

# Flexibility and Insecurity: An Insight into the experiences of Uber drivers in Brisbane

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## Introduction

Between October 2018, and March 2019 researchers from the University of Queensland interviewed Uber “driver-partners”, ex-drivers, and met with Uber management, and several key stakeholders involved with ridesourcing<sup>1</sup> in Brisbane, Australia. While there is a growing amount of information surrounding Uber and ridesourcing as a form of gig-work<sup>2</sup> we are concerned about the lack of Australian specific information that is rigorous and independent. More specifically, while much information focuses on specifics of income disparity, driver inequality, and safety concerns our research seeks to explore the effects of ridesourcing on drivers’ social, work, and family life. To this extent the following report outlines the key findings of twenty-four interviews with current Uber driver-partners about their work history prior to driving for Uber, as well as their work identity, routines, and their philosophy on work more broadly.

Key findings in our report suggest that drivers have less control over when, where, and how they operate than is promoted by Uber<sup>3</sup>. While flexibility was reportedly the most frequent reason that drivers signed on to Uber, our report demonstrates that work experience and driver’s family responsibilities are likely to contribute to the experience of flexibility. For instance, many drivers reported signing up with Uber because they were underemployed, or underappreciated in their previous occupation. Similarly, while almost all drivers detested driving in the Brisbane CBD and driving on weekend nights, drivers from single income households were considerably more likely to work these hours than drivers from households with a combined income. Drivers from countries other than Australia or New Zealand were also more likely to drive these undesirable hours. These findings suggest that the patterns that organise Uber driver-partners are more likely to reflect a driver’s economic capital (the availability of economic assets), or their social and cultural capital (their ability to draw on friends, or knowledge to prosper in society). Consequently, our findings suggest that flexibility amongst Uber driver-partners is more likely to be an outcome of the driver’s position in society, than it is of Uber’s business model.

These findings complement recent research from Rosenblat (2018) about the financial and social struggles of Uber drivers in the United States. It also complements research from Campbell and Price (2016) who question the causal link between precarious work and precarious workers. Our research addresses these tensions by demonstrating that while Uber’s ‘flexible’ model benefits some drivers, it does not benefit all — or even most — drivers.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term ridesourcing to refer to the digital sourcing of independent contractors to transport passengers for a fare as is consistent with definitions from the Australian Tax Office (<https://www.ato.gov.au/general/the-sharing-economy-and-tax/Ride-sourcing/>)

<sup>2</sup> We define gig workers as workers who support themselves “as flexible, free independent suppliers, moving seamlessly from one job (or ‘gig’) to another, utilising digital technology to connect with purchasers of their services” (Stanford, 2017: 383).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uber.com/au/en/drive/>

## Summary of Findings

While our sample size only includes twenty-four drivers we have done our best to ensure a proportionate representation of drivers by gender, ethnicity, and age. Our sample size is informed by driver demographics from the United States, the United Kingdom, and surveys from Australia. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that our findings are illustrative rather than representative of broader driver experiences. The following findings were most illustrative of driver experiences in our research.

- ❖ The degree of flexibility drivers enjoy depends on their economic, social, and/or cultural capital. Drivers with fewer forms of capital were more likely to drive at undesirable and risky (but more lucrative) times.
- ❖ Drivers tended to join Uber because they were underemployed, or underappreciated in previous jobs.
- ❖ The social/cultural interactions with passengers was reported as the most rewarding and satisfying part of driving with Uber.
- ❖ Drivers felt high levels of job insecurity as a result of:
  - The inability to defend themselves against customer allegations and feedback from the star-rating system
  - Income generated was below Australian minimum hourly wage rates
  - A perceived lack of support and infrastructure governing operations in the CBD
- ❖ Most drivers interviewed were primary caregivers. Uber's flexibility was essential to minimising childcare costs and supporting families.
- ❖ Only half the drivers interviewed had a clear awareness of their business, operating, and legal responsibilities and expenses.
- ❖ Despite drivers often having multiple sources of income, Uber was almost always the most profitable source of income generation.
- ❖ Drivers were not overly concerned about their safety, although each driver implemented their own risk management strategy.

