into different kinds of enterprises and jobs across the industry.

At present, the VET system does not support workers to develop ways of conceptualising the new social field of work but rather, increasingly defines competence as individual ability to execute discrete tasks. Farrell provides an excellent example of the ways in which the narrow conceptualisation of skill leads to the re-framing of skills within company hierarchies so that women’s skills in particular are de-valued. She discusses the ways in which a textile firm’s new fault management processes have de-contextualised the knowledge embedded in the social practices involved in a quality product, and in doing so, further de-value the complex work of women textile menders at the end of the production chain. Despite the fact that women who work as textile industry ‘menders’ require in-depth knowledge of the whole manufacturing process and the product in order to correctly identify and fix a fault, new language and processes for charting and representing company ‘faults’ has rendered the knowledge of these workers invisible (Farrell 1996).

The naming and recognition of core skill is critical in defining a transformative role for vocational education and training. At present it has a greater tendency to simply confirm the widening social inequalities between workers within the new work habitus.

The Australian field of vocational education

The knowledge-based economy raises fundamental questions about what counts as knowledge and who owns, manages and controls it (Evans 2002, p. 92).
Evans and others have raised fundamental questions about the notion of the ‘knowledge based economy’ (Evans 2002). Others have claimed that the skills and knowledge of workers have already outstripped the requirements of the economy, particularly at the lower paid end of work (Buchanan et al. 2000). There are inherent tensions within the field of education as it currently stands and these are starkly evident in the lives of retrenched manufacturing workers.

In the Bourdieuan analysis, education as a social process tends to act as ‘symbolic violence’, to the extent that it imposes a system of values that favour those in positions of dominance (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Individuals adopt dispositions in relation to a given field; the individual and the field are mutually constitutive and responsive to disruption. This potentially opens up the scope for individual transformations through new learning processes emerging out of events such as retrenchment.

Whilst the problems of focussing on personal attributes rather than social context have been touched upon above, there is an additional consideration, which is that learner dispositions change as the features of personal identity such as age and experience change. With such changes come constantly re-framed and re-valued understandings of past experiences and re-framed aspirations for the future. Personal motivations for learning are not a static feature in the life of an individual worker.

In grappling with the interactions between individual learning paths and the broader context of work, adult education theorists such as Hodkinson and Bloomer (2002), Falk (2002), Martin and Healy (2008), Gallacher and Crossan (2002), Crossan et al. (2003) and Webb and Warren (2009) have referenced and developed Bourdieu’s theories in relation to vocational education and the habitus. They have variously examined the relationship between structure and agency in transformative aspects of learning. Webb and Webb argue that increased instability between the (globalised) habitus and the (localised) field holds out ‘the possibility for personal and social
change’ (Webb and Warren 2009, p. 6). Such change is possible, they argue, through transformations both within the field of work and personal identity.

The degree to which transformative possibilities can be realised in the personal lives of retrenched textile workers is in part determined by their understanding of learning itself and the role of learning in personal change processes. The extent to which patterns can be seen in learner experiences of formal education, in relation to aspects of disposition such as gender and class, is still an under-researched area. Webb and Webb note that the responsiveness of the field of education to real changes in the local work context, and therefore its capacity to reproduce dispositions suited to it, is also not yet well understood (Webb and Warren 2009). In order to understand factors contributing to the transformative power of vocational education, and increase its efficacy, such outstanding questions in relation to both agency and structure in the field of learning for work require more research and detailed policy responses.

Balatti and Falk have theorised that outcomes of learning are largely contingent on the ‘social capital’ which can be generated throughout the learning process. They found that desired outcomes from learning, along with interaction with others and individual ‘identity resources’ inform and generate the social capital critical to outcomes (Balatti and Falk 2002, p. 286). It has been found in other studies that for adult learning to be considered necessary or effective by retrenched workers, the outcome must be seen to have a realistic relationship to employment outcomes (Virgona et al. 2003). However, workers who want an employment outcome may or may not have a critical understanding of how training works to increase the likelihood of employment. Elements such as interaction with other trainees and trainers for example, may be overlooked as a resource.
Crossan et al. found that individual choices and ‘learning careers’ are often contingent on the interaction between identity, life experience and work availability. They provide an example from their research, wherein a blue-collar, semi-skilled male labourer, retrenched in his fifties, assesses the ideals of ‘lifelong learning’ as having little relevance for him. Despite his respect for education, he has concluded that the qualifications available to him would carry little weight in the labour market and would therefore not increase his resources (Crossan et al. 2003). It could be that the power of formal learning is most often realised when learner disposition, identity features and aspiration are aligned with the classed, gendered and otherwise socially constructed features of jobs within the work hierarchy. The question for VET in that case is whether a more transformative role is possible.

For some individuals, identity factors, aspiration and opportunity do come together through vocational education experiences to generate new social capital and new opportunities. They may develop new life goals or worker dispositions as they ‘become’ their new working identity through the learning process. Learning can be a deliberate or accidental process of ‘becoming’, linked intrinsically with the transformation of identity. Colley et al. built upon Bourdieu’s theory to develop the concept of a ‘vocational habitus’, which reinforces and develops pre-dispositions in line with the system of dispositions favourable to a particular industry. They found that students studying for the Certificate in Aged Care, for example, can develop both a ‘sense’ and ‘sensibility’ for emotional labour through their exposure to the industry as a trainee (Colley et al. 2003).

Worker identity transformations through VET are generated through acculturation into sets of values, practices, role models and social performance, which are both gendered and classed. Colley et al. posit that lifelong learning policy needs to ‘focus as much on individual agency as on the social press to which individuals are subjected’ (Colley et al. 2003, p. 309). They refer to ‘identity work’ as the central subject of vocational
education, in which individuals are ‘oriented to’ a vocational habitus. Their research also indicates that vocational orientations are both classed and gendered to reproduce social inequalities amongst individual graduates and ultimately within local labour markets.

Whilst dispositions are cultivated and social inequalities reproduced through the values and practices inculcated in some vocational courses, there are often unintended learning benefits to be gained for individuals embarking on formal learning. Some of these may include individual experience with experimentation, practice bearing disappointments and learning from failures. There may even be benefits that individuals gain from reconstructing themselves positively over the course of a lifelong learning ‘career’ (Colley et al. 2003, p. 15). The concept of a learning ‘career’ is useful to help contextualise the experiences of retrenched Feltex workers in their first few years after retrenchment. The concept was framed first by Hodkinson and Bloomer (2002) and can be used to consider changing adult learner motivations, experiences and outcomes from formal education. This concept is taken up in the analysis of narratives in Chapter Five.

Whilst the orientation of an individual’s ‘learning career’ is shaped by an empirical context, learners are also, as agents in the process, actively involved in re-negotiations of their identities. The tension between the concept of learner agency and that of structural limitations is in part resolved through the concept of a learning career. Over the course of a learning career, learners are situated within networks of personal and structural relations at any given point in their lives. The ways in which choice and agency are shaped within these relations challenge discourses around VET’s central role in career progression.

There is little research available regarding the participation patterns of potential adult learners, such as groups of retrenched manufacturing workers. From my research, however, it is clear that individuals from this
group were able to generate new learning and working aspirations as well as the imaginative and social resources required for changing social milieus. The possibilities for this kind of change, according to Gallacher and Crossan, have arisen within the late modern habitus, through the uncoupling of ‘relatively static characteristics as social class and gender from style of life and consumer aspirations’ (Gallacher and Crossan 2002, p. 497). However, it is not clear that the changes in the field of work or education have enabled retrenched machine operators to develop the resources to move out of low-skilled, low paid and insecure jobs.

One of the changes in recent years is that the Further Education (FE) sector, traditionally focussed exclusively on providing ‘foundation skills’ education for marginalised adult learners in non traditional learning contexts, has become increasingly aligned with and integrated into a skills for work agenda. It has been challenged to reach out to those on the margins and bring them closer to the labour market through learning, including those who ‘may feel unsure of their potential to learn or may even reject entirely the seductive allure of the learning society’ (Gallacher and Crossan 2002, p. 496). General education courses such as those offered to retrenched machine operators from Feltex provided a bridge for the (mainly female) workers who lacked the confidence to move into new vocational areas.

However, those workers who are marginalised in the labour market cannot necessarily be rescued from the margins through engagement with formal learning. Policy rhetoric around general education and vocational qualifications positions formal learning as essential for individual self-improvement and expression of national duty in relation to the skills crisis. Bourdieu’s notion that individuals improvise within a limited field of possibilities within the habitus ‘contrasts sharply with dominant policy articulations of choice as co-terminus with equality of opportunity’ (Webb and Warren 2009, p. 14). Whilst retrenched workers may exercise agency as learners, this very agency has personal, political, historical and social
dimensions. Adult learners are often negotiating changes and transformations around which there is a limited process of deliberate decision making. In this sense, learner agency can be seen to play a limited role in the transformations taking place in their lives.

Apart from the interrelationships between multiple contextual factors in determining opportunity, motivation and disposition, the ‘careers’ of tentative new adult learners also depend on how their self-perceptions as learners develop and change. This takes place in numerous ways as individuals acculturate themselves to work. Lave and Wegner’s ideas of learning through ‘communities of practice’ in the workplace help to situate retrenched workers who enter new work and training situations as engaging in legitimate but ‘peripheral’ participation (Lave and Wenger 1991 p. 47). Such participation, as a learning experience, enables them to minimise the risks whilst engaging in transition from one social milieu to another (Lave and Wegner 1991; Gallacher and Crossan 2002).

The ability to experiment with and practise new identities is critical for those who are reinventing themselves after a turning point in their lives. Vesna’s experience in completing multiple courses and testing out jobs in customer service and the hospitality industry, for example, was critical to her realisation that she preferred the option of returning to the more predictable work environment of a warehouse. The ‘status passages’ (Lave and Wegner 1991) brought about through divorce, retrenchment, or some other life-altering event that changes status and social identity, trigger a range of personal transformations. As discussed in Part Two of this thesis, opportunities through new learning at work led the retrenched workers to aspire to move from one ‘social milieu’ to another. Their narratives are resonant with their efforts to seek out the support for this process. For some, however, such opportunities did not arise.

Learning as a social practice is interactive, in that workers and workplaces engage in a process which builds working culture. Learning frameworks
based on atomised notions of workers as learners who are disembedded from this process fail to take into account the ways in which social and individual transformation takes place. For example, Billett and Somerville examine the ways that workplaces generate learning cultures in which social roles and values are imparted to workers in highly gendered ways. However, they also demonstrate the potential for individual agency to transform the social context and the workplace itself. They conclude, for example, that individuals can and do ‘elect to appropriate, transform or ignore’ social suggestion when it comes to constructions of competitive, masculine or unsafe work practices, such as those found within the coal-mining industry (Billett and Somerville 2004, p. 313). In the same way, worker engagement with work culture informs individual identity on many levels. Workers in aged care were found, in Billet and Somerville’s study, to adopt ‘caring dispositions’ as their commitment to the work developed (2004). They concluded that individual sense of self and identity informs the ways in which individuals learn to ‘become’ workers, and that further, identity is informed by this learning process.

Resistance to adopting new values and to learning new ways of working may determine the sense of ambivalence many workers experience as they move into new industries or job roles. The requirement of workers to accept the conditions of their work does not necessarily lead to ‘unquestioned appropriation or socialization’ of the values and dispositions within them (Billett and Somerville 2004, p. 317). However, whilst resistance may constitute an exercise of agency, it does not necessarily improve job outcomes or enable workers to have an impact on the work cultures they enter.

There continue to be inadequate frameworks for examining the relationships between structures (such as local economies, policies and training organisations), learner agency, and the nature of the ‘vocational habitus’ in which worker dispositions are ordered. Some researchers ask why, for example, the required ‘vocational habitus’ for some sectors, such
as aged care, seems to have remained static, without appearing to reflect major shifts in policy, such as those favouring privatisation and efficiencies since the early 1990s (Webb and Warren 2009). Their questioning of the ways in which structure and learner agency interact in lower-paid industries are of critical importance to research which investigates the role of the VET system in a transformative social process. Within the human-care industries, the emergence of a new ‘vocational habitus’ may be contingent upon policy and social transformations that reposition the work of women and the work of care. Similarly, the ‘vocational habitus’ required by transport workers and cleaners may not have altered significantly despite radical changes in the economic re-structuring of these kinds of jobs.

Learning for work is situated within a fluid and rapidly transforming field, although in practice the relationship between economic transformations and the work habitus is uneven. Not all fields are transforming rapidly, nor is learning always undertaken by individuals wishing to undergo vocational transformations, despite the turning points they have experienced and aspirations for the future they may hold. In addition, training organisations are required to become responsive to changing demands for skills from industry bodies and employers without necessarily taking into consideration the aspirations of learners to move into different social milieus. The ability of VET to address the latter may determine the degree to which it can play a transformative role at the lower end of the economy. VET is charged with a critical role to support learning for work in a changing work habitus. However, it has increasingly focussed on economic outcomes without reference to the social transformations involved.

Notions of ‘choice’ and ‘agency’ in policy discourses around education and training can downplay the role of the state in shaping individual dispositions towards learning (Owen et al. 2009). Personal transformation and economic outcomes have become increasingly co-terminus within
recent educational policy discourse. Meanwhile, the opportunity for individuals to develop greater reflexivity through educational and labour market opportunities can arise as they undergo critical life changes. Unless formal learning is contextualised as part of a broader social policy project, its influence on economic and personal transformative process remains, at best, uneven.

Resources are differently available to individuals, and there are also differences in how individuals can make use of and benefit from them (Webb and Warren 2009, p. 14). Whilst ‘status passages’ brought about through retrenchment may give rise to changes in self-perception and personal identity (Crossan et al. 2003, p. 56), such transformations may not be supported through formal learning at the critical moments or in the relevant context. In addition, retrenched workers with few positive experiences of formal education may bring with them non-linear approaches to learning. For many, the ‘desired outcomes’ of formal learning, upon which critical ‘social capital’ is built, must also be understood as fluid and unstable (Balatti and Falk 2002). Under such circumstances, learning support would need to be built into the many contexts of daily life in ways that reinforce the practices of self-motivation, entrepreneurship, broad social networking and reflexive self-knowledge.

Finally, the learning that might lead to skilful practice is heavily modulated by management and workplace culture. Chapter One has demonstrated that the culture and practices within workplaces are also shaped by company responses to broader social and economic transformations. Farrell and others have shown that constructions of the ideal post-Fordist workplace, wherein workers are more autonomous, does not necessarily lead to work transformations for those whose positions in the new work order are neither valued nor considered skilful. Whilst trainers and educators are sometimes specifically brought into workplaces to ‘promote new literacy practices and new values and dispositions of the global workplace’ (Farrell 1998, p. 3), this does not
necessarily lead to a move away from an older model of ‘persistent and enduring structures of privilege’ (Farrell 1998, p. 3).

Farrell also notes that shifts to textually mediated and more technologically sophisticated work modes may result for some workers in the entrenchment of ‘peer and self surveillance’ rather than more reflexive and holistic work practices.

Adult education theorists in the 1990s linked broad-based adult education with the widening of social space for civic participation. It was hoped that a broader educational process would enable people to ‘minimise the fear of change and combat the fatalism that arises when globalisation is treated as a juggernaut’ (Holton 1997, p. 169). Whilst current government rhetoric exhorts older workers to re-skill in order to both play a continuing role in Australia’s new ‘knowledge economy’, the re-valuing of ‘core skills’ for work is a contested, but inherently gendered and classed process which reproduces social inequities along re-organised lines.

**VET policy and practice**

Arguably the most pressing issue for VET policy-makers is simply this: how to reconcile the imperatives of skill creation for ‘leading edge’ sectors with equipping the mass of the workforce with the appropriate skills to find decent employment. (Buchanan et al. 2000, p. 5)

Bourdieu suggests that widening access to post compulsory education has simply led to the introduction of more sophisticated barriers and boundaries within the field of education. Such barriers are designed to maintain both the relative economic positions of vocational fields and the social position of those undertaking vocational courses (Bourdieu 1990).

Gerber and Lankshear claim that as late-industrial governments turn policy attention to the ‘splintering of society’ they have focussed too narrowly on economics. Current education discourses have not yet started to reflect a broader focus (Gerber and Lankshear 2000). It has been noted
that educational policy has more overtly aligned itself with narrow economic objectives since 2002. Gee and Lankshear observe that ‘capitalist texts’ have become overt in equating ‘excellence’ in education with productivity in the new work order. Such texts have ‘served, like a magnet, to attract and change the shape of educational debates in the “developed” world’ (Gee and Lankshear 1997, p. 87). These and other commentators also observe that, despite the rhetoric that liberation from dehumanising work will flow from the new ‘knowledge economy’, the growing number of casual, part-time and temporary workers with no ‘value added’ knowledge to sell are open to ‘deep exploitation’ by employers (Gee and Lankshear 1997, p. 89).

Access to increased employment opportunity through vocational training assumes a ‘level playing field’ although it remains true that those most likely to benefit within the altered economic conditions are still those who bear the characteristics of success under previous conditions. If there is transformative potential for retrenched workers undergoing formal training it would rely on their capacity to re-frame their existing dispositions in order to move between jobs at the lower end of the economy, and to build their employability as broadly as possible through new networks of influence.

Recent policy discourses and frameworks in relation to skill-sets for work have situated blame for competitive failings in the economy onto ‘skill shortages’ across the whole economy (Kosky 2005). Retrenched workers who had dispositions and the attendant social networks deemed suitable for particular jobs and industries were often able to find work opportunities in those areas without qualifications. For those wanting to enter new jobs and industries without these, training and qualifications proved of little service. The subsequent gap between policy and practice in relation to training as a means to generating generic or transferable skills raises significant challenges for the VET system.
Since the late 1990s, communication and literacy skills and generic work competencies have assumed centre stage in policy discourse around skills for work as well as in the structure of vocational qualifications. Whilst there are potentially positive outcomes from this in relation to access and participation these gains are ultimately determined by approaches taken to delivery and assessment of ‘competencies’. If work competencies are developed, as Sandberg suggests, through broad and deep socialising and acculturating processes at work (Sandberg 2000), this raises questions about how casual and transient employees can be brought into learning processes.

Kusterer argued several decades ago that Braverman’s category of ‘unskilled’ worker creates an artificial divide between the mind and the hand. Workers always learn and practice the working knowledge required through engagement with the work (Kusterer 1978). What workers in lower paid jobs often learn is that by contrast to the past, depth and quality can be less valuable than speed, and individual inputs at work are not subject to peer support and learning but rather various forms of management surveillance (Virgona et al. 2003).

VET policy has made use of particular definitions of skill to determine core competencies within vocational training. Notions of ‘literacy’ have been integrated into these definitions. One of the difficulties with determining what kind of ‘literacy’ is required in an industry is that competencies can confuse de-contextualised performance ability in writing, form filling or computer software with the kinds of applied working knowledge that informs skilful social practice. Another difficulty with ‘literacy’ definitions within VET policy is that they often support government discourses which position ‘literacy’ itself as both problem and solution, rather than addressing the work cultures in which literacies are required.
In 1995 the International Adult Literacy Survey used what is now considered by many adult educators to be a narrow definition of literacy, as ‘a particular skill, namely the ability to understand and use printed information in day to day activities, at home, at work and in the community’ (OECD 1995, p. 13). Using this definition, the first Australian Literacy Survey (ALS) found that almost half the adult population in Australia can be expected to have ‘difficulty coping with the information processing demands of everyday life’ (OECD 1998). Nearly half the surveyed non-English speaking background population and fourteen per cent of surveyed English speaking background population were found to be at the lowest level of literacy. However, Figgis has argued that, despite statistics pointing to forty per cent of people having low levels of literacy in Australia, this ‘doesn’t correspond to most people’s experience of the world’ (2004, p. 17). According to Figgis, most Australians do not see workplace communication and problem-solving in terms of ‘literacy’. Problem solving, knowledge building and improving ways of working are practices that are carried out in workplace teams regardless of the level of print literacy of individuals.

Broader definitions of literacy have, since then, started to appear in policy discourses. These are less prescriptive, but play a clear role in linking lifelong learning with the twin notions of economic prosperity and social justice. The 2002 Ministerial Statement on Adult Community Education seamlessly links the two in the following way: ‘Communicating and relating effectively, reasoning, problem solving, and decision making – often in a variety of cultural contexts – are skills that we all will need if we are to enjoy productive and rewarding lives in an educated and just society’ (MCEETYA 2002). The individual and the national good are also effectively bound together in policy statements around the acquisition of literacy: ‘Our capacity to innovate and learn will drive our future economic and social progress … [A]cquiring basic literacy and numeracy
remains the foundation for further learning and for participation in a complex society’ (MCEETYA 2002).

Such policy statements convey the notion that individuals will be contributing to both their own personal benefit and the economic position of the nation by acquiring basic literacy and numeracy. However, social partnerships necessary to the creation of a skilful workforce are not mentioned. They do appear as pre-requisites for applications for government VET funding and yet the competitive funding environment generates an irresolvable tension in the market that actively works against cooperative approaches to training delivery (AMES 2008a).

The political usages of ‘basic literacy’ in policy discourses around skill are examined in Kelly’s critique of previous Australian government employment policy (Kelly 2001). She points out that during the late 1990s the Howard government consistently linked poor individual performance in the economy with low levels of print literacy, ignoring broader definitions of literacy. However, at the time, the OECD literacy survey found that the incidence of those unemployed who fall into the lowest literacy classifications was more closely related to the ‘capacity of the economies to create and sustain employment opportunities for those with low-skills’ than to literacy (Kelly 2001, p. 49). In contrast to the government rhetoric, Kelly found that unemployed Australians at the time more commonly blamed the lack of available full-time jobs for their unemployment, rather than their literacy or education levels (2001, p. 33).

In the mid to late ’90s, the skills for work agenda started to focus increasingly on a mix of company-based and individualised training options. However, these efforts did not position employers within social partnerships, and focussed on narrow notions of skill acquisition, geared to limited and specific economic outcomes for the company (Marginson 1997). The policy rhetoric around work skills has increasingly shifted blame for unemployment onto individuals, pushed further to the margins
of the labour market by the new ‘rules of the game’. Both Young (2002) and Black (2002) point out that, despite government rhetoric about the need for a more literate workforce, most new jobs are predicted to open up in low paid service and retail sectors and that ‘many of these jobs will involve repetitive and deskill ed textual competence’ (Black 2004, p. 12). Geraldine Castleton agrees that ‘the depiction of workers’ limited literacy skills as a prevailing cause of nations’ poor economic performance has become a popular discourse on the role of literacy at work’ (Castleton 2003, p. 9), and blames the ‘organisational context’ rather than the individual for skill shortages. Regarding government rhetoric around lost productivity, Black claims that ‘it is these economic conditions that cause literacy and numeracy problems’ (Black 2004, p. 14), rather than the other way around.

Policy discourses that focus on individual language, literacy or employability ‘deficits’ that retrenched textile workers bring with them into unemployment fail to pay attention to the social deficits that surround their transformations. Much of the current workplace education research concludes that innovation and effective communication are stimulated by workplace and institutional cultures, regardless of the individual literacy levels of individuals. In describing skills enacted in workplaces, literacy experts emphasise the importance of membership and belonging to the enacting of judgement, and that ‘through judgement in real work situations they [workers] enact the skills, knowledge and dispositional behaviours appropriate to the situation. Judgement is strongly linked to ... membership, values, belonging and identity’ (Waterhouse and Virgona 2004, p. 21).

Significantly, policy discourses on employment, education and training set out to influence not only dominant definitions of skill for work, but also the way in which skill can be meaningfully demonstrated and socially recognised.
In recent years the issue of skilling and re-skilling for work has become a central policy platform for both state and federal governments. ‘Skills for the Future’ was a federal government initiative which introduced ‘Work Skills Vouchers’ in 2006. These enabled unemployed workers over the age of twenty-five to complete a Certificate II-level qualification at any training organisation they chose. Following on from the 2006 Liberal government VET policy document Skills for the Future, in 2008 the Labor government released a discussion paper, Skilling Australia for the Future. Whilst this discussion paper had as its goal the creation of 450,000 additional vocational education and training places nation wide, it has been acknowledged, even within industry bodies, that ‘simply offering training places is no guarantee of actual uptake by those at which they are aimed’ (Industry Skills Council 2008, p. 2). The Australian Industry Skills Council (ISC) suggests the development of a set of ‘value propositions’, which appeal to the ‘ideals and business needs of enterprises and the workforce’ in order to convince the population of the value of training (ISC 2008, p. 2).

In the same year the Office of Training and Technical Education (OTTE), once situated under the umbrella of the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) underwent an identity transformation of its own. Not only was it renamed ‘Skills Victoria’, but the office was moved into the Department of Industry Innovation and Regional Development (DIIRD). To confirm its re-focussed role in relation to work and its uncoupling with education itself, Skills Victoria then released a discussion paper firmly positioning vocational education and training as an instrument for securing the state of Victoria’s economic future. The paper, Securing our Future Economic Prosperity (DIIRD 2008), proposed a more competitive model of training delivery and a restructured set of VET training fees which reflected the economic benefits likely to accrue to individuals undertaking particular qualifications. The paper attracted a large number of submissions from Industry Skills Councils (ISCs),
employers, Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes, Higher Education (HE) institutions and social welfare organisations.

Whilst the Foreword of this paper re-states the dual role of VET as a driver of economic prosperity as well as social participation, it abandons the latter focus thereafter. The policy message is clear – that businesses have difficulties ‘finding the people they need’ and that this problem can be resolved by higher numbers of individuals undertaking education and training to attain entry level qualifications and upgrading existing qualifications (DIIRD 2008b). Meeting the ‘shortfall’ of 123,000 diplomas and advanced diplomas across the state was identified as the target of Victoria’s VET sector in the ensuing five years.

Adult Migrant Education Services (AMES) argues that for workers in low-skill jobs, for whom access to employment generally takes place through non-linear and opportunistic rather than planned approaches, the completion of whole certificates prior to entry should be less important than continuous learning and skill recognition whilst in employment, so that workers are not ‘consigned to low-skilled employment in the long term’ (AMES 2008, p. 14). AMES proposes that to more effectively link individual and business training choices with future economic needs the Australian Government should re-focus skills training on a broader systemic level, ‘distinguishing skills that are in growing demand from those in declining demand’ (AMES 2008, p. 21). This would involve an analysis of the pattern of skills within the economy that are in greatest demand, rather than a broad reference to the need for all workers to acquire a set of ‘basic’ skills through entry level vocational qualifications.

The 2008 federal government focus and investment in VET qualifications for trades has been accused of being actively at odds with the changing share of jobs available across the labour market. Construction, for example, is the main industry in which demand for skilled tradespeople
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has increased, although an increased demand for 105,749 tradespeople nationwide is arguably dwarfed by the increased demand for an additional 439,000 professionals in white-collar professions during the same period (Birrell et al. 2008). Whilst this argument highlights the fact that the focus of education investment in Australia has lacked specificity, it fails to highlight the need for new kinds of educational investments to address the learning needs of workers in the rapidly growing low-skilled, low paid jobs in the services sector.

The Victorian government exhortation for all individuals to complete a post school qualification because ‘[t]he impact of skills shortages is … felt right across the Victorian economy with flow-on effects for Victorian families’ (DIIRD 2008a, p. 8) disguises a more nuanced reality. Technical skill shortages are experienced in particular pockets of the economy. In addition, at the lower end of the economy, where the number of part-time and casual jobs are increasing, a Certificate in Aged Care or a Diploma in Retail Studies are now significantly more expensive in Victoria, particularly for those who are entering re-training after having attained a diploma in another area. Young points out that ‘[t]hose who attain level 5 in the framework have rarely done so from the lower rungs up’ (Young 2002 p. 57). Instead, adult learners entering training at the top of the qualifications framework have usually transferred over from another higher level qualification. The government decision to increase fees to more than twice their previous levels for those moving to lower qualifications has already had a significant negative impact on enrolments in TAFE, as can be seen by the initial drop in diploma level enrolments in 2010 (Tomazin 2010).

In Australian VET policy discourses, a range of ‘individual’ barriers are blamed for low participation in training amongst some groups, including ‘attitudinal barriers, lack of desire for skilled work, learning ability and learning style’ as well as ‘employer attitudes, access issues, negative past experiences, locating entry points, finances’ (DIIRD 2008a, p. 11). The
socially constructed space, which includes policy-makers and industrial parties, communities and employers, is often absent from the exposition of the participation problem or its policy solutions.

Buchanan et al. argue that Australian policymakers have had to move beyond the ‘impossible dream’ of the ‘high skills economy’ and advocate that instead, the Government now faces the challenge of managing a ‘diverse bundle of skill ecosystems’ (Buchanan et al. 2001, p. 2). The term ‘skill ecosystems’ reflects a context-specific notion of skill sets, in which the work environment itself and the employer play defining roles.

Apart from providing technical skills in a band of skill shortage areas, VET as a system may have a broad role to play in the provision of support to the changing ‘skill ecosystems’. Whilst Wooden et al. found that ‘training of older persons should be subsidiary to helping them secure employment’ (Wooden et al. 2001, pp. 238–9), re-employment is often contingent on the person’s perceived ability to transfer skills from previous employment to new work contexts. Virgona et al. found, in their study of displaced workers, that this process was highly dependent on individual capacity for self advocacy and ‘entrepreneurial consciousness’ as well as financial and career planning (Virgona et al. 2003, p. 10). Payne identified the questionable engagement of VET in ‘grooming for employment’ through personal ‘makeovers’ in identity aspects of appearance, speech and presentation (Payne 2000, p. 361). Whilst the prospect of this kind of blatant social engineering raises more issues than can be dealt with in this thesis, there is something to be said about vocational education providing opportunities for workers to develop a greater level of reflexivity on matters of identity and the new conditions of work.

The skills and understandings associated with resilience under new conditions are often those which enable them to ‘embrace … competitive work relationships and concepts of personal entrepreneurship’ (Virgona et
al. 2003, p. 42). For displaced experienced workers, the price of this is often too high. Many are not prepared to compromise their values to get a job or are reluctant to ‘play the game’ (Virgona et al. 2003, p. 44). Many displaced workers are also left with the sense that within new work culture the appearance of loyalty is more important than teamwork, and the skills involved in doing things well are no longer valued.

This raises one of the challenges for VET policy makers, which is that employers in the low-skill end of the economy tend to define the generic work skills of their employees in narrow and simplistic ways. Despite employer expectations of clever employees who can demonstrate problem solving and teamwork (Townsend and Waterhouse 2008), employers are often more concerned with recent product knowledge than process awareness. The generic employability skills which workers can carry with them from job to job must be gained somewhere.

Adult education research has demonstrated that only once initial economic needs are secured, can most people take advantage of opportunities for continued learning (Catts, et al. 2003, p. 5). In efforts to meet the nuances of skill requirements, the context for the delivery of VET has expanded to include workplaces. Whilst VET practitioners within industry contexts may have the scope to influence workplace learning cultures (Harris and Simons 2006, p. 489), they may still fail to reward or recognise the deeper knowledge or skill of workers at the bottom of the chain. In reality, the embodied knowledge of workers in many contexts is ‘rarely viewed as authoritative anywhere but on the shop floor’ (Farrell 1998 p. 3). Employers have, in some instances, embraced a continuous learning agenda. However, although workplaces may position learning discourses at the centre of their operations, ‘the harsh reality … means that the rhetoric is not even an aspiration for many organisations’ (Evans et al. 2002, p. 11). Many efforts to use VET to address skill shortages at the enterprise level can tend to merely reproduce existing workplace cultures and further entrench the existing hierarchy of dispositions within them.
The individual possession of ‘bargaining power and status’ in society (Evans 2002, p. 24) remains a determinant of social mobility and employability. The ageing of the Australian workforce has generated some policy attention to finding better strategies for population re-skilling. Even at current levels of participation, the ABS predicts that ‘80 percent of the growth in the Australian labour force in the year 2016 will be among people aged over 45’ (Catts, et al. 2003, p. 1). At the last census, the forty-five to sixty-four year age group accounted for almost one-third of the working population (Mission Australia 2004). However, according to Mission Australia, ‘older workers are still more likely than other unemployed people to experience lengthy periods of unemployment and marginal labour force attachment’, and older workers are still perceived by many employers as ‘over cautious, unable to adjust to new technology, inflexible, and prone to uneasy relations with younger managers’ (Mission Australia 2004).

Policy approaches to the provision of VET have included the reconfiguration of literacy and foundation education as a stepping stone to employability and the realignment of vocational education provision with employment rather than education policy structures. The restructuring of vocational certificates so that employers are central in the identification of skills and workplaces have become delivery sites for training packages has not necessarily led to well targeted vocational learning options. The Australian Government recognises that there are now insufficient workers with the minimal qualifications to move into the great number of new skilled jobs in trades and white-collar professions. For workers leaving low-skill jobs in manufacturing and hoping to enter a range of jobs in the service industries, there are a number of barriers to accessing the necessary support to their transformations. For them, the critical personal attributes which define the required dispositions of casual-workers, particularly those in service industries are rarely supported, rewarded or otherwise reflected in the context of work and training.
The qualifications system

Qualification frameworks have been universally adopted across the English-speaking world to facilitate the upgrading of work skills in the working population. Young notes that neither German-speaking nor Nordic countries have taken this approach (Young 2002). There is yet to be an assessment of the link between the existence of a qualification framework and the amount of learning that is taking place.

With the common mismatch between skills identified in industry certificates and the requirements and practices of workplaces, the nature of the learning which is taking place through VET and also that which could possibly take place needs closer examination. Only a few VET certificates have been found by graduates to result in employment within the relevant industry. In addition, with notably few exceptions, it has been found that the absorption of ‘generic skill’ components of VET courses, rather than technical skills, are likely to have more impact on employment results (Karmel et al. 2008).

In Australia then, as in the European Union, VET’s social role is brought into tension with its economic role. Those students with social advantage are likely to be those able to take best advantage of training opportunities. Indeed some researchers ask whether the direct linking of VET to the labour market actually leads to increases in social inequity. Young found that addressing the re-skilling needs of retrenched and older workers is hampered by ‘fragmented approaches across sectors’ in the delivery of training guidance (Young 2002, p. 13).

According to the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER), the needs of older workers are becoming an urgent policy priority in the European Union. As a counter to the ‘deficit approach’ towards older workers, work-based learning, which focuses on providing support to worker mobility, has been found to produce better re-employment results after retrenchment. Harris et al. provide examples of
training models in the Netherlands, where collective agreements in the workplace enshrine the right to training and in Hungary, where close contact with mentors is used to support older retrenched workers in new work situations (Harris et al. 2009, p. 26). Neo-liberal education and employment models in countries such as Australia continue to situate lifelong learning as the responsibility of the individual, rather than contextualising it within social partnerships.

In Australia, vocational qualifications are not subjected to credibility testing and agreement across the educational community as they are in some other countries such as Germany. These issues generate tensions in the relationship between VET training and skills outcomes (Young 2002).

The content of VET training is often problematic, particularly in relation to recognition of workers’ communication skills. The real levels of social skill required by workers in their jobs do not necessarily fall in line with their overall skill classification. Core training competencies in relation to processing information, team-work, dealing with novel situations, and problem-solving are set within industry training packages in order to develop higher order communication skills for higher level job classifications. However, complex communication skills are commonly found amongst workers in both low and high skill classifications (Evans 2002, p. 84). Segmenting communication processes according to band classification is a failed approach to integrating communication as a core competency into training packages.

Equity and access issues continue to thwart the capacity for VET to improve the life chances of retrenched workers. This conundrum is difficult for the system to address through formal recognition of skills gained in non-formal learning environments. Formal recognition of ‘tacit skills’ such as those developed through life experience or within domestic roles will not necessarily broaden access to work opportunities. Firstly, it has been demonstrated in Chapter One that tacit skills are differently
valued depending on their gender classification. In addition, individuals who can best articulate and market their skills are those most likely to have them recognised. This automatically advantages those who are already aware of the value of their skills and who have the social networks required to market them.

The March 2004 Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) newsletter stated that ‘the Australian Government wants more Australians in work, not just so they are engaged in productive activities and not just for the financial rewards, but because having a job is fundamental to a person’s sense of worth and dignity’ (DEWR 2004). What is not acknowledged is that, for many retrenched workers, their new working lives may not heighten, but in some cases reduce their sense of skilfulness and self-worth.

It has been remarked that Australian government policy attention should be redirected to support workers in vulnerable industries and ‘to the ways in which their previous lives enable and constrain their dispositions to current learning and work and to the problems of learning for the future which may well be outside the firm where they are currently employed’ (Rainbird 2002, p. 235). This section has demonstrated the many ways in which worker knowledge and skills, being context dependent, are inadequately recognised through a hierarchical skills framework. A new approach to skill identification, skill development, and competence assessment for work would involve more integrated and responsible partnerships. These would ideally extend beyond the immediate job, employer and workplace and encompass broad agreements and approaches to the development of a learning society. In such partnerships, employers and governments would be share the responsibility with workers for generating processes and environments which promote skilfulness, motivation and flexibility. This approach, however, runs counter to current policy discourses (Engstrom 2001). At present it is
individual Australian workers who carry the burden of becoming skilful and employable within the new work habitus.

Conclusion

Chapter Two provides a discussion of the policy discourses which have re-framed both learner and learning within the new work habitus, and of tensions which have compromised its potential to support social and individual transformations. It demonstrates that whilst vocational education and training has been positioned as a key form of support to retrenched textile workers in Australia, it has a questionable role in building the skills to support current social and economic transitions at the national level.

In an effort to define an effective role for VET, skill frameworks within OECD countries have attempted to summarise the kinds of skills and therefore learning required of workers in the new economy. These frameworks include inter-personal skills and even personal attributes relating to self-esteem and openness to change as integral characteristics of a skilful worker. The tensions which have arisen in the implementation of these frameworks in Australia have generated an often frustrating context within which retrenched workers learn.

Firstly the role of VET in developing personal attributes, generic skills or literacy for work, has been highly contested. Secondly, in the Australian context, lifelong learning discourses have framed continuous vocational education as the obligation of all individuals wanting to maintain productive working lives. At the same time it is increasingly recognised that participation rates are low amongst certain groups, that educationally marginalised individuals come to VET with different expectations and outcomes in mind, and that certain kinds of workers have lower access to both training and learning-on-the-job opportunities because of their part-
time or casual work status. Thirdly, whilst it has been widely agreed that skills for work evolve through individual engagement with social contexts, narrow constructions of skills and aptitudes for work on the part of employers often lead to workers sensing that their new jobs are less skilful, autonomous and responsible than their previous jobs.

Post retrenchment training programs are generally not based on a model of social partnership between employers, governments, community agencies and workers, but on a model of workers as individual entrepreneurs. The gaps that subsequently arise between stated employer expectations, industry or enterprise culture, worker dispositions and qualifications for work can lead to poorly focussed learning investments on the part of enterprises and individual workers.

The current model for VET furthers and supports dis-embedded constructions of individual workers and their skills. This is taking place whilst the current conditions of work require workers to have high levels of social connectivity and resourcefulness. The tensions arising from this disjuncture are evident in the failure of VET to clearly link the vocational qualifications framework to learning or skilful outcomes at the level of individual enterprises. In addition, the separation of technical and interpersonal skills from the specific social contexts of work has given rise to confusions in the constructions of skill, and the role of VET. Whilst ‘transferable skills’ include such attributes as openness to learning and customer-focus, it is also clear that workers must adapt themselves to the highly specific social practices of a workplace.

National discourses around the need for ‘flexible workers’ have not been accompanied by policies which focus on integrated ways to support individual learning careers and changing vocational aspirations. Whilst VET is focussed on developing skills and aptitudes defined by industries, for many participants it is primarily a step towards defining vocational goals and possibilities.
Vocational education has been identified as a pathway for workers into new jobs and industries. However the tensions between the principles and aspirations of lifelong learning and the narrow economic focus of VET raise significant questions about how social transformations in the field of work and education are playing themselves out in individual lives. The next part of this thesis explores such questions.
PART TWO: Narratives of change

The changing experience of work, belonging and learning
Re-defining working identity

Constructing the past is an act of self identification and must be interpreted in its authenticity; that is, in terms of the existential relation between subjects and the constitution of a meaningful world (Friedman 1994, p. 145).

As discussed in Chapter One, late-modernity has been characterised by a fracturing of the social field with which workers engage. As the internal cohesiveness between the fields of work, neighbourhood and family shifts, so too does the way in which individuals think about work and construct their worker identities. This chapter examines several dimensions of this process, as conveyed through the narratives of retrenched workers. I analyse narratives on work as a practice in order to understand how reconstructions of the field of work have influenced the ways that people perceive and experience work and themselves as workers.

As retrenched Feltex workers negotiated the ‘fractious diversity’ of enterprise, (Hearn and Lansbury 2006), they changed their views of themselves as workers. In the process, their various worker dispositions which had existed in relation to the Feltex habitus, and which had been part of a larger construction of work and the worker in the Australian economy, underwent a range of transformations. Dispositional change was simultaneously an internal process and a process of repositioning within a new system. It involved individuals forming a new set of understandings about work processes, social relations, skill and ways of learning. The material, social and cultural ‘capital’ which mattered in relation to their working lives had undergone a series of changes. The
available ways of accessing and utilising this capital had also changed. The struggle to position themselves in the new field necessitated a level of dispositional change.

This first chapter of Part Two takes us into the nuanced ways in which individuals experienced the process of re-thinking work in the years after retrenchment. As they discuss their ongoing process of re-assessing past and future, their accommodations, refusals and resistances, and ultimately the choices they made and were still making, an inter-play becomes apparent, between macro-level social transformations and transformations at the micro-level in individual lives.

It was not only the performance of new job roles, but the conditions in which they were performed and the altered possibilities for social connection, that informed individual choices and strategies. As retrenched textile workers learned to become new workers, they re-positioned themselves according to the new freedoms and limitations they had acquired and the new resources and opportunities they hoped to access.

The rules of the game at Feltex had established certain parameters around worker identity, and given rise to a set of work dispositions. Some workers had more economic status and power than others within the Feltex hierarchy, some had a greater sense of ease or influence amongst fellow workers and some were part of marginalised sub-groups. Others belonged to worker sub-groups which had a strongly defined culture within and outside the workplace. In 2005, Feltex workers were forced to move away from a work site defined over two decades by a constantly changing, yet overall stable set of working conditions, in which particular dispositions were valued. Each worker took personal identities and identity resources as well as aspirations into new conditions.

After retrenchment, retrenched Feltex workers entering workplaces wherein broader practices and conditions were defined decisively by the late industrial *habitus*, experienced transformations in their ideas, values
and expectations. Their narratives reveal a critical re-evaluation of their positions as workers and social beings over three years. The ways in which retrenched textile workers responded to change expressed a new understanding of power relationships and relied on new strategies.

Australian workplaces, like old-style football clubs, were once commonly associated with a sense of belonging to both a geographic locality and a community. Like football clubs and players, workplaces and those participating in them reproduce a new logic of practice (Calhoun 2003). The complex social benefits accrued to workers through networks once maintained by loyalty and commitment were based both on identification with place and deep ties between people. For many workers in low-skilled jobs, the collective accrual of risks and benefits at work has been replaced by a highly individualised process. In order for workers to respond quickly to opportunities they accumulate risk strategies and sources of information and support.

The majority of those interviewed in this research came from the sub-set of retrenched Feltex workers who had succeeded in staying employed or in the labour market. The extent to which each one succeeded in generating the resources they needed was influenced heavily by dispositional factors such as identity and social networks.

Johnathan Friedman, in his discussion of culture in a postmodern world, insists that people’s reconstructions of their pasts are acts of self-creation and as such must be viewed, not as variations on truth, but as authentic representations of change (Friedman 1994). My discussion of narratives in this and the following chapters does not seek to re-order worker experiences in relation to a schema of outcomes against individual dispositions, but rather to examine the ways in which processes of change and sense of bounded choice led individuals to strategic choices as they were available within the new habitus. Narratives indicate, as Friedman suggests, ‘a functional relationship’ between the ‘flows and accumulation
of capital in the world arena and changes in identity construction and cultural production’ (Friedman 1994, p. 169).

The first part of this chapter situates the retrenched workers within their long-held identities as workers in the Feltex workplace. This context incorporates changes that took place within the factory, within the Australian manufacturing environment more generally and within broader Australian community attitudes towards work over the twenty-year period from 1985–2005. It offers some analysis of the tensions at play within social and economic policies and employer practices in the field of employment. It then moves through the changed conditions retrenched workers encountered beyond the Feltex workplace after 2005. I use fragments from interview narratives to illuminate the ways in which individuals experienced and responded to change, and reflected on disruptions to their lives and their identities. I analyse how different workers saw themselves positioned in the altered field of work, and the influence this had on their sense of agency.

Changing rules of the game

[T]he players’ actual shots are actions that cannot be reduced to theoretical rules. They are improvisations. Sometimes they are inspired surprises, occasionally disastrous mistakes. But for a good player, they are also embodiments of a highly consistent style. That is what Bourdieu termed a ‘habitus’, the capacity each player of a game has to improve the next move, the next play, the next shot (Calhoun 2003).

Most workers emerged from Feltex after a lifelong experience of work, which had been shaped by the working habitus, or system of dispositions embodied by the players of a given ‘game’, within the Australian manufacturing industry in the decades following World War Two. Feltex Carpets developed a small social field within the larger field of work, defined by a late-industrial habitus. The workplace progressed in stages,
initially maintaining strong vestiges of traditional values, structures and ways of working, and changing in the early 1980s and 1990s to adopt new team structures, mergers and rationalisations. Although the dismantling of industry protection, the corporatisation of the management structure and the introduction of new technology had brought changes to working life, the Feltex workplace delayed its full subjugation to new rules and social conditions of the late-industrial *habitus* for over a decade. This was largely possible because of the long-term bonds that defined working relationships on site, and which in turn facilitated widespread unionised resistance and struggle.

For long-term workers at Feltex, identity was mediated through certain commonly understood practices of belonging. These practices of belonging were exercised in relation to the migrant experience, the Western suburbs locality, the common workplace, the nuclear family, and participation in religious and sporting communities. Strictly delineated gender roles and gendered opportunities in each field clearly marked and determined each of these practices. The changes taking place within community life, family structure and the workplace were undergone, to a large degree, together. Shared understandings between workers reinforced the coherence of relationships between work, family, place and community and reflected a shared *habitus*, albeit one which had becoming increasingly marginalised within the economy.

The shifting conditions of the *habitus* as experienced by Feltex workers between the 1980s and 2005 can be discussed in relation to three interrelated small fields; firstly the Australian manufacturing industry, secondly the Feltex workplace and finally, the low end of the local labour market.

Since the 1980s, the Australian manufacturing sector has rapidly reduced in size (Webber and Weller 2001; Leigh 2002; TCFUA 2003; TCFUA 2005e). The TCF industry has shrunk nation-wide from 128,000 workers to 42,000
(Colebatch and Moncrief 2009). In the twelve months alone leading up to the 2005 Feltex retrenchment, the TCFUA documented 1,072 TCF retrenchments in the State of Victoria, with sixteen per cent of these taking place in the Metropolitan West of Melbourne (TCFUA 2006c).

Downsizing within the Australian manufacturing sector since the 1980s has had a disproportionate impact on female and unqualified workers. In the 1980s women working in manufacturing had disproportionately low levels of formal education with forty-one per cent having left school before the age of fifteen. Gender segregation of jobs and inequality of pay was still very pronounced, with women in the Textile Clothing and Footwear industry earning seventy-three per cent of the average male salary in the industry (Chataway and Sachs 1990). As the least educated and the least valued workers, women workers in the sector were targeted first in restructuring and exited the industry in large numbers. By the late 1980s, the proportion of working women employed in the sector had declined from twenty-one to eleven per cent, whereas for men the figure had fallen only from twenty-eight to twenty-two per cent (Chataway and Sachs 1990).

Despite this sector-level phenomenon, women comprised nearly half the workers employed in the Feltex Spinning and Tufting sections at the time of the 2005 Feltex retrenchment. As male employees were more likely to have found work at Feltex in recent years, women were more likely than men to have long service records. Whilst forty-five per cent of the retrenched male workers had been at Feltex since the 1980s, the figure for retrenched female workers was sixty-seven per cent. Whereas only three of the retrenched women were under the age of forty, there were ten Australian-born men in their twenties and thirties, most of whom had trade or apprenticeship aspirations in related areas at the time of retrenchment.
Workers’ perception of job security in Australia underwent a sharp decline from the mid-1990s (Borland 2000), reflecting a shift in the stability of work. Feltex workers at that time, whilst undergoing an intense change in work organisation on the factory floor, were protected from the full force of this shift. By the early 1980s, the family-run company employed approximately 1,500 workers at the Braybrook site. The workers at that time were assigned to one of three regular shifts in one of three sites in the Western suburbs: Braybrook, Tottenham and Sunshine. They were assigned to one machine and used the same processes until multi-skilling was introduced and became common practice in the early 1990s. Change was managed and responded to in various ways.

Workers across different sites and shifts had developed distinct workplace cultures; some were generally perceived to be more industrially militant, serious, united or fun-loving than others.

For many workers, changes at the level of senior management remained of distant importance. It was the day-to-day process of production and individual achievement of targets that continued to matter to workers at the machine operator level. Dorothy Peterson, an ex-worker from Feltex, put it like this:

> People didn’t give a damn about the management. They cared about what they were doing, ‘cos if they didn’t it would turn around and bite them on the bum … There were people who really didn’t give a damn [about the work] … but that was rare. That was very rare (Peterson 2007).

However, changes in management did result in changes in the ways that work was organised. In line with broader changes within the industry, by 1994 multi-skilling was underway. The introduction of new machinery required a different approach to parts of the work. For some workers this was a difficult transition, because their attachment to and intimate relationship with their old and idiosyncratic machines was, as Savage remarks of early twentieth century weavers in England, an integral part of
the workmanship (Savage 1985). According to Dorothy, resistance to the changeover to multi-skilling in the Feltex workplace was linked to workers’ close relationship to their work and their daily outputs. She explained the relationships individuals experienced with their work in this way:

They were very attached to their machine. I guess it’s because they did it so well and they were good at what they did. If I dared stand near someone’s machine they’d say ‘that’s my machine – go!’ One woman – she didn’t speak English but she knew her machine so well …

It’s the sounds. You pick up on the sounds. If there’s too much tension or there’s a fault you’ll know – this yarn, it’s gonna be 5,000 metres –, ‘cos you’d been there so many years. You learn ways to do things (Peterson 2007).

The production of carpet at Feltex remained a heavy, manual process largely unchanged by the shifting social conditions of work. Machine operators both resisted and adapted to new arrangements as Australian TCF was re-positioned within global production. Unionised action was understood and recognised by all workers as a mechanism for refusal and resistance. Whilst not all workers may have agreed with industrial action, the possibility of resistance and negotiation were perceived as rights.

Many of the workers who left Feltex in 2005 had experienced change and struggle against change on site over two decades, whilst remaining insulated against the full impact of changes. Sit-down hot lunches, which once brought 1,500 Feltex workers together in the canteen for moussaka and fish and chips, were phased out during the 1980s. Over twenty years the Braybrook site workforce was reduced to 300 workers. This reduction in the size of the workforce came about in a number of stages through three changes in ownership and management. Yet the Feltex workers continued to perform their working identities within familiar parameters. Changes taking place in the field did not challenge the basic rules of the game at Feltex and, in this sense, workers emerged uninitiated in the new ways of work.
Individual relationships to dominant culture and counter-culture within the Feltex workplace were indicative of the kinds of social networks people belonged to and the social resources they could access. Those in supervisory and trade-qualified positions often had access to networks outside the family and Feltex. As the middle management layer was retained with each change of ownership, some Australian-born or educated men were responsible for both engaging with new management about the changing requirements of industry, undergoing training and managing multiple processes of change across the workplace. Many were also trade qualified, and were heavily relied upon by senior management for understanding the new technology and implementing change. Supervisors generally delegated the day-to-day management of conflict and tension to the leading hands, a group comprised of both men and women of largely migrant backgrounds, who, whilst skilled and experienced in their work, were both representative of the teams they managed and answerable directly to supervisors. In a work site such as Braybrook Yarns Mill, this group of unqualified experienced workers carried the main responsibility for both protecting their teams and ensuring the company targets were met.

Within the work *habitus* at play in the Feltex workplace, leading hands were often caught at the painful human interface of the change process. Resolution to conflict often hinged on agreed notions of fairness and integrity. Personal interventions from team leaders were common, and often based on pleas to reason, fairness and good character. Whilst requiring considerable leadership skills, leading hands were not easily able to transfer their leadership skills to new work contexts.

Men and women machine operators experienced similarities in their working conditions in the Yarns Mill at Feltex, but working life was to take on a different set of gendered conditions when they moved into new workplaces. The work *habitus* in operation at the Feltex site was gendered in very particular ways. Women working at Feltex, regardless of their
individual histories and dispositions, had their day-to-day working lives and aspirations determined by rules, conditions and attitudes within the carpet manufacturing industry, which specifically assigned decision making, authority and mobility to the male domain. Of the eighty-eight men involved in this study, thirty per cent had been either born or educated in Australia and a further thirty-four per cent were born in Eastern Europe. Five were supervisors or mechanics at the time of retrenchment. By contrast, of the seventy-six women involved in this study, only nine per cent were born in Australia and seventy-one per cent were from Eastern European backgrounds (Appendix A). In the group of retrenched Feltex workers from the Spinning and Tufting departments, no women were shop floor supervisors or responsible for driving forklifts in the workplace.

Whilst women worked beside men as machine operators in physically demanding, noisy, dirty conditions, often sustaining physical injuries from their labour, they also went home to be house-cleaners, home-makers, cooks and carers. Ironically, for many it was these traditionally gendered skills that were to prove more valuable in the labour market than the manual or technical skills they had acquired at Feltex.

Whilst adjusting to the realities of their work options, Feltex men and women also adjusted their expectations, motivations and aspirations in relation to work. Clean working conditions, fewer hours, and the opportunity to engage with different kinds of people were reported by many as positive changes, whilst lack of social connection, camaraderie and certainty at work were reported as losses. Lack of networks in relevant fields of employment and focussed advice about the labour market disadvantaged people who had previously confidently assumed they could re-train and become employed in the area of their choice. The shift towards individualised contractor-style employment demanded a new range of attitudes and skills.
Every individual had to use whatever advantage they had to secure their next step. For some it was their English, for others their family networks. As the trauma of loss subsided, each individual worker from Feltex weighed up their past, their future, their losses and their gains, and in the process they redefined themselves.

**Engaging with the new habitus**

*Maree: What do you remember about Feltex?*

*Vesna: I remember how it was when everybody work there. Was completely different. After when we finish last day, was, like, a sad place. Everything was dead, everybody cry, nobody want to talk. But otherwise, every day, like, [we] work. (pause) What I can remember? (Karadulev 2008, emphasis in original text).*

Retrenched Feltex workers experienced a myriad of disruptions to their conceptions of work and themselves as workers in the months and years afterwards. With the fracturing of previously coherent relationships between the fields of family, community and work, retrenched Feltex workers experienced a shift in their motivations, practices and aspirations. Those retrenched workers who successfully found new work realised that the ‘game’ was played under a fundamentally different set of rules. New hierarchies defined the value of skill, identity attributes and ways of thinking.

At the time of retrenchment in 2005, Feltex workers joined thousands of other workers who had recently exited the manufacturing sector. Although their jobs were classified as low-skilled, most thought of themselves as skilful workers with experience, knowledge and a good attitude to work. The most immediate process many underwent as job seekers involved the re-framing of their skills, experiences and attitudes.

It was immediately apparent to nearly all the retrenched workers that there were few employment opportunities that provided the pay, regular hours and security of their previous jobs. The Feltex work conditions, enshrined within an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement, which they had
fought for over years, had formed the basis of their material life decisions, their estimations of their skill, the value of their time and their plans for the future.

As the value of production skills declined, associated social practices often lost value in a parallel process. Public sympathy for retrenched manufacturing workers in 2009 recession conditions was notably tempered by broad agreement that sectoral downsizing was an inevitable and necessary change for a competitive Australia. In September 2008 the manufacturing sector still provided nearly 300,000 jobs for Victorians, a number amounting to sixteen per cent of the state’s workforce. However, it was a commonly held view that:

> Australia should forgo dirty old manufacturing ... We don’t want to be just churning out people who just got to Year 10 and 11 to be put on to the factory floor. We want people who can actually develop (Colebatch and Moncrief 2009).

Training has been put forward as the route via which to rescue the future of the Australian manufacturing sector from a continued descent. But after two decades the value of training for the sector and for those leaving the sector is yet to be comprehensively evaluated. As early as 1990, the Australian Manufacturing Council noted that ‘[m]anufacturing is regarded as dirty, noisy, dull and without clear career paths … no amount of argument will persuade Australians that manufacturing is desirable if the fundamental conditions in manufacturing are not changed’ (Chataway and Sachs, 1990). The change specifically required was noted in the report as the replacement of ‘unskilled’ and ‘semi-skilled workers’ with ‘thoroughly trained workers at all levels’ (Chataway and Sachs, 1990).

Such discourses have contributed to the growing social acceptance that emerging alternatives to the ‘old’ manufacturing jobs would be good for both the economy and workers in two critical ways. Firstly, new jobs would not involve dirty, hard labour and would necessitate different kinds of workers – workers who ‘can actually develop’. Secondly, new
jobs would require workers who are not ‘churned out’, but by implication, have greater individual agency and therefore are able to develop social skills of a higher value. The ability to ‘develop’ is linked explicitly to a formal process of ‘training’ which individual workers at all levels would be required to undergo.

Age played a role in increasing the sense of vulnerability experienced by Feltex workers, particularly those lacking in formal qualifications. This had some basis in empirical reality. In 1998, Australian workers aged more than forty-five years were found to be less likely to be re-employed and those aged fifty-five years and over were more likely to exit the labour market (Borland 2003). Despite the large body of recent Australian government policy and supporting literature available on the need for investment in order to retain older workers in the Australian workforce (Productivity Commission 2004), it is widely noted that, in practice, biases continue to limit older workers’ access to jobs (Borland 2003; Kirk and Belovics 2005).

Employers continue to fear various aspects of employing older workers, including that training older workers will be both more costly and more time consuming than training younger workers (Cully et al. 2000; Ranzjin et al. 2002). Despite the decline in older workers’ participation in the workforce, recent research demonstrates that at least one third of Australians who have retired would like to be working part-time (Ranzjin et al. 2002). There appears to be a mismatch, however, between the market expectations on older workers coming back into the workforce and their actual access to the market.

Patrickson and Ranzjin identify a number of attributes such as ‘self-help, self-sufficiency, independence, commitment and personal responsibility’, which are assumed within recent Australian federal policy emphasis on mutual obligation, but also note that older workers with these qualities are often disadvantaged nonetheless. This is especially true for those who
‘have skills that are widely available, have little experience of retraining or of contract style employment, have few work-related networks and do not perceive the need to change’ (Patrickson and Ranzijn 2004, p. 428).

Employee qualities often associated with older, experienced workers, such as reliability and punctuality, do not necessarily give older workers an advantage in the labour market. Human capital theory, applied in the workplace, has led to the reorganisation of desirable worker attributes into categories including specific work-related and interpersonal skills as well as work-related ‘personality’ (Ranzijn 2004). Research into employer and employee perceptions has found that particular kinds of personal response to change can contribute to work outcomes more than worker attributes such as reliability. Ranzijn found that employers often place more emphasis on interpersonal skills than older workers re-entering the workplace do. He found that older workers, by contrast, tend to place greater importance on specific work-related skills and such attitudinal differences can disadvantage older workers. Those exiting Feltex in 2005, imbued with work values such as reliability, regularity, hard work, efficiency, capacity to perform, attention to detail and quality control were, in Ranzijn’s model, likely to experience a clash with the new work ethos.

Learning the new rules of the game, in this light, becomes critical to successful work outcomes. Whilst theoretically, hard working, reliable and seasoned workers are considered by employers to be assets in the workplace, the increased value placed on interpersonal skills across the labour market has increased the demand for workers with a focus on service and personal presentation. Whilst this was only a minor shift for some of those retrenched from Feltex, notably those for whom caring for and serving others was an ingrained performance of their identities, for others it provoked confusion or resistance.
For Feltex workers ambivalence, contradiction and emotion in the construction and maintenance of new identities was often indicative of struggle in the process of acquiring resources. Adkins has remarked on this process in relation to women workers as they, often uncomfortably, inhabit dominant practices, discourses and attributes (Adkins and Skeggs 2004, p. 30).

The interactions between domestic roles and worker identities are critical in low-income families where the budget has long depended on a regular dual income. As Feltex workers re-negotiated their capabilities to achieve a desired balance of ‘worker’ and other identities (Kesting 2009), they also evaluated the new resources this required and the impact of changing work status on family relationships. Casual work, whether part-time or full-time, has become the new form of ‘standard work’ in a range of Australian industries. The rise of insecure, casual work has had a dramatic negative effect on many workers’ perceptions of themselves in the workplace, as well as in family and community life (Pocock et al. 2001; Pocock 2003; Charlesworth and Macdonald 2007). Relationships of authority, responsibility and power in workplace relationships have an additional impact on the resources available to casual-workers. Labour Hire Agencies supply the large bulk of workers to manufacturing, retail, construction and business support areas, and newly arising dynamics around employer-worker relationships continue to raise industrial and policy issues in the Australian labour market and in workplaces (Hall et al. 2000; Productivity Commission 2005).

Connell and Burgess note the lack of research into temporary work, skill development and training for casual-workers, whom they have termed the ‘second-class workforce’ (Connell and Burgess 2006). Some of the new conditions of working life for a steadily rising number of temporary workers include precariousness, lack of entitlements, increased stress and confusion and ambiguity around regulations and processes. In addition, on-call requirements for such workers can mean that planning social and
family activities may become impossible (Connell and Burgess 2006). Such aspects of work can restrict the development of workers’ sense of responsibility and autonomy in their work, leading to a high level of job dissatisfaction (Martin 2007). Lack of autonomy is often experienced by workers as an intolerable condition. Martin notes that overall, casual employment in Aged Care is comparatively low, with only eighteen per cent of Personal Carers in the industry employed casually, compared to thirty-seven per cent of all women with up to Certificate IV level education in Australia. High staff turnover rates in the industry are not attributable so much to overall job dissatisfaction, as to conditions at work that do not allow workers sufficient autonomy or the freedom to exercise their full range of their skills (Martin 2007).

The altered conditions of the labour market required many retrenched workers from Feltex, particularly those over the age of forty-five, to radically re-think their space and time allocations for working life, the nature of the employment contract, and their obligations towards and expectations of employers and co-workers in the workplace. Narratives around their changing notions of work reflect complex individual judgements made about current life priorities, perceived capabilities and tolerance for change, and future aspirations. Their reflections on personal change in relation to work evoked a range of emotional states including relief, hope, fragility, nostalgia, and regret. Their assessments of their current and future working lives cemented elements of their previous worker dispositions, whilst disrupting assumptions about choice, autonomy and social relationships at work.

Narratives on disrupted identity

We are constrained not just by external limits ... but by our own internalisation of limits on what we imagine we can do (Calhoun 2003).
Some claims can be broadly made about the experiences of the interview participants. The structures within people’s lives were less stable, everyone travelled more for work, few earned as much money and daily uncertainty and income insecurity had become part of working life. Apart from the loss of personal support, the loss of power, loyalty, trust and self-confidence experienced by many retrenched older workers has been well documented (Borland 2000; Campbell and Charlesworth 2004; Charlesworth and Macdonald 2007; Peetz 2007). Some retrenched Feltex workers at the time of this research experienced an acute sense of precariousness about their current and future working lives, whilst others responded to their fluid economic situations with a new sense of optimism and freedom. Others expressed both.

Whilst some found the work they wanted, others resigned themselves to the work they could get. Some saw the future as a potentially better time in their working lives, whilst others saw the future as more of the same, or a frightening and difficult time ahead. Depending on the meaning and importance derived from work in their lives, Feltex workers rearranged their activities, their approach and their self-concept in relation to work in different ways.

**Changing spaces for work**

In practical ways, most of the retrenched workers interviewed in late 2008 had made dramatic changes in three years. One obvious change was in the amount of time they spent at work and thinking about work. I asked participants to reflect on the percentage of their time they felt they were at the workplace and then to reflect on the amount of thinking time they felt they had devoted to work. I then asked them to reflect on their pattern of work and thinking about work in their current working lives. Whilst the questions were not meant to elicit precise responses, their responses gave an indication of the space work occupied in their lives throughout their employment at Feltex, compared to their new workplaces.
Out of seventeen interviewed in 2008, most felt that they had spent over half their time in 2005 working at Feltex. Female machine operators with no additional responsibilities in the workplace were among those with the highest number of working hours. They usually worked on afternoon shift and worked high levels of overtime. The two leading hands also experienced among the highest number of regular work hours.

More than half also reported that they had spent most of their thinking time preoccupied with work. Of those, the leading hands attributed a phenomenal ninety per cent of their thinking time to work. Female machine-operators and supervisors attributed similar high amounts of time thinking about work.

The tendency to devote themselves to work had been a powerful aspect of the work dispositions of workers regardless of status or pay level. Whilst it is easy to understand why leading hands and supervisors might have spent a lot of time thinking about work after hours, it is slightly less obvious why machine operators would think so much about work in their own time.

Desa

By the time of the interview, Desa Ivanovic was incapacitated for work. She had had an operation on her foot for an injury sustained whilst working the spindle pedal and was also unable to use her hands to carry anything or lift her arms above her shoulder height due to muscle strain in her shoulders. Aged in her early sixties at the time of interview, Desa explained that she had worked an excessively heavy job for twenty-three years on a very old and difficult machine that no one else had wanted to operate.

According to Desa’s husband Dusan, who was present at the interview, Desa would come home from working her twelve-hour shifts, six days a week, and be unable to stop dwelling on work. A strikingly diminutive woman, Desa performed work that involved constantly lifting heavy wool
tubes onto the machine called the Platz, (or ‘number nine’), which took 120 tubes at a time and had to be re-filled eight or nine times a day. As soon as they emptied or broke she would lift them off and hoist full tubes back up again. She worked on this one machine for sixteen years with one other co-worker. Dusan said of Desa:

*She would come home from work and sit on the couch and think about work. For me, that’s it! Come home from work and I forgot about it – I think about what I got to do here* (Ivanovic 2008).

Whilst Dusan was able to relax when he was at home, Desa could not. Desa explained that she chose the number nine machine because her height made it difficult to work on the bigger, higher machines. It was recognised in the workplace that she had an excessively difficult job, but she took a certain pride in being able to work a difficult machine that no one else had wanted, whilst recognising that it also gave her painful injuries. This sense of recognition motivated her under difficult working conditions until she was too injured to continue:

*I don’t know – even Tony when he comes, he says, ‘I don’t know how you work on this rubbish’ … I can’t tell you because it’s tough work … I’m short – other machines much bigger and for me easy to lift ’em up ’cos not high the machine, but was hard. (It was an) old machine and I have to stop … my hands …* (Ivanovic 2008).

For many years Desa had chosen to accept overtime every Saturday, despite the heavy nature of the twelve-hour shifts and the negative impact they had. Many other machine operators in the Feltex work environment had made similar choices over many years, potentially foregoing personal health and wellbeing in order to maintain longer hours.

Levy Ramos had been an afternoon shift worker, working as a general hand doing a range of different jobs over sixteen years. She also chose to work a large amount of overtime. She was in her mid-fifties at the time of retrenchment and had sustained serious repetitive strain injuries to her wrists only three years after starting at Feltex. A vivacious and articulate
woman, Levy continued to do heavy machine sewing and general-hand work at without reporting the injury. This was not unusual as injuries were rarely reported at Feltex. She described her life outside of work when she was at Feltex in this way:

*I don’t have much life. Get up about eleven, do some cooking and prepare for work. (I worked from) three o’clock until twelve o’clock* (Ramos 2008).

For workers like Desa and Levy, being a Feltex worker was an all-consuming, all-important identity, occupying most of their time and acting as a defining element in their lives. Through physical pain and tiredness, they each travelled from home to the factory six days a week, year after year, thinking about work for hours after they arrived back home. Both also had two young children during their years working at Feltex.

All those interviewed said that they spent less time at their jobs since Feltex, except for two of the men. One was Zaim, who had been a machine operator at Feltex and had then gone into an owner-operator truck business, mainly taking jobs in the construction industry. He spent forty per cent of his time at work when at Feltex but estimated that he spent about sixty per cent of his time at work in his new job. The other was Stan, a supervisor at Feltex, who spent sixty-five per cent of his time working when he was at Feltex but felt that he spent seventy-five per cent of his time working at the time of the interview, as he was on twenty-four hour call duty every second week in his new job as a team leader.

Both men were both resourceful enough to have taken enterprising new positions in life after retrenchment, and were ambivalent about the increase in their working hours. Whilst Stan stated that he would ‘have to finish’ his new job soon because of the long distance he had to travel and the on-call nature of the work, he had developed a range of strategies to accommodate the new time requirements of his work, without feeling he was surrendering his agency or control over his time.
Since I started at Autex … I’m on call there every second week, so twice a week any time I can get called out … so I can get half-way home and get called back. If I got scouts on a Thursday I organise someone to take over … We [my wife and I] go line dancing so I can’t do that when I’m on call or I’m working back late … We’ve always had the rule you do what you like and if something happens you go back to work, and if nothing happens, you haven’t lost (Wotjniak 2008).

His narrative at all times conveyed his sense of choice and control over his working arrangements, which he negotiated with his wife, even though the work hours were extremely disruptive. This highly developed sense of personal agency was conveyed through almost every aspect of Stan’s narrative. Zaim, however, saw his excessive time at work as out of his control, and responsible for a diminished social life. Unlike Stan, there was no ‘employer’ and Zaim had to generate all his own business, which generated additional stress. He attributed his increased stress and inability to fully relax to the insecurity of his work pattern and the unreliability of income, saying:

> When I finished [at Feltex], for two years I have job, I feel good. I no have job, depressed. Couldn’t relax (Abazovic 2008).

Zaim was coached into the business by his brother, which was a great help to his new venture. Despite this valuable resource, Zaim was positioned differently from Stan in the labour market. Stan’s marketable skills as a qualified tradesman and experienced supervisor had provided him with networks through which he secured a senior job within the textile industry. He continued to build confidence in his future options, new networks and skill sets. Zaim’s sense of choice in his current and his future working life was tenuous as were his new networks. He accepted his limited options in the labour market and the uncertainty which marked his working life, as an unchangeable situation, saying:

> It’s a long time to live like that but it’s my future now – always will be like that (Abazovic 2008).
At the time of interview, three men spent as much or more time thinking about work in their new jobs as they had when at Feltex. Whilst thinking about work when at home was difficult to avoid for both Zaim and Stan, with Jano it appeared to have become a habitual way of being rather than a requirement of the job. Like Desa, Jano had formed an extremely strong attachment to his worker identity at Feltex. In his new working life, this aspect of his disposition appeared to remain the same.

Jano

Jano Kolaric was born in Yugoslavia but grew up and went to school in Yarraville, a Western suburb of Melbourne. Despite his Australian upbringing, his speech still carried the strongly marked accent and syntax of a person with English as their second language. Jano lived in a modest house in Werribee with his wife and his son.

Aged fifty-four when he left Feltex, Jano had worked at Feltex for twenty-eight years in total, with a short break after ten years to work elsewhere. When calculating the number of years he had worked at Feltex he became very emotional and had to stop. It was clear that working at Feltex had been an incalculable part of his life, starting at the age of seventeen. The redundancy payout for Jano in 2005 was based on an unbroken eighteen years of service. With his payout he went overseas for three months with his family and then came back and spent six months taking casual labouring through agencies.

Jano had started at Feltex as a machine operator but moved into a leading hand position which involved maintenance and extra responsibilities at work. He had worked night shift for a period of about four years, from 1992 to 1996, seven days a week.

At the time of interview, Jano worked afternoon shift in a physically demanding and poorly remunerated job, full-time on the production line in a wool processing factory. Jano, like Desa, was preoccupied with thoughts of work. He had carried a high level of stress and a deep sense of personal responsibility at Feltex as a leading hand, and whilst he no longer exercised much authority in his new job as a wool scourer, Jano still worked long hours. This included regular overtime in a challenging working environment, as illustrated by the following excerpt from our interview:
Jano: This job … for two years work eleven days on, three days off, because of saving of water. Wool factory, scourer, on the row. Afternoon shift.

Maree: Has [the move to afternoon shift from night shift at Feltex] changed your routine outside of work?

Jano: No, not really – it’s getting worse! Getting older! (Kolarik 2008)

Apart from these three examples, interview participants were devoting less time to work, and thinking less about work since leaving Feltex. For most, the reduction in working hours did not alter their perceived social patterns and out-of-work routines, their level of enjoyment in those activities, or the amount of time they spent thinking about work.

Meliame was working two part-time jobs in the aged care industry and Florica had an evening job cleaning in a school. Whilst the nature of their work and the amount of time they spent at work had significantly changed this did not affect the amount they thought about work outside work hours. The same was true for Vesna, who had successfully pursued work in a warehousing environment after experimenting with other industries, and Abdul, who was driving a taxi.

For the rest, the proportion of time working and thinking about work markedly decreased and in all cases this was perceived as a positive change. Zofia was working part-time in 2008, happy to have reduced the space for work in her life. Levy had moved from afternoon shift at Feltex to working night shift in a job she found very un-demanding. John and Mark still worked some overtime although Mark had moved from afternoon shift work at Feltex to day shift work with a transport company and John from night shift work at Feltex to day shift at a steel company. Both perceived that the option of moving into a day shift had made a positive difference to their lives outside of work and had reduced the space for work. Satwinder claimed that the move from afternoon shift to day shift meant that she had both more time in her life for a life outside work, and also that it placed work less centrally in her life as a mother and a social being.
About half those interviewed had thought about work for more than fifty per cent of their time when at Feltex. Of those, Kathy and Jano reflected that they had thought about work ninety per cent of the time. As leading hands, Kathy and Jano had extra responsibilities at Feltex without the benefits of extra status or less physically demanding work, as was true for supervisors. They were the workers who had attributed the highest proportion of time to work when at Feltex and who had thought about work the most. Neither Jano nor Kathy missed anything about the work at Feltex, and spoke emotionally about the high levels of stress they remembered experiencing in their jobs there:

*Working on that winder … what I remember … think I lost ten years of my life … that’s what I remember …* (Duricic 2008)

*I got too much worries in Feltex and too much stress … they want you do this no want you do that* (Kolarik 2008).

The ways in which work had been positioned in individual lives stemmed from a range of factors, including family responsibilities, seniority in the workplace, level and type of responsibility, shift worked, and heaviness of job performed. In a range of different ways individuals from Feltex each experienced significant changes in the space required for work after retrenchment. Whilst individual workers like Desa and Jano, Levy and Zaim exercised a level of agency regarding their approach to work, a highly developed sense of obligation, loyalty and attachment motivated the choices they made. There was also an overriding sense of necessity which underlay their perceptions of working life. Stan was the only worker who expressed agency in his approach to work as well as a highly developed sense of choice and mobility in the broader field of work.