## Methods

One of the main reasons behind a lack of rigorous information about Uber — its algorithms, and experiences of drivers — has been the difficulty of establishing a reliable sampling method. While online driver forums present a great avenue into the world of Uber drivers, it represents a specific demographic of drivers who are both active online, but also, actively engaged in the Uber community— which as the reader will see — may represent up to half of the demographic of Uber drivers. We were unable to access drivers directly through Uber and instead recruited drivers via an online forum on the Facebook platform. An online post informing members of the research was posted on January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019 in the “Uber Drivers Brisbane” group; a group whose description reads:

This group exists primarily for Uber drivers who drive in Brisbane, for the purposes of support, sharing of information & our experiences in driving Uber in Brisbane...<sup>4</sup>

The Facebook group has ten thousand members, and features regular posts from members about ridesourcing related questions (mostly for drivers on the Uber platform), issues and comments. Unlike many other dedicated forums the level of engagement is largely pragmatic (questions about parking, money, tax, etc.) and politically ambivalent with some exceptions. The forum also features a stronger contingent of drivers from different genders and ethnic backgrounds and therefore was an ideal medium for driver recruitment.

Twenty of the twenty-four driver interviews assembled in this report were organised from this sampling model within a week of the Facebook post, and conducted over the following two and a half weeks at various locations around Brisbane in early 2019. These interviews were semi-structured and conversational. The interviews explored drivers’ employment history, career outlook as an Uber driver, and their daily routine and work-life balance. All interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis except for one where a driver brought his partner along to serve as a translator. The other four driver interviews included in this report were collected in October and November 2018. These interviews shared a similar method to the other twenty with the exception that they were conducted “in-car” by researchers who booked a ride from the University to an outer suburb in Brisbane. The twenty-four driver interviews were complemented by five interviews with ex-drivers who were known to the research team, and several meetings with Uber management, and key stakeholders in the Queensland ridesourcing community which informed our analysis of the data.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/914062318633236/about/> (accessed 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2019)

The demographic of the sample size is modelled on pre-existing data from the United States<sup>5</sup> and the United Kingdom<sup>6</sup> where more focused demographics of Uber drivers have been compiled. We achieved a 17% representation of women drivers, which is in line with some older data from the United States (2014) and suggestions from Uber management in 2018<sup>7</sup>. We also ensured an even balance between Australian and New Zealand born drivers and other immigrant drivers. While we suspect, as key stakeholders do, that Brisbane has a higher proportion of immigrant drivers<sup>8</sup>, we consider an even split reasonable given our recruitment of participants through an online forum in English. We also included three drivers who were retired or semi-retired, which is proportionate to existing data. Of the drivers interviewed most (67%) drove full time (i.e. 35+ hours a week), most (67%) had a level of education in-excess of high school (including vocational/TAFE, and/or university), most (60%) had dependents, and most (60%) relied on a joint household income to 'pay the bills' [although not all parents had the luxury of a joint income to support their children]. While most drivers worked across a variety of other roles including: other rideshare apps (75%), taxis (20%), and full-time/part-time/casual employment (35%), almost all — with the exception of two — drivers reported Uber was their primary source of income. Interestingly almost one-fifth of our sample rented a car to drive for Uber. This figure points to the importance of intermediaries involved in the gig economy; it suggests avenues for future research to explore the effect of digital platform growth on job creation, and the financial interdependence of workers and businesses in this gig economy.

## Flexibility and Insecurity

Drivers in this project revealed both high levels of economic and job status insecurity as well as reasonable levels of work satisfaction. While insecurity may seem like an obvious finding for gig workers like Uber drivers, its coexistence with these satisfaction levels highlights an interesting paradox.

### Part 1: Insecurity

Fourteen drivers responded in a favourable or somewhat favourable way to the opportunities that driving with Uber offered them. Of the ten who did not, only four were overwhelmingly negative about Uber, and the others were unsure about whether they enjoyed driving with Uber or not. Paramount amongst the issues raised with Uber were:

- (1) Almost all drivers interviewed had low levels of trust in Uber, and many were unsure that Uber would be able to provide a fair and reasonable opportunities for them in the future. Many were concerned about a perceived lack of transparency in the star-rating system,

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<sup>5</sup> (Hall & Krueger, 2018)

<sup>6</sup> (Berger, Frey, Levin, & Danda, 2018)

<sup>7</sup> Although we note that these figures are significantly higher than the most recent findings from the United Kingdom in which Berger, Frey, Levin, and Danda (2018) found only 1% of drivers were women.