**Changing motivations and sources of job satisfaction**

Along with the change in time and space dedicated to it, work had come to fulfil different roles in the lives of interview participants. This came about partly because retrenchment had forced a reassessment of the past
and of future work options and partly because new jobs provided different kinds of stimulations and challenges.

Bourdieu theorised that in a given field, agents strive to acquire various forms of capital, depending on what is deemed to be of value within that field. For the workers at Feltex, money was universally put forward as a primary motivation for work during their time there. Whilst material capital such as money was invariably mentioned as having a high value, and was singled out as the primary motivator for work, the benefits of particular kinds of social capital at Feltex were also described. Belonging to a harmonious team, learning from others, having the protection of fellow workers and being seen to be trustworthy, loyal and capable workers were, in varying degrees, all described as major sources of job satisfaction at Feltex. In many cases, the primary motivations for work and sources of job satisfaction in relation to work appeared to have significantly changed in their working lives three years later.

Most workers’ previous focus on financial or material benefits of work had shifted in various ways, which often reflected changes in life circumstances. Some older workers like Levy, Kathy, Dusan and Desa found themselves with ‘empty nests’ within twelve months of the retrenchment. Others such as Abdul and Mark had young families and had assumed increased financial responsibilities. For some, cultural capital in the form of gaining greater awareness of society, and interacting with people across the social spectrum had come to assume a new importance and was seen as a benefit in their new jobs. For others, learning to socialise and enjoy themselves had become a new priority.

The nature of the work individuals had sought after retrenchment reflected a changing set of ideas about themselves as workers. For some, the cleanliness, orderliness or autonomous nature of the job had become an important source of satisfaction or pride. The opportunity to interact with the public was sometimes perceived as a newfound freedom and
personal benefit. Most had needed to find new ways of structuring their lives outside of work.

All of those wanting work, apart from Florica and Zofia, had decided to look for, and had found, effective full-time work after retrenchment. Florica reflected that throughout her working life at Feltex, money had been her primary motivation for work, and this was no longer as great a concern for her, as her children were older and her husband was working. Her satisfaction from work at Feltex, however, had been derived in equal parts from her relationship with team-mates and her mastery of the machine:

> In every job you have a part that is easy and a part which is hard, but with this machine there … first I have two friends and I like the machine (Stoican 2008).

After the retrenchment, Florica took part-time cleaning at a school in the evenings only to ‘fill up’ her time and earn ‘a little bit of money’. However, she was concerned with the low status of the work, and this affected both her self-esteem and her job satisfaction as a worker. She reflected on how she felt about cleaning, saying:

> I feel like, you know, before, people work for other people – poor people for rich people. I feel like that. In my country I never do this job. I can’t say is hard or dirty because there’s kids. But in my country just do very poor people. I think ‘I’m not that poor’. I just vacuum, mop and dusting. That’s it … I don’t like nothing. I don’t like anything. I just want to fill up my time and a little bit money but that’s all (Stoican 2008).

By contrast she described her work at Feltex enthusiastically. Florica’s disdain for service and her perception that it was a step down from factory work brings to mind Schwarzkopf’s observation of Lancashire weavers’ strong working identities:

> Given the degree of self-determination on the basis of full mastery of the labour process, Lancashire weavers scorned the idea of going into domestic service, where they would be at the beck and call of a demanding mistress (Schwarzkopf 2004, p. 58).
Like the weavers, Florica ‘scorned the idea of going into domestic service’ despite the material benefits of accepting part-time, casually paid evening shift work to supplement the family income. Florica’s future work aspirations conveyed something of her imagined (and preferred) worker identity. She had a strong desire to work as a Security Officer, where she could wear a uniform and interact with the public in an official capacity. Both the official status of the role and the public nature of the work appealed to her:

*Now I will do anything to leave this job and to do something else, and what I really, really want is [to work in] Security … I see myself black pants white shirt* (Stoican 2008).

Despite her aspirations, Florica is held back from pursuing her goals because she believes that her English language skills will be inadequate for such jobs. When I questioned that, she explained that her lack of motivation to seek the work she wanted was in part caused by her inexperience and lack of confidence in communicating with the public:

*I mean, like, I know you, but if I don’t know you, and you know how to talk, and you know what you want, I’m not sure I can explain to you what you want to know. Maybe I can, but I’m not sure* (Stoican 2008).

When I answered that her English had always seemed clear to me, she indicated that the problem was in part to do with her lack of practice engaging with the broader public:

*Yes, but you want to understand me. But some people no want. They no try* (Stoican 2008).

In the case of two other women, Kathy Duricic and Maria Bizdoaca, the ongoing work that they had secured through their own perseverance had ended not long before the interview took place. In Kathy’s case she gave up cleaning work in an aged care hostel because her arm injury, sustained at Feltex, was aggravated by the work. In Maria’s she came back from leave and her employer dismissed her for no reason. As the sole casual
employee in a retail store, Maria had no recourse to legal or industrial action. Both Kathy and Maria wanted to work again soon.

For Kathy, after sixteen years doing heavy physical labour and working as leading hand at Feltex on afternoon shift, it had been a relief to leave Feltex and find work in a less gruelling and conflict-ridden position as a cleaner. Although Kathy talked at length about the strong bonds she had shared with other workers at Feltex, she also complained bitterly about how relentlessly hard the work had been. She reflected that the driving financial needs which had motivated her as a younger woman with small children had changed. She said:

*At Feltex it was like, I had to work. I had no choice (Duricic 2008).*

I asked her to talk about her work since her retrenchment and she focussed on the quality of caring human relationships she had been able to form with residents rather than the cleaning job itself or other workers:

*I did enjoy the work because every day somehow got sort of attached to those people. We all did … It’s more the people … every time I walk through the door they run, hug me, like babies … I really miss them you know! (Duricic 2008)*

The financial aspect of work since Feltex was far less prevalent in her narrative than the social relationships. When she left her cleaning job a year-and-a-half after the Feltex retrenchment, Kathy consciously realised that she felt isolated and increasingly dependent on contact with her family:

*I realise now I was happier when I was working. I was more socialising with the people, which now is not as much. Every day I was with people there (Duricic 2008).*

New modes of work enabled exposure to different workplace cultures. For some the option to work multiple part-time jobs was exciting, and a new source of work satisfaction. Meliame was motivated by the flexibility and sociability of her new work as personal care attendant. Whilst Feltex had been a convenient and reliable job located five minutes walking distance
from her house, her new work required her to drive to two different workplaces every week. New networks in new places were seen by Meliame as highly valuable aspects of her new working life. She said:

*I see more friends now, and in my job I also see more friends, because I have two jobs, one in Sunshine, one in Altona. I see different faces and different boss* (Vaati 2008).

For Meliame it was not just the contact with new places and new networks of fellow workers that stimulated her in her new job. Working as a carer allowed her to do something that she enjoyed more and found easier than working with machines at Feltex. Meliame found a high level of satisfaction in performing a caring role with old people who depended on her. This work held more meaning for her than working with machines, which she thought of as ‘dirty’ rather than ‘human’. The work also rewarded a set of existing skills that Meliame held as more innately valuable than working with machines. She said:

*I feel better than I felt at Feltex, ’cos my new job is human people. When I worked at Feltex was a dirty job but now I feel that people like my mother and father, even like grandmother and I feel more love for them [in] my job now, ’cos every day I do for the old people* (Vaati 2008).

Mark, an ex-supervisor at Feltex, was the only interview participant who was able to earn more money in his new position. The sole breadwinner in his family with a young child, this was a great motivator, but also a source of personal satisfaction. However, Mark also described being motivated by an enormous sense of loyalty to ‘the company’ when he worked as a supervisor at Feltex. He indicated there has been a major shift in his approach to work since then:

*I didn’t have much of a social life then. Now I do. Dedicated your life to the job, yeah.* (Hughes 2008).

He described the ways in which his new job as a truck driver was better than his job at Feltex:
It’s different … I don’t have any responsibility, apart from myself – no more stress … go there in the morning load it up and off I go for the day (Hughes 2008).

Mark perceived that, because of fewer work stresses, more affluence and more time at home, his life outside of work had improved enormously since taking his new job as a truck driver. Although it was an isolated job requiring long hours on the road, for Mark, his work in the transport industry brought better conditions. Most importantly, his job enabled him to spend more time with his family and friends, and engage in more interesting activities on his holidays. Previously motivated by a highly developed sense of loyalty and responsibility to the workplace, Mark’s motivations to keep his current job were different. He said:

Now I’ve got a social life. We get friends come over for dinner and that in the evening, go to the movies, spend more time with the family. Time at work is now more like fifty per cent – a normal working day (Hughes 2008).

Workers who had leading positions at Feltex were generally pleased to surrender their positions of responsibility in their next jobs. This was true for Mark, who most disliked managing people in his position as a supervisor at Feltex:

Someone has to do it. It’s hard, very hard … don’t wanna do it again. They used to hate you … hate you! (Hughes 2008)

However, despite enjoying the autonomy of truck driving and the freedom from having to manage other people, the reduced opportunity to develop close relationships with co-workers was something that Mark missed keenly. He expressed his ambivalence about this aspect of leaving Feltex with some emotion, saying:

I miss working with the people. I don’t miss the job itself, but I miss the people (Hughes 2008).

Like Mark and Kathy, Jano also talked about ‘missing the people’ he had worked with at Feltex. This was balanced against his great relief to have reduced stress and pressure in his current work place. Whilst he had
broken down in tears twice during the interview, upset by remembering his missed friends at Feltex, Jano explained the difference in his current job:

[At Victoria Wool] you running machines, something break down. You don’t push yourself down. Don’t put finger in there. Just leave it to fitter. I was fitter [at Feltex], I was leading hand. Look after people, look after machine, look after everybody. [Now] less work, less stress. Leave it to somebody else now (Kolarik 2008).

**Work as transformation**

There were those who felt that leaving Feltex enabled them to transform themselves through work. Whilst Florica and Stan talked in the interviews about having been engaged in a level of constant learning and change at Feltex, others felt that they learned little at Feltex but that work since had provided learning opportunities which would further their longer term goals. For some, this meant being able to use work as a means of expanding their repertoire of social skills and practising new social identities.

Abdul Mussa, who was enthusiastic about the different kinds of customers he engaged with every day as a taxi driver, gave this example of the common knowledge he was acquiring:

*I didn’t know if you are married twenty-five years is silver, fifty years is gold, sixty years is diamond. It changed my knowledge. I see different people and I find bad people and good people and people who talk about personal life (Mussa 2008).*

Apart from exposing him to a broad cross-section of social attitudes and opinions, his new job also required Abdul to learn particular kinds of valuable social skills for work. He says:

*If you have nice behaving and nice talk and smart way, you have to have clever, talk nicely, and you get a tip (Mussa 2008).*

For those in the service industries interpersonal skill development was understood as critical in the further re-working of their dispositions.
Maria Bizdoaca remarked on the motivation and enjoyment she experienced in learning different social skills in her new job managing a shop. She attributes this partly to the requirements in her new job to mix with people from a ‘higher class’. She said:

I start to learn things now. I open my mind different. Factory just inside – not very much. Everybody just the same every day … but have contact more people, more different people. Maybe more higher class – three times maybe than mine (Bizdoaca 2008).

She explains that complex social interaction with people from a ‘higher class’ has created a high level of enjoyment at work for her and is now her primary motivation to work, saying:

When I get up and go in there I enjoy it, especially when I see people. I enjoy it … work with people. This is my love, to work and talk with people. It’s my life. Don’t want to be work in isolate (Bizdoaca 2008).

At the same time as recognising the benefits of broad contact with the public, however, Maria was painfully aware that her English language skills and her accent marked her as someone who would find it hard to find the secure work she wanted with a large department store such as Myer.

Not all retrenched Feltex workers aspired to take on the new dispositions of workers in the service sector. Whilst workers such as Meliame, Maria and Abdul perceived the move away from the factory environment as an improvement of job status, which brought about new motivations and satisfactions at work, Vesna was one retrenched machine operator who was happier to be in a factory or warehouse environment. Despite having had the opportunity to work in customer service jobs, Vesna found the sense of surveillance she experienced in a small service team and the restrictions on her sense of autonomy in these roles were too great a compromise. She perceived her latest job in a warehouse as allowing her to focus on her greatest life priorities: her home and family. Whilst aware
of the status improvement of customer service, she preferred less confronting, more familiar work:

_ I happy 'cos I’m more with the family now. In the mornings everyone go to work together and in the afternoon everyone together. I’m more happy – doesn’t matter, it’s manufacturing. Doesn’t worry me. I’m not running up for title, just my family’s more happy_ (Karadulev 2008).

Vesna had been a powerful, straight-talking and independent character within the Feltex workplace. As a union representative, she was accustomed to regularly speaking her mind with fellow workers and with management. However, many the new diplomacies necessary for working with the public as well as the sense of being watched and judged were intolerable for her.

For workers like Vesna, security and stability within work routines remained the main motivations for work. The big changes in her life since leaving Feltex had been an increase in financial stress and job insecurity. Vesna felt that these had ‘changed’ her internally, and made her less secure as a person. She describes the differences in her life like this:

_ I still work day shift – only financial – because you don’t know how much you work now, so when singer [from Macedonia] comes sometimes you can’t go. But people come – is the same. Time doesn’t change. It same. Just financial. Make more stressful of now, because before we know we have secure job and so can be more relax, and every day there and you go and have weekly pay, and you know how it is. But like this now, when we lost job, you want go somewhere special, you don’t know [if] you gonna have full pay at end of week or not, and that’s stressful. That’s the main thing for change, not something else and it’s really stressful. It’s only that what’s change in the life_ (Karadulev 08).

Vesna wished to maintain the same pattern of life, in which family and social life was sustained by work. She claimed that her main sense of satisfaction had always existed outside of work, as a member of strong family and social networks. Her focus was still on having a job that allowed her to feel secure and free to fulfil her primary role within these networks.
For others, however, new jobs provided an opportunity to assume new, desired dispositions. Like Meliame, the move from a ‘dirty’ job to a ‘clean’ job was, for Abdul, a source of satisfaction and a signifier of improved job status. Whilst the hours were long and the work insecure, the improvement in conditions made up for this to some degree:

*It’s a clean job, not dirty … I use a uniform … I clean my taxi using a fragrance, so is nice and you clean yourself and very good for passengers and always have a shower and take a tie and you work and have good passengers (Mussa 2008).*

**Changing self-perceptions as workers**

The uncertainties and the risks inherent in the new field of work contributed to changing self-perception. Such risks were perhaps most eloquently suggested in Zaim Abazovic’s reflection that since becoming a new worker, it was like:

*You’re walking somewhere. You no know which way you’re walking but you just keep going. Maybe be all right, maybe not (Abazovic 2008).*

For those who had experienced a protracted period of not working, or not finding satisfying work, there was a tendency to valorise their working lives at Feltex, as they made uncomfortable personal adjustments to their self-image. In the case of Jano Kolaric, a combination of fear that advancing years had weakened his future work prospects, the experience of protracted job insecurity, a personal resistance to change and a demotion in position since Feltex resulted in a deeply ambivalent perception of change, and along with that a conflicted new worker disposition.

Jano had anticipated an early retirement when he first left Feltex, but then found that despite a reasonable payout, which enabled him to relax and enjoy some time on holidays, he quickly felt uncomfortable not working. At first he looked for work and saw that he could only get an average hourly rate of $14.50 for a similar factory job (as opposed to his work at Feltex, which had brought in $21 per hour). Instead of taking a casual job
immediately he first went overseas for a long-overdue family holiday. He says now that he might retire when he is sixty-two years old, but confesses that retirement is a prospect now that evokes conflicting emotions. He commented:

\textit{Maybe I retire. Then I enjoy! Maybe ... That's what I was thinking when we finish in Feltex ... we go around there ... go holidays and get sick of it! (Kolaric 2008)}

Jano found that work had purposes in his life other than income generation. When I asked him to explain how long it took to ‘get sick of it’ he said:

\textit{Oh not long. Maybe two or three months and then I want a job. I want to work. Yeah. We was overseas for three months and not bad, but still work is work. Have to do something (Kolaric 2008).}

After retrenchment Jano had quickly come to believe that retirement may not be as pleasant as he had once anticipated because it would mean life without work. The retrenchment and his subsequent casual work experiences had triggered a critical moment of understanding but also a deep fear. As he became aware of his limited future options in relation to work, he placed new value on his past working life. Whilst Jano no longer wanted to care as deeply about another textile workplace, he was compelled to care.

Jano’s new work had not allowed him to invest himself in what he considered to be meaningful work practice. He had, two years into his new job, a continued sense of himself as somehow dispensable and marginal. A new understanding of vulnerability had entered into his self-concept as worker. Although habituated to taking personal responsibility for outcomes at work, his new position in his new workplace did not allow this. Whilst he was pleased to no longer have the stress that came with responsibility, the inability to influence poor work practices and outcomes in his new job left him feeling powerless and frustrated. In addition, Jano has adopted a low profile in the workplace to avoid being
noticed and perhaps arbitrarily dismissed. Florica expressed a similar ambivalence about her changing circumstances:

*I will go back to Feltex any time. For the work and for the friends. Any time! When I hear they gonna close I think, 'Yes, OK, I stay home' but then I start to see. It’s not that simple. And now I miss. It’s something you don’t think. I go to work, money come, go home* (Stoican 2008).

Jano and Florica had re-positioned themselves in relation to work so that they saw work as a necessary routine but one with which they were disengaged on a social level. Their new self-perceptions as workers were in sharp contrast to the dispositions they described within the Feltex work habitus. Their perceived inability to move into a better work situation – Florica because of her English and Jano because of his age – stopped them from taking risks at work or seeking a better situation. Looking backwards, these two workers pointed out both the positives and negatives of change in their working lives. Their emotional responses in reflecting on the past illustrate their ambivalence towards their new work dispositions. Both their self-perceptions as good workers and the benefits work brought into their lives had been seriously diminished.

**The interplay between disposition and change**

Whilst they had shared decades working side by side with others at Feltex, life experience, access to education and qualifications, self-perception in the world and personal identity had prepared some workers to take greater advantage of transformations in work. For both Stan Wotjniak and Satwinder Kaur, the transition period from retrenchment into new, ongoing work had been brief and relatively free of distress, although for different reasons. Within a couple of months, both found work back in the textile industry in carpet manufacturing companies. Whilst Stan had held a supervisor position at Feltex, Satwinder had been a machine operator. Neither experienced an ongoing sense that it would be difficult to find work and neither had their sights set on re-entering the
textile industry, but had instead started to develop alternative prospects in other industries.

Like many of those interviewed Stan had not been surprised by the retrenchment and had seen it coming. Mentally, he had already started the process of re-thinking his future working life before the retrenchment announcement came:

*Probably because I was thinking of moving on anyway, so my mind was there … that’s why … that’s probably why I hung on!* (Wotjniak 2008)

Unlike most, Stan was mentally prepared for the next step and unafraid of change. He sees the retrenchment as partly the result of his choice to stay. This may have been because he knew that his working life as a supervisor at Feltex opened up opportunities rather than narrowing them. He had the confidence of knowing that he understood carpet production from the factory floor up to the management level and that this was valuable.

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**Stan**

Stan Wotjniak, born in Australia to Polish parents, was forty-two years old at the time of the interview. He had started work at Feltex at the age of sixteen and completed a trade apprenticeship, quickly working his way to a position of seniority in his team. He had worked at Feltex for more than twenty years and was the only Feltex supervisor who took part in these interviews. His supervisory status marks him and his narratives as separate from others whose narratives are analysed here. In many ways it is important for the reader to see his distance from the other workers in terms of status and opportunity. It is also important to remember that despite this distance in status, Stan’s experience of work was formed entirely at this one workplace, amongst the one group of people. Whilst mobility had been an option for Stan, it had not been a habit of practice. ‘Management’ as a practice was for him part of an ethos in which embodied, long term relationships had been forged with people he had grown up with, worked with and lived close to from the age of sixteen. Stan is an interesting example of an ‘old-style’ supervisor, who was nonetheless able to easily ‘transfer’ or ‘abstract’ the confidence and skills he acquired at Feltex, in ways that many others could not.

*Text Box C: Stan Wotjniak*

His particular disposition was shaped as much by the opportunities that came with his status within Feltex, as those he knew he could access.
outside. Stan expressed a strong sense that he had been in a constant state of change and movement throughout his working life and that this in some ways defined his working identity. He said:

*I wanted to be doing something that was going to be more challenging … I changed a lot.*
*I’ve never been stuck – even at Feltex I was always doing something different* (Wotjniak 2008).

Stan’s narrative in some places indicated that he was partially unaware of the power differential that marked his opportunities from those of others at Feltex. Perhaps in this he ‘misrecognises’ the source of his own sense of agency as something natural and ordinary rather than a product of his position. One example of this is the way his narrative focussed on his personal preparedness to work rather than his senior work experience, his trade skills, his management networks or any of his other advantages in the workforce. When I reminded him that many others had been scared at the time of the retrenchment that they would not know what to do next, his answer conveyed a sense of both necessity and personal choice:

*Well, I didn’t really know either but I wasn’t worrying about it. I needed to work but I wasn’t in a hurry to go back to work and … I had to go back … I wanted to go back anyway* (Wotjniak 2008).

Like many of the other retrenched men, he got a truck licence first. Unlike many others, however, his social networks included other men who were in trade and management positions so his skills and experience were soon sought out. If he did not like the work in the trucking industry, he acknowledged that he ‘could have gone anywhere’. He says:

*I knew I would be OK. We did a lot at Feltex. We experienced so much with all kinds of machinery and I could get work in textiles and I also did mechanical engineering training so I could have gone anywhere* (Wotjniak 2008).

Stan’s new job offered lower pay, longer hours and a greater travelling distance but this did not appear to worry him. After two-and-a-half years in the new job, Stan at the point of the interview was still ready and
willing to initiate changes in his employment situation and felt confident there were better opportunities ahead. Stan’s learned success with and appetite for change was, critically, a disposition which served him well and improved his ‘feel for the game’ within the new habitus. The opportunities afforded him within the remaining manufacturing sector were still high, as he had been able to gain the aptitudes for the changing field as an Australian-born, trade qualified, youthful man with senior experience.

Like several others, Stan reflected back on his long-term connection to the Feltex workplace as a matter of chance and opportunity. He remained apparently undaunted by the prospect of further instability in the years to come. Stan presents the precariousness in his new job as a result of his own decision-making processes, rather than as factors beyond his control.

*It’s just circumstantial why I stayed in it [at Feltex] … I was thinking of going into business on my own and that’s still something I want to do, but that’s still up in the air now [with this new job]. I’m not necessarily going to stay there. I won’t stay there* (Wotjniak 2008).

Stan was not the only one to quickly re-enter familiar work at a similar level, although his sense of personal sense of agency and freedom of choice over both his past and his future was the most developed. Unlike many others, it was relatively quick for Satwinder to find work after she left Feltex. Her skills and experience as a skilled machine operator in the tufting section of Feltex were unusual and another, smaller carpet company was looking for someone with her precise tufting experience. The Textile Clothing and Footwear Union sent through her resume to the company on her behalf when they heard of the job opening, actively pursuing the position for her.
Satwinder

Satwinder Kaur was fifty-four years old at the time of the interview and before taking a voluntary redundancy when the retrenchments happened, she had been working at Feltex as a machine operator in the Tufting section for nearly fifteen years—most of her working life in Australia. Prior to coming to Australia, Satwinder had completed her Masters degree in Education and had worked as a teacher in India. Satwinder was the most highly educated of all the retrenched workers who took part in this research. Whilst she had close and enduring friendships, particularly with the other Indian women she had worked with, Satwinder’s emotional investment in Feltex as a workplace seemed to be minimal. She spoke to me at length about my Ph. D. research project and her own research interests prior to the interview.

Her narrative shows that she was highly aware of the distance her education put between herself and others in the Feltex workplace and that she had felt unchallenged and relatively disengaged in the workplace. Whilst her educational background had not provided her with more opportunities in the labour market, and did not benefit her career trajectory at Feltex as had Stan’s local trade qualification, it had clearly generated for Satwinder, a different set of aspirations in relation to the type of work she ultimately wanted. Whilst most other retrenched women from Feltex sought work in unqualified or ‘semi-qualified’ work in services, Satwinder wanted to pursue her goal to work as a librarian. She loved books and learning and yearned to return to this area in her working life now that her children were a little older. Whilst she had ruled out teaching, she had set her sights on a more modest, and she hoped, achievable career goal.

Like Stan, Satwinder reflected in the interview that she had not felt stressed about finding work, and that as she was prepared to do any kind of work she had been confident she would find something. Also like Stan, she undertook a course of study after retrenchment and then realised after brief work experience that she did not want to do that kind of work.

Satwinder’s narrative conveys the belief that that she was not compelled to work and that it did not really matter much what she did for work as long as she did something. The most difficult aspect of not working, for her, was the loss of routine activity rather than the loss of income. She said:

*I didn’t worry at that time because if I can’t find, I can do anything … also my husband works so no financial worry. Just all day staying at home. There was no routine at that time. I didn’t like that* (Kaur 2008).
For Satwinder, working in the textile industry had not provided an environment in which to learn valuable skills or to develop useful social networks that would help her to find new work opportunities after retrenchment. As a migrant and as a woman her social networks revolved heavily around family life and the local Indian community. Whilst the job at Feltex had provided her with routine and social contact, Satwinder neither spent time thinking about Feltex nor developing alternative networks outside of work.

As she took a voluntary redundancy, she was prepared for leaving Feltex, and had started studying a librarianship course part-time prior to leaving, and over the years since then had completed her degree and was looking for relevant work experience. In the meantime she returned to the textile industry, at a level which reflected her past work experience as a machine operator rather than her aspirations. The leap she wished to make required a profoundly different set of networks to the ones she had already established. Her narrative reveals that she is fully aware of the need for them in order to fulfil her aspirations:

_Last year I finished certificate and I am doing the diploma after I do my work experience. If you know anyone who can give me one day volunteer because that will give me practical experience … because I asked everywhere and they don’t do … even if they give me half a day that’s all right. Public libraries don’t do. A school is taking me for work placement for two weeks and they say no, they can’t take me after, but I will ask. I love books. My aim in the future is to work in a library_ (Kaur 2008).

For machine operators like Satwinder wishing to enter skilled work, for which they were experienced or qualified, the lack of social networks frustrated their efforts and forced them to re-evaluate their work aspirations. One example of this was Levy Ramos, who reflected that she owed her material security to the years she had worked at Feltex:

_My house and everything, my car is come from Feltex_ (Ramos 2008).
Levy Ramos, aged fifty-five at the time of the interview, arrived in Australia from the Philippines in the 1980s with qualifications in Social Work. Like Satwinder, Levy had worked at Feltex as she had been unable to find work with her degree. Levy had also volunteered to take a redundancy from Feltex in 2005. She had worked as a general hand there for sixteen years, although the first ten or so were under another part of the company, under the management of Redbook. Levy had applied for the redundancy feeling very confident that she would find work in her chosen field, which was to become a medical receptionist, a job she had believed she would have no problems getting.

An experienced formal learner, Levy left Feltex feeling confident that she would find work in an administrative area and was enthusiastic about looking for work where she might use her significant administrative skills, experience and qualifications. However, despite her high motivation, and the medical reception qualifications she completed after retrenchment, her native English proficiency and her excellent computer skills, after six months of looking for work as a receptionist, Levy was still unemployed. She slowly came to see her employment options after retrenchment as more limited:

I decided to really leave the place and overall I was looking forward to finding a much better job but unfortunately it did not happen, because I don’t have any … no job available ’cos they asking for experience. I was so confident because I lived in Australia for twenty years, I practise my English well, I know people now, but still… (Ramos 2008)

Levy eventually found work as an un-qualified personal care attendant for a private family. At the time of the research interview in 2008, Levy had been in that job for over two years and had abandoned the idea of getting a job in reception and administration. She was enjoying better pay and a physically easier job than she had at Feltex, although she found the job boring, as it was a night shift job requiring very few tasks or responsibilities and with very limited contact with people. However, Levy
saw her present situation as temporary and did not consider her work to have much to do with her personal identity, as she had before at Feltex. Although like Jano, she no longer saw herself as having many opportunities as a worker, she looked forward to a different path, as her future plans were to return to the Philippines when she retired, and become an investor.

She believed that her self-limiting thoughts reflected a lack of confidence. However, like Florica, she had no ideas about how to overcome her confidence problems and she believed that going back to the Philippines was her best option. She said:

*I want to retire. I’m getting old … no one’s going to hire me. When they ask ‘how old are you’ I say ‘fifty-five’ and they think ‘oh no, what service can she be?’ I know it’s a lack of confidence, really* (Ramos 2008).

Unable to take physically demanding process work again because of work-related injuries in both her elbows, and needing both the money and the social stimulation from work, Levy’s accessible employment options had narrowed to personal care. Her belief that she could find work in her preferred field soon died. Still citing a high level of enjoyment in her life, however, Levy had reconstructed her future work aspirations in her country of birth, where she was confident she would be successful.

Stan, Satwinder and Levy were each resourceful, resilient and self-confident individuals who had completed post-secondary school qualifications, had excellent English and a confident approach to the unknown. It was clear that age, gender and ethnicity had played a significant role in shaping each of the life choices and circumstances that defined their options after retrenchment. Whilst their new working lives did not completely satisfy them at the time of the interview, they each took something positive from their working years at Feltex and had all begun to actively formulate new futures for themselves. Despite setbacks,
in reflecting on change, each reported that they had never felt ‘stuck’ at Feltex, nor that their future working lives would be there forever.

For other workers, the experience of insecurity in the job market was acute, and affected not only their choices, but also their personal identities and future plans. Those who had spent twelve months or more in multiple, short-term work episodes before finding secure work experienced repeated disappointment and often a reduced sense of resilience.

Zaim Abazovic’s narrative demonstrates that over time he has come to expect uncertainty although he is ambivalent about the impact of this on his state of mind. I asked him if he had been prepared for the Feltex closure and his answer conveys the ambivalence he now feels about his approach to the change he knew was coming:

I feel like [I should have left] long time ago … too many time I talk to people … thinking after finish here, what I do after that … because always thought not long before department stop. But nobody know nothing … start thinking that, but … not a shock ‘cos I … see all the machines go New Zealand … labour cheaper… I know be one day closed, just don’t know which day (Abazovic 2008).

There were strong financial incentives for Zaim to work, and due to the insecurity of work he took two jobs, sometimes working seven days a week, before going into business with his own earthmoving equipment. The lack of security at first determined his emotional state and brought about a constant level of distress. Zaim no longer believed his working life held any security, as the workflow would continue to be unreliable. At the beginning of the interview, Zaim reflected favourably on his previous working life at Feltex and describes the future as a continuation of his high-pressure existence:

Before much better, ’cos not have pressure like now … like tomorrow, worry you no got work. Too much pressure, too much paperwork, too many things, but it’s life. You have to try … Lot of change, yeah. That time never be worry much. Just you work only for enjoy.
Now have to work heavy too many time, have to use too much brain now. Too much telephone now, too many thing now, more pressure now (Abazovic 2008).

He also attributes his increased volatility to the experience of having gone through such a stressful change over such a long period:

[I am] becoming nervous. Like, before, doesn’t matter. I don’t care. Now little things make me upset (Abazovic 2008).

In response to a climate of insecurity, there is a certain fatalism in Zaim’s claim that ‘it’s my future now’ and in Jano’s reflection that ‘I suppose I have to [get] use to it’. Such fatalism is absent in the narratives of Satwinder and Levy, who have found un-rewarding but un-stressful jobs for now, in order to pay the bills, with the hope that the future will bring more satisfying work.

**Ambivalence, struggle and resistance**

Jano: I was one of the Chiefs … but was only Sitting Bull.

Maree: And now?

Jano: Only Indian! [laughs]

(Kolarik 2008)

Individual dispositions had changed for each worker insomuch as each worker had incorporated new perceptions of work, of themselves and of change into their identities. In re-entering the labour market, each had investigated and experimented with strategies for a new game. These experiences inevitably provided them with new understandings of the game and a new sense of their position within it.

The extent to which dispositional changes can be said to have brought benefits into the lives of individuals was, however, contingent on several factors, which can be viewed in terms of the material, social and cultural capital workers acquired. Depending on how well workers’ identities and aspirations had aligned with their new jobs and industries, their overall responses ranged from enthusiasm for change and optimism about a
continuum of change to fatalism about the future. For some, ambivalence was the salient feature of their response.

Jano had been aware for a long time that the Yarns Mill at Feltex would soon close, but like many others, left with no plans regarding his next step. His narrative is peppered with statements indicating that he considered himself as having come ‘down’ in life. This appeared not only in discussions of his reduced status in the workplace, but also in discussion of his reduced sense of personal power as a worker. His reference (above) to ‘Sitting Bull’, ironically captured both the clash of cultures he experienced in entering a new workplace and the destruction of a system of meaning which retrenchment brought. Jano’s sense of now being ‘only Indian’ in his new workplace brought into sharp relief his sense of restricted choice.

After retrenchment, Jano found casual work through an agency for the six months before he securing an ongoing job at Victoria Wool, a wool-processing factory. Initially he did truck driver training, but, like Stan, did not like it and so he went back to look for the work within the textile industry, eventually prepared to take work at a lower level, at pay rates he would not have considered six months earlier. He explained that as his current job became more long-term his stress levels reduced:

*Before it was very upsetting going through agencies and all this, but now all right. This eighteen months ... now good. I know I can work ... this all settle down. The job is very secure because I am operate these machines same as in Feltex (Kolaric 2008).*

By the time Jano had found his current ongoing job, he had been through a long period of fear and self-doubt. He said: ‘Was... I thought I’d never get a job again, or something’.

Jano explained that it took him twelve months to adapt his expectations to his new workplace. This process had involved reviewing and even discarding his previous work standards in light of his limited control and confidence in the workplace. Jano’s surrender of his previous work
standards did not come easily and was still a source of unhappiness for him. He describes the process in the following narrative:

*Jobs is all different. When I start work here, it was terrible. I was keep talking about job to my missus ... All these people doesn’t do what they supposed to do ... I gonna kill somebody. It was so stress 'cos I had to learn how [it] had to be, not how I want ... I knew I don’t gonna change anything, but had to learn their way. I wanted everything is clean and perfect but people is not like that. I don’t know. I supposed have to used to it because every factory is different so ... I don’t know how to explain, so ... Every different people, different machines, all this, 'cos when you used to it, one job for so long, so this ... I thought I'd never find a job anyway. So I mean, similar or same I got now, but I s'pose I was lucky, that's all (Kolaric 2008).*

Jano had to subjugate his previous sense of choice, freedom and authority about how things were ‘supposed to’ be done. The process of surrendering his habit of dedication to certain ways of working, as well as his heightened sense of responsibility and even authority in the workplace, generated an unbearable level of distress. His efforts to redefine himself had not increased his access to money, friendship, learning, networks or mobility, but they had brought him a job, when he thought he might never work again.

Unlike Satwinder, whose job at Feltex had reflected little of her sense of worth or identity, or Vesna who saw work as a means to an end, Jano had cared deeply about the Feltex workplace, its systems and the way it was organised. His social networks were largely comprised of fellow male workers who regularly went camping, fishing and drinking together. As a leading hand at Feltex, Jano had been deeply invested as a ‘chief’, albeit a small one, within the Feltex culture. Unlike Stan, however, he was not trade-qualified, highly literate or well connected outside of Feltex.

The possibilities for argument, resistance or organisation in Jano’s new job were minimal. He felt as though it required constant vigilance for him to maintain his position in an atmosphere of increased employer surveillance and decreased worker solidarity. He said:
Victoria Wool is like … you do whatever you feel like doing but if you do wrong you can go out in two seconds if you make, like, a mistake (Kolaric, 2008).

Jano’s story indicates that adaptation to new workplace cultures in a similar manufacturing context left some Feltex workers with fewer resources. As workers like Jano brought their histories, their imagined futures, and their previous worker dispositions into new workplaces, the process of adjustment entailed acts of surrender, re-imagining, and in many cases, internal resistance.

For Vesna, the process of adaptation to a work culture required her obedience to unacceptable new rules and she experienced the level of management surveillance and the lack of autonomy in her new workplace as stressful and ultimately, intolerable.

**Vesna**

Vesna Karadulev had been a machine operator in the Braybrook Spinning section at Feltex for twelve years. She had also been the TCFUA Union representative on the factory floor and was known for her outspoken and articulate manner. After the retrenchment, Vesna completed numerous short courses and industry qualifications, and over twelve months she moved in and out of seven consecutive short term casual positions in different industries. Vesna Karadulev spent a long time immediately after retrenchment experiencing short term casual jobs before finding one that was more secure. Whilst she had imagined herself in many possible new work roles, she eventually decided she wanted to return to a manufacturing or warehousing environment. As Union representative on the floor she had a pivotal and public role in both management and worker negotiations.

In the first few months after retrenchment, Vesna was confident that she would probably return to the retail industry and so completed a range of related courses. A bright, confident person of forty-two years of age, Vesna had been the shop floor union representative in the Yarns Mill for several years. After she completed training, she easily found employment in positions which brought her into customer contact. She worked in a pharmacy, in a casino, and then in a warehouse, in a metals factory and in
various other short-term positions over the first eighteen months after retrenchment. The pharmacy position, however, had brought her into conflict with a very different workplace culture, and Vesna soon found it so oppressive that she decided to permanently return to factory or warehouse work. Her narrative describes the way she experienced work in the pharmacy:

*I felt like I was in the jail. They watch you every single step. You don’t feel free at all. I just hate every single moment I spend there … It was my worst experience in my life. I never had any worse than that* (Karadulev 2008).