<sup>8</sup> One stakeholder suspected that 60% to 80% of drivers in Brisbane were immigrants.

and the ability of customers to make unsupported allegations against drivers without drivers having the right to defend themselves against unfounded reports. Almost all drivers had negative experience with the customer support 'hotline', although many who had visited Uber's physical headquarters in Brisbane had much better experiences.

- (2) Most drivers interviewed felt like they were not getting paid a fair rate. Drivers reported grossing between \$20 to \$35 an hour (after Uber's commission of 27.5%, but before expenses), and netting about half (i.e. \$10 to \$17.50 an hour) of this amount after expenses. However, other studies suggest these drivers would net less than this, and receive somewhere between \$9.07 and \$15.72 an hour<sup>9</sup>. Regardless of the metric, both figures fall below Australia's current minimum wage of \$18.93 an hour<sup>10</sup>.
- (3) Almost all (85%) of the drivers reported the difficulty and financial risk of operating in the Brisbane CBD area. These risks were largely because of passengers trying to enter and exit the vehicle in unsafe, and illegal locations (i.e. passengers getting out at street-lights, or calling an Uber from a bus or taxi zone). However, some drivers also reported conflicts with taxi drivers who had intentionally blocked loading zones and parking spots while taxi zones were empty. Drivers were evenly split as to who was to blame for the city issues: half of the drivers thought Uber needs to invest in infrastructure in the city and educate/direct riders to safe and legal places to wait for Uber drivers, and the other half blamed overzealous police and Brisbane City Council parking inspectors for targeting Uber drivers.

Consequently, concerns about the place of ridesourcing in the transportation industry were central amongst the insecurities of drivers. Insecurity is here defined by the anxiety drivers had with regards to Uber's ability to provide them fair and reasonable work into the future. These issues of structural fairness, organisational support, fair pay, and appropriate infrastructure (now that drivers pay significant fees in annual registration) emerged across all the interviews and need to be taken very seriously by management, government and industry regulators, and future policy makers addressing the rise of on-demand gig work. All these concerns contributed to a sense of insecurity about the poor status and quality of the job, and Uber's ability to provide a reasonable avenue of income for these drivers.

*I believe the most talented driver, the best driver, couldn't do too well with Uber or any other of those [ridesourcing] apps alone. (...) I can't really say which one [fault of Uber] is worse, being unable to provide job security or the regulation...in terms of providing evidence for dispute and picking up and drop off in a legal spot in the city. (Uber Driver #07, 32yo, Male)*

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<sup>9</sup>Dr. Jim Stanford's estimation of Uber driver income argues that income should be factored on kilometres travelled as well as hourly wage. After deducting expenses (in line with Stanford's 2018: 11 assessment) drivers take home roughly 34.8% of their total gross fare (which includes Uber's 27.5% commission and their 0.55 cent booking fee). This would mean that our drivers grossed somewhere between \$26.05 and \$45.18 an hour, and net only \$9.07-\$15.72 an hour.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/how-we-will-help/templates-and-guides/fact-sheets/minimum-workplace-entitlements/minimum-wages>

## Part 2: Flexibility

Despite the above finding the most valued aspect of being a driver-partner with Uber was (unsurprisingly) the convenience and flexibility of driving. Flexibility needs to be carefully defined because it is not used as nebulously by the drivers as it appears in media reports. There were two particular aspects of flexibility that were enjoyed by drivers. The first, as we will detail in the following section, is that a significant proportion of the drivers had dependents of which they had to organise their schedules around; Uber was considered perfect for these drivers with caring responsibilities (and, more often than not, a partner with a more stable income to support the household).

Secondly, a significant proportion of drivers explained that they joined Uber because they were not getting enough hours at their previous job. Most drivers came from the hospitality industry where they reported poor treatment from managers, and often struggled to work sufficient hours to support themselves. The second industry that drivers commonly came from were “professionals”, specifically finance, advertising, and business management. Many of these drivers had been in commission based positions, or were struggling to win tenders and joined Uber either part-time or permanently because they could make more money as a driver. Thus, the attraction of flexibility for these drivers was more about the promise of being able to work full time hours and no longer being *underemployed* than it was about being able to drive whenever they wanted.