At the time of the interview she was waiting to have her permanent status confirmed as a worker in a Mitre Ten warehouse. At that time she felt that the constant change in workplaces over the three years since retrenchment had reduced her self-confidence. Despite her completion of multiple entry-level industry qualifications and her repeated success in finding work, within the first eighteen months, Vesna was exhausted from the experience of clashing with profoundly different workplace cultures and adapting to constant change. Like Zaim and Jano, she reflected that she had become a more nervous person. She said:

*Because I passed through all these places, I feel like more nervous! More jumpy. It’s not … I dunno. Like, make me more stressful, changing the job. I think I’m not the same person anyway. I think I change because the changing the jobs make me different, because I no used to it, changing the jobs* (Karadulev 2008).

Whereas Jano described his belief that he would not be able to find ongoing work after he left Feltex, Vesna had left Feltex with clear aspirations, desirable interpersonal skills as well as confidence. Both, however, experienced an irreconcilable mismatch between their work dispositions and new work cultures.

Their sense of autonomy over work processes, their outspoken practice at work, and their attachment to the culture at Feltex were central to their dispositions. On this fundamental level, neither Jano nor Vesna wanted to
change. Whilst Jano had a strong sense of ambivalence over the resources he had lost, Vesna made a choice to refuse the transformations available to her in order to prioritise other aspects of her social identity. She had not embraced a culture of change, but felt that she had been diminished by it. She had experimented with new jobs in new industries, and developed strategies to find and maintain new jobs, and ultimately, she had determined that the benefits were greater for her if she continued working in a familiar industrial setting, as long as it was possible to do so.

**Making sense of disruption**

*I think now I think for myself more than before. I take care of myself* (Stoican 2008).

Workers were asked to reflect on what had changed for them over the three years since retrenchment. Each described a process in which they made sense of themselves within a new set of possibilities. Florica relates the change in her self-image and her attitude to the extra time she has had to think about her life, and to the process of repositioning her work identity in relation to her identity and well-being in other areas of life. She had adopted a new set of values in the process:

*I believe in life! I think that life is different and you have to take ... not just work and home and work and home ... have to take care of you a little bit and you have to do anything just to feel good. Doesn’t matter what you do if you feel good. Before I no have time to think like that. Before I go to work come home that’s it. Before, a little bit shopping, cook, clean, sleep, go to work. Now I have time. So I can think little bit of me* (Stoican 2008).

For many, improvements in personal or family life were linked to the relief of reducing commitment and responsibility at work. For Mark, this difficult process of change was summed up in his reflection on his new values around workplace loyalty:

*Oh, I was devastated! Uh, what it’s done for me now is [that] I don’t think for my employer. I don’t put my job first. Yeah, I work five days a week and that’s it. That’s a good thing. Before at Feltex, I’d say yes. But now, my family comes first* (Hughes 2008).
For some, the positive experience in changing the type of work they were doing led them to reflect that they should have left Feltex before the retrenchment. Some, like Kathy, reflected that they now thought they had ‘wasted’ time or like Zaim that they should have left years before but had been stuck in a rut. Their perception of themselves in this respect had shifted, and they had come to see themselves as people who could learn from change, and even anticipate more change ahead.

Meliame, who felt much happier with her job in aged care than she did working in Feltex, commented that she should have left the job earlier, and with hindsight, reflected that she would have done so if she had known how to find a course and a better job. She said:

I liked that work but I think, for twenty years I ask myself ‘Why I no do the course?’ Because no one help me to go to find out … find a good job or go to school in twenty years. If Feltex not broke down I stay in Feltex for retirement. [Retrenchment is] a good thing. It's a very good thing that we changed jobs (Vaati 2008).

Mark also referred to his ‘comfort zone’ at Feltex. He reflects that although he is much happier now, he knows he would not have left Feltex voluntarily. He said:

It was a good thing. I wouldn’t have been able to leave that job, though (Hughes 2008).

Change had become an ongoing challenge. Abdul mused that when he first started working at Feltex, he had been incredulous that people had stayed there for twenty or even forty years. He had allowed himself to stay there for nine years because he had enjoyed one central feature of the work: his relationships with people. Whilst he was happy as an owner-driver, he had re-evaluated the values that gave work meaning:

When I start at Feltex I found people had been there twenty or forty years and I ask them, ‘Why you here for so many years? You can’t find another job?’ And they say, ‘Just wait, you will stay here years’ and I didn’t think I was gonna. Stayed nine years and when I came to Australia, my brother gave me advice, said ‘If you don’t have your own business, you never successful’. When I was finish and I didn’t think I was gonna get another job, I was feeling a little bit sad. I thought maybe my life was not a success (Mussa 2008).
Conclusion

The narrative analysis in Chapter Three mirrors the concepts raised in the first part of Chapter One. In Chapter One we saw the ways in which changes in global production and related changes in national policies on trade, industry and industrial regulation worked together with transformations taking place in local TCF industries. The downsizing of Australian TCF production has taken place as growth in the lower end of the service sector has supported new constructions of work and workers. Skills for work have been instrumental in national discourses framing the new work habitus.

Chapter Three examines this process from the perspectives of individual workers. Reflections on their changing perceptions of themselves as workers and of work as a practice revealed that dispositional change for work had taken place for each worker. This chapter situates workers within the Feltex workplace, outlining the struggles, norms and work practices which characterised the working habitus. It then examines changes in workers’ positioning of themselves in relation to work, work routines and workplaces, finding that both motivations and self-concept as workers had changed for all workers in different ways. The chapter finally analyses the relationship between dispositions and individual approaches to change and disruption.

Feltex workers brought a range of dispositions to their jobs. These were further developed and re-shaped by the responsibilities they assumed, the shift they worked, the skills they developed and their self-perceptions as factory workers.

The changing position of work since leaving Feltex was evident from the reduced time workers spent thinking about and engaging in work, as well as their changing motivations and sources of job satisfaction. For a range of reasons, most had acquired new life status and future aspirations. Such
changes did not necessarily result in improvements in their overall positions as workers.

Some experienced their new jobs as rich learning contexts, and saw their new jobs as an opportunity to change their lives and identities in fundamental ways. However, most experienced a reduced sense of confidence as insecurity, constant change and the lack of control over their work conditions affected their overall resilience and optimism.

In terms of material gain, only one worker was earning more money than when at Feltex. In his case, opportunities arose as a direct result of his disposition as a young, strong Australian man entering the transport industry. Already advantaged by this match between his aspirations and the role stereotype he fitted, his new job came with full-time hours, good pay and strong union protections. Material benefits were not the only advantages sought by retrenched workers. Learning about the world, having more time or energy and improving job ‘status’ were other advantages individuals hoped to gain through occupational or vocational change.

The perceived benefits of change depended, not only on the material capital individuals were able to accrue, but on the aspirations they had formed and the new social milieu they aimed to join. Those moving into aged care, retail and small business perceived a range of rewards, including a broader scope for learning, the potential for forming new networks and the possibility of upward mobility. These workers were highly motivated to attain a new position in the social hierarchy through their new work identities.

The interplay between disposition and opportunity determined whether workers inhabited their new work identities with confidence or ambivalence. New work dispositions incorporated the expectation of change, risk and uncertainty and awareness that reaping the advantages they sought through work required a new set of strategies and resources.
One retrenched supervisor already had, through his existing work identity, personal attributes and social networks, a good feel for the game beyond the Feltex workplace. For him, change was an exhilarating process. For a few others, confidence and agency in relation to change grew after retrenchment, once there were favourable results. For most, however, diminishing chances after retrenchment over time only entrenched a fear of anticipated change and a loss of earlier resilience.

The next chapter continues to examine the ways in which retrenched workers struggled for new resources and new positions in the process of redefining their working identities. It is clear that for retrenched Feltex workers there was a significant rupture, for better or worse, in their sense of belonging. The usefulness of social networks in individual processes of transformation after retrenchment has been touched upon in this chapter and will now be further explored. Just as relationships at work and identification with place required re-working after retrenchment, so did notions of group belonging, the relevance of unionism and role of casual or loose networks.
Re-defining belonging

It’s always about the people you know, isn’t it? I got the job at Feltex because my dad was talking to the next-door neighbour and his two daughters worked there. I rode my bike up with them. They introduced me to the boss and that was it. It was the day after my fourteenth birthday (Bowen 2006).

Chapter One outlined the ways in which belonging has been theorised in relation to the acquisition of social capital. Retrenched textile workers, in the process of reconstructing their working lives and identities, thought of themselves as belonging in the world in new ways. Close networks of influence and information were both harder to form and less useful in practice in new workplaces. In response, workers conceptualised belonging in new ways.

This chapter explores worker narratives about belonging in a changing social world at work. It tracks the role of union membership and the various aspects of belonging at Feltex and then illustrates workers’ experiences of belonging after retrenchment. In doing so it shows the ways in which shifts in worker identities also involve new self-perceptions and social practices and how these in turn position individuals within the work habitus.

Australian workplaces were once associated with the obligations of membership, and the benefits of community belonging. Such communities were often built around fixed places, within which networks of allegiance to locality, family, class, skills and trades were interwoven. Certain modes of belonging at Feltex accrued benefits in a field of work in which stability,
group action, continuity and longevity were critical elements of success. Long-term communities such as the Feltex workplace allowed for the development of close networks that could be mobilised to consolidate resources for individuals.

Individuals increasingly develop their networks across social fields, which are fragmented through the globalisation process. These networks are usually looser and generate different resources to those of close networks. Since global restructure, the resources that individuals need for the transformed field of work have changed. Adaptability to change and immediacy of response are highly valued individual attributes, but these require new social practices. In order to thrive, workers develop networks of belonging that connect them to a broader stream of information, influence and identity affirmation. New, diverse networks are required for individuals to attain information and advice that is unavailable through family ties and close networks. In addition, close networks of belonging at work are not only more difficult to forge and maintain, but are often perceived as less relevant to their needs.

The field of work, as described in Chapter One, is no longer built upon a social contract between government, employers and employees according to broad notions of ‘fairness’. Loyalty and mutual obligation are no longer at the core of social relations of work. New conditions of transience and constant change require new kinds of resilience and confidence from workers. Worker communities must thrive on notions of mobility rather than longevity. Such communities tend to be interwoven with looser, less interconnected networks of workers who live in different parts of the city and who carry radically different work histories and aspirations. Such networks may not mobilise for a common cause at work, but may be capable of connecting individuals to opportunities and information within the broader field.
Most retrenched machine-operators mobilised family members and close friendship networks as they sought new work after Feltex. Whilst this assisted many in finding low-skilled jobs, it did not assist them to move into higher skilled work, or work in new industries. Senior workers like Stan used loose networks to move into jobs of a similar position in manufacturing. Some used labour-hire companies and training courses to develop tenuous new connections in different networks, whilst some remained heavily reliant on family and friends.

James points out that, as individuals and communities are ‘mutually constitutive’, the stories of individuals can tell a larger story (Mulligan et al. 2006, p. 17). The stories of Feltex workers’ changing identities and changing experience of ‘belonging‘ tells a larger story about community transformation. As communities have become more connected in looser ways, and as close networks cease to characterise working life, a new social order is reproduced through individual practice. In this process, this chapter will demonstrate how workers in low-skill casual jobs without the means to access looser modes of belonging can become even more disadvantaged than before.

Understanding the ways in which workers perceive belonging builds understanding of the specific impacts of retrenchment on individual workers and the critical redefinitions they must undergo. It has also been argued that healthy communities are those that generate social inclusion among their members (Mulligan et al. 2006 p. 7). If social connectivity and success increasingly rely upon loose networks, then communities and individuals must find ways to develop them.

In referring to the Feltex community, this chapter does not seek to downplay the ways in which sub-cultures and counter-cultures flourished in the workplace. There is a distinct difference between speaking of ‘the community’, which represents the dominant, or majority view, and of ‘communities’ defined by identity such as ‘the migrant community’
(O’Donnell 1997). The larger worker community at Feltex was comprised of individuals who identified with a number of sub-groups defined by such factors as gender, class, position, educational or cultural background. The ways in which migrant communities have built and sustained social capital for newly arriving families has been well documented (Martin 1999). This process was in evidence at Feltex, particularly among the Eastern European workers. However, complex relationships existed between people who were close in one sense (for example, through the migration or the factory experience) and yet were in other ways divided on the basis of class aspiration or educational attainment.

Whilst the social networks at Feltex were close, the community was far from homogenous. Experiences, relationships and ‘sense of belonging’ were starkly differentiated by such factors as gender, job, shift, class and cultural background. Skeggs, in her discussion of working class women within worker communities, demonstrates that women may ‘actively refuse’ the perspectives of the dominant community (Adkins and Skeggs 2004). Satwinder, educated and Indian, predominantly enjoyed the company of other Indian women at work, and otherwise found the work at Feltex profoundly boring, dreaming of a job where she could be surrounded by books. On the other hand, Vesna, who was a central figure in workplace negotiations at Feltex and thoroughly acculturated to factory life, consciously chose to seek out new work in the manufacturing sector after retrenchment. Both women strongly defined themselves according to their own life priorities and aspirations, and actively sought positions that would maximise their potential to achieve them.

Despite individual differences, the capacity of the larger worker community at Feltex to actively pursue its collective interests gave it a cohesiveness that was lacking in the workers’ subsequent workplaces. Unionism at Feltex reinforced, for many, a collective sense of ‘belonging’. Changing individual commitment to union membership after retrenchment reflected a reduced sense of ‘belonging’ to community at
work. Partly because of a declining sense of ‘belonging’ and partly because of a changed legislative environment, confidence in and commitment to the potential for social action at work had declined. On the whole, regardless of their commitment to union membership at Feltex, it had quickly ceased to appeal to most of the retrenched workers once they started in new jobs.

Feltex worker stories tell of the interconnectedness of neighbourhoods, families and workplaces, and the benefits that belonging brings. As working identities shifted, the benefits associated with being part of work communities such as those formed at Feltex also shifted. However, social relationships are repeatedly referred to across the narratives as the second most important aspect of work, after income.

I asked the interview participants to describe the quality of relationships at Feltex and in their new jobs, activities they engaged in with work friends, and the place of union membership and collective activities with fellow workers. Their narratives convey disruption and strain, opportunity and hope as they redefined their sense of belonging. The following table illustrates the overall findings from the interviews in relation to the group’s uses of networks of belonging. Throughout the chapter, the retrenched workers’ narratives are used to demonstrate changes occurring in the role and relevance of belonging as a dimension of working life and identity.

Those few who were able to establish new networks of influence tended to believe that they were resilient and employable and that they would be able to find alternative work again in the areas in which they wished to work. Most, even those who described a new sense of belonging, did not feel secure that their new networks could support further work transitions. All had talked about being primarily supported in emotional and practical ways by close networks immediately after retrenchment.
Mentioned strong reliance on close networks to find a job/support after retrenchment

Mentioned ongoing reliance on close networks for employment/other advice, information, support

Believed they had access to new networks

Believed they had ability to generate desired, ongoing employment through new networks of influence

Stan  ✓  no  ✓  ✓  ✓
Mark  ✓  no  ✓  ✓  ✓
Zaim  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  insecure
John  ✓  no  ✓  ✓  ✓
Abdul  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  insecure
Meliame  ✓  no  ✓  ✓  ✓
Zofia  ✓  no  ✓  ✓  insecure
Florica  ✓  ✓  no  ✓  ✓
Kathy  ✓  no  ✓  ✓  ✓
Levy  ✓  ✓  no  ✓  ✓
Satwinder  ✓  ✓  no  ✓  ✓
Jano  ✓  ✓  no  ✓  ✓
Osmundo  ✓  ✓  no  ✓  ✓
Vesna  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  insecure
Dusan  ✓  no  ✓  ✓  ✓
Desa  ✓  no  ✓  ✓  ✓
Maria  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  insecure

Table E: Table illustrating the kinds of networks that retrenched workers in this research relied upon and the role of those networks in supporting their transformations.

Changing Community

Feltex workers generally experienced a strong sense of belonging to the workplace and shock at the loss of community after retrenchment. During telephone surveys, participants reflected on the difficulties of the previous year. During face-to-face interviews three years later, most talked in some detail about the recent occurrence of major life crises, which had been compounded by the impacts of retrenchment.
The personal difficulties which escalated at retrenchment resolved for some but for others, wellbeing and quality of life continued to deteriorate. For some, serious injuries had precipitated withdrawal from the workforce altogether, leading to social isolation. For others, a sense of increased vulnerability and distrust marked their working lives three years later, despite stable employment. Most of those interviewed maintained contact with one or two close friends from Feltex, often because they lived close by. Casual contact with others took place incidentally in the local community.

One of the few contacts Dusan and Desa maintained after retrenchment was an old friend from Feltex who called in to see them occasionally:

Tony, he sometimes come. He live close. Sometimes he come past, but mostly people come to my place. Even if they call me for coffee, they come here … not every week … every couple weeks or months (Ivanovic 2008).

The social connection with Tony, an old friend from Feltex, was maintained because he lived locally, and this connection provided one of the couple’s few ongoing social interactions outside of the family.

**Dusan and Desa**

Perhaps the most striking example of the experience of social isolation after retrenchment was that of Dusan and Desa, a couple who had worked at Feltex for many years. Their daughter, a mother of two children, died of cancer just prior to the retrenchment. Three years later, Desa was deeply grieving and unable to talk for any length of time about anything without dissolving into despair about her daughter’s untimely death. The death of her daughter and a serious repetitive strain injury, which led to a permanent disability in her hands, led Desa to withdraw from an active social life and the workforce. She relied entirely on her husband, Dusan, for support at home, to drive her places, to go shopping with her and for regular companionship. She rarely saw family friends unless they called in. And because, she explained, her closest family friends could not deal with her suffering, she no longer saw them.

**Text Box G: Dusan and Desa Ivanovic**

Similarly, Kathy no longer had very much social contact since giving up cleaning work when her injured shoulder finally hurt too badly for her to
continue working. Apart from visits from her daughter, and her weekly
curch activities, Kathy rarely saw anybody outside of her immediate
family any more. Notably she talked about occasional casual contact she
still had with old workmates from Feltex:

[I still see] the ones who living close and [we] even bump into each other in shopping centre
and I still do – like Hassan. I see him and his wife. Now and then, we visit … not every
week (Duricic 2008).

Others had re-entered the workforce and established good relationships
with fellow workers in their new workplaces. However, ‘community’ was
notably absent in their descriptions of working life. The kind of
interpersonal support that a close community like Feltex provided to its
members was no longer available to many retrenched workers, leaving
them more dependent on close family networks for those resources, but
also requiring individual workers to develop new strategies in setting up
their work relationships.

Stan recognised that the lack of a familiar work community forced him to
negotiate significant life changes in a more socially isolated context. As
with most issues, Stan had adopted a positive attitude towards the
challenges this brought into his life, whilst also acknowledging that the
loss of community made life changes harder for him. He said:

It [the mid life crisis] would’ve happened anyway, but if not for the retrenchment I might
have been able to push it under the carpet. It wouldn’t have been so obvious and I would’ve
had the support around me. Yeah, because we all matured together. We were looking after
each other because we were working together every day. Your personal life and the work
you did was connected. Because you’re working hard with the same people every day, they
know what’s happening for you and they look after you (Wotjniak 2008).

Most interviews contained voluntary references to the ways that loss of
the Feltex community had challenged people’s known strategies in coping
with change. Each individual had struggled to find new strategies in
dealing with significant change, which they previously would have shared
or processed in some way with workmates.
Osmundo talked about the death of his mother and his heart bypass operation, which both happened around the time of his retrenchment. Each of these stresses built upon those brought about through retrenchment; Osmundo was already fearful that his age would work against him in the labour market, and he found that, with reduced social resources around him, he felt suddenly vulnerable, both financially and emotionally. He leaned heavily on a supportive group of like-minded Christian friends. He said this support helped him to adjust to the changes in his life in the following way:

*We have the same beliefs. The problem they come and they try to solve them together. Before I go in to have a bypass they come to me and said ‘Even though there is a problem, just give it to Him’. They ring and visit and remind me I’m not alone. Without Him, your life has no direction, that’s what I believe. You don’t know what you’re doing’* (Tena 2008).

For others, immediate family members remained their sole support. Maria, like most others interviewed, emphasised the singular importance of immediate family members in helping her adapt to the changes in her life. She had experienced a long illness and had been forced to sell the family home soon after the retrenchment. When I asked Maria what it was that had helped her to adjust to all the changes, she did not hesitate:

*My husband, he encourage me ... My daughter said ‘Mum, don’t give up – one day you gonna find a job, one day you gonna find a job.’ My husband used to say ‘You can’t find, you can’t find. We survive the world. We gonna survive.’ He give me a lotta support and make me feel more strong for myself to keep going* (Bizdoaca 2008).

The narratives all made reference to sources of personal support as individuals made their way through life crises. It was clear that, for most, the pool of others with whom they could share their problems had diminished with the loss of the Feltex community. I asked participants whether friends at Feltex had been able to provide personal support when they had worked together. Nearly all talked about the ways in which friendships at Feltex had sustained them through difficult times.
Social opportunities available in the Feltex workplace differed for men and women, as they did for workers in different sections. However, for all of the workers interviewed, social opportunities played a major role in creating close workplace relationships and a sense of community at work. These occurred in the tea-room, and out-of-work functions and events. The out-of-work relationships were strengthened by geographical proximity of most of the Western suburbs-based workers, which facilitated casual interactions in the community.

Stan recollects some of the social opportunities that created bonds between some of the workers at Feltex:

> Cosmo’s dad might make up pizzas and bring them all for us to share at lunch, so we get together to eat that, so when you start doing things like that … we had footy matches, soccer matches, we played indoor cricket (Wotjniak 2008).

Three years after retrenchment, Stan regularly maintained a number of relationships with ex-workmates from Feltex. He believed that organised social opportunities for the people in his section provided a critical focus for deepening personal relationships:

> At work, the social club, being in maintenance [section], we ended up doing that every year off our own bat – thirty people going out every year for the end of the year party. Really, that’s what … we’d go away together, go camping every year or go to someone’s farm. We’d go stay at their place (Wotjniak 2008).

Similar stories were told by Mark, Zaim and John, all of whom had continued their social relationships with a few good friends from Feltex after retrenchment. The group experiences, the organised games and the trips away, however, had all ceased.

The Feltex workplace also provided an active social life for many young people, as was expressed by Abdul, one of the few Ethiopian workers in the predominantly European workplace. He had started working at Feltex in 1996 at the age of twenty-two. He talked about going out to nightclubs and to birthday parties with other young people from Feltex on the
weekends. Although he had experienced a negative relationship with his immediate superior, he described an intense sense of ‘family’ with others in the workplace in the following dialogue. I asked him what it was like to work at Feltex and he replied:

Oh, beautiful! We are like family. I miss these people. I work with these people for nine years and we hug and we kiss. They call me ‘a black bastard’ or whatever and I’m happy with them because they give me joke, I give them joke back. When we finish at 3 o’clock, I rather stay there with them (Mussa 2008).

Abdul summed up the quality of support in this way:

When I have a problem at home, I forgot when see these people. The stress I have outside, when I go to work it finish (Mussa 2008).

Several of the men talked about the out of work social opportunities that generated lasting bonds. In particular, fishing and camping expeditions, organised annually by some of the leading figures in the workplace were memorable experiences for Jano, John, Stan, Mark and Zaim. For these men, this element of Feltex work ‘culture’ was particularly central and influential in their lives. Whilst Stan, Mark and John had developed some new social strategies, or at least maintained a less regular contact with friends from Feltex, Jano had not been able to do so. It was Jano in particular, who noticed a decline in the quality of his social networks, and his overall social resources since the retrenchment. Jano described the way that trips had been organised by the influential men at work, joking that one in particular was like the ‘godfather’:

We go every June or July ... Every year we go to Murray River. Twenty, thirty … just the men. All age, all from Feltex. I think [it was organised by] Rocco and Piscopos. Rocco was Godfather (Kolaric 2008).

Without the leading personalities to organise events, and the daily connection with others through work, Jano had lost all contact with his previous friends from Feltex after retrenchment. He lived in an outer Western suburb where he was unlikely to run into ex-Feltex people in the
local neighbourhood. He had not forged ongoing familial ties with individuals outside of work, but had enjoyed regular group activities through which he consolidated his social networks.

**Zaim**

Zaim Abazovic had worked at Feltex for sixteen years when he was retrenched. Previously, in Montenegro, he had worked as a truck driver. He had helped his brother get work at Feltex many years before, and after retrenchment, his brother had helped him get work as an owner-operator in the trucking business. He had started work at Feltex on the afternoon shift, but through a stroke of luck, was able to move into a day-shift position after a few years. Zaim had worked at the North Sunshine site for twelve years before moving to South Road Yarns Mill. He had been responsible for six carding machines as well as maintenance and had an active social life outside of work with the men he worked with and their families. Zaim was glad to have moved out of factory life but missed the social aspects of the job and the sense of camaraderie he had there. He found the local trucking business very competitive and the work unreliable and this caused him a great level of stress. Whilst he felt he would not return to factory life he felt ambivalent about the gains he had made in taking on the responsibilities of small business.

For Zaim, the contrast between his life before retrenchment, which had been filled with social experiences, and his life since, which was much less so, provoked his greatest sense of ambivalence with regard to change.

*Before, I go to join friends on weekends – not every weekend, but regular. Few times go camping for friends, especially for Invicta. Just the boys. Less money but better life [with] Invicta (Abazovic 2008).*

Zaim described the process involved in becoming close to his fellow workers at Feltex. He described the process of making friends and of socialising inside and outside of work:

*Spend all day together, always talk nice, joke nice, laugh together. Of course be friends. As soon as people pass, they not say good morning, s’okay, you leave it. No touch! You no touch, him no touch. But people who like joke, we like joke together. After, spend time, too many time for the pub together, especially Christmas time together at work and after work too (Abazovic 2008).*
Whilst Zaim and Stan belonged to the older crowd, and had spent decades developing their friendships, there was also a high level of contact maintained between some of the younger men. John, who had worked night shift at Feltex and was still a single man in his twenties when I interviewed him for this research, still had active contact with his workmates of all ages from Feltex:

Stayed friends with a few of them, still catch up with them, go for barbies, few older guys and that. Mitko – go fishing with him now and then, Graeme and I go clubs, bars. Johnno as well, catch up for a drink. Angelo as well (Aleksovic 2008).

When women talked about their relationships at work they focussed on intimate conversation and sharing of personal information, which largely took place in the workplace at Feltex, over shared food at lunchtime or at the machine. Levy, Florica and Meliame all referred to the personal and emotional support they received from their friends at work. The sharing of common pressures as mothers and mutual advice-giving forged different kinds of close bonds which, in some cases, continued into one-to-one friendships outside of the workplace:

Oh we … uh … they nice to me, they … how you call this? Theresa and Sofi, that’s my friend, afternoon shift. When we at Redbrook, we worked day shift, she [Sofi] my very, very best friend and I had two kids. She really opened up to me, and even up to now, she still call me, we have coffee (Ramos 2008).

Meliame also continued to see some of the women she forged an intimate connection with over lunch and whilst working together at the machine at Feltex:

When I work together in the machine, I provided food and talk with friends with the machine. Talk together and laughing and enjoying. I ask my friend ‘you like this job?’ ‘How is his family?’ and [s]he ask me ‘How is my family?’ and communicate with my friend in the machine … and after that, we have something we talk [about]. I feel crying, because something for my health and I talk about my health and that helped …. In the morning, come sit together, talk. Same department all the time. Sometimes I ring up Christina Fumolo and Jenny and Marta and Irene and Sofi. And most of the staff in Twister[machine]. Sometimes I go for dinner with Sofi (Vaati 2008).
For those who had workmates, socialising at work continued to come naturally and remained an important aspect of their new work lives. For people like Stan, socialising was a natural part of his relationships with the new work teams. He described the strategies he employed in developing relationships, and in interpreting the new workplace culture. He said:

*I like socialising. People don’t worry me. Because they’re new people I probably watch to see what kind of people they are ... I knew how everybody was in the other place, but in this place it’s a bit harder to know what people are really like, so you look at ... watch, you know?* (Wotjniak 2008).

I asked him how he could work out what people were like and he described the process like this:

*You just tell ’em, tell ’em things, like you do trust them and if there are repercussions, then ... You can’t prepare – you just have to put it out there and see what they do with it* (Wotjniak, 2008).

As a full-time leading hand for new textile industry employer, Autex, Stan had to forge social relationships with fellow factory workers in his new job. For many others, however, the opportunities to do so had seriously reduced.

**A changing role for union membership**

According to the earliest definition of social capital, it is associated with the potential for people to engage in collective action. Hanifan said in 1916:

*When the people of a given community have become acquainted with one another and have formed a habit of coming together upon occasions for entertainment, social intercourse and personal enjoyment, that is when sufficient social capital has been accumulated, then by skilful leadership this social capital may be easily be directed towards the general improvement of the community well-being* (Hanifan 1916, p. 131).
Since then many social theorists have discussed the collective and individual benefits of belonging to communities. According to Bourdieu, social capital is one of the areas over which individuals struggle within the field of work.

Collective action through union belonging is one way in which workers have achieved and maintained improved outcomes in workplaces such as Feltex, where strong communities overlaid with close networks have flourished. Increasingly, the social capital of greatest use to workers increases individual access to new opportunities rather than consolidation of existing resources. Narratives in relation to union membership reveal many ways in which collective thinking, belonging and action at work have ceased to generate the social capital of value to many workers. At the same time individual changes in worker identity have also weakened personal incentives for belonging to close community in the field of work.

The union at Feltex was constantly referred to by retrenched workers as an important conduit for information, and had played a strong leadership role in mobilising the work community. Through union belonging many workers become knowledgeable about the ‘rules of the game’ at work and took responsibility for protecting their conditions at Feltex. All interview participants had been union members at Feltex except for the two supervisors. After retrenchment, a shift had not only taken place in workers’ sense of belonging, but also in the benefits they sought from belonging. The issue of union membership raised a number of issues, which are significant to this shift.

During the interviews, I asked people to talk about the role that they thought the union membership played for them personally in the workplace and the role that unionism and union activities played in the workplace culture there. Every interview participant who had been in the union at Feltex talked passionately about their own deep beliefs with regard to union membership. These beliefs supported many of their
actions and their passionate positions in relation to workplace conditions, relationships at work, the power of collective action. These beliefs also played an important role in self-definition as workers and as members of workplace community.

The Union at Feltex

Power dynamics in the Feltex workplace were significantly influenced by workers’ perception of the union representative. Stan explained that workers were galvanised by what they understood as integrity in their relationship with the union representative rather than ‘unionism’ itself. He explained it in this way:

Originally it [the union] wasn’t making any difference ... Just going twenty-five years ago – they always see the union come in the door, do a walk around, not talk to anybody, go into the manager’s office and walk out again. So they were feeling like, it wasn’t worth being in the union. So when the boss was saying things to them, they would be more shy ’cos they didn’t feel like they had someone they could turn to. So if you had a boss that was heavy-handed, you would find those people were meek and mild (Wotjniak 2008).

Several interview participants expressed a deeply passionate set of beliefs about their union membership in the Feltex workplace. Jano and Osmundo are two examples.

Text Box I: Osmundo Tena

Osmundo

Osmundo had worked at Feltex on the dyeing and drier machines on afternoon shift, largely on his own, for sixteen years. A gentle man of devoutly Christian beliefs, Osmundo had been devastated at the time of his retrenchment. That same year he faced the death of his mother and had heart bypass surgery, and his confidence and resilience had been shaken, leading him to suffer from a depression, which lasted for six months. Osmundo spent a lot of time in the interview describing his difficulties adapting to the workplace culture and building trusting relationships with his workmates at Qantas, where he had been working for two and a half years at the time of the interview. He suffered high levels of self-doubt about his workplace relationships at Qantas, despite the evidence that his fellow workers liked him and his employers trusted and valued him highly.
Osmundo highlighted ways in which union membership provided a vehicle for the expression of trust as well as shared social and political values:

Always we have a problem. Was a little bit … because my union at Feltex good for talking but not for action. It changed. When [the previous union official] took the position, the union was not very strong. They say something but cannot do anything and after that changed [to a new person], oh, very good this time. That’s why when we had a strike that time, the first day I inside, the second day I go out (Tena 2008).

Osmundo’s decision to join the strike enabled him to express a strong sense of commitment to and allegiance with his fellow workers on matters of collective importance. He explained it like this:

My boss said, ‘Osmundo, the first day you here and the second day you go out. Why no go inside again?’ I said, ‘No. As long as I saw people sitting outside I want to sitting outside. I don’t want to go inside’ (Tena 2008).

Whilst not all workers joined in, taking part in collective action in 2001 allowed many workers like Osmundo to engage with beliefs about ‘something good’ in the workplace that were worth fighting for. He said:

I feel sorry for people sitting in the street and for that … me and my leading hand Laurie the only ones [from my department] who go outside. Because on my opinion, they are fighting for something good. But some people, they don’t believe for that one. But I believe in that. I want to go outside, that’s all (Tena 2008).

Jano went into considerable detail in describing his views on unionism and its role in the Feltex workplace. He was clear that it altered the dynamic between people at work and that this had many positive consequences. I asked Jano if union membership made a difference to the workplace at Feltex:

Union membership is … make people more friendly, more communicate and you know, just together (Kolaric 2008).

For him, union membership at Feltex was a statement that he was personally willing to take responsibility for his conditions at work. His
experience at Feltex had shown him that union membership itself was both an individual statement and a commitment to collective action between workers. He elaborated on the role of unions in the workplace in this way:

_That’s what I try to explain here at this work [new workplace]. I say, ‘Union is not that person, that person. Union is you, me, him, see?’ That’s what union is. That’s what I understand. Not only Dot [the union official]. She’s not union. We are union. That’s what I think (Kolaric 2008)._

The fact that Feltex workers eventually won their conditions through the strike action had reinforced Jano’s belief in the culture of unionism. I asked Jano whether the strike had created divisions between people at work:

_I had a friend who went out from the union and I said to him, ‘Don’t do that. That doesn’t take you anywhere. It doesn’t make any difference.’ ... Is all of us. 2002 when we was on strike, that was union ... And we won that ... If we all stay together probably only take one week. Took one month (Kolarik 2008)._ 

Apart from collective action, union membership gave workers somewhere to go for advice and information about work conditions. Maria had recently lost her job in a retail outlet after more than two years and she referred to this in her answer:

_Yes, because you can have power. You can ask. Like, what’s happened now with me [at DFO], somebody to give me advice where I have to go, what I have to do (Bizdoaca 2008)._ 

Others explained the level of individual confidence that workers gained through their relationship with supportive union officials, who acted as mentors, and how this in turn impacted on the culture in the workplace. The relationships this generated had resulted in significant resources for individual workers. I asked Kathy if being in the union was important to her when she worked at Feltex. Kathy had been part of a very close team at the North Sunshine site before re-locating to the South Road, Braybrook site. She experienced an intense culture shock when she realised how
disempowered the Braybrook site workers at the Yarns Mill were. She expressed the importance of being in the union in terms of challenging a culture of bullying in the following way:

_We got a lot of help from the union. We couldn’t survive without the union. I mean, everything you need to know, I was ringing Dorothy on the mobile, you know. Big, big difference … for the better … ’cos when I went to Braybrook [South Road], it was very hard for twelve months. They were pushing you like a slave there. This was 2001 or 2002. It was very hard sort of … you know, but, talking to Dorothy to give me advice about what can be done. So I took advice and I put my foot down. Had support and more guts and stood up for myself_ (Duricic 2008).

Relationships were created through union meetings and the discussion and debate they stimulated. Stan said:

_They’d have the union meeting, get together, voice issues, and they’d be standing up for each other and talking about what they wanted, and … they always talked beforehand and afterwards. So they’re building their relationships with everybody as well_ (Wotjniak 2008).

Union membership at Feltex allowed a close community to become active about the conditions of their employment. For individuals it also built, within the workplace culture, a network for the exchange of information, advice and support. Whilst this group of retrenched workers were predominantly union members when they were at Feltex, and had been through successful strikes and won landmark victories over conditions at work, few chose to rejoin a trade union in their new workplaces. In addition, few knew who their shop steward was, or were aware of the details of their employment contracts. This was in part because of the new social conditions of work but also because of changed perceptions of themselves.

**The Union after Feltex**

Union membership had significantly dropped amongst Feltex workers since their retrenchment. Whilst the participants in this research claimed that union membership had played a critical role in their working lives at Feltex by improving the quality of work relationships and building social
networks, few had chosen to join a union in their new workplaces. This was true even for those who had been in stable jobs for up to two years since leaving Feltex. Reasons indicate that there was often an interplay between new social practices and favoured dispositions for work.

Some claimed that union representatives in new workplaces did not give them confidence, whilst others believed that the culture in their new workplaces or their status as casual employees did not create a strong basis for bargaining. Some said they were disinclined to start a relationship with a new union, because their perspectives had changed or they had become ‘tired’. Others, particularly those working in isolated positions, claimed that they had sought information about the union, but had been unable to find the information they needed to join. Reasons given for no longer belonging to a union were often combined with statements implying that major life changes had also reduced the relevance, more generally, of ‘belonging’ at work. In general, workers expressed a reduced sense of loyalty and commitment to the work community and a sense that the scope for using networks to influence conditions of work had diminished.

Structural changes in the field of work, as suggested by Pocock (Pocock 2003), led to changes in worker perceptions. The declining practical relevance of union membership for casual-workers, as suggested by McManus (McManus 1997), influenced the perceptions of those workers towards union belonging. Overall, belonging in the old ways had ceased to provide the resources that individuals needed.

Jano claimed to have tried to use his previous TCFUA contact from Feltex to find out what to do to get union support in the workplace, but had eventually decided that he now had the skills and personal confidence to look after his own interests by himself. He also believed he was experienced enough as a worker to know how to look after his own interests. He said:
I tried to contact Dot couple of times, but phone was busy or whatever, so I decide, better don’t touch. I look after my job, I work very hard and I know what I’m doing, ‘cos I’m not twenty, twenty-one, whatever, and I look after my job, I know what to do. Try to be more tricky than they think they are (Kolaric 2008).

Despite his confidence in negotiating the workplace social dynamics, Jano talked about missing the union as a conduit to critical information about the work contract. This information could not be gleaned from relationships within his new workplace culture, nor did he have networks outside of work through which to access the information. He believed that his job and his workplace were characterised by a sense of precariousness due to his uncertainty about his rights. Although he has not re-joined, Jano says:

I think I need the union. I need to ask few questions and all this, because I’m not sure about insurance, what your rights and all this, and I be happy to join the union (Kolarik 2008).

Workers at Victoria Wool were, Jano found, too fearful to openly join together in exchange of information, or to exert collective influence:

People over where I work is very scared. They work there ten years, eight years, make big boss very upset, he just come – ‘You finished – piss off!’ That’s it! He’s finished! That’s it, because people don’t pay union so no one to turn to ask (Kolarik 2008).

Casual-worker status had changed both the practical role of unions in individual working lives as well as their own self-perceptions. Vesna and Osmundo explained that there was no practical role for a union as providing protection for casual or temporary workers. Vesna had been the shop steward and a strong union supporter at Feltex. She was clear that she still considered herself to be a ‘union supporter’, but had not joined the union in her new workplace. She described her decision in this way:

I am a union supporter but when I am a casual they can’t help me. They can tell me ‘Go’ and the union can’t help me. It’s not worth it ‘cos, you know, they can’t help me (Karadulev 2008).
The sense that investment in union membership was ‘not worth it’ was shared by other casual employees, but this was not always framed simply in terms of the ‘protection’ or ‘help’. Osmundo, a strong union supporter at Feltex, considered the question of why, as a strong union supporter at Feltex, he had resisted joining the union at Qantas over two-and-a-half years. Firstly, he did not believe that the sense of commitment between other people at work or from the union representative was reliable:

Too many people say they not happy. I knew they fight together, then they very close on that time, and sometimes, nothing. The union just say something and then go (Tena 2008).

Secondly, Osmundo believed he has become ‘tired’. Like Florica, Jano and others, his level of energy and enthusiasm for ‘belonging to’ workmates and the workplace had dissipated. He said:

That’s a good question because, I don’t know, because there ... maybe I’m getting tired or something like that. Yeah. I think I have changed (Tena 2008).

Osmundo also felt his casual-worker status itself altered the kind of relationships he would benefit from, at work. He said:

But still like thinking about it [joining the union], ‘cos maybe, because of the job, because I’m casual or something like that, not a full-timer, because I believe if you feel a casual you are not good enough, to voice your problem or something like that. ‘Cos any time they are going to sack you or something like that. But if I become a full-timer, perhaps I will join, for my protection (Tena 2008).

It was not just casual or short-term employees who failed to re-join a union. Nor was it only employees who worked in isolation from other workers. Meliame and Jano had both been in their new workplaces for over two years when I interviewed them and both felt confident that their work would be ongoing. They both claimed to have an enduring commitment to unions in general and that they both considered themselves to still be strong union supporters. Some of their reasons for not joining a union again were specifically connected with their lack of
trust in the individuals who represented the union in their new workplaces. This was Meliame’s explanation:

*I don’t feel for union in my new job. I write a letter I am no more union. I wrote the letter to resign. It’s different. Because the staff member come and talk and I no talk comfortable for that staff and that’s why I resigned from the union. I didn’t like the approach for the people* (Vaati 2008).

Taking this further, Jano attributed his refusal to re-join the union to the lack of visible community from which leadership could emerge. Jano had given a very positive view of unions and the role of the union at Feltex. He explained that the lack of visibility of the union combined with the lack of a visible worker ‘community’ made it meaningless to join. He said:

*No I didn’t ‘decide’ not to join, but … people doesn’t exist and you pay union, you feel you paying something for nothing because you can’t see … you can’t talk to nobody. It doesn’t exist* (Kolarik 2008).

Jano had an altered sense of belonging within a drastically altered social field at work. Whilst he had previously spoken of the Feltex workplace as ‘home’, he described the diminished social environment in the following way:

*Well, [at Feltex] if you want to ask something about your pay, about this, your rights, everything, you go and ask. I just go and ask Dot and she tell me ‘you entitled this’ and you know where you are. But now! I don’t know. I just shut up and working, that’s all* (Kolaric 2008).

Some of the interviewees claimed that they would have liked to join a union but because no one from the existing workplace community had approached them, they had believed there was no union they could join. For most of those interviewed, their positive experience of union membership at Feltex had consisted of a public process in which information and representation had been a topic for discussion over many years.
The sole employee in a clothing shop, Maria had managed a business for her employer for two-and-a-half years since completing her retail qualifications after leaving Feltex. At the time of the interview she had just been dismissed from this job when she returned from holidays. Although she claimed that managers and sales assistants from neighbouring shops had been very supportive, she was highly aware of how vulnerable she was under new legislation. Maria considered herself to be a strong union supporter. She claimed she had not joined a union after leaving Feltex because there was no conduit through which to find out about unionism. She had asked other workers about it. When I asked why she had not joined she said:

*Because I didn’t know, because I ask to join retail and they said is no union. They said retail doesn’t have a union … Small businesses, shops and anybody doing what they want. He pay the way they want, he treat you the way they want.* (Bizdoaca 2008).

Abdul had wanted to join a union but when I asked why he had not, he said that taxi drivers had no union. Abdul explained that his commitment to unionism at Feltex was very strong but said:

*I asked VTD [Victoria Taxi Department] and I check the guide and I ask even the taxi drivers who work for forty years. I ask them and they say, ‘We don’t have a union’. We have Transport Union like truck or tram transport or bus – they have a strong union, but in taxi, because they don’t pay nothing for the union, so that’s why they don’t have a union* (Mussa 2008).

As workers started to place work in a different position in their lives, the work community generally mattered less and the motivation to join a union was diminished. Whilst many of the reasons given for this were related to the nature of work or of work cultures, some reasons were to do with internal changes at the individual level as well.

Florica explained that she still supported unionism, but had chosen not to join a union again, because she no longer ‘cared’ like she had before. Her life had changed in several ways and as a result, unionism was no longer a
critical part of her work identity. I asked her why she had not joined a
union in her new job as a cleaner and she explained:

I don’t really care that much like before. I think before I had to work, but now I don’t really
have to work. I need, but … That time I depend on that money. If I don’t have that money it
would be bad, because my kids were small. But now it don’t matter so much. If I work, I
work (Stoican 2008).

Two of the interview participants had re-joined a union because they
believed membership provided them with individual ‘protection’. Both
worked in the male-dominated transport and trucking industries. Zaim
had found out about the union through his brother, who was also working
for himself as a truck driver. Through his advice and information, Zaim
had found out everything he needed to know about the correct union to
join, to contact, and how the union could help him. Zaim was, at the time
of the interview, working with his union to try to collect money owed to
him by a company that was refusing to pay.

Unlike at Feltex, however, Zaim explained that his union membership did
not consolidate a sense of community amongst truck drivers. The union at
Feltex had the capacity to galvanise a group of people who already knew
and trusted each other. Self-employed truck drivers must negotiate for
themselves with the help of the union. Whilst the union acts as an
advocate for the individual worker in Zaim’s situation, it is not seen to
provide leadership in collective action. He sums it up like this:

Just myself and my truck. Don’t have union meetings. At Feltex bring people together.
Help people too many time, finish agreement … [Company] wanna cut this one, wanna cut
this one … union, we all go together … should be all together. Everyone should join the
union. People no join the union, say ‘Ah, what for?’ and I no listen. I think rules are the
rules and that’s it (Abazovic 2008).

For Mark, previously opposed to unions as a supervisor at Feltex, unions
simply provided insurance for individuals who may need advocacy
assistance at some point. He said:
Well, since being made redundant I thought, better join the union just in case! At Feltex, I think if they hadn’t have been in the union they wouldn’t have got what they got. It made heaps of difference, yeah … it’s made me feel more secure ’cos if something happens I can go somewhere else for backup (Hughes 2008).

For retrenched Feltex workers it was clear that the union no longer played any role in affirming or motivating a sense of community or belonging at work. Whilst the old kinds of belonging became less possible, new kinds of belonging had to be learned in specific ways, depending on the organisation and practice of new work.

Narratives on disrupted belonging

Richard Sennet writes about the ways in which old-style workplaces required fewer boundaries between personal and work behaviours, values, expectations and attachments (Sennet 1977). For retrenched Feltex workers belonging at work was once a familiar process. The words ‘home’ and ‘family’ frequently arose in conversations about the Feltex workplace, in the months immediately following the retrenchment and then again in intensive interviews three years after they had left.

Many of the interview participants used the imagery of ‘home’ when I asked them to talk about their recollections of their years working at Feltex. Different participants went on to explain that this sense of the workplace as a ‘home’ was partly a reference to the ways they felt about belonging to the place, the longevity of their connection, the types of personal relationships they had built with other workers there, and their relationship to teams and authority. The analogy of ‘home’ situated the Feltex workplace culture and social relations within a familiar set of parameters.

Some referred to a sense of familiarity, autonomy in the work and common interest with others in the Feltex workplace. Vesna described the enjoyment she felt in going to the Feltex workplace over her twelve-and-a-
half years as a machinist, by likening the workplace to a family environment:

*It was like we end like being family there and I got used to enjoying going to work – we had bad time, that’s normal, but most of it was good time* (Karadulev 2008).

Similarly Florica talked about the workplace as though it were an extension of her home and explained this as growing partly from a sense of intimately knowing the physical environment, and partly through the habits of practice over time:

>*You feel like you go – like is part of your home. You feel all right – you feel like you go from this house to that house, but a big house … yeah … know everything like your home and you stay there long, long time* (Stoican 2008).

Sometimes close bonds between Feltex workers carried over into friendships outside the workplace, and sometimes they were situated only in the workplace. For many, the intensity of these bonds was reinforced through shared fishing expeditions, barbecues, birthday parties and family camping holidays over many years – social activities which ceased after retrenchment. The drives which created the sense of ‘belonging’ and the important social capital that flowed from such shared social connections for migrant workers were partially explained by Zofia Kloss:

*We all arrived by ourselves, without families. So Feltex became our family* (Kloss 2008).

Familiarity with individuals in positions of power often fostered a certain informality and openness in communication. Close social networks permeated the workplace and fostered social relations where fairness across the hierarchy was expected. For Vesna, these kinds of social relations were the ones she expected to form in the warehouse as well. She described her continuing approach to workplace dynamics like this:

*If you married first year it’s hard. After few years you feel more free, more comfortable. In everything it’s same. With the job when you start new job, it’s hard. First you learn the job, after a few years you find the way how it’s easier for you. But the beginning it’s always tough* (Karadulev 2008).
Vesna, like other retrenched workers, was deeply affected by the ending of the Feltex community, and carried on her marriage metaphor, saying, ‘I hate breaking up!’

However, most Feltex workers had learned since retrenchment that social relationships and networks were no longer built at work in the same ways. Whilst new work was most commonly found through personal efforts and support from close family, awareness of work opportunities in new fields relied upon networks outside their immediate family and friends. Retrenched Feltex workers needed to be able to mobilise resources to find out about work and career paths. Close friendships, emotional support and collective action were no longer found through work communities. These would also need to be found elsewhere.

Whilst narratives reflected the significance of this loss, the need to belong to a close work community had lost some relevance within the new ‘game’. For some, it was replaced by a sense of belonging to an industry, a virtual team, transient clients, or a diverse set of customers from different classes and backgrounds. For some, loose connections with fellow trainees played a role in a loose network of acquaintances. The new game required new strategies. This meant leaving behind a set of understandings and also a set of values which were a function of capitalism under different conditions.

**Belonging through place**

Connection to place was critical to the experience of belonging among workers at Feltex. Of those interviewed for this research most had worked at Feltex for over fifteen years, with six out of seventeen people interviewed having worked there for more than twenty years.
Mark Hughes was a supervisor at Feltex who had a close group of friends at Feltex, friends he saw frequently outside of work. He described the Feltex workplace itself as more than ‘just’ a place to work; it was also a community. Whilst he admitted that he would not return to the stress and time commitment of his job at Feltex, he had been deeply affected by the loss of his work-based community of friends, and although at the time of the interview he still maintained regular contact with several friends from Feltex, he explained that he no longer had a set of work-based friendships that he would describe as close, or that operated like a ‘family’. Mark had worked there for sixteen years before he was retrenched at the age of thirty-eight in 2005.

According to Mark, the Feltex workplace was a family setting. He said:

_It was like a family but I still had my job there_ (Hughes 2008).

After leaving Feltex, new ways of working made it difficult for Mark to develop friendships through work. As a truck driver, Mark no longer spent time in one place nor did he spend time with work mates. Like Zaim and Florica, his job was now largely solitary. At the time of the interview Mark still maintained contact with one of his friends from Feltex although most of his other friendships from those days had died off. He described the difficulty he had in making new friendships with people he met in his new job.

_There’s one guy at work I get along good with, but he lives on the other side of Geelong … we [truck drivers] see each other in the mornings for maybe an hour, hour-and-a-half, then we’re out on the road, so you don’t really get a lot of time together and you don’t really get to know the person like you did at Feltex. You were working on the floor all the time. Different, different work style … They’re good blokes, good blokes to work with. We get along. It’s work. See, I’ve struck … I’ve started to form a friendship with one of them – Mick his name is – he’s from the other side of Geelong, but ’cos we were in Geelong for a Christmas party had them come over for a barbeque in the caravan park, but they didn’t … like, didn’t seem to me that he sort of wanted to be, like, friends. And I invited him over here for dinner, but they didn’t come and, like, you know, huh! I didn’t try any more. I tried, but …_ (Hughes 2008).
Mark’s familiar strategy for making friendships through work was unsuccessful for two reasons: homes were located far from one another and friendships could not be fostered during work hours. Any effort to forge a friendship under these circumstances involved a high risk of failure such as the one Mark experienced. Comparing this with the ease of making friends at Feltex he said:

*Obviously with Angelo and some of the other guys it wasn’t such a risk – it was a bit of a gang* (Hughes 2008).

The workplace culture also allowed questioning and challenging to emerge. As this resulted in positive outcomes, the sense of belonging for many workers intensified. Stan, a supervisor and tradesperson at Feltex for twenty-three years, explored the idea of the Feltex workers ‘growing up together’. Stan had started working at Invicta at the age of sixteen, and he reflected on the evolution of the close bonds between workers on the shop floor over their many years of working together. Long-term bonds of commitment between workers grew from a sense of belonging to the place and to each other, and with this came the right to question and to negotiate. Stan described the process in this way:

*As people started to trust each other more, and probably growing up – because they were young people when they first started for a lot of them, and migrants, so they weren’t in Australia for long. And we didn’t have much turn-over really – people turn-over – so people stayed for a while. They started to say ‘I’m not doing that’* (Wotjniak 2008).

For Mark and many others like him the lack of a place in which to forge group relationships removed the opportunity to forge and consolidate close friendships through work.

**Belonging in time**

Time for work, once consisting of regular daily shifts shared with others, had provided a reliable rhythm to which workers belonged. Relationships and patterns of work were constructed around these shared rhythms. Casual work routines disrupted workers’ capacity to know fellow workers
well. At the time of the interviews, many of the retrenched Feltex workers still had casual work status several years into their new jobs. For those who had central workplaces, casual status often denoted a sense of still being an ‘outsider’ and set apart from the ‘full-timers’ in the workplace.

Many retrenched Feltex workers, working as cleaners in shopping centres, or drivers in transport or as personal care attendants in hospitals, were unable to take part in the interviews for this research because it was impossible for them to know when they would be asked to work. They explained that they quite often worked an afternoon shift followed by a day shift and rarely relied upon having weekends free.

The prominence of casual work in the interview group resulted in a general sense of employment insecurity, although casual work itself was not stressful for all interviewees. In fact, it suited many. Women like Zofia, Florica and Satwinder, preferred part-time casual work during this period. However, in their cases the hours were predictable and regular and they felt ‘safe’ in their jobs. For those without regular rhythm in their working lives, their sense of belonging to the community of workers was dramatically reduced.

At the time of the interview, Osmundo had been working on casual work status at Qantas for two-and-a-half years, working constantly rotating shifts. Sometimes he worked a night shift followed immediately by a day shift, and found this very demanding. Mondays and Tuesdays were technically his ‘on-call’ days although he never refused to work on these days, and so his only definite day off each week was Friday. He was often asked to work overtime on Saturdays although he did not like to, as this was his church day. He still did not feel in a position to refuse overtime because a workmate advised him:

*It’s up to you, but if they call you it’s better you say ‘yes’ than say ‘no’ all the time because sometimes if they call you and you always say ‘no, no, no’, maybe there is … maybe they give you only two days or three days a week (Tena 2008).*
Osmundo spoke at length about the dilemma for him in applying for a full-time position. A permanent position had been advertised recently at Qantas but he had decided not to apply:

*I mean, if I become a full-timer, Saturday I will have to work and I don’t want to, because I go to church with my community* (Tena 2008).

Since leaving Feltex, Osmundo had become reliant on his church community for social support and he therefore felt trapped in rotating shifts working as a ‘casual’ labourer in different teams and on different sites. Despite the length of time he had been at Qantas, Osmundo therefore felt that as a casual-worker he had not adjusted to the work culture and that he belonged there. This feeling of being an ‘outsider’ at work also made him feel paranoid and suspicious of workplace interactions:

*When I go to warehouse the first person who saw me calls my name ‘Ah, Osmundo’ and everyone call my name. I don’t know why they do that one – it never happened in Feltex. They call me sometimes different names – they have some kind of Aussie variant of my name. Maybe they don’t like me – that’s what cross my mind! ‘No, Osmundo,’ he [a guy from work] said. ‘It’s not like that.’ He says ‘Ah, Osmundo, you are the first person I meet like you – I’m very happy to meet you’. Always like that. But when I work in Feltex, not like that* (Tena 2008).

Osmundo was unable to fathom his workmates’ behaviour. As a ‘casual’ he mixed with multiple teams in multiple work sites, doing a range of widely varying tasks. After two-and-a-half years he was still overwhelmed by the number of different bosses, work teams and routines he needed to be familiar with. He was also finding it impossible to ‘decode’ the informal, seemingly friendly messages he was receiving from team-mates. He contrasted this experience to his sense of belonging at Feltex. He explained that, by contrast to his relationships at Qantas, people who had been co-workers at Feltex still felt like close friends, even when they no longer worked together and did not really know each other well. He said:
I see Feltex people – like, there is one guy who walks his dog in the morning and when he sees me I wave and he is very happy. It’s like, Oh! Like, for me, these people are like a family to me – a family – like close friends, even though it’s not (Tena 2008).

Workers like Osmundo could no longer assume that time working together with people at the workplace would lead to a sense of belonging. Vesna articulated the different sense of belonging available to casual-workers. Even after ten months of working in a warehouse environment, Vesna explained that it was not possible for her, as a temporary casual-worker, to really feel she belonged to the community of workers:

They are full-timers. They can do anything. They treat you completely different. Not really same [as Feltex], because sooner or later you are not there. You have to finish, because you are not part of that place. When you are full-time you feel different, even with friends, with the job, and everything! When I were full-time Feltex I feel free for the job to ask something, to talk with people or everything. But when you are casual you can’t talk much. You can’t say something, because you … you feel different (Karadulev 2008).

**Belonging to the team**

Many participants talked about the way that work organisation at Feltex generated bonds between people, and a sense of belonging to each other as a team. Some thought that the kind of work that they did required a level of cooperation and trust.

Small teams had, over the years, found effective ways of working together. The organisation of work enabled regular team members to bond as a unit, sharing break times together in a common room. Meliame described the way that her small work team enjoyed time together at work, emphasising the importance of shared team breaks in consolidating friendships:

We had morning tea and lunch together and when we went overtime on Saturday we collect money and buy the chicken and sometimes I bought fruit or birthday cake (Vaati 2008).

When changes had disrupted team size or work habits they had formed, it also critically changed the working relationships at Feltex. Stan described
the ways in which work groups at different sites developed their own cultures. He concurred with Kathy that the culture at the North Sunshine site was more harmonious than the South Road, Braybrook site. Five years prior to the retrenchment, as part of a company restructure under new Feltex management, the workers from the South Road site, including Stan and Kathy, had been relocated to the Braybrook site. He describes how two team cultures clashed at that time:

[There was a] big difference. I think South Road people were a bit more, yeah … how do you explain it? People were different. They weren’t used to us being … ‘cos we were close at North Sunshine, and we knew people at South Road as well. But a lot of people were worried about … there was a different work culture (Wotjniak 2008).

Larger teams, he believed, were able to ‘get away with’ not supporting each other as much. He said:

It was a bigger place [at South Road]. There were a lot of people who weren’t getting much help from other people to get through their work. They weren’t helping each other – probably because it was such a big place. People clashed and people kept to themselves and in a big place you can get away with that. But in a smaller place you have to get over it, so at South Road they kept to themselves or kept bitching (Wotjniak 2008).

Levy Ramos had worked in the sample room at the Feltex Tottenham site for sixteen years prior to taking a voluntary redundancy in 2005. Several years earlier, Feltex had merged the Tufting Department with the Tottenham-based sample room, previously under the management of another company, called Redbook. She described how the shift in team size and structure affected dynamics at that time:

Before, there were twenty-four people – the regular Redbook people. They shuffled the people with Invicta and Redbook, and the techniques and their knowledge was totally different and they did not want to be checked. So it was not happy any more. We were like family before. When we were Redbook we were like family but when we included Invicta – the Tufting Department – we were not happy any more (Ramos 2008).

When retrenched workers from Feltex found work elsewhere they generally entered work teams in which they were not able to re-create the
intimacy and autonomy of the work teams Levy and Stan described. Osmundo describes the difficulty in this way:

_For me I prefer Feltex, because not too many people. In Qantas, so many people. At Feltex you work maybe eight or nine people. It was easy. At Qantas, maybe fifty in Despatch, and in Warehouse there are maybe fifteen people’ (Tena 2008)._

Small teams within the open factory environment at Feltex also provided ample opportunity for workers to observe each others’ characters, individually and as team members. Florica, now a cleaner who works alone, described the way in which the physical work environment at Feltex had enabled people to observe each other and be observed. When I asked her how friendships were made at Feltex she sharply contrasted it to an office environment:

_First, we work together and then you can see. You’ll see straight away. This one can be your friend. It’s not like an office. You sit in the office and that’s it. We go around, we eat together (Stoican 2008)._

Interview participants often talked about the cooperation involved in the physical work at Feltex and its link to a sense of social closeness. I asked Kathy what she liked about the work itself at the North Sunshine site at Feltex and she said:

_Everything! The people, the work ... people like one family ... helping each other all the time (Duricic 2008)._

For many, the physical nature of the job at Feltex required working together as a team on a machine every day. Satwinder explained that working together in this way allowed for hours of informal sharing between team-mates:

_On one machine we worked, three people together eight hours. When you work eight hours you talk. Talk all the time and come close (Kaur 2008)._

Vesna described the inevitability of personal interaction when working together on machines in this way:
You work every day together, and you used to it. You have to say something, you can’t say nothing. So slowly, slowly you learn to speak to each other - family, friends and you get used to each other start and talk (Karadulev 2008).

The idea of being ‘looked after’ in the workplace arose in the conversation with younger workers like John Aleksovic, who had started working at Feltex with no previous experience in an industrial environment. Three years after leaving Feltex John continued to have active friendships with several of the men who had acted as mentors to him. According to Mark, the physical nature of the work and the team structure meant that workers formed more than a superficial relationship, but took on additional social roles. He said:

I s’pose the work brought us together, yeah ... You look after each other, yeah (Hughes 2008).

Whilst many interview participants reported strong relationships in their new workplaces, the type of work and the work organisation limited the amount of social observation, casual social interaction and work-based interaction taking place every day. The work tasks, the isolation of job roles, or the fleeting and irregular nature of their contact with other workers in the course of their jobs reduced scope for the development of a sense of belonging to work teams.

In addition, relationships with other workers were often superseded by direct relationships with clients or customers. Meliame and Kathy worked in aged care facilities after leaving Feltex. Although Meliame’s job as a personal carer brought her close to the residents and she feels close to other workers in the places she works, the conversations she had with them were built on reflecting together ‘about’ the job, rather than talking whilst ‘doing’ the job together. Kathy, too, felt she had built close relationships with fellow workers in her job as a cleaner. But the work itself did not involve cooperating in the same ways. She said:
It was different because physically was easier in hostel. I didn’t have to do anything heavy, like I mean there, I mean not just me, all of us, if it was a large load and it was ten o’clock we help. But on the trolley in hostel is not a hard job (Duricic 2008).

### Zofia

Zofia Kloss was in her early fifties at the time of the interview, and had recently returned from a trip to Poland to visit a seriously ill family member. She had recently found out that her husband was also seriously ill and was focussed on making sure she had the time and energy to support him and take care of him. Zofia had worked with a number of other Polish women in the Despatch section of Feltex. She had chosen a voluntary redundancy and had used her payout to travel back to Poland with her group of friends from Feltex and re-establish relationships with family there. Zofia took advantage of numerous general education and computer courses with other women from Feltex after retrenchment, and completed an aged care certificate. She took a few months to find a job through a local council agency but eventually got work visiting old people in their homes. She found the work somewhat sad and was glad to be working part-time. An articulate, intelligent woman, Zofia considered the work a convenient income generator. She talked a great deal about the ways that Feltex filled a social role for workers, most of whom had arrived from somewhere else without family. Her family had been part of a group of families connected through Feltex, who had socialised regularly outside of work.

Text Box K: Zofia Kloss

Zofia worked in aged care at the time of the interview and had been in the same job for nearly three years. As a home-care worker with the council, Zofia’s relationships with other council workers were minimal. Her contact was primarily with clients and, if there was a problem, the management. She summed up the nature of relationships with her work peers in this way:

*We don’t see each other – just on the phone. We met once together. We just talk about job because we don’t know each other. We just see each other on Christmas – once a year. That’s nothing. Before, [at Feltex] we was always together. If there’s a problem, we talk together (Kloss 2008).*

Mark no longer talks about the family of friends who ‘look after each other’ at work. In stark contrast to his description of his social relationships at Feltex, when I ask him to describe his relationships with his fellow truck drivers he says:
No friendships – just workmates (Hughes 2008).

In competitive work such as taxi driving, camaraderie is actually replaced with defensiveness. According to Abdul:

Taxi drivers don’t like each other … they pinch the jobs. They are competitive.

Most of the interview participants considered themselves unchanged in their willingness to make work-based friendships. The reality for most, however, was that they no longer experienced a sense of belonging to teams and to co-workers, as shift, place, daily work objectives and conditions were no longer shared features of the job.

Belonging in the hierarchy

Relationships between management and workers at Feltex were neither homogenous across the different sections, nor consistent over the years. However, the parameters around new worker-management relationships were significantly different from those they had experienced at Feltex. Whilst no two machine operators had the same relationships with management at Feltex, there was a common understanding of how those relationships were framed.

As a supervisor, Stan believed that the closeness of the relationships between workers were an asset to management and that outspokenness amongst the workers increased over the years. He saw this as a marker of increasing trust between management and workers on particular sites:

As we got more people that were there longer, it probably got more harmonious too there. Well, there was probably conflict with management, but it let them voice what they wanted to say openly and what they felt about it. Even if it didn’t get resolved, at least people knew what they felt about it (Wotjniak 2008).

At the point of the retrenchment in 2005, Feltex as a company had been through many changes over two decades of restructuring. However, Kathy Duricic, who had been a leading hand at Feltex, identified a high level of trust and negotiation that characterised relationships between
groups of workers and management at the North Sunshine site prior to the Feltex takeover in 1999. Kathy believed this was possible because some managers had been working at Feltex for so long:

*North Sunshine was just like home. I mean, with the people and everything, but especially the management. It makes a big, big difference, the management* (Duricic 2008).

It was clear that not all management relationships were positive. Maria described the way in which some management decisions generated negative changes in the culture at Feltex:

*In the end, the last couple of years before Feltex finish, people start to change. Pressure – pushing and all this. People start to fight each other. The difference was because, too many machine has been throw away and he put a big machine and nobody liked work the big machine because very heavy one ... Everybody fighting – ‘it’s not my turn, it’s your turn on that machine!’ – arguing and fighting. In the rest, everybody was like a family in there* (Bizdoaca 2008).

Numerous other interview participants agreed that the harmonious working relationships between workers at Feltex had started to splinter in the last five years, since Invicta was taken over by Feltex. Under these conditions, small teams could be disastrous for workers who were unfortunate enough to have a bully in management. Kathy described the way this situation would play out:

*When I was in North Sunshine I was happy there. [I enjoyed] everything! The people, the work … People like one family, helping each other all the time. I mean, Tony Peroni, he was a good man, understanding. You could talk to him. He’d explain things to you, he wasn’t pushy. But there – South Rd! What they done to her, Stanka. They pushed her so hard that she was going crazy – didn’t speak English much. Oh! So I took her to the doctor, of course – from stress. Every muscle in her body shrink! She couldn’t settle down. Every afternoon she goes home in tears. What Janelle [the supervisor] used to do!*(Duricic 2008).

The harsh treatment that Kathy’s co-worker and friend received was ended through Kathy’s advocacy. The informal way in which this took place was an indicator of Kathy’s disposition within the workplace and also the culture in which Kathy’s intervention could happen.
In other sections of Feltex, workers enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. For some retrenched workers, the high level of management presence and surveillance in new workplaces was difficult to deal with. Osmundo claimed that he would still prefer to be back working at Feltex than in his current job, because of this. As a worker at Feltex, Osmundo worked ‘until it is finished’, rather than watching the clock. He compares his work now at Qantas with his working life at Feltex in this way:

[The work at Feltex was] more heavy, but I think because you are being free doing what you are doing in Feltex. In Qantas I feel – not unhappy – but you are not free. You have to do eight hours working [with] your boss watching you. Feltex, you do the job until it is finished (Tena 2008).

Vesna had also reacted against the lack of autonomy in her role as worker after Feltex. She was unable to deal with her job in customer service wherein she was watched ‘every step’.

Osmundo found, that even in a larger company with bigger teams, there seemed to be no autonomy and no escape from surveillance at Qantas. This increased his sense of work as a performance, which was done for the benefit of others. It was as though his sense of belonging to the job had been replaced by a sense that he belonged instead, to the boss who was always ‘coming look at you’.

**New ways to belong**

The above narratives indicate the ways in which new work and work organisation disrupted retrenched workers’ sense of belonging as they re-engaged with the field of work. In responding to these disruptions, some had started to develop tentative inroads into new forms of belonging. These facilitated different kinds of relationships and generated new kinds of resources. The relationships which produced potentially valuable resources for them were formed through engaging conversations with customers, potential clients, workers in other businesses, through a short term shared work experience or a shared training course. Families and
close friends continued to provide the primary source of support, and often, information to help them in their work endeavours. However, passing acquaintances increasingly became important networks of belonging.

New engagement with social networks was most noticeable in workers who had re-entered the workforce in service roles or small businesses. The women who had moved into customer service or aged care roles talked about the close relationships they had developed with their clients. Maria, for example, had adapted well to the new types of relationships available to her as a shop manager in a large Direct Factory Outlet (DFO):

_I had one girl and she already called me [after Maria’s holiday] and said ‘You back!’ ‘cos she saw my car back. I have friends – shop managers, around the shopping centre. Some friends from there – everybody love me. When I have problem in the end with manager with money everybody stick with me. They come call the cops and teach with me what I have to do. More friends than Feltex! (Bizdoaca 2008)._ 

Similarly Meliame claimed that working two part-time jobs at two different aged care centres gave her access to more people, more friends, more connections. Neither Maria nor Meliame had joined a union in their new workplaces. Both had done courses with other trainees, had made new connections through their work, felt a strong calling for their new work in service industries, and considered themselves different, better kinds of workers since leaving Feltex. Like Abdul, whose taxi customers educated him about things he had previously not known, they felt that their new jobs opened up a sense of belonging to a wider world.

For Maria, Meliame and Abdul, retrenchment from Feltex had been the beginning of positive transformations, in which their sense of belonging had changed completely, and out of which they had made the first tentative in-roads to new kinds of social networks.
Abdul

Abdul Mussa was twenty-two years old when he started work at Feltex, having arrived in Australia from Somalia. He worked there until he was retrenched nine years later at the age of thirty-one. As one of the few African workers at Feltex, Abdul did not always find the social dynamics easy at Feltex. He told stories in which it was clear that his skin colour was used as a slight in some of his interactions with his supervisor. Nonetheless, Abdul describes his years at Feltex with enormous affection, and describes his peer relationships as open, sociable and extremely close. Abdul had socialised with other young people from his workplace on weekends and learned to interact in particular ways with them, often through teasing and joking around matters of race and religion. Abdul completed several truck driving certificates and a taxi licence after finishing work at Feltex. He had tried to get work as a truck driver but found it impossible to get a job, and so he started driving taxis and found he enjoyed it enormously. He described in some detail the difficult and often confrontational exchanges he had to deal with now as a taxi driver. Despite these difficulties he felt he had good relationships with most of his passengers and that he was learning a great number of new social skills and understandings of the world through his new job. His brother had loaned him the money to set up as an owner-driver. His brother had told him, and he agreed, that to be a success, he had to own his own business.

Text Box L: Abdul Mussa

Zaim and Zofia, although not completely unhappy about leaving Feltex, had a more difficult time redefining their sense of belonging and finding new social networks. Their narratives were also filled with greater ambivalence about the benefits of change in their working lives. Both worked alone, providing services for a wide range of customers and clients, without getting to know other workers in the same field as themselves. Their work was focussed on those for whom they provided a service, but with whom they did not have the opportunity to talk freely, and their livelihoods depended on nurturing fleeting relationships.

For Vesna, Jano and Osmundo, who were all doing unqualified labouring work, exposure to new social networks through work was even more limited. Their degree of distrust of workplace relationships with fellow workers was also quite high. The social benefits of change were few for them. Whilst Osmundo had taken a greater interest in his close local church community, Vesna and Jano continued to invest only in their close
networks. Each of these three workers had lost a layer of social relationships in losing their Feltex community, without replacing it with new networks of belonging. Each also felt unsuited to the style of interaction that such relationships demanded.

Of all those interviewed, Jano was the only one who moved back into the textile industry without considering either training or alternative work options. He had calculated that he would have low chance of success finding a job. He was also the one most negatively affected by shrinkage in both his social networks and his life aspirations. His inability to forge new networks was in part a function of his disposition. However, whilst he had been able to thrive in the Feltex work context, new work conditions had presented a harsh social environment in which to redefine his fragile new working identity.

Relationships at work required different approaches and an acceptance of greater distance, but for those with loose networks and jobs that provided them with industry experience and new connections, life outcomes had undoubtedly improved.

Conclusion

The conditions of work in each industry favour and reward particular worker dispositions. At the same time, they foster the development of particular kinds of social networks and communities. Chapter Four is structured to mirror the concepts raised in the latter part of Chapter One, through a discussion of the changing sense of belonging and the changing use of social networks which took place in individual lives after retrenchment. This chapter demonstrates that new social practices accompanied and supported changing worker identities.

The close-knit social relationships and networks fostered in the Feltex worker community evolved out of regularity and longevity of routines
and interdependent team culture. A high level of unionism emerged from a social context in which family members, neighbours, long term work mates and personal friends were driven to express bonds of powerful loyalty around matters relating to work conditions. Work relationships evolved in a context of informal relationships with management, a sense of collective ‘ownership’ of work processes and opportunities to learn, seek advice and influence working conditions through the organised structure of the TCF union. Belonging of this sort reflected a set of social and industrial conditions that enabled a community of workers to generate the resources to protect work conditions, look after each other’s interests and maintain individual positions. It also generated particular ways of thinking and learning about work which could not be easily replicated under new conditions.

Immediately after retrenchment, close networks of family and friends were crucial in supporting personal resilience, as workers completed training and looked for work. However, networks beyond the close-knit factory based community were required in order for individuals to move into new occupations. Once they had found their way into these occupations, a diverse set of networks were needed for individuals to access advice and information for work, build social lives outside of work, have their work identities affirmed and confidently face the rigours of constant change. Whilst at Feltex, close networks were used in consolidating and maintaining work conditions, after retrenchment workers benefited from a more diverse and loose set of networks. Unions lost their appeal for many under these new conditions, both because membership no longer expressed deep bonds of personal loyalty and because protection of current workplaces, work mates and workplace conditions were no longer the focus of working life. Mobility and constant change required new survival strategies.

Moving into service industries had enabled some workers to tentatively establish new networks. Relationships based on transient, diverse or
casual connections provided some with a sense of belonging to a wider world, which affirmed new work identities. However, in most cases these new networks were unable to generate reliable advice, or sufficient influence to increase employment opportunities or other advantages for individuals. The structure of industry and the nature of training led to a highly atomised working life for many, where qualifications, skills and experience were often insufficient in the constant quest to maintain employability and forward momentum. For most workers, particularly those who had remained heavily dependent on close family networks and had been unable to develop looser networks through their jobs or courses, their new positions in the new work habitus still carried a sense of fragility three years after retrenchment.

Workers identified the need for different kinds of networks in order to thrive within the transient conditions of work. However, many found that the field of social relations at work had become exclusively client-focussed, whilst others worked alone, or in the absence of fellow workers with similar roles. Some had tried and failed to develop friendships or even trusted connection with co-workers. New work contexts generally required individuals to develop new strategies in forming social connections although in many cases workers had ceased expecting that these connections were possible or that they could be fruitful.

For those few workers who had been able to thrive under new work conditions, the evidence from this research suggests that a sense of social connectivity was a very strong factor. One had joined an enterprise in which most workers were union members, and where industrial protections were vigorously defended across the industry. Whilst unable to form friendship networks with co-workers, he could access formal union structures for support to working conditions and his improved shift conditions enabled him to establish a separate social network in his neighbourhood. His new diverse networks, although no longer closely
overlaid, generated the resources he needed for advice, information, opportunity and affirmation.

Another had secure, flexible, part-time work in two aged care hostels, where she had confidently acquired the skills and the relevant networks to find employment in other parts of the industry. Through her work-experience-based training course and her mobility across two similar workplaces, she felt she had widened her sphere of influence, increased her skills and improved her ongoing resilience in the labour market.

Loose networks of belonging such as these provided some workers with important bridges into opportunities for learning, as well as access to new information, advice and social relationships. However, for other workers employed in warehousing, retail, taxi driving, or owner operator businesses, new loose networks had been unable to function as bridges. For most workers, training had provided no work experience, collegiality or mentorship and it was not clear how the considerable work skills acquired in their new jobs would be recognised or transferred across their industries. Whilst contact with the public may have increased in many of these cases, contact with spheres of employment influence were not well developed and nor were workers confident about how other parts of the industry operated.

Under these conditions, whilst willing to take risks and embrace change, workers interviewed in this research were often more vulnerable and isolated than ever before in their working lives. Learning to thrive under these conditions would require new strategies and approaches but these could not be achieved by the workers alone. Connectivity between jobs within and across industries has become a matter which social policy urgently needs to address in order for workers to utilise the most powerful resource at their disposal in the new economy; diverse networks.
The following chapter examines the critical learning involved in transformative change for this group of workers and the support that vocational education provided to the learning process.
Re-defining learning for work

The everyday rules and forms of social interaction which occur in production are abstracted and reified as moral values to be extended into all other spheres of social and private life (Casey 1995, p. 77)

This chapter explores the ways in which new ‘learner dispositions’ were produced through workers’ engagement with new work practices and notions of skill. It analyses the tensions which were embedded in this process and how such tensions reflect the changing field of vocational described in Chapter Two.

As argued in Part One of this thesis, the norms and values accompanying the modes of capitalist production are internalised by its workers as they learn to carry out their roles (Casey 1995). The learning process takes place in both formal and informal ways. As experienced, displaced textile workers learn to ‘generalise from their particular experience and re-apply what they have learned in a new or different context’ (Virgona et al. 2003), they develop new dispositions for work in the late-industrial Australian economy, complete with new attitudes, values, self-perceptions and practices.

This chapter explores the various ways in which previous learning experiences influenced individual workers’ ‘learner dispositions’ at the point of retrenchment. New learning experiences since retrenchment also built upon and influenced individual ‘learning careers’. This includes the influence of unexpected or incidental learning. It analyses the ways in
which workers’ aspirations and sense of the ‘yet to come’ were in turn influenced by their ‘learner dispositions’.

Throughout this chapter I explore individual workers’ perceptions of the learning involved in their transitions and the ways in which that learning was supported. Whilst some perceived that formal learning failed to improve their chances of employment, they may also have found that it brought about unintended outcomes in their lives. For workers who wanted to move away from machine operator work, training was either viewed as a pathway into a different kind of job or into becoming a different kind of person. For most, training did not lead directly into a job, although it may have had unintended consequences. In some cases it increased their confidence, opened up new social networks, allowed the opportunity to experiment with different possibilities or provided exposure to new ways of thinking and speaking.

Gonczi summarises the inherent problem set up by the work/school divide that ‘whilst performances of activities/tasks can be observed, the attributes that underline the performance are necessarily inferred’ (Gonczi 2002, p. 3). Vocational education and training competencies are generally used to assess trainees on their abilities to perform as formal learners rather than on their preparedness for performance in jobs. Maria Bizdoaca summarises her criticisms of the Diploma of Retail she undertook in saying that it is ‘better to be trained in that job, not the school, because school and job is two opposite world’ (Bizdoaca 2008). The highly nuanced, desirable attributes Maria later articulates as essential in effective customer service required a certain ‘disposition’ which appreciated the different ways in which customers need to be treated. Maria’s narrative showed that, from the perspective of a retail assistant, it was vital to have an understanding of customers in relation to the kinds of products they may be looking for, their possible expectations of the particular shop and the ‘class’ background of the customer. Her deep understanding of this was informed by both her previous work history.
and her life experience. Maria’s frustration with the Diploma of Retail was that it did not assist potential retail assistants at the lower end of the pay range to think about and prepare for the full range of social, interpersonal and organisational issues they would confront as they moved into different parts of the industry.

Just as the worker dispositions of those interviewed were influenced and informed by their previous work experiences, learner dispositions were influenced by the kinds of learning and learning environments they engaged with. Despite Maria’s criticisms of formal learning as a preparation for employment, she articulates numerous other benefits which the learning experience brought into her life. Maria believed that she needed ongoing support and formal learning in order to stay employable as a casual worker in an uncertain labour market after another experience of retrenchment three years later.

Smith says that ‘the key to the utilisation of skills lay in the ability of the older person to “let go” of their previous occupational identities and create new career opportunities’ (Smith 1999). However, as argued in Chapter Two, the process of letting go and creating new career opportunities does not take place in a social vacuum. It is not equally possible for all people to create new opportunities and nor are the same set of practices and dispositions required for entry into every job and industry. Both identity (including appearance, self perception and aspiration) and industry (including industrial norms and gendered value systems, employer attitudes and specific workplace cultures) are in an ongoing iterative relationship as workers redefine themselves.

Meliame, as we saw in Chapter Four, was easily able to ‘let go’ of her factory worker identity in order to embrace a new career as an aged care worker. Returning to formal study was not an issue for her. Meliame had completed secondary school many years earlier in Samoa, using English as the language of learning. Her desire to be of service and to take care of
others was a strong work motivation and a job as a carer was perceived as a step towards a higher goal. Entry to part-time casual work in the industry was easy and quick and was experienced as a perfect ‘fit’.

On the other hand, Satwinder, unsuited to aged care work, wished to pursue her goal of becoming a librarian. Educated in English language at the tertiary level in India, studying for an Advanced Diploma presented no problem to her. Motivated by a strong desire to work with books and knowledge and to be involved in education, a job in a library was perceived as an attainable and suitable goal. Satwinder was, however, thwarted in her efforts to create new career opportunities by a range of labour market barriers and identity factors, and soon returned to machine operator work in a carpet factory. Formal training experiences potentially have a critical role to play in assisting older workers as they go through the process of ‘letting go’ of previous identities, although this is contingent.

Exposure to formal learning was almost certainly proportionally higher for this group than with most retrenched textile worker groups because of the continuous mentoring, support and advocacy available through the TCFUA project and because those interviewed for this research were largely selected from those with positive re-employment outcomes. Whilst some workers acquired new understandings through course participation, most felt that the most important changes to self-perception and self-confidence as workers came about through positive workplace experiences. The security of an ongoing job allowed some of those interviewed to start planning for the next change. For some of those who remained insecure in their work, formal learning and career change had lost their appeal. For others, formal learning combined with new life or work experiences supported changes in their disposition as learners and workers. Apart from a notable few courses, VET training did not lead retrenched workers to gain direct entry to the labour market, and its role
was secondary to those of supportive mentoring, social networks and willing employers.

It is clear from this research that the ways in which formal learning influences and supports worker transformations are highly nuanced. Vocational education and training, constructed around policy discourses of lifelong learning, overtly seeks to ensure that worker identities and attributes, as well as skills, are aligned with the expectations of industry leaders. It repeatedly emerges through the narratives of this group that learning support was insufficiently targeted and available as they reached new points in their ‘learning careers’ as flexible workers undergoing constant uncertainty and change.

From October 2005 until October 2006, over one-third of the retrenched workers undertook more than 115 accredited vocational education and training courses between them, and many completed multiple courses. Taking into account TCFUA research into the level of training undertaken by workers after other large-scale retrenchments in Victoria, the high level of training undertaken by Feltex workers can be attributed to two factors: redundancy payments which removed the immediate imperative to find work and the existence of post retrenchment advice and support. The extremely high level of engagement with training indicated that financial support in combination with mentoring, advice and guidance were critical elements to immediate post retrenchment training participation.

The following table summarises the ways in which training was perceived by those amongst the interviewed group who undertook courses after retrenchment. For most of the broader group of eighty-five retrenched Feltex workers who were still contactable and in the labour market twelve months after retrenchment, formal learning had played some role in a process of change. This following chapter uses narratives to highlight the various ways in which training was used and perceived.
### Table F: Table of retrenched Feltex workers in this research who undertook training and their responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Undertook training after retrenchment</th>
<th>Directly used qualification to move into an ongoing job</th>
<th>Believed training did not address their needs as a worker</th>
<th>Felt training assisted in other ways</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stan</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaim</td>
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<td>n/a (Used previous license)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<tr>
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<td>✓</td>
</tr>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
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<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>no</td>
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<td>no</td>
</tr>
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<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter 5: Re-defining learning for work

**Changing learning dispositions**

Most of the machine operators retrenched from Feltex in 2005 had completed between five and nine years of formal education. Many arrived in Australia with no English language and learned it on the job through exchanges with other workers at Feltex.

Their English language and literacy skills varied, along with their levels of first language literacy and formal education. Younger men were more likely to have trade qualifications, and men generally demonstrated more
confidence than women in their spoken English language, reading, writing and basic computer skills.

Some of the older migrant women had higher level certificates and qualifications from their countries of origin, which they had not used in twenty years. Few migrant men or women had experienced any direct contact with the Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) system.

As well as having less contact with formal education and lower confidence with spoken and written English language, women had a less well developed sense than men of the kinds of work they might do after leaving Feltex. Only twenty-five per cent of the Feltex women who filled in a TCFUA form in October 2005 had specific ideas about jobs they might look for, including work as a cashier, in hospitality, cleaning or caring industries or work in a library.

Of those women, all were either Australian born or educated, or had proficient English language and general education skills. It was clear that women with less contact with formal education and lower confidence with their English language skills were less well prepared to seek alternative work.

By contrast, sixty-eight per cent of the Feltex men who filled in a TCFUA form at retrenchment had specific ideas about preferred jobs outside the manufacturing sector, including fork-lift driving, truck or bus driving, furniture making, hotel management, work in the gaming or security industries, computer repair or office work. Many of these men were hoping to use skills and hobbies that they had developed outside of Feltex to find work.

Men who lost their jobs at Feltex in October 2005 appeared to have an advantage in their preparedness for job-seeking over the women participants, both in terms of experience with job-seeking in the past and
the confidence they expressed in their current English language, literacy and computer skills.

After a presentation on the potential benefits of training, prior to their last day at Feltex eighty-three of the 124 workers who filled in TCFUA forms in October 2005 indicated that they were interested in undertaking vocational education and training. Of the remaining retrenched workers, most were planning to retire. The type of vocational learning wanted varied considerably, depending to some degree on previous formal learning experience. Thirteen of the thirty-one women who indicated a desire for training mentioned English as Second Language (ESL) courses, and nine mentioned Hospitality or Food Processing certificates. The relatively high level of demand for ESL courses amongst the women may have indicated a self-perception that English was a critical barrier to further employment, or that a lower proportion of the women thought they could improve their employment options through vocational training. More women than men were interested in addressing gaps in their communication skills.

By contrast, fifty-two out of the sixty-three men who filled in forms in October 2005 indicated a desire for training. Of these, only three cited an interest in ESL or general education courses, whilst thirty mentioned truck driving or forklift licences. These figures are important in understanding the different contexts of choice men and women faced at retrenchment. Women’s understanding of the training they could do radically improved in the months following retrenchment, as they tried out different courses with the support of the TCFUA project. The majority of vocational courses undertaken in the first three months after retrenchment were undertaken by men, whilst that trend was reversed by the last three months of the project, after many of the women had undertaken English courses and basic computer courses. The learning trajectory for women as a group was different from that of the men over 2006, both in terms of the skill-sets they set out to attain through training and also in terms of the importance
of gaining increased awareness and confidence through foundation skills courses before undertaking vocational training.

It is clear from feedback on the perceived benefits of training (Appendix D) that vocational courses rarely resulted in direct employment outcomes that the women wanted. The pathway from learning to employment appeared to be less linear for the women, particularly those wanting to enter a customer-focussed industry, and even more so for those who hoped to find office-based work in a qualified position. Two such women were interviewed for this research. Both had a previously high level of education, good English language skills and clear ambitions; both found that the lack of critical social networks in their chosen fields made it virtually impossible for them to gain work experience.

In other cases, women felt that identity factors limited their potential for employment in industries they had believed themselves suited to, regardless of their qualifications. Neither of the women who had studied hospitality felt that they were suited to the work because of perceptions of their age and English language as well as aspects of work culture in the industry. None of the three women who completed a security certificate found work in the security industry, despite indications from recruitment companies that they would be contacted. One returned to work in a factory, one remained unemployed and the other found work as a cleaner.

Experienced, displaced workers often seek training that they hope will assist them to transfer their existing skills and knowledge to other areas of employment. Perhaps general education courses alongside vocational courses increase the probability that this can take place. Certainly other research in adult education suggests as much. Virgona et al. note that the ‘[e]vidence suggests that those who are given opportunity and a discourse in which to consciously reflect upon and identify the generic skills they have developed may be in a better position to transfer their skills more effectively and speedily’ (Virgona et al. 2003, p. 35).
The behavioural competencies and generic skill base required by employers of workers in jobs classified as ‘low-skill’ often extend to self-esteem and positive attitudes towards learning. Despite this, vocational training is often based on abstract ideas or conversely, narrowly defined technical competencies, leaving individuals to intuit the attitudes and behaviour required in the work context (Buchanan et al. 2001; Curtis and Mackenzie 2002; Hager 1998). Many researchers into VET training have noted that there is an important distinction to make between situated, generic work skills and conceptualised generic work skills and that ‘the dominant discourse of policy makers threatens to overwhelm the grounded experience of (VET) practitioners and demand adherence to de-contextualised conceptions’ (Virgona et al. 2003, p. 14).

Whilst several industry certificates and licences lead retrenched Feltex workers directly into jobs (Appendix B), industry training courses tended not to cover skills which have been identified as having the greatest use to retrenched workers, such as self-advocacy, entrepreneurial skills and life planning. Many personal resources associated with identity are engaged when workers adapt to new work environments, and it has been observed that ‘[t]hese are the very skills, the skills of identity change that receive little explicit attention in education and training courses’ (Falk et al. 2002, p. 8.). If employers are looking for employees who are hardened to the impermanence and change which characterises the labour market, who can weather insecurity, and thrive in a culture of uncertainty (Virgona et al. 2003; Curtis and McKenzie 2002), then vocational education and training courses appear, on the whole, to be failing to prepare retrenched workers for these features of the new labour market.

**Responses to retrenchment**

*I didn’t have to understand, I just had to know how to work* (Stoican 2006).

When reflecting during a General Education class about her experience of undertaking training for re-employment in 2006, Florica Stoican mused on
the changes in her thinking that were taking place, describing the
difference she has discovered between knowing how to work and
understanding the broader field of work. Workers left Feltex having
shared a learning culture and a learning habitus over many years.
Particular learner dispositions evolved within that habitus, as can be seen
in their narratives.

Learning processes in the Feltex workplace were embedded in social
relationships and reflected the values and power dynamics of those
relationships. They were often so lacking in abstraction or formality that
workers tended to disregard them as learning. Learners knew their work,
and they knew what kind of workers they were. The group as a whole
tended to confer labels onto individuals, which described how well they
knew and executed their jobs. For example, a group of fifteen retrenched
Feltex workers were able to quickly agree on which of their fellow
machine operators had been ‘lazy’, ‘good’, ‘hard working’ or ‘fast’. Some
workers ‘didn’t care too much’ and others ‘really cared’ about the quality
of the work. These adjectives simultaneously described worker attitudes
towards their jobs and their quality as workers in the eyes of the group.
All workers were not equal, as could be seen and agreed. However, this
same group found it almost impossible to describe what it was that a good
worker did differently from a not so good worker, apart from paying
attention to the detail of the job.

Learning the job of a machine operator in the Yarns Mill involved
watching, copying and practising the tasks associated with managing a
huge machine in a loud environment. Communication was necessarily
non-verbal most of the time. Expertise came through getting a ‘feel’ for the
different machines through repetition, trial and error. In those workers
who were motivated, learning the job often involved becoming competent
at a broad range of maintenance and quality control tasks as well as the
multitude of daily judgements and decisions which accompanied work on
old, idiosyncratic machines, and yarn with varying quality.
The low profile of ‘learning’ as a process of skill formation was reinforced by industry culture, in which the range of technical skills common to machine operators was poorly acknowledged and rewarded within industrial agreements. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and formal learning opportunities were limited to a few employees (mainly male) in supervisory, management or maintenance roles. The broad designation of machine operator work as ‘low-skill’ and the attendant attitudes prevalent in the broader workplace culture had a profound impact on many machine operators’ concepts of themselves as inexperienced learners.

In interviews conducted with retrenched Feltex workers three years after the retrenchment, in late 2008, they talked about the acquisition of different knowledge and skills for work, the role of formal and informal learning in that process, and the influence of formal learning in their changing lives, job options and self-perception.

Whilst about half of those interviewed had undertaken vocational education and training in some form before or during their work at Feltex, for others retrenchment opened up opportunities to take part in formal learning for the first time. As outlined above, previous learner identities played a critical role in influencing individual responses to retrenchment, particularly in the early stages. These previous dispositions were also informed by the social learning which took place at Feltex.

**Learning context**

Whilst at Feltex, the workers’ learning had been a socialising and acculturating process. For machine operators and other workers outside of the management and trade qualified strata of employee, the learning which took place at Feltex was not ‘employer driven’. Whilst it usually took place through informal interaction between workers, it was also sometimes provided to union delegates as part of their entitlements, or to supervisors. The learning which supported the development of skills in self-advocacy, confidence and communication in the workplace usually
took place without the employers’ explicit permission. This ‘Borderland’ learning had a somewhat subversive nature.

Kathy

Kathy Duricic was fifty-six years old at the time of her retrenchment from Feltex in late 2005. She had worked at the company for a total of twenty-two years, nineteen of which had been at the North Sunshine site on afternoon shift as a supervisor in the Winding and Twisting areas. When she moved to the Braybrook site in the last few years of her employment at Feltex she declined to continue as a supervisor; by this time Kathy found the demands of driving a forklift all day too great, having already sustained a back and shoulder injury. Instead she worked as a machine operator. In her last few years at Feltex, Kathy also played an informal role as an advocate and protector of other workers, ensuring their rights and their physical limitations were respected in the workplace. In the three years after retrenchment, Kathy’s life went through enormous changes. She was divorced from her husband at the same time the retrenchment took place. After retrenchment, she found work cleaning at an aged care hostel, which she enjoyed for eighteen months until her arm injury made it impossible to continue working. She had enjoyed working in an environment with old people and felt that she had bonded very quickly with them. At the time of interview, however, Kathy was feeling quite isolated, and was unable to work or drive. She was playing with the idea of one day returning to the aged care hostel to do volunteer work with old people.

Text Box M: Kathy Duricic

Kathy Duricic undertook formal ‘Supervisor Training’ whilst still working at Feltex. During this training, she gained knowledge and skills, which she has used in her working life since, to position herself in relation to, and advise others on, workplace rights. She says:

We used to go to school, a few of us … and we knew what’s our rights – what we can do and what we can’t. Johnnie and the others, we learned what was our rights and how to communicate with people, you know (Duricic 2008).

The critical learning that took place for Kathy was not on the employer’s training agenda. When I asked if Feltex management knew the training content, Kathy answered:

Yeah. But there they didn’t know. I mean, they knew, but, you know … (Duricic 2008).

Kathy had identified aged care as a possible future area of employment, although her injuries made it difficult for her to consider doing physical
work. She was satisfied with the cleaning work she had found after leaving Feltex because it fulfilled her social needs and was not stressful, as her work at Feltex had been. Her supervisor training, which she believed had taught her to become informed about her workplace rights and to confidently stand her ground with management, continued to inform her personal position in the aged care hostel. The ways in which her learning experiences at Feltex went on to influence her worker disposition in her next job were evident:

“They [other workers] were told to do things they shouldn’t do, but me, I sort of ... knew what was my job. They couldn’t force me. Like the worst job was cleaning the toilet – that dirty! And I wasn’t allowed to do it, which I was explained – ‘this is your job and not that’. And I didn’t want to do it. And management knew about it, so she didn’t force me … ‘cos she knew I knew it was not my job (Duricic 2008).

Kathy believed that her opportunity to undertake supervisor training many years earlier had influenced her approach to work and enabled her to practise self-advocacy.

Most machine operators, however, learned self-advocacy and other critical skills for work through informal learning experiences in the workplace. For young, inexperienced workers, the process of learning at Feltex often arose in the process of bonding with fellow workers and forming support networks within the broader work community. Co-workers sometimes helped others whose literacy was poor, or who made mistakes in the workplace, imparted knowledge and skills, and advocated on the behalf of those who were vulnerable. One example was John Aleksovic.

John explained his first few years of learning at Feltex, in which other workers helped him to overcome his limitations and to advocate for himself, but also ensured that he was not left to deal alone with consequences of his mistakes. He described the range of ways in which this took place:
Oh, if I had any problems with pay, I’d just go see them and Johnno would say ‘yeah, this wrong, go see the office’. Or even with machines as well. Like when my machine caught on fire! ‘Mate, what happened here?’ And Angelo turn[ed] it off and fix[ed] it for me straight away (Aleksovic 2008).

Not only was individual performance at work shared and supported by fellow workers, but it extended beyond the technical knowledge to the kinds of knowledge a younger worker might need in relation to pay and conditions. Stories like John’s demonstrate some of the ways in which informal learning encompassed a wide range of social and cultural elements in the workplace.

Willingness to learn broadly was a marker of worker disposition within the workplace culture at Feltex. Commitment and motivation as well as a sense of belonging were all expressed through workers’ willingness to learn more broadly than the narrow technical requirements of the job.

Florica described her love of work at Feltex as falling roughly into two parts. The first was that she enjoyed the social aspect, and the second was that she took pride in being able to fix her own machines. This was learning which she had identified for herself and actively sought through her close connection with the mechanic at work. This knowledge and skill was not recognised, supported or rewarded at work. However, it was part of the workplace culture that individuals chose to take this level of responsibility anyway. She said:

In every job you have a part that is easy and a part which is hard. But with this machine there – first I have two friends – and I like the machine. I don’t know, maybe because it was automatic and I had a mechanic showed me many, many things. Some people can’t care, don’t want to learn, but I like to know. I like to fix my machine (Stoican 2008).

Social relationships were forged across the work hierarchy over time, facilitating a range of such informal learning. These were critical to individual learning progressions and also to increased levels of responsibility adopted by machine operators. Like Florica, Zaim Abazovic describes a process in which he was able to assume greater responsibility
at Feltex through a gradual process of learning from skilled workers. He said:

_I worked there sixteen years. Started as carding, but after carding machine operator the last four years I did maintenance on the carding machines. The one who worked there longer, he taught me. For maintenance job, I learn to [my]self. Learn how easier to fix up machine_ (Abazovic 2008).

Such approaches to learning were contingent upon the structures and the social relationships valued in the Feltex workplace. Learner dispositions were forced to undergo change in the process of adapting to new work conditions. Upon retrenchment, a number of men undertook short courses to gain truck and transport licences, confident that they already had the requisite experience, networks and skills to move into labouring and driving work. However, for some, the fragmented nature of casual work disrupted familiar patterns of learning, creating a demand for new social strategies and learning approaches.

Zaim’s narratives often return to the problem of how to learn from and for the new context of his work. As a small business operator, he had shouldered the full responsibility for his learning, as he had at Feltex, but the kinds of informal social relationships which Zaim relied upon to learn the system at Feltex were now, in his new position, impossible for him to forge. The short-term, rapid interactions between people he now worked with gravitated around specific business issues, and made it difficult to form broader social relationships (such as those based on personal sharing and trust). He said:

_Not easy, because somebody looking at job, everyone thinking first for job, learning the job, thinking for safety, have to remember name, have to remember person, too many things to think._ (Abazovic 2008)

Unable to establish his new learning processes through work relationships, Zaim was supported in learning the new work system of his truck business though his own family networks. Social networks of family
and close friends were critical to the transitions many workers made into new jobs and new vocational directions, and this was particularly true for men. His learner disposition was well suited to learning from others and working independently to achieve results. I asked him where else he found the support, or knowledge to support his new working life, outside his family. His answer indicated that work itself had become a highly fragmented social process and as a result his learning had become fragmented. Whilst he picked up bits of information from other workers wherever he could, his close family networks were now his main learning resource:

*Outside family ... no need it. You know, no have this time. I need some help [from] somebody, but ... Always you talk to people. Always you learn something. When I talk to truck drivers I learn something, always, anything. How to do this and that* (Abazovic 2008).

**Learning careers**

Where individuals made the decision to move into a new area of work, previous learning experiences, formal qualifications and skills gained decades earlier were often relied upon to support the process of vocational change. Zaim explained how his previous experiences supported his transition:

*Before I come this country, I be truck driver three years in my country. I have interest for trucks, too many machine, excavator. But when, first time when we come here, not speak English, nothing! Can’t get licence, can’t get work. That’s why I go with the factory. But now, after that, I think now I understand a little bit. Now is more easy. Plus brother, he have business, he tell me too many thing. He learn me too many thing and after I want to start anyway* (Abazovic 2008).

Many of the retrenched Feltex workers had been qualified in other areas prior to arriving in Australia in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s but were unable to use their skills or qualifications because of poor English language skills, lack of social networks and difficulties accessing Australian qualifications. These previous identities played a critical role in
providing a ‘logic of practice’ for workers wanting to enter new areas. In Zaim’s case, his brother was also able to provide the critical social networks he required to become a new kind of worker. Others had to build those learning networks in other ways, and in so doing they were able to build ‘social capital’ for their new working lives.

When she was retrenched, Maria Bizdoaca also drew upon her previous qualification and experience, gained in Romania more than twenty-five years earlier, to plan her future vocational change. Maria reflected in the interview that her self-perception and her assessment of past decisions had changed since retrenchment. Maria had a highly developed sense of authorship over her decisions, and reflected that she had made a mistake, rather than having had no choice:

*I have the qualification back in my country for retail, but when I come to Australia I was young. I didn’t have money, I have a daughter. I didn’t have no English, no nothing. Didn’t go to recognise my diploma. I started Feltex. I made a big mistake. I didn’t understand what’s going on* (Bizdoaca 2008).

Initially unsure that she would be able to complete a formal qualification because of her English language limitations, the experience of enrolling in a Diploma of Retail Studies at TAFE and finding work as a clothing shop manager reminded Maria that she was already an experienced and successful learner. Despite her fears and reservations about starting to study, she said: ‘Once I started school, I knew everything’ (Bizdoaca 2008).

It was as though returning to formal study were a return to a point in her learning career at which she had taken a sharp detour twenty years earlier. Her knowledge that she had previously succeeded in completing a trade qualification had given her enormous confidence to undertake study again. She left Feltex believing that she may have overcome the barriers she had arrived with. Her English was better, she was confident with Australian culture and her children had grown up and gone to university.
Maria Bizdoaca had worked at Feltex for nearly twenty years as a machine operator in the Yarns Mill in Braybrook before being retrenched in 2005. In that time she was responsible for operating more than six different machines. Prior to coming to Australia, Maria had completed a post school qualification and worked for seven years in the retail industry in Romania, her home country. Due to poor English language and the urgent need to find work, Maria took work at Feltex at that time rather than pursuing retail work in Australia. In her early fifties at the time of the interview, Maria was very clear from the moment of her retrenchment that she would seek work in the retail industry again. She attended the TCFUA General Education course for six months and simultaneously undertook a six-month Diploma at TAFE. This helped her to regain her confidence in herself as a learner and to realise that her previous qualifications, skills and experience were useful in entering and maintaining a job in the industry. She was fortunate to find work as a clothing shop manager at Direct Factory Outlet (DFO) soon after completing her course in 2006.

Text Box N: Maria Bizdoaca

Previous qualifications had generated in Maria a sense of herself as a successful learner but social networks and work experience were also critical in order for Maria to sustain employment in an industry characterised by a wide variety of employment conditions and contexts. Unemployed again at the time of the interview, after two years as a shop manager, Maria worried that her work experience in the retail industry had not given her the experience with computers and electronic equipment to help her find her preferred employment in a large department store.

Her diploma had enabled her to re-discover the confidence to pursue her vocation. However, Maria found that success as a worker in her industry demanded high levels of personal resilience and support as well as a wide network of contacts. Whilst her family provided a critical level of support, Maria had left Feltex with no friends in the retail industry. Her Diploma had offered her a peer network of others seeking work in the industry. Two years working in a complex of retail outlets also provided her with contacts, friends and networks in the small business industry. These new friends had provided her with support and advice when she lost her job,
but were unable to exert the influence necessary to help her find new work. At the time of the interview, Maria was in contact with one of her fellow classmates in the Diploma, who she was seeking advice from about getting work in a large chain like Myer or Target. The training provided both confidence and a way to develop a new network. She said:

*Was helping my mind to get back the way I was start when I was young. I get back on track and say to me ‘you not stupid. You like you was when I was young’. My confidence broke before … I met a lot of friends in there[training] (Bizdoaca 2008).*

The combined influence of previous qualifications, work experience and support networks in Zaim’s and Maria’s working lives after Feltex were clear. However, in Maria’s case, previous experience of learning had shaped a learning disposition which was critical to her chosen vocational shift. As an experienced learner she drew a range of benefits from undertaking vocational education after retrenchment. She already had a ‘feel for the game’ which attuned her to the broader personal and social benefits of undertaking a vocational diploma.

For others, however, a previously acquired learning disposition may have assisted them to successfully undertake relevant diploma-level vocational training, without assisting them to develop a work disposition with the features required in their new field. For those retrenched workers wanting to break into a new work milieu, particularly those wanting to move into a higher skill category of job, personal identity factors, lack of relevant social networks and lack of local work experience generated critical obstacles to their vocational change.

Satwinder Kaur first arrived in Australia from India in the 1980s as a qualified teacher with a Masters qualification in Education, but she could not get her Indian qualifications recognised. Like Zaim and Maria she had taken work at Feltex whilst she settled into a new life in a new country, and stayed there for many years as a machine operator, supplementing a double income family.
When Satwinder was retrenched from Feltex she started a certificate level course in librarianship, whilst working part-time in another textile factory. At the time of the interview, she had qualified to work as an assistant librarian, and was continuing with a diploma to become a fully qualified librarian, whilst still working at the factory. She indicated in the interview, however, that while she was very confident as a learner and very clear about what kind of work she wanted to do, vocational education had not helped her to move into her preferred area of work. The courses provided no work experience and no supported contact with the industry which left her to find her own contacts and make her own networks.

Whilst Satwinder had no interest in factory work, she also had not developed networks to assist her entry as a librarian into local or school-based libraries. Nor did she appear to know how to look for related kinds of jobs which might put her in the right milieu. Despite taking a voluntary redundancy to pursue her new vocational direction, Satwinder was still working in manufacturing as a machine operator three years later. Although she had progressed to the final year of her diploma, she had little awareness of how to become a librarian. Satwinder’s learner disposition was neither suited to factory work nor her much desired career area. She had not started to learn in ways which would make jobs in higher skill areas more accessible to her.

Satwinder’s story illustrates the complex interactions between training, disposition and vocational skill requirements for workers. Whilst Satwinder left Feltex certain that her successful formal learning history would help her to enter a new career through a familiar pathway, her networks and her identity situated her within the expatriate Indian community in the Western suburbs. As a highly educated migrant woman married to a white collar professional, she had failed to easily integrate into local working class networks. However, she had not developed networks in the social milieu which she was seeking to enter, and nor had she developed a strategy for doing so.
Individual disposition, encompassing features of personal identity and social networks, had a striking influence on the relevance of vocational learning as a pathway to career change. Whilst previous learner disposition played a significant role in motivating and shaping the aspirations of some individuals immediately after retrenchment, vocational learning after retrenchment influenced the ways in which ‘learning’ came to be seen as a strategy by others.

For John Aleksovic, retrenched from Feltex at the age of twenty-six, there was a long period of uncertainty, indecision and a reticence to undergo change after retrenchment. Lack of success in previous formal learning had resulted in a general disinterest in undergoing training as a strategy for change. John’s parents were Croatian and he had been brought up in a Western suburb in Melbourne, where he had attended a local state school. When he had first left school as a teenager, he had started at Trade School learning to be a painter, but did not finish the course. He talked about his early experience as a learner in the formal education system in this way:

“It was like school, trade school. I used to be a painter before I was at Macca’s [McDonalds]… I just got bored with it after a while and stopped (Aleksovic 2008).

John thought that his decision to stay in a night shift job as a machine operator at Feltex for five years reflected that he had been too ‘lazy’ to look for anything better. When I commented that he had stayed at Feltex for some time, John made sense of his choices by describing himself as unmotivated:

‘I don’t know. I kept saying ‘I’m gonna leave soon, gonna leave soon’ and people say, ‘Look at you – you’re a young boy! You’re smart! You can read and write! You know there’s other jobs better than here’, but I was just lazy, I think (Aleksovic 2008).

Aside from considering himself to be easily bored and lazy, John also described himself as ‘lucky’ enough to have found an ongoing job with a hydraulics company since leaving Feltex. John’s self-perception was neither that of a loyal worker nor a self-motivated learner. Despite this,
since starting, he had been given an opportunity by his new employer to become a qualified fitter and turner by taking up an adult traineeship. Although he felt that there were many opportunities for a future in the industry, John decided that the benefits of completing a trade qualification did not outweigh the reduction in pay that he would have to accept over the period of the traineeship. He said:

> He’s asked me, but I don’t wanna go through with that. There’s a lot of people there without the papers and stuff, and they get good money and all that stuff. But fitting and turning apprenticeship, there’s no money in it! It’s too low, especially for my age (Aleksovic 2008).

John had found an ongoing full-time job in a growing steel manufacturing company, where he earned good money and had job security. I asked him to tell me about his future work aspirations and his reply demonstrated that he did not feel that either his working future employability or his job security in the industry would improve with a qualification. This belief was supported by his employer’s active encouragement and positive feedback. For John, who lived at home with his parents, his work aspirations and his worker disposition were perfectly matched to an unqualified position in manufacturing, and he believed that a qualification had little to contribute to his career path. This did not mean that John was not learning new things or becoming a different kind of learner. His workplace culture required him to think broadly about learning in the job. I asked him where he thought he would be in five years and he said:

> Probably the same place, and my boss says ‘Just work your way up and get to know the ropes and it’ll take more time to learn everything properly’. It’s gonna get bigger soon – a lot bigger’ (Aleksovic 2008).

**Narratives on learning**

Post retrenchment learning had introduced workers like John to a new strategy after retrenchment. Lacking in confidence or ambition
immediately after the closure of the Yarns Mill, John had eventually completed both a red card and a food handling certificate through training organised through the TCFUA post retrenchment support project. He reflected that it had taken him four or five months before that to accept that he would not be able to find familiar work back in a textile factory and to start looking for different kinds of work.

The process of undertaking training created a focus for John, during which he started thinking about alternative kinds of temporary jobs which could act as a stepping stone to better work options. He explains this process:

> Probably after four or five months when I couldn't find no work, and then I thought I'd look for any job I could find and just stay there a few months 'til I could find another job (Aleksovic 2008).

John’s decision to refocus his goals and his successful learner experiences completing short courses of a practical nature worked together in this process. He was so convinced of the value of doing courses that he advised other unemployed retrenched friends from Feltex to use training as a step towards change. He said:

> There's one friend, he was working at Feltex – an older guy – and he couldn't find jobs and I told him 'Don't look for the same thing. Look for something else', and I told him 'do some courses'. And he said, 'I don't even speak English', and I said, 'Well, find a course to speak English' (Aleksovic 2008).

John recognised that continuing to imagine his future in a textile company was a mistake that he should advise others against. Whilst the training he completed did not directly lead to new work, John reflected that it was valuable as it may help him to find work later on. He considered it would hold some value in his imagined future learning career.

Whilst training clearly had an impact on John’s learner disposition, it was practical work experience that he considered to have provided him with the context in which he could learn to become a different kind of worker.
over a sustained period of time. When I asked him how long it had taken him to feel he had ‘moved on’ after retrenchment, he said:

*When I started at this place two years back, after the first week I wanted to leave. After two months I just got that little bit of experience and confidence as well, and got better and better, and after another four months I felt better. Probably eighteen months (Aleksovic 2008).*

Whilst practical work experience and job security eventually provided John with the confidence that he could apply himself to learn in new ways, short courses also provided him with a new outlook on training and on his future capacity to navigate change. The combination of the two provided him with some additional strategies with which to deal with change. John’s engagement with vocational education and training after retrenchment did not lead him directly to work, but it changed his attitude towards himself as a learner.

**John**

John Aleksovic had worked on night shift at Feltex for five years from the age of twenty-one. Educated locally, John had left school early to work at MacDonald’s for a few years. After he first left school he had started a painting apprenticeship at a trade school but soon dropped out. John reflected on his lack of confidence and motivation to leave Feltex, despite the fact that working night shift had seriously limited his social life outside of work and left him feeling tired and drained. He also reflected on his lack of direction in finding new work after retrenchment. When he finally decided after four or five months to look for work in new areas, he completed Red Card and Food Handling courses through the local Job Network and started to consider alternative kinds of employment. After nine months of unemployment he found a stable job as a metal worker in a hydraulics company, where he had been working for the two years prior to the interview. John saw a strong future ahead of him in the company, and in the hydraulics industry more generally if he wished. He was still contemplating what he wanted to do in the future, however, and commented that he would like to go into business with a friend if the opportunity arose.

*Text Box O: John Aleksovic*

In remarkable contrast with the person I first met after retrenchment in 2005, John seemed confident in navigating more changes in the future. His work disposition had shifted to include a more skilled work orientation
which he believed he could adapt to a range of new situations. He spoke confidently of his plans for the next change if and when it happens, saying: ‘If this job didn’t work out, I got a red card now. I could apply for jobs in the commercial side. I got experience’ (Alekovic, 2008).

**Learning to transfer soft skills**

As outlined in Chapter Two, and discussed in the previous section, learner disposition is a critical element in determining how change, particularly a change such as retrenchment, is navigated by individuals. Whilst successful engagement with formal learning clearly assisted many retrenched Feltex workers to re-focus their goals and plan their next steps, there was a dynamic interplay between individual learner disposition and aptitude for particular vocational shifts.

In Chapter Two I discussed the particular relevance of aged care training in both the development of new worker dispositions and in trainees finding employment in the sector as a result of training (Colley et al. 2003; Waterhouse and Virgona 2004; Karmel et al. 2008). In order to become aged care workers, both Zofia Kloss and Meliame Vaati underwent formal aged care training, and then soon after found part-time positions within the industry. Neither found it difficult to adapt to the work of caring for old people, although both talked about the emotional challenges involved in dealing with the suffering of others. Their preparedness to undertake the emotional work was critical to their transition into the industry.

In the case of Meliame, the smooth transition into aged care work corresponded closely to her own perception of her existing skills, experience and practices in looking after older family members throughout her life. She felt sorry for the suffering of old people, but this only made her find compassion for them, describing them as being ‘like my mother and father’. With only a little advice and guidance, and minimal vocational training, she had changed work milieus within six months.
Meliame

Before retrenchment Meliame Vaati had worked at Feltex for twenty years since arriving in Australia from Tonga. When she was first retrenched, Meliame was very distressed about losing contact with her work-based friends and she stopped going out for a few months. She completed a course in aged care in June 2006 after which she started working in the industry straight away. Meliame had a permanent part-time contract in two different residential care workplaces, working sixty hours regularly every fortnight. If she wanted more work it was easy for her to get an additional shift. She enjoyed her new life as a carer, and found that it suited her much more to be working with people, even though she had enjoyed working with machines. Outside of work, Meliame’s life was based almost exclusively in home duties, involving taking care of her home and family. She still saw friends from Feltex occasionally but felt that she had changed a lot since changing jobs, and that the change was for the better.

Text Box P: Meliame Vaati

Unlike Meliame, Satwinder had completed training and work experience in the aged care industry but quickly found she did not have the temperament required for the job. Satwinder had said:

When I saw the practicum I didn’t like much. When I saw people suffering, I don’t like to see them because … somebody can do this, but I can’t. I saw people suffering and after I cried, and I can’t (Kaur 2008).

Instead, Satwinder had decided to pursue her passion for teaching and books but found that, despite her qualifications, experience, skills and practices which prepared her for entry to professional work as a librarian assistant, changing work milieus would require her to find mentoring, new networks and a willing employer. The skills required to locate or develop these critical support structures had to come from her identity resources rather than her training.

Those who, like Satwinder, lacked the new social networks and willing employers to enter semi-professional employment, were not necessarily able to overcome these obstacles through determination, professional disposition or formal qualifications. Like Satwinder, Levy Ramos had aimed to return to a professional role. Previously a qualified social worker in the Philippines, Levy had never worked in Australia in her profession,
but had been a machinist and general hand at Feltex for sixteen years. After retrenchment, she completed a qualification to become a medical receptionist as she had a friend working at the Royal Melbourne Hospital who had encouraged her to qualify and apply for work there. Unfortunately, Levy’s contact at the hospital had left before she finished the course, and Levy had no further networks to connect her to the new field. She was therefore unable to use her new qualification to find work.

Her well-developed English language, literacy and computer skills, her recent qualifications, previous experience in social work and her persistence over several months did not enable Levy to enter the area for which she had been trained. After several months of looking, she eventually found ongoing night shift work as an unqualified personal attendant to a man with a disability. When I asked Levy what might have made other career pathways possible, her answer encompassed both the relevance of choosing the right course and of having friends in the right places:

*I would study part-time some subjects for social work because, maybe I could finish that course – because I have a friend in Dandenong, a social worker, says ‘you should have studied because I am now looking for a social worker – qualified’* (Ramos 2008).

John Aleksovic’s post retrenchment experiences as a young, locally educated man looking for work in an area traditionally employing others like himself, reflected a very different range of opportunities and a different role for formal learning. Unlike Satwinder or Levy, John had few work ambitions and limited previous experiences with formal learning. He had consistently rejected opportunities to become formally qualified. However, in contrast with the experiences of the two women, John’s narrative conveys a strong sense that he had found a job in which he felt he was continually learning and which would continue to offer interesting work and learning opportunities. He said:
I get bored with every place I work at. I work there a while, I get sick of it and same this place as well. But the thing is, here you’re not always doing the same thing. Always something different (Aleksovic, 2008).

Whilst experienced and qualified for skilled work, retrenched workers such as Satwinder and Levy returned to work which they considered undemanding, repetitive and often boring, because they had not been able to ‘transfer’ their generic skills or their technical skills. Transferability of these skills would require a number of social supports, and in effect further formal training had not enhanced their processes of becoming new, skilful workers. Whilst they were not unhappy in their new work, neither did they feel they were fulfilling their potential.

**Learning to think about work in new ways**

Whilst vocational education increasingly refers to interpersonal or soft skills as ‘generic’ and therefore transferable from job to job, the so-called ‘soft skills’ required of a worker are not so easy to ‘transfer’. As can be seen by the examples of Satwinder and John, skills for finding and keeping work are both classed and gendered, and indeed are marked by and expressed through a complex range of personal identity features. They also manifest as part of particular work processes, which differ from job to job. Work processes and work culture create a mindset amongst workers with regard to what constitutes ‘the work’ and therefore what constitutes ‘the worker role’.

Customer service and the relevance of the customer is one example of this. John was learning to engage with new kinds of day-to-day decision-making and teamwork with the support of his new employer. The learning John needed to engage with in order to excel in his new work required new technical knowledge, but it also required him to review his overall approach to work so that application of skill, team communication, and customer satisfaction were factored into his understanding of quality output. Whilst the new technical knowledge was in itself not complex,
achieving a good product required a level of mastery and decision making, which required time. He said:

> When I left there [Feltex] had no experience in nothing else. He [the new boss] told me about millimetres and centimetres and that, and talking about two-inch thick rods, and I’m new to that and took me a whole year to learn things, so it was a big change (Aleksovic 2008).

John also had to think about work in different ways. At the hydraulics company, the chain of quality control surrounding his output included the boss, the other welders and the customer. He said:

> As soon as I finish, I check it’s welded properly and I go to the boss or I go to the welder, and the customer would just reject it and send it back to me. Don’t want to get no one in trouble, but just do a good job. Boss’ll be happy, customer happy (Aleksovic, 2008).

The considerations in his new job were significantly different from his job at Feltex, in which his primary interaction was with the machine, and where the monitoring of product quality and quantity took place with little interaction between workmates, or with customers in mind. John now had a new set of social consequences to think about in his work. He had moved from a repetitive and physically demanding job operating a machine, to one in which his own technical mastery of welding had to be applied and which also took into consideration the customer expectations of the final product.

For others, the context of work generated ways of thinking about work that took broader processes into account, such as product quantities, or that incorporated an awareness of a high level of surveillance and adherence to regulations in the workplace.

Vesna Karadulev explained that on a physical level it was not possible to ‘use different parts’ of herself at work in a warehouse compared to her work as a machine operator. She stressed however, that the type of attention her work required was different as were the consequences of inattention:
You have to use your hands to lift, your brain to count! Here you have to concentrate more, ’cos you’re counting and you feel like you have to more … when you count you have to know, because goes into machine and have to know. But Feltex, just the machine – no worry.

Osmundo Tena reflected that his work at Qantas demanded a heightened awareness of authority and of rules and regulations. He said:

Worry. Worry at work. Always. Looking out for the boss – so many! The first company is so many – I don’t know. Safety. It’s very, very safe. Hair net, shoes (Tena 2008).

For John, Vesna and Osmundo, the new technical knowledge requirements for work were small, involving learning about metric measurement or concentrating on counting boxes, or being mindful of health and safety regulations. However, what emerged repeatedly was that adherence to new systems and processes and the development of skill, required acculturation to new ways of thinking about work and work practices. None of these jobs required formal training although all required learning. Learner dispositions had to become attuned to the nuances of work culture and symbolic meaning. As new learning was incorporated into strategy, workers established their new work dispositions.

**Learning for constant change**

For those in owner-operator small business, learning strategies for work had to be developed in the absence of features such as physical surveillance or work teams. After nearly three years, Zaim found the demand to be constantly prepared for multiple expectations in different jobs and of networking to find new jobs was constant and draining. He said:

Lot of change, yeah. That time [at Feltex] never be worry much, just you work only for enjoy. Now have to use too much brain now, too much telephone now, too many thing now, more pressure now. Everyone something new one – new place, new people (Abazovic 2008).
According to Zaim the demands of work required a highly strategic and customer-focussed work disposition in order to be successful. He says:

There’s getting less and less jobs because more trucks everywhere, so less jobs, yeah. So that’s why you have to try everywhere to be good, to be nice person. If you get upset and agency no send you no work anymore. Another like that – finish (Abazovic 2008).

Zaim already had the technical skills required for running his truck, but the skills for managing his business and the social performance of maintaining sufficient work required a new set of practices.

Similarly, Maria dreaded the process of looking for work again, despite having qualifications and experience. She believes that, as each retail employer has different software and computer systems, this requires slightly different kinds of experience from employees. She said:

It’s not gonna be easy, because I didn’t do anything in that business. He doesn’t have a computer. He has just cash register and everybody has a computer. Cash register and basic computer, but that doesn’t help you much. Different programs and different things (Bizdoaca 2008).

Maria believed she would constantly face the need to stay competitive for work in the retail industry, which she believed favoured younger English-speaking women. Now that she had a qualification and experience, she believed she now required both English language courses and mentoring to find a secure job in a larger company.

As retrenched workers established themselves in new fields of work, many identified and developed work goals. In so doing they articulated new learning required, including new personal and social skills for securing and maintaining work, and strategies for dealing with stressful working conditions. Buchanan’s ‘skills ecosystem’ was in evidence with every worker’s story. Vocational education and training addressed only some of the many complex acts of learning involved in becoming new workers.
Perceptions of formal learning

Whilst vocational education and training was perceived as an aid to some, others experienced a gap between course content and the real challenges of navigating the field of work. Finding work, understanding how to communicate with customers and clients, learning to manage time and plan for work, managing the stress that came with higher levels of accountability, adapting expectations and goals, required each retrenched worker to think and learn differently and to develop new learning practices.

For some, like Florica, undergoing foundation level courses offered an opportunity to develop social skills and confidence to ‘talk with different people’. Florica initially developed new confidence by undergoing formal learning, saying:

“When I start do the courses I think, then I see ‘Oh so I can do something else. I can talk with different people’. I did talk with different people. I was confident that time. Now I’m a little bit down” (Stoican 2008).

I asked Florica to reflect on what it was about the courses that assisted her in moving on from Feltex and her response indicated that it was the social element of the courses and the conversations they enabled, combined with a positive learning experience which combined to improve her confidence.

She said:

“I think the people. We talk something different. We talk something new. We forget Feltex. We start again. We talk what we gonna do. I think the people, yeah (pause). Not just the people. Like, I think, I will never read a book or write something, but I did (pause) and I was pretty good! So then I think ‘Well, I’m not that bad. I can do something else’ (Stoican 2008).

Florica did not go any further with her vocational plans to enter the security industry. Instead, she accepted part-time cleaning work; a job which she felt had a low status.
Florica Stoican was in her mid-forties when she was retrenched from Feltex. From Romania originally, Florica had worked at Feltex for fifteen years, since first arriving in Australia. Florica was enthusiastic about the opportunity to complete formal studies. In the twelve months after retrenchment she completed six formal courses, three of which were in English as a second language and computer studies, one of which was for her drivers’ licence. Six months after retrenchment, she completed a Certificate III level vocational course in Hospitality and afterwards decided that she did not want to work in the industry. Nearly twelve months after retrenchment she completed a course in the security industry, and developed a strong interest in this work. At the time of the interview, Florica was still working part-time as a cleaner, but wanted to move into the security industry.

Text Box Q: Florica Stoican

Instead of pursuing further computer studies and first aid training as she said she wanted, she had abandoned further study as soon as the TCFUA project finished. The following dialogue demonstrates some of the ambivalence that Florica identified about returning to study. She felt that her English was not good enough, and that she needed the support of a mentor. She also felt that she needed an intense and long-term experience of learning rather than a short course. Florica felt less motivated or confident to attend training without some people she knew. Finally, she admitted that she had the sense that nobody really cared enough to help her. I asked her why she did not keep looking for the work she wanted:

Florica: I think my English.

Maree: Your English is good, though.

Florica: I just think it’s the English.

Maree: What do you think you need now, to get where you want to go?

Florica: I think I need somebody to push me to do what I want to do. Other way by self … think I don’t wanna do.

Maree: You mean – within a course?

Florica: Well, anyone. My family or … But I need somebody to push me or otherwise I not gonna start.

Maree: Is it just ‘push’ or is it ‘advice’ or … ?

Florica: I think ‘help’. Like computer, I did that course but I don’t know nothing. It was very short and there were too many people in that class and that mean that the teacher
doesn’t have time for each one and when you don’t know nothing, you need somebody to help you and it was short. You can’t learn like that. Too short.

Maree: And why didn’t you go to do another computer course?

Florica: Well, I don’t have money any more. And I think ‘that’s it! I don’t want any more’. I don’t know.

Maree: So you enjoyed it, but you didn’t really want to go back and do any more.

Florica: No, because not many people from my group want to go. And I think ‘I gonna start again with another people’ and I no want. I said ‘that’s enough’.

Maree: What about now?

Florica: I don’t know. Computer I want to learn little bit. You feel like nobody care of you anymore and nobody help you and that’s it. I think I am a little like that.

For Florica, the social nature of the learning environment was closely linked to her motivation to study and look for work outside the familiar work realms of factory or cleaning work. She felt that the social support from friends, the mentoring role of the teacher and the feedback about her progress over a long period of time were all critical to the development of her confidence to accept the challenges of change. The contrast between Florica’s earlier description of a successful learning experience and her learner confidence two years later highlighted the ‘fragility’ of her new learner identity (Meijers 1998; Gallacher and Crossan 2002). Her narrative also indicated her sense that she needed someone to support the development of her new learner identity and work goals.

Some retrenched workers perceived vocational courses as playing a functional role in maintaining their optimism and focus during uncertain times. Unlike Florica, Vesna had persistently looked for and found full-time work in a familiar area that satisfied her social and financial needs. Like Florica, Vesna had also had multiple experiences of formal training in the year following retrenchment. Hoping initially to enter a new industry, she completed her Gaming Licence, Hospitality Licence, Security Licence, Introduction to Computer Studies and the Certificate of General Education for Adults Certificate III. Already confident in her social skills,
Chapter 5 Re-defining learning for work

Vesna was initially convinced that she would return to a customer-focused job, as she had worked in the retail sector in Serbia prior to migrating to Australia. She did as many courses as she could and simultaneously threw herself into navigating the labour market using every technique she could find. After twelve months of working in different jobs as a pharmacy assistant, gaming assistant, and process worker she was tired of poor pay, temporary and part-time positions, and new pressures to perform in customer-focused jobs. After two years Vesna had found warehouse work which she hoped would be ongoing. I asked Vesna about the usefulness of the formal training she completed in 2006 and she reflected that ultimately they had not helped her to find work.

*I did not use nothing. One of them I use – like when I working gaming attendant but in the end it was for nothing because it was shift work. Computer course was good 'cos from that at least I use the basic stuff. But from there I no use the computer now* (Karadulev 2008).

Although Vesna is disparaging about the usefulness of the courses in helping her find suitable work, she reflected later in the interview on the broader usefulness of doing the training at that time in her life. She believed that it helped to maintain her levels of optimism during a transition period:

*At that time, it was for us, because, like, I never been disappointed. I always think, 'When I finish this one, I gonna find something better' – something what I want or something. Like, I never give up. I always think something positive. With that training I think, 'Oh that’s gonna be after this … better!' So … was good* (Karadulev 2008).

Like several other retrenched Feltex workers, Abdul Mussa was able to use his short course to get a job as a taxi driver. For him, the training was not long enough to provide him with sufficient working knowledge to confidently enter taxi driving. Now an experienced taxi driver, he felt strongly that the training should have been more than one week long. He described the week-long training in this way:
I did my training for about one week. After that they check how our English mix words and we have to correct the words. Second step, they check our driving for half an hour. Third step, they teach us the Melways and the fourth step, they teach how we gonna behave to the passengers, what kind of passengers to avoid, emergency responses to accidents, if someone die in your car what to do, first aid (Musa 2008).

John’s description of his process of finding work places vocation training in perspective. His age, gender and suitability for manual labouring were of greater interest to his prospective employer than his knowledge or his aptitude for formal learning. He says:

I was lucky. The agency, she goes to me ‘You look like you want a full-time job, hard working’ and that. I go ‘Yeah’, and she called the boss up there and said ‘I got something for ya’ and I end up going up there for an interview and he showed me around and he goes ‘You know much about, ern, fitter and turning?’ and all that stuff, and I go ‘No, I don’t know nothing about it’, and he’s asking me, ‘How long is this?’ And I said, ‘I don’t know, 500 millimetres’ and he goes, ‘No, you got a lot to learn’, and I go, I tell him, sort of thing, ‘I never done this sort of job before and I’m a quick learner’ and all that sort of stuff. And he put me on and I been there ever since. Just over two years (Alekovic 2008).

Young, male and employable, John had reason to believe that a qualification would do little to enhance his conditions or his job prospects in the manufacturing sector.

Maria, on the other hand, aged in her late forties, had been determined to complete formal training and recognised qualifications for the retail industry. Three years after retrenchment, I asked her about the value of the training she had completed. Like Vesna, she saw the training as an opportunity for her to maintain her optimism and re-frame her situation in a positive way. She said:

It help me think to myself, ‘It’s not the end of the world. You don’t have a job, you finish the job, but is gonna find another job. Maybe a better one the one you have if you keep going’ (Bizdoaca 2008).

However, Maria was adamant that the course was inadequate as preparation for work in any retail workplace. I asked her what she would have found useful instead and Maria felt that, to be useful, training should
be based partially in retail department stores, to provide grounded experience in a workplace. She said:

*Training – but not in the school. Like, for example, you wanna work Target [the company], training is better to be trained in that job, not the school, because school and job is two opposite world. Whatever I learn in the school I never use in the shop. I knew from the start – what the interest I have. What he teach me in the school was going to be totally different. The training should be … the government should … give to Target take one … to say to Target, to give you whatever percentage to help train these people. For three months we give you, or one month or something* (Bizdoaca 2008).

Maria’s strong sense that school and work are ‘two opposite worlds’ did not lead her to totally discount the value of the training. It was clear to her that school-based learning was primarily aimed at changing the identity of the students. I asked her if she thought there was any value to her training and she said:

*If you understand, it’s teaching you to be more reliable or more higher class. Because the way he explain, he explain using higher words. Doesn’t explain using proper words, like every day, you use everywhere else. Like you in the government things, in a big environment* (Bizdoaca 2008).

However, Maria believed that being exposed to training where the instructor was speaking and behaving like the ‘higher class’ did not assist her to advance her career in the field or to nuance her own communication skills to the requirements of a retail job. I asked her if the learning was useful to her and in her answer, she described the complex skills required in knowing how to speak to and interpret the needs of different customers:

*No. No. Because when you come from the school, that is school [hand up in the air], when you come the shops and the businesses, are here in the middle [using hands held up at different levels] and you have to drop, so is there, but you don’t know how far you got to drop. ‘Cos you not have to drop too much. If too much you go underneath. You have to know where to stop* (Bizdoaca 2008).

Her reflexivity about the skills required in retail and her own position within the field, as well as what she needed to learn were impressive.
Maria believed that it was her experience over seven years of working in retail before she came to Australia that really helped her to find, learn from and retain her job as a shop manager for nearly two years. Her previous experience from twenty years earlier supported her vocational transition, whereas she felt her recently acquired diploma did not. She said:

-What work experience I get? Nothing! I have to use my mind when I start, to twenty something years, to remember what I did when I start work in my country ‘cos if I use what I learned here I was next day out the door! (Bizdoaca 2008)

For Maria it was not just the lack of practical experience and the lack of training in speaking to customers which made the course inadequate. It was also the inclusion of industry information which was broader than she felt a front line employee could use.

- The only thing good for me was refreshed the memory by reading the book, but the rest just be there to spend time for no reason. Just things not for me – I’m not the owner! Why they not start for how to put clothes in the bag, how to talk to the people and what happens if you have a problem? (Bizdoaca 2008)

From Maria’s perspective, industry courses would be more effective if they guaranteed work experience in a range of contexts. She said:

- Now I understand everything ‘cos I was managing the shop – 6 months I was just fixing the hangers – nothing else! I was getting sick and tired and after I learn myself how the business worked. I learned by myself ‘cos I had a chance, but not everybody has a chance … School is not the same as job. Once you knock the door, any door is gonna ask for experience. Why I get this job – because I put in there the seven years experience in my country. If I don’t have that one, I won’t get a job even in that shit place … If government subsidises us to get casual job in a business and after we can pay it back … but school not gonna help nobody. Lots of people finish university – still no have a job. My daughter finished tourism and did double degree HR and Business. Courses not gonna save people in this country (Bizdoaca 2008).  

Three years after retrenchment, many of the machine operators who had integrated into new industries reflected that the key element required in aid of their transformation processes was intensive support. This support
was seen as critical in helping them to find the right training course which would steer them into a job. For those whose dispositions were already well matched to the ‘identity’ requirements of a job like an aged care attendant, learning to become a new kind of worker by engaging with others in the work context was then a familiar and straightforward process. Meliame, who found the transition into aged care an easy and rewarding one, reflected that whilst at Feltex she had little or no exposure to ideas about training or working in other industries. Her networks outside of the family were people like her with work experience limited to the manufacturing sector. She says of the change:

I liked that work but I think … for twenty years … I ask myself ‘Why I no do the course?’ Because no one help me to go to find out, find a good job or go to school in twenty years. If Feltex not broke down I stay in Feltex for retirement … I find a job I like because they [the TCFUA] help us to find a job (Vaati 2008).

Meliame succeeded in finding work for which she had experience, gained in her family and home life. Once qualified, she was easily able to step into secure, ongoing work in aged care. For others, well developed skills acquired through gendered work in the home environment were not easily transferable into paid employment. Osmundo had entertained the option of studying although he could not afford to stay unemployed for the duration of a full carpentry traineeship. He had been advised by TAFE that industry standards were high and short courses for people with his range of building skills were not available. He said:

I was planning to do training in carpentry and some people at that time said, ‘If you wanna do this one, it’s a long course, not a short course. So if you are prepared, you can do that, but …’ So I changed my mind ‘cos I thought, maybe if I got a job at the same time…’ (Tena 2008)

The first eight months after retrenchment were very difficult for Osmundo as he was not referred to any casual jobs by the agencies he registered with. His dream of studying part-time for a trade qualification in a familiar skill area such as carpentry, whilst working part-time, was
abandoned when he took casual work as a general hand working across a range of shifts at Qantas, which he was still doing two years later.

Some had felt all along that formal learning had nothing to offer them, given the likely trajectory of their future working life. Zaim, who was aged in his fifties, was very clear that he already had a truck licence and so further training was not relevant for him. He was proud that his son and his daughter were university qualified, and had a deep respect for education, as did most of the retrenched workers. However, when I asked him whether he had considered further training, his answer was unequivocal. With his work history and experience he had all that he needed to move into the area of his choice. His main concern was to build a steady flow of work and manage the stress of job insecurity:

_No! Don’t need the training. Nothing from this happens. We have good history with job, everything!’_ (Abazovic 2008).

**Status passages**

The individual experiences, learner dispositions and aptitudes of workers interacted closely with the mercurial requirements of the industries they wished to enter in determining the relevance of VET in their pathway. In addition, a third factor played into this process. Learner identities are not stable. A number of personal identity features shifted significantly in the post retrenchment period for many of those interviewed, and this process in itself had led to re-framing of the past and considering the ‘yet to come’.

In framing the past, many of the interview participants reflected that retrenchment had coincided with the beginning of a whole new period in the life cycle. For Stan, this involved a ‘mid life crisis’; for Zofia it was the illness and death of her brother in Poland and then soon after the illness of her husband; for Kathy it was the divorce from her husband; for Levy it was her children leaving home, and for Dusan and Desa it was the tragic death of their adult daughter. For others, like John and Jano, changing from night to day shift generated lifestyle changes and a new awareness of
the world beyond work. For Florica, there was just more time to think and act for herself, and to re-imagine the person she wanted to be. Major life events and circumstantial change combined with retrenchment to produce a period in which a ‘status passage’ took place for many of the retrenched workers. Status passages, as discussed in Chapter Two, open up the space for dispositional change in unanticipated ways. Foundation level and vocational training provided some of these workers with a life-boat during uncertain times.

According to Maria, the changes that had taken place for her over three years were equally as much to do with her life experience and a changing sense of position in the world that has come with middle age, as they were to do with her changing work circumstances. In the following narrative, Maria talks about her growing awareness of personal change, which strengthened her new identity and her future goals. Unhappy with insecure work, Maria was nonetheless feeling proud of the way that moving in new networks had changed her communication skills. She talked about changes in her perspectives in this way:

*I start to learn things now, not just because of the job, but because of my age and everything. I open my mind different. Factory just inside. Not very much, everybody just the same every day. But have contact more people, more different people, maybe more higher class, three times maybe than mine. You learn things. Which one is your friend and which one is not your friend, which one is behind you, which one has nothing similar, ‘cos you can see it* (Bizdoaca 2008).

Zaim disliked the insecurity of his new work and felt that his general resilience to ‘little things’ was lower than it had been when he was younger. He also found that the change to working outdoors had come at an age where he appreciated the freedom after working for nearly two decades inside the factory. His motivations to keep learning to be a different kind of worker were therefore high.
Older. Different thinking … Like, before, doesn’t matter, I don’t care. Now little things make me upset. Getting older, you change. See now I like the job truck driver. I like the job outside, and maybe if I go back to the factory, I don’t think so can go back inside the factory because, because I like to be outside. Factory now I no like. My age, fifty years old, I feel like being like a jail something now (Abazovic 2008).

Stan Wotjniak had also been looking for a change after working at Feltex his whole working life and he felt that the retrenchment forced him to undergo and learn from change in new ways. He felt that he had wanted to learn and develop other work skills and found another job easily. However, the retrenchment also coincided with challenges in Stan’s personal life, which highlighted a new sense of loss and uncertainty at work. The following narrative shows that retrenchment coincided with a status passage in Stan’s life, which in itself brought about changes in his disposition. At such a time, the loss of community opened up for Stan questions about how to regard issues of personal and emotional trust at work. He needed to see work relationships in a new light and to position himself differently as a person in authority whilst dealing with personal crisis. The process of ‘individualisation’ was a poignant one for Stan:

I went through a lot of changes – personal changes. I had some growing up to do around the time I moved on and that made it hard. It was like … like mid-life crisis. Like, if I’d been at Feltex with people who I’d grown up with, people I’d known all my life, well, they knew me and, like, it made it harder going through that at the same time as starting to work with people you don’t know. Like, if I snap or something, well, people know what I’m really like, so they don’t take any notice of it but, like, if you don’t know what people are really like and they come in late, it’s hard to judge whether to be hard on them in case they’re taking you for a ride or something … It would’ve happened anyway. But if not for the retrenchment I might have been able to push it under the carpet. It wouldn’t have been so obvious and I would’ve had the support around me, yeah, because we all matured together. We were looking after each other, because we were working together every day. Your personal life and the work you did was connected. Because you’re working hard with the same people every day they know what’s happening for you and they look after you (Wotjniak 2008).

For John Aleksovic the Feltex retrenchment coincided with the end to life as a night shift worker. John describes the way in which night shift work at Feltex had sapped his energy and made him feel tired and ‘lazy’ all the
time. The change to day shift had resulted in a significant change in his energy, his social life and self-perception. Suddenly he has room in his life for socialising and thinking about a life outside of work:

I do my shift day shift, go home and do what I have to do. Go to the bank, go to a friend’s place. Not like before, you know. Before you just had no life sort of thing. I go to the gym now, mostly gym and go see friends and when the weekend comes. Even if I work, sometimes I work Saturdays, um, go out to clubs or go to a bar (Alekovic 2008)

Training is not often taken up, fully used, planned for or considered by individuals until they have overcome the immediate crisis, found work and started to think about the future in a new way. As individuals moved through personal changes, the appeal of formal learning changed. For Osmundo, a health crisis and the death of his mother coincided with retrenchment, leaving him extremely vulnerable and socially isolated for a period. His confidence declined and he was convinced he would not find another job. This in turn influenced the decisions he made in the months after retrenchment. He did not undergo training, although he was interested in pursuing trade-affiliated work. Instead, he planned a return to the Philippines. It was only after he found another job that he was able to start re-building his lost confidence. He described his post retrenchment situation as a struggle to survive:

When I left Feltex, I think that is my last day to see these people as my friends. I planning to forget everything that happened to me at that time. I don’t want to do too much. Fighting depression … In Australia I don’t own my house. In Philippines my mum left me some land and so I don’t have any problems. Because even though I got so many friends here compared to the Philippines. If I lost everything I go back to the Philippines because I am sure that even though I am not working somebody gives me to eat, but here if I lose the job, maybe somebody give me something to eat, but … (Tena 2008).

Mark, Osmundo and Jano all described their responses to retrenchment as a major shock followed by a period of great insecurity and grief. For all of these workers, a new sense of the future was only possible for consideration after they had found and adjusted to stable work. All primary breadwinners in their families, none had any intentions of
thinking about more change, or looking for alternative work. Unlike Maria or John or Satwinder, these men considered their stable new jobs to have been their salvation in some form, and maintaining their employed status continued to be more important than planning for future changes. When I asked what had made the biggest difference to his confidence, Mark said:

_The money and the fact it was a full-time job. The fact that it was full-time. It’s very hard to get a full-time job these days. When you work casual you don’t know if you’ve got a job tomorrow. When you work full-time, you do_ (Hughes 2008).

**Conclusion**

Chapter Five has mirrored the concepts raised in Chapter Two in relation to the tensions in vocational education and training, through an analysis of worker perceptions of learning for work. This chapter outlines the ways in which learning experiences and learner dispositions influenced initial approaches to change, and the notions of learning that were produced under the Feltex work habitus. It analyses worker perceptions and experiences of learning within new work places, and in particular, their experiences of VET courses as supports to the critical learning involved in the change process. In this process, Chapter Five demonstrates that learning from change is a highly nuanced process, and one which is also highly contingent on social connectivity and workplace context. VET played a limited and uneven role in supporting this process.

The individual dispositions that Feltex workers brought with them into the labour market had a considerable impact on how each worker conceptualised the role of vocational education. Whilst some heavily invested their hopes in formal training as a means to entering new vocational occupations, others saw the gaining of certificates as an incidental exercise, a way to constructively use time or an irrelevance. Older women in the group were more likely to rely on vocational training to open opportunities as well as connect them to other industries. Previous
experience with formal education and in particular industries added to their incentives to undertake qualifications, although many women with gaps in their basic education and no experience outside manufacturing were also attracted to free courses for a variety of reasons. Young men and Australian-born men with senior experience tended to use their social networks, or relied on the advantages of their identities in familiar parts of the labour market to find work. For many of the retrenched men, training performed a perfunctory role in providing essential certificates and licences.

Vocational education played a role in the lives of most workers interviewed in this research. Some were able to use training to move into new occupations, whilst those who had hoped to move into a different work milieu had not been able to forge the necessary social connections to do so. Most believed that VET training did not address their many learning needs that arose once they were employed. Overall, VET did not help individuals to learn what they needed to know at the time that they needed to know it. For those without supportive employers, advancement within the industry remained a mysterious process, and skill development within the job was generally unsupported. Several entrepreneurial, forward looking, resilient workers who had successfully moved into vocations requiring highly developed inter-personal and self-advocacy skills were limited by their casual or self-employed status and their limited sources of information and advice.

This chapter demonstrates that VET, despite its limitations, sometimes served unintended purposes in individual processes of change. For under-confident learners, vocational training provided a positive experience of learning, and altered their self-perceptions. For those who undertook training, it was seen as one strategy among many for weathering future change.
The generic skills required by the Feltex workers involved changes in attitude, self-perception and social practices acquired through a continuously changing process. Dispositions for work were transformed over time through engagement with work culture, although VET offered a fraction of the support required in that process. Training may have a vital role to play in increasing individual skill transference across jobs. However, VET policy may need to shift its emphasis away from the shortcomings or aptitudes of learners and focus on the ways in which learning more broadly supports learning needs arising from the social context of work and increases the connectivity of work and workers.
Conclusion

In Australia, as elsewhere in the late-industrial world, employment in manufacturing has been dramatically reduced since the 1980s. At the same time, employment has grown at the lower end of the service sector. Retrenchment in the Australian textile industry has become an accepted side-effect of global restructuring. Workers affected by this phenomenon often prematurely leave the labour market, in recognition that their dispositions are neither well suited to finding and maintaining work under new conditions or to the learning processes required in becoming different kinds of workers. Those retrenched textile workers who stay engaged in the labour market may choose to return to familiar work in a shrinking manufacturing setting, accepting a lower and often harsher set of conditions. Others aspire to moving into new kinds of work in expanding industries. They take their chances in unfamiliar terrain, and must learn to thrive under different conditions and stresses.

Textile workers who engage in the process of redefining themselves for work have often left low-skilled jobs as machine operators, general hands and machinists in factory environments. Whilst these occupations and these work environments are less and less available to them, those who stay in the labour market after retrenchment often have decades of experience involving problem solving and maintenance, team leadership, a high level of personal responsibility, quality control responsibilities and an in-depth understanding of the various processes leading to the end product. In addition, many have previous qualifications, work experiences and family backgrounds which have enabled them to develop aptitudes and qualities for entrepreneurial positions, complex learning, customer
service and self promotion. Some of those who succeed in staying in the labour market have a broad range of social skills for work and a willingness to undertake high risk activities, as well as an entrepreneurial spirit, which they hope they can apply in their new jobs. They have dispositions for work informed and reinforced by the social and political context of their work histories as well as their age, gender, experience, aspirations, family backgrounds and social networks.

Workers undergoing change and transformation are highly reliant on the social resources they can generate to provide practical advice, support, information, affirmation and influence. Whilst at Feltex, workers in low-skill jobs were able to generate such vital resources through close social networks, brought together in the work context through shared time, work practices and regular social connection. Built on a strong basis of trust, union membership also operated as a vehicle through which many Feltex workers organised to protect and consolidate the shared conditions of their work. New conditions of work, however, do not generate enterprise cultures wherein workers can build close social networks on the basis of personal trust and interdependence. In any case, consolidation of workplace benefits is no longer the focus for most low-skill workers. In order to remain employed and employable, access to information, advice and influence in relation to new opportunities outside the current workplace has become the critical resource. Up-to-date industry knowledge, awareness of different company requirements and loose social networks have become essential resources for workers.

In this thesis I have sought to understand how retrenchment led to changes in identity and social practice for a group of workers with a range of individual dispositions. In framing my research process, I have called upon the theoretical work of Bourdieu, whose concept of the ‘habitus’ as a system of dispositions brought about in relation to a field, has helped me to consider the bounded choices available to individuals as they encountered an unfamiliar set of circumstances. I have also sought to
understand how vocational education supported the learning which accompanied the process of individual change.

What transformations were undergone by retrenched textile workers over three years as they engaged with changes in their work practices and redefined their work identities?

Firstly, this research found that individual workers had each repositioned themselves in relation to work, and in the process each underwent changes in their dispositions. In various ways over three years workers had considered and re-considered their capacities and their willingness to embrace social mobility, formal learning, a new sense of belonging and the uncertainties of constant change. Regardless of their new job or occupation, each worker had forged a new work identity based on an assessment of that capacity and willingness. In many instances, workers maintained a high level of determination to succeed in new, difficult industries on the basis of that assessment.

Secondly, it was generally true that the new dispositions that workers had developed had not positioned them for improvements in their conditions, mobility, opportunity and resilience as workers. This did not appear to be directly related to their determination, experience or qualification. Some completed training and tested their vocational aspirations in the labour market and, unable to effect their desired change over time, ultimately accepted unqualified work that did not make use of their skills and experience. Previously confident workers, who had considered themselves to be active learners or leaders at Feltex, had not taken this disposition into their new job. Loss of confidence, status, social contact and influence marked the movement of these workers out of manufacturing. Their willingness to take responsibility for problems and their motivation for work was lower than previously. A few highly motivated and resourceful workers maintained their determination to succeed in new occupations, albeit struggling to maintain a tenuous foothold in their industries.
Whilst workers all acknowledged the opportunities available to them through change, their transitions into either familiar or new vocational areas generated various degrees of ambivalence. Overall, most perceived themselves to be more vulnerable to the next wave of change, and to exercise less control over the conditions of their working lives.

There were exceptions to this second finding, arising out of two specific conditions. When both these conditions applied, workers were wholeheartedly convinced that they had benefited from change. The first was when employing enterprises valued the worker’s personal identity attributes such as gender, age and language background and the second was when workers were able to use new networks of belonging to generate essential advice, information, affirmation and opportunity. Under these conditions, several workers had developed a strong sense of optimism and future possibility in their new job or occupation.

Retrenchment required individuals to learn in areas that extended far beyond technical skills. They learned a range of new understandings and social strategies, new ways of building and accessing networks and a new level of reflexivity in relation to their identities as workers.

Vocational education was promoted by Registered Training Organisations, government brochures and Job Networks as a means for individual retrenched workers to increase their access to opportunities. At the same time VET policy discourses positioned it to address the urgent skill requirements of industries, particularly those with a growing number of customer-focussed, service-oriented jobs in retail, transport, care, small business and para-professional areas.

New industry training frameworks have identified a range of basic foundation skills, intellectual abilities and personal attributes required of workers in the new economy. Spoken and written English-language skills and familiarity with technology rank highly within this hierarchy, as do intellectual skills associated with self-management, problem-solving and
personal attributes such as openness to learning and changing, a sense of personal responsibility and self-worth and ability to work well with others and develop a customer focus. Whilst this list identifies many important areas of learning for workers at the lower end of the economy, nuanced and relevant learning in these areas does not take place in a social vacuum. Employers and social networks are critical in the learning process. Under current social conditions, how adequately was learning in the lives of retrenched textile workers supported by the vocational education and training system?

This research found that vocational education sometimes played a role in confirming dispositional change amongst those retrenched workers whose personal attributes aligned with the industry ‘norm’. However, in general, VET did not support workers to move into or to maintain work in new occupations and industries. It did not lead to their feeling more skilful in their work. Nor did it contribute to the development of their strategies, networks and social resources for playing the new ‘game’ in the altered field of work.

The effectiveness of VET qualifications in supporting transition into a new vocation or job was uneven for several reasons. Firstly, VET policy has not positioned the national learning agenda as a broad social process, but has rather mirrored the narrow economic focus of work as constructed through new work arrangements. Education and training courses for retrenched workers are rarely contextualised through industry exposure, and are not required to support the development of links between the individual and the industry.

Secondly, the worker, constructed as a dis-embedded individual, bears the full responsibility for success, failure, improvement and advancement. VET courses do not incorporate learning outcomes in relation to the social skills involved in this process. Instead, VET qualifications often appear to simply reflect and support industry constructions of favoured workers,
based on gendered and classed assumptions. Driving courses, targeting men, were short and involved little or no contextualising of driving work. Aged care courses, on the other hand, were longer, and reinforced an essential ‘caring’ disposition in graduates through work experience.

Such tensions in the construction of VET have influenced its effectiveness in supporting transformation at the individual level. It neither supported most workers to do well at their work, or to maintain work and thrive within their new work environments.

Additionally, new learning needs and interest in training often arose after a period of time in a secure job. Individuals in the most socially isolated employment circumstances (such as those in casual positions) had few means to access advice, information or support about relevant available training support. Certainly amongst this research group, the demotivating experience of constantly struggling to find industry information and advice in a socially isolated context often resulted in a loss of worker resilience and optimism.

However, despite its failure to support vocational learning, participation in VET had a number of unintended outcomes in the lives of retrenched workers, which served to build confidence for a limited period. Undertaking vocational education and training allowed most workers to have a positive experience of themselves as successful learners. It also contributed to their process of re-engagement with work in new ways as it provided an opportunity to experiment with new ideas, knowledge and ways of thinking. In this sense, it assisted workers to maintain their optimism over the first twelve months whilst they were working in casual jobs or looking for secure work.

Training also provided an opportunity for retrenched workers to meet others who were hoping to enter into the same industries, and to forge social connections. Overall, however, these indirect benefits of vocational education appeared to be largely ad hoc and unintended aspects of the
courses. Certainly they were not consciously valued or promoted as learning outcomes.

This thesis has found that shifts in the fields of employment and education have, in some cases, brought about new possibilities and aspirations amongst retrenched Feltex workers. This opened up a transformative space, within which several retrenched workers were able to benefit from shifts in the economy. For most, however, retrenchment generated a series of risks and challenges which many carried without support. As a result most Feltex workers experienced a shift in their work dispositions, which, despite their apparent alignments with the new field of work, placed them in a less favourable position than that which they had previously occupied.

Whilst vocational education and training confirmed the transformations of those who were already advantaged in the new field, it failed to support the overall learning required by most workers as they entered and struggled for position within new jobs and occupations.

Participants in this research were primarily drawn from those retrenched workers who had undertaken VET courses and who were still active in the labour market twelve months after retrenchment. In this sense they were amongst the most successful of the larger group. The Australian VET system offered a form of support to individuals undergoing change at the lower end of the economy. However, the positioning of VET as a tool for the achievement of narrow, economic objectives rather than broader social objectives rendered it unable to support learning that could underpin social and individual transformations. The lack of policy attention on the provision of learning to workers in high turnover, casual, part time and self-employed jobs further exacerbated tensions in workers’ experience of VET participation at the lower end of the economy.

Feltex workers in this research were participants in a major process of individual change which had local, national and global dimensions. They
incorporated new understandings of work, belonging and learning as they assumed dispositions for new roles and occupations. Despite a high level of participation in VET, after three years many felt less motivated, socially connected and prepared for change, despite their efforts and aspirations. Few found that training supported learning processes that would lead to meaningful and advantageous change.

There are several implications from this research. Vocational education and training has been positioned to contribute to the development of a skilful workforce and a resilient society, in which industry and workers are flexible and competitive, as well as optimistic and motivated. The current model of partnership between the Australian government, business community, trade unions and education and training sector generates numerous gaps in this process. Whilst economic considerations have dominated restructuring efforts to date, this research indicates that it is time for social policy in Australia to focus attention on the interrelationships between social practice at the individual and community level and national strategies around learning for work. This research indicates that social and economic transformations cannot be supported through the vocational education and training system unless social connectedness is stimulated and reinforced in new and relevant ways. Failure to attend to this challenge has particularly significant implications for those working under casual and isolated conditions at the lower end of the Australian economy.
Appendices
Appendix A - Demographic and aspirational data

Secondary data was made available to me through the Textile Clothing and Footwear union (TCFUA) Victorian branch. Information was gathered by the TCFUA through direct involvement with the 165 retrenched workers from September 2005 until the end of 2006. The workers were predominantly from the Braybrook-based Yarns Mill section, although a small number of voluntary redundancies are also included in this number, from other parts of the company’s operation, including the Tufting, Packing and Sewing areas.

Of those retrenched in October 2005, eighty-eight were men (fifty-three per cent of the total) and seventy-eight were women (forty-seven per cent of the total). Several days after the retrenchment announcement, the TCFUA gathered workers together in groups of thirty or so. The groups were addressed by the TCFUA’s English language and literacy teachers regarding the post retrenchment support available to them and the types of training they could do in order to maximise their re-employment potential.

Fifty-five women and sixty-nine men (seventy-five per cent of all those made redundant) completed a TCFUA information form two weeks prior to leaving Feltex. Those who did not fill in the form were either away from work in that time, on long-term leave under Work Cover, accepting voluntary redundancies or unwilling to fill in the form. The form was designed by the TCFUA to ascertain ongoing contact details as well as training and employment aspirations of those facing retrenchment. The form also asked workers to indicate how long they had worked at the factory, their first language as well as how proficient they thought they were at reading and writing in English, speaking in English, and using computers. The ages and previous positions of the employees were filled in by the TCFUA Project Workers throughout the project. Educational backgrounds were not requested on the form so that embarrassment could
be avoided and also to facilitate a speedy and un-intimidating process. Forms were administered and analysed by qualified English as Second Language and Literacy teachers who were trained to discern basic information about language and literacy levels through written responses.

The forms provided enough information about the respondents to determine basic demographic information about the group. Those who did not fill in the form (twenty-three women and nineteen men) were contacted later by the TCFUA and offered assistance and support throughout the project. Most of those who did not fill in forms lost contact with the project throughout the first twelve months.

**Nationality**

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*Table (i): Nationalities of fifty-five women who filled in pre-retrenchment forms October 2005*

Amongst the men, thirty-three per cent were either born or fully educated in Australia, reflecting the greater level of participation in textile factory work amongst blue-collar Australian men than women. The disproportionate level of opportunity in the industry available to Australian-born men with trade qualifications has been a feature of the restructured manufacturing sector (Chataway and Sachs 1990). A further
thirty-four per cent of the men were from Eastern Europe. Asian, South American, Mediterranean, and Islander nationalities contributed to the mix of cultures amongst the men, with the additional later inclusion of a few Somali men.

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<tr>
<td>Eastern Europe (unknown)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>78</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table (ii): Nationalities of seventy-eight women retrenched from Feltex, October 2005*

Amongst the sixty-nine men who filled in the TCFUA form, the nationalities showed quite a different demographic and are therefore worth representing separately. The break-down of countries of origin are as follows:
### Table (iii): Nationalities of sixty-nine men who filled in pre-retrenchment forms October 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia (born or educated)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macedonia</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (one each from Slovakia, Greece, Italy, Argentina, El Salvador, Russia, Samoa, Tonga)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>69</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table (iv): Nationalities of eighty-eight men retrenched from Feltex, October 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia (born or educated)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macedonia</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (one each from Slovakia, Greece, Argentina, El Salvador, Russia, Samoa, Tonga, India)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>88</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Age

Of the fifty-five women who filled in TCFUA forms, over half were aged between forty and fifty years of age. As another nine were aged between fifty and fifty-five; those aged from forty to fifty-five years of age comprised seventy-five per cent of the retrenched group of women who filled in a form. None of the women were aged in their twenties, and only one was sixty years of age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table (v): Ages of fifty-five women who filled in pre-retrenchment forms in October 2005

Of the sixty-nine men who filled in a form, forty-five per cent were aged between forty and fifty years old. Another nine were between fifty and fifty-four years of age, so those in the forty to fifty-five year age-group comprised over half of the retrenched group of men.

Retrenched men were more likely than women to be in their twenties and also in their sixties, with nineteen per cent of the total number of men retrenched in these two age groups. A higher number and proportion of the retrenched men than women therefore fell into age groups, which either increased their eligibility for retirement and the pension, or advantaged them in the job market by comparison to older manufacturing workers. The five young men who were retrenched had all been educated in Australia, and had worked for fewer than ten years at Feltex.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>69</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table (vi): Ages of sixty-nine retrenched men who filled in pre-retrenchment forms in October 2005*

**Positions at work**

The majority of those retrenched were machine operators from the Braybrook Spinning section, although some were also from the Tufting section and there were some voluntary redundancies from the Sewing and Packing areas. There were five supervisors and mechanics, all of whom were male and either born or educated in Australia and with a very good command of spoken English. Supervisors were primarily involved in work organisation and people management. Whilst they were required to be highly mobile, their work was not as physical nature as it was for machine operators. Most were confident of re-employment.

There were also three leading hands, men and women from Eastern Europe in their late forties and early fifties, who had worked their way up and were often also involved in most elements of the work including machine operating, maintenance, work flow management and conflict resolution. At the point of retrenchment they all anticipated working again as leading hands in a manufacturing environment.
Work aspirations

Feltex workers were given three weeks’ notice in September 2005 that the Spinning Section was closing. At the point of filling in the forms, most were still in a shocked state, and had not thought about their working life beyond Feltex in any detail. However, it was clear that some workers found this process of thinking about their future easier than others. Higher levels of English language proficiency and formal education levels, seniority of position and youth were significant factors in their capacity to respond to the question ‘What kind of work are you looking for?’ Gender was also a clear determinant in the ease with which this question was handled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses (Women)</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retire or work cover</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Don’t know’ or ‘any’</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine operator/factory</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashier</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring work</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table (vii): Responses to question ‘What kind of work will you look for after retrenchment?’ from fifty-five women who filled in a pre-retrenchment form in October 2005*

Of the fifty-five women who filled in a TCFUA form, nearly half were either planning to retire or had no idea what they would do after retrenchment. Just over a quarter of the women were only planning to seek employment back in the manufacturing sector. Fewer than a quarter of the women had formed aspirations outside the manufacturing sector. Those women were all either Australian born or educated, or had proficient English language and higher levels of formal education.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses (Men)</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retire or go on Work cover</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine operator/factory</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forklift driving</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truck driving</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture making</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel management</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming Industry</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus driving</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer repair</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office work</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>69</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table (viii): Responses to question ‘What kind of work will you look for after retrenchment?’ from sixty-nine men who filled in a pre-retrenchment form in October 2005*

There appeared to be a much greater awareness of work options and/or willingness to consider work beyond machine operating amongst the retrenched men than the retrenched women (sixty-eight per cent of men and twenty-seven per cent of women).

**Years at Feltex**

A total of sixty-seven percent of the women who filled in a form had been working at Feltex for over fifteen years. Not many had been at Feltex for fewer than ten years.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years at Feltex</th>
<th>Number of retrenched women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25+</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table (ix): Number of years working at Feltex cited by fifty-five women who filled in a pre-retrenchment form in October 2005*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years at Feltex</th>
<th>Number of retrenched men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25+</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>69</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table (x): Number of years working at Feltex cited by sixty-nine men who filled in a pre-retrenchment form in October 2005*

A lower proportion of the men had been working at Feltex for more than fifteen years, and a higher number of men had been at Feltex for fewer than ten years. However, two men had worked at Feltex for over thirty-five years (thirty-eight and forty years respectively) at the point of retrenchment. From the retrenchment figures it appears that Feltex retained more new male than female workers in the Braybrook Spinning Section from the late 1990s. In examining the information from the forms, it would also appear that in almost every case, employees who started at Feltex after 1995 were likely to have more developed spoken English language skills. This could be a matter of the changing demographic of available workers or of changing management policy.
Self-assessed skills

The final piece of information that could be gleaned from responses to the TCFUA form regards workers’ perceptions of their own English language and general education skills. Variances between workers’ perceptions of their own skill levels were likely to influence their experience of retrenchment, and their confidence in undertaking re-training, job-seeking and developing new work aspirations in the months and years to follow. Again, clear gender disparities in responses were evident, and these were further exacerbated by age, education and life experience.

Workers were asked to define their own English language ability in speaking, reading and writing as ‘OK’, ‘not good’ or ‘good’. They were also asked to indicate their experience in using computers as ‘never’, ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’. Three women did not answer this question.

Amongst those fifty-two women who answered the question, the likelihood of having used computers reduced in close relation to perceived poor spoken and written English language skills. Those who believed, for example, that their communication skills and reading and writing in English were all ‘good’ tended to also have experience using computers ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’. Twenty-one women believed their spoken English was ‘good’ or ‘OK’ and written English was ‘good’ and of these, only twelve had used a computer.

Those women who believed that both their spoken and written English language skills were ‘not good’ were highly likely to have never used a computer. Sixteen women believed that both their spoken and written English were ‘not good’ and none had used a computer. A further fourteen believed that their spoken communication skills were ‘OK’ whilst their written English skills were ‘not good’ and none of these women had used a computer either.
A total of forty women out of fifty-two (seventy-seven per cent) who answered this question had never used a computer. Not surprisingly, on subsequent analysis of the data, it was found that the twelve women who had used a computer before had completed at least Year 11 education in their country of origin, were educated in Australia or were under the age of forty.

The twenty-two women who believed that their communication skills and reading and writing skills were ‘good’ and ‘OK’ were a little more likely than other women to indicate a desire for training, with fifteen noting some kind of training next to the question, ‘What kind of training would you like?’

Of those thirty women who believed that either their spoken or written English (or both) were ‘not good’, sixteen indicated the desire for some sort of training. Thirteen of the thirty-one women who indicated a desire for training mentioned English as Second Language (ESL) courses, whilst nine mentioned hospitality or food processing certificates. The relatively high level of demand for ESL courses amongst the women indicates either a self-perception that English was a critical barrier to further employment for them, or that a lower proportion of the women were concerned with improving their further employment through work-related training. It could also indicate that women were interested in addressing gaps in their general education.

Amongst the retrenched men who filled in the TCFUA form, six did not answer questions to do with their self-assessed English language literacy and computer skills. Of the sixty-three who did answer the questions, thirty-one (or nearly half) had not ever used a computer before.

Those men with self perceptions of ‘good’ or ‘OK’ language and literacy were more likely to report experience with computers, indicating that their life experience had provided them with opportunities to use computers. However, unlike the women, several of those who reported
low levels of language and literacy skills also reported having experience with computers.

Twenty-five men believed that their spoken communication was ‘good’ or ‘OK’ and their literacy ‘good’. Of these men thirteen had used a computer.

Thirteen men believed that their spoken communication was ‘good’ or ‘OK’ whilst their literacy was ‘not good’, and eight of these men had used a computer. Six men classified themselves as ‘not good’ at either English communication or literacy, and yet four of these had used a computer.

Twelve men who thought of their literacy as ‘not good’ indicated that they had nonetheless had the opportunity to use computers. This differed markedly from the women, amongst whom none of those who classified their literacy as ‘not good’ had used a computer. In addition, a greater overall number and proportion of women considered both their spoken and written English to be ‘not good’ (nineteen per cent of the men and fifty-eight per cent of the women).

A remarkable fifty-two men out of the sixty-three who filled in forms indicated a desire for training. Of these, only three mentioned ESL courses and thirty mentioned truck driving or forklift licences. This indicates that work-related certificates had more appeal to the men, either because the link between the licence and improved job prospects was more widely accepted or simply because men had a clearer picture of the training and work options available to them.

**Full-time or part-time**

Amongst the fifty-five women who filled in the TCFUA form, forty-nine indicated that they would be seeking work. Of these, thirty-four said they were looking for full-time work, ten said they were looking for part-time work and five said they were looking for either full- or part-time work.
By contrast, amongst the sixty-nine men who filled in the TCFUA form, sixty-two indicated that they would be looking for work. Of these, all but one was seeking full-time work.

For over a third of the women, part-time work was a preference or an option they were prepared to consider, implying that the male-as-main-breadwinner role was probably continuing to be a crucial dynamic within these families in mid-life.
Appendix B – Employment data after twelve months

In October 2006 all workers retrenched from Feltex in October 2005 were individually contacted by telephone and invited to the launch of a book of their stories, *Finding the Thread*, which had been funded by the TCFUA, to commemorate their working lives. During these conversations they gave the TCFUA information over the phone about what they were doing. Their responses were noted in the TCFUA Feltex project database.

**Those who were not working**

Of the 165 workers retrenched in October 2005, fifty-nine were not working twelve months later:

- Twenty-seven were ‘retired’ due to family pressures, illness, choice or age and were therefore not looking for work (16%). Eleven of these were men and sixteen were women.

- Twelve were on Work Cover due to injuries and therefore not looking for work (7%). Six were men and six were women.

- Five (three women and two men) were studying full-time towards employment.

- Fifteen (12%) were looking for work had not yet found work.

**Those who were not contactable**

A further forty-two were not contactable twelve months after retrenchment (25%). Thirty-two of these were men and ten were women.
Those who were working:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of work</th>
<th>Number of workers (64 in total)</th>
<th>Percentage of total number of workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working in new industries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport drivers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warehousing labourers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged or disability care attendants</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaners</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail customer service</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General hand</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction earth removing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming attendant</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security officer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working in their trade areas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting and turning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory-based work</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food processing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other manufacturing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laboratory processing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C – Work experiences and social resources in job seeking

Of those forty-three retrenched workers surveyed in 2007, not all participants had looked for work immediately. However, there were some stark differences in the time that it took male and female participants to find work after retrenchment. A higher proportion of men than women found work in the first month and a much higher proportion of women than men waited twenty weeks or longer before finding work. At the time of the survey, the nineteen male participants who had found work since retrenchment had waited an average of ten-and-a-half weeks before finding work. More than half (thirteen) found work in the first two months. For the remaining six, however, the wait was between six and seven months.

Of the nineteen men interviewed who had found work in the twelve-month period, most had experienced at least one very short-term job lasting less than three months; six men had two very short-term jobs, and three had five very short-term jobs. Despite this, at the time of the interview, eleven men had secured at least one job lasting more than six months. Truck driving, taxi driving, forklift driving or bus driving (six jobs) and factory, packing, operator and labouring work (ten jobs in all), were the most popular jobs for men. Several men also reported finding short-term work in aged care, mail sorting, cleaning, security and storeman jobs.

For the twenty women who had worked since retrenchment, the average time spent waiting for a job was significantly higher. Whilst six women were re-employed within the first two months, five women took between two and six months and nine had spent between six and ten months before finding a job. Thirteen women had experienced very short-term jobs of less than three months each, eight had two very short-term jobs, one had three very short-term jobs and one had four very short-term jobs.
By the time of interview, however, sixteen women had experienced jobs lasting more than six months.

The types of jobs women found were quite different from those of men. The women between them held more than double the number of factory or warehousing jobs to men (28). Three women had found longer term work in aged care or disability services and seven had found cleaning work, either short or long term. Some individuals broke into longer term work in areas such as laboratory processing, mail sorting, cash processing, and retail.

**Social resources in job searching**

Thirteen men and six women surveyed volunteered information about the positive role played by close networks of family and friends when discussing the process of finding work after retrenchment. For men this support often included support from their wives in practical ways such as taking a resume around and finding them jobs, as well as providing moral support and encouragement. Brothers, cousins, fathers and friends helped get many of the men into jobs.

For women, six reported receiving moral support from close family and friends in job-seeking. However, two also reported that they had moved into a larger role in providing support to their family since losing their job and one reported that she was getting negative pressure from her husband to find work. In addition to close networks, women were also likely to mention other forms of practical support in finding work through informal sources of advice such as the union, and through networks formed through training.

Both men and women talked about their experiences of using formal support such as labour hire agencies and Job Networks. Both reported mixed experiences and responses to the formal support available. Both men and women talked about the importance of having a resume,
although women made many more references to this tool, and were more likely to take their resume around door to door and to apply for jobs on the internet and through the paper than men, who relied more heavily on word-of-mouth.

Describing themselves more in the role of the care-givers than receivers of support, the women less commonly reported practical support from family and friends, and spoke more freely about calling on support from a friendship group forged through training or through the union.
Appendix D – Perceived benefits and job outcomes from training

The majority of those who had undertaken training reported a range of benefits after twelve months. Some of these benefits were related to work outcomes and others were of a more general nature.

Fifteen of the twenty male respondents had, at the time of retrenchment, mentioned specific training they would like to undertake as well as specific jobs they thought they would be seeking. The desired training tended to relate specifically to transport licences, with one young man who was in a leading hand position interested in management training. Two wanted computer skills training and another one indicated that he wanted communication skills training. This man already had very well developed communication skills and went into a position as a personal care attendant in a hospital following his retrenchment. At the time of retrenchment, most of the surveyed men were hoping to find work in one of three general areas of work: maintenance, security or transport.

Fourteen out of the twenty men interviewed had undertaken some formal training since retrenchment. Of these, eleven reported that the training had led directly to their getting a job because it had given them marketable qualifications.

Few indirect outcomes of training were reported by the men, although three commented that ‘the training got me back into the swing of things’, ‘it kept the options open’ and ‘it gave me some new skills’. One made the additional comment that whilst the training had helped him into short-term work, it did not increase the long-term work options he wanted.

Whilst half of the men who undertook training completed one course, the other half had completed two, three or even four courses. The overwhelming majority of the multiple courses done were in transport related certificates and licences. In addition, two men completed an Aged
Care Certificate Level III and one continued with his Management Diploma as anticipated. In addition, individual men completed short courses to increase their general employability in a range of areas, in areas such as computer studies, first aid, occupational health and safety, red card (for work on building sites) and food handling.

The pattern of training and of benefits from training differed markedly amongst the women surveyed. At the time of retrenchment, eleven of the twenty-three surveyed women had identified training they would be interested in, and the same number had identified specific types of work they would be likely to seek. The training identified included studies in English language, computer skills, aged care, hospitality and food handling certificates. The relationship between the training and stated work aspirations had often not been as clear or direct for the surveyed women as it was for the men. The work they aspired to had either been stated as retail or process manufacturing industries or as specific jobs including kitchen hand, cleaner, and packer.

Nineteen of the twenty-three women had completed training, although only four of these perceived that the training directly assisted them to find a job. One of those four reported that the value of the training was limited by the fact that it led to short-term jobs she had not actually enjoyed. The other three were employed in the aged care industry.

By contrast, the ‘indirect benefits’ of training were more commonly reported by women than direct job outcomes. One woman reported, for example, that getting her driver’s licence directly impacted on her life in many positive ways, although finding a job was not one of them. Another reported that learning about using computers had directly changed her life as she now used them all the time for practical daily activities such as paying bills and emailing people. Ten others reported a range of indirect benefits from attending training courses. These included general
confidence in life, an experience of learning which was valuable in itself, opening up a social world, and providing ‘future options’ to consider.

Whilst seven women had completed one course, eight had completed two or three courses and the other four had completed four, five or six courses altogether in the twelve-month period. Compared to men, more women undertook courses (nineteen) and apart from the general education courses, eighteen additional vocational courses were ultimately undertaken by women. These were in aged care, food handling, librarianship, medical secretarial training, retail, security, asset maintenance (cleaning), hospitality, and forklift driving.

In 2006 there were twenty enrolments in general education courses amongst the twenty-three women surveyed. These included English as a Second Language, Certificate of General Education for Adults and Introduction to Computer Skills. Most of the women who had undertaken a general education course had also undertaken other vocational courses. Comments from survey respondents indicated that general education courses boosted their self-confidence, addressed gaps in their basic education, and provided an opportunity to maintain social contact and support with others.

For thirteen of the Feltex workers surveyed a year after retrenchment, training had played a direct role in their ability to move into longer-term casual, part-time or full-time work in different industries. It provided the qualification required for that transition. For many of the others, the manufacturing sector continued to provide them with casual, insecure employment which required no qualifications or formal training.

Whilst most men and women surveyed had experienced a number of casual work experiences in the first fifteen months, the kinds of work they found were very different. Six of the jobs acquired by men were in truck driving, taxi driving, forklift driving or bus driving, and these jobs all required targeted, licence-based training. Two men had found work in the
aged care industry, requiring longer training of up to six months and one had done short term security work during the Commonwealth Games, which required he complete a short vocational training course. Men had, between them, also taken up ten jobs that were either factory-based, (including packing, machine operating, storeman and labouring work), or in other short term work areas such as mail sorting and cleaning, none of which required any specific vocational training.

Of those surveyed in early 2007, three women had found ongoing work in aged or disability care and four were working in jobs which would also be considered a major shift away from carpet manufacturing, including laboratory processing, mail sorting, cash processing, and retail. Of these, retail was the only area that required vocational training. The women between them had held more than double the number of factory or warehousing jobs to men (twenty-eight jobs) and seven had found either short-term or ongoing cleaning work. These jobs did not require specific vocational training.
Appendix E – A summary of training available to Feltex workers in 2006

Throughout 2006, an array of short VET courses were available to retrenched manufacturing workers through two government-funded programs. Due to a confluence of circumstances, the TCF SAP was one of several avenues through which this particular group of retrenched workers was able to access a relatively large amount of formal education and training.

Training funded by SAP through Job Networks

Job Networks administered the TCF SAP, which offered job-seeking support and training courses for those who asked for it and were deemed eligible. The training could theoretically be accessed through Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) up until the retrenched worker had found employment which was ongoing for more than thirteen continuous weeks. After that, the TCF worker lost all eligibility for ‘intensive support’, including the free training component (TCFUA 2006c).

Approval for the training tended to be determined on the Case Manager’s estimation of how likely it was that the training would directly lead to employment (TCFUA 2006b). One consequence of this was that during 2006, despite intensive advocacy and support, very few retrenched Feltex workers accessed training through the TCF SAP. The TCFUA final report on the Feltex Workers Post Retrenchment Advocacy and Support Project estimated that in the twelve months after retrenchment, the main Job Network Provider associated with the workers approved only fifteen workers to access training through the multi-million-dollar TCF SAP, and spent a total of less than $1,6000 on training support in that time (TCFUA 2006d).
Skill Up

Another source of government-funded training was offered to retrenched Feltex workers in October 2005. The Victorian State Government made available up to eighty hours, or $600 worth of free training per head, to approved groups of retrenched workers, through the Skill Up program. Skill Up funding had to be used in the twelve months following retrenchment, although this was the only restriction. It was administered by staff from the TAFE institute closest to the retrenched workers, but the training could be delivered through any RTO of the trainee’s choice. The program was distinguished by its flexibility, and minimal approval processes for accredited courses.

TAFE Institutes with Skill Up contracts tended to market short courses which were easiest and most cost effective for them to run or outsource, including certificates in food processing, cleaning, aged care, security, warehousing, retail and hospitality, red card (construction site certificate) as well as transport and truck licences (TCFUA 2005). The TCFUA estimated that by the end of the first twelve months after retrenchment, the local TAFE enrolled students in at least fifty separate courses worth a total of about $20,000 (TCFUA 2006d).

Feltex fund

There was a third source of training support for the retrenched Feltex workers. In meetings with Feltex management after the retrenchment announcement in 2005, the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA) had successfully argued that ongoing access to education and training, support and mentoring would be essential components of successful work transition for the retrenched workers. In order to ensure that they were able to access training opportunities after retrenchment, the TCFUA brokered a unique agreement with Feltex, that the company fund project officers to independently mentor, advise, support and advocate on behalf of the 165 retrenched workers for a period
of twelve months. Two part-time project officers for the TCFUA Feltex Workers Post Retrenchment Support and Advocacy Project were funded.

Feltex management also agreed to fund up to a further $1,000 a head for re-training, to be accessible and available to all the retrenched workers over the period of twelve months from the day of retrenchment. The TCFUA estimated that $60,000 from Feltex was spent on training, to fund fifty-six courses in the twelve months following the retrenchment (TCFUA 2006d).
Appendix F – Survey January 2007

The sample group of forty-three survey participants were chosen from those who, responding to the TCFUA phone around in October 2006, were working or looking for work.

Survey Questions

Hello (name). This is Maree Keating. We met through the TCFUA post retrenchment project last year. I am not working on the project anymore but I am conducting my own personal research into the experiences of workers from Feltex. 

My research is for my PhD and it is looking at how the experience of retrenchment impacts on people leaving the textile industry. Would you agree to speak to me on the phone now for 20 minutes as part of that research?

1. Do you understand my explanation about the research? Do you have any questions? You don’t have to answer any questions if you don’t want to, and can stop me at any time if you want me to explain anything.

Name

Can you remind me of the length of time you were at Feltex prior to retrenchment?

How long did it take you to find work after you left?

Can you describe the kind of work you’ve been doing?

What training have you done since leaving Feltex?

Did you feel the training was useful to you? Why? Why not?

Would you say you are happy with the job you are doing now? Why? Why not?

How are the pay and conditions?

How are the people, the location, the work activities?

What things have been hard about the past twelve months?

What things have been good about the past twelve months?

Thanks for your time. Did you have any questions?

Would you be happy for me to contact you next year if I want to conduct a longer face-to-face interview with you?
### Appendix G – Interview questions June 2008

#### How you spent time in October 2004

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<th>LEVEL OF ENJOYMENT</th>
<th>TIME</th>
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<td>R=regular</td>
<td>AH=always high</td>
<td>NE=not enough</td>
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- Work (regular)
- Work (overtime)
- Time spent working at home (domestic tasks)
- Time spent relaxing alone or with family at home
- Travelling to work
- Travelling to other activities
- Visiting friends
- Having people over
- Events/parties
- Sports/concerts
- Festivals
- Church /club activities
- Hobby (reading/dancing/playing cards/fishing etc)
- Holidays or breaks
- Looking after friends’/comm’ty or family members
- Other activities

#### How you spent time in June 2008

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- Looking after friends’/comm’ty or family members
- Other activities
Interview questions

Name:………………………………………………
Age:………………………………………………
Phone:…………………………………………
Address:…………………………………………..
Date of Interview:………………………………

Introductory blurb

This interview is part of a research project I am writing for my PhD. The topic I am writing about is the impact of retrenchment on workers at Feltex. This interview will go for about an hour and I am going to record it. I am going to ask you some questions about life before and after you lost your job at Feltex. Later, if you agree, I will use some of your words on the recording in my PhD.

Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary and is not in any way connected to the Feltex project in 2005 or the TCFUA. You don’t have to answer anything you don’t feel comfortable with. You can stop the interview at any time.

Do you understand the purpose of the interview?
Do you agree to the interview and the recording?
Are you happy for me to use some of your words in my PhD?
Are you happy for me to use your name in my PhD?
Would you like me to double check with you before I write your words and your name into my PhD?

Changing relationship to work and the use of time:

1. How long did you work at Feltex?
2. Would it be right to say that Feltex was a big part of your life?
3. How much of your life did Feltex take up in terms of time? How much did it take up in terms of importance?
4. How did work routines (shifts, overtime, deadlines, flexibility) at Feltex fit in alongside routines and priorities in the rest of your life? (home, family, neighbourhood, church, clubs, celebrations, holidays, weekends etc).
5. Since leaving Feltex, have your routines and the time you spend on things outside work changed? How would you describe the main differences in your life now compared to then?

6. Have there been changes in your family life or your involvement in community activities around your work commitments since leaving Feltex? (i.e. time available, energy levels, ability to make plans, regular responsibilities, social activities).

7. Were you involved in the union at Feltex? Did you feel strongly about being a member of the union? What difference did your membership of the union make to you over the years you worked at Feltex?

8. Have you joined a union at work since leaving Feltex? If not, would you still describe yourself as a union supporter? Do you think it has made any difference to your life at work or outside of work now that you are not in a union? If so, what are those differences?

**Changing sense of community at work:**

9. Can you tell me what you remember about your relationships with people you worked with at Feltex over the years? (Did they only take place at work? Did people know you well? Did you share personal information?)

10. Would you say that relationships at work were supportive for you at Feltex? If so in what ways? If not, can you explain?

11. Do you think union membership (or non membership) affected relationships between people at work? If so how? If not why not?

12. What were the big factors that brought people together or divided them at Feltex? (race, language group, personality, class, education, position, age, gender, etc)

13. When you heard that the place was going to close down, how did you think the closure would affect your relationships with people you knew from work?

14. Since leaving Feltex, tell me about the place you work now. How would you describe your relationships with people at this workplace?

15. Do you think the quality of your work relationships with people is any different now than it was when you were at Feltex? If so, what do you think are the reasons for that?

16. Are issues such as union membership ethnicity, class, language, etc important in the same ways in your current workplace as they were at Feltex? If there are differences, what are they?

17. When you think back over the past two-and-a-half years, do you think you have changed your ideas about the kinds of relationships you can have with people at work?
Changing relationship to work as an activity:

18. You worked as a machine operator/supervisor/leading hand when you were at Feltex. Can you tell me about the work you did? When you think about working there, what are the things you remember the most? Do you miss the work you did there? Tell me why/why not.

19. How long have you worked in this job? Tell me about the job you are doing now at …………….. How is the job different from the job you did at Feltex?

20. When you were at Feltex you were responsible for producing carpet by deadline and ensuring quality along the way. Did you have strong feelings about the product you were making?

21. Tell me about the job you do now. Do you have the same sorts of feelings about the results of your work? How do you feel about the results of your work?

22. The job at Feltex was quite a physical job. How does your present job compare to that kind of work?

Changing relationship to work as a place:

23. What do you remember most about the physical space at the Braybrook site?

24. After you were retrenched was there anything you missed about the physical environment? (look, smell, shape, sound, openness etc)

25. Was there anything else you missed?

26. When you look back now and compare your physical work space now to Feltex, how are they different?

27. Do you have strong feelings about the physical place you work now? What do you like or dislike about it?

Moving on

28. When do you think you started to move on and change your life?

29. What do you think were the things that helped you to adapt to the changes?

30. Reflecting back, do you think you have changed in any way as a result of the retrenchment from Feltex in October 2004?

31. How do you see your future working life?
List of Abbreviations

AAACE Australian Association for Adult and Community Education
ABC Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABS Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACIRRT Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training
ACOSS Australian Council of Social Services
AEC Australian Education Council
ALA Adult Learning Australia
ALNARC Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium
AMES Adult Migrant Education Services
ANTA Australian National Training Authority
ATEC Access Training and Employment Centre
DEEWR Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations
DEST Department of Education Science and Training
DET Department of Education and Training
DEWR Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
DIIRD Department of Industry Innovation and Regional Development
EDC Economic Development Committee
ERC Equity Research Centre
ISC Industry Skills Council
MCEETYA Ministerial Council of Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs
OECD Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
TCFUA Textile Clothing and Footwear Union
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AAACE – See Australian Association for Adult and Community Education.


ABC – See Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

ABS – See Australian Bureau of Statistics.


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ALNARC – see Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium.

AMES – see Adult Migrant Education Service.

ANTA – see Australian National Training Authority.


ATEC – See Access Training and Employment Centre.


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