*I was working in the kitchen and in purchasing...I was getting some shifts, but my main job was in the kitchen. (...) I was not getting full-time hours, and then I had to do my own bus fare, as well, and then travelling time from here to city. (...) my friend was doing Uber at that time. But he used to tell me how much gross he made. That sounded very appealing...*

*(Uber Driver #09, 34yo, Male)*

In addition to flexibility, drivers often signed-up to Uber because it was “convenient” and “easy”. Drivers explained that Uber was ideal for them because they did not have to sit in job interviews, or spend weeks at a time applying for jobs. Instead they had to fill out the paperwork and pay the registration fees and they would be guaranteed work. Uber’s relatively low bar for entry into the job market was especially valuable for immigrant drivers who were concerned about their ability to communicate in job interviews or were concerned that their overseas credentials and work history would be unrecognised in Australia.

*I prefer office work, but now I think [I] wouldn’t have the university [credentials] to get this kind of job [in Australia]...Before in my country I work[ed] over 10 years in [an] office. (Uber Driver #14, 36yo, Male)*



In summary, two forms of ‘flexibility’ were prevalent amongst the responses from the interviews that underline and counterbalance driver insecurities. The first was a form of flexibility that allowed drivers to work sufficient hours to support themselves and their families. The second appears to be the flexibility to schedule driving around full-time caring responsibilities. While all the respondents felt a degree of risk or insecurity (defined through the lack of reasonable income, and a lack of trust in the organisation) about their role with Uber, this risk was countered by Uber’s ability to offer either (a) enough hours to make ends meet, or (b) balance work around their family life.

Many drivers were satisfied with Uber because it was better than their previous occupations which had failed to provide them an adequate means of income and/or security. For these drivers Uber promises a *better* avenue of income, or a supplementary form of income to those who work in other occupations, but get paid on commission (like real estate agents, mortgage brokers, and sales representatives). Nevertheless, this promise of a job that supports and provides a livelihood for its workers is not a radically new idea; Uber’s promise of ‘flexibility’ reflects the deteriorating quality of jobs in which many of these Uber drivers have worked in previously. This finding suggests the imperative of the ‘flexibility’ narrative is not that Uber is supplying something extraordinary for society, but rather that other jobs are failing to provide reasonable conditions for decent paid work. It needs to be recognised that Uber’s low rates of remuneration, and poor driver support are still problematic; but that in the experience of these driver-partners these issues are better than chronic underemployment, and unpaid work.

## Work and Family

One surprising outcome of the research was that Uber driver-partners were predominantly primary caregivers to their family. Such a finding is more surprising given the significant proportion of men who drive with Uber. Twelve respondents had children (nine men, and three women), three others were retired with children out of home, and two respondents had family back home (overseas) that they were sending money to. Excluding the three retirees, then, fourteen of our twenty-four respondents were supporting at least one dependent. Such a finding is important to understand the fiscal responsibility on these driver-partners and to contextualise the stressors on each driver to produce a regular, and reasonable income, and it amplifies the threat of insecurity outlined above. Contrary to a public conception of Uber drivers — or more generally gig workers — as young, free and independent people, the major demographic of the drivers in the sample were in their mid-to-late 30s with families and responsibilities.

Of these twelve driver-partners with children, most relied on a joint income to support their children, while their partners pursued more profitable and secure career jobs. The flexibility that

Uber offered these drivers was a form of mobility for their partners, and it allowed families to avoid the otherwise unaffordable costs of childcare.

*I could sign up quickly and be earning money quickly...and it was flexible, because I applied for a lot of different jobs, but it would have been part time and I would have had to find care for the kids, before and after school, or whatever. Yeah, so it was just flexible, and I knew I could work when I wanted to work. (Uber Driver #08, 34yo, Female)*

As outlined in the above section, flexibility is invoked here as an important mechanism to avoid an undesirable aspect of contemporary society for many working age Australians: the unaffordability of childcare<sup>11</sup>. If childcare was more affordable, it is not clear whether Uber would be as appealing to these drivers as other part-time jobs that could provide a more reliable and stable income. Nevertheless, this flexibility was essential to the three drivers who were single parents and had even greater restrictions on their availability to work. For single parents in particular, Uber was essential to navigating the costs of childcare and their time commitments to their child. One of our participants reported it was cheaper for him to quit a permanent job in retail management and drive with Uber than it was to stay at work and pay for childcare:

*well my son came back to stay with me during the week because he used to be with his mum during the week and me on weekends, and then we switched it around, and the cost of before school care and after school care was going to be far too much. So, the flexibility of Uber won out. (Uber Driver #15, 38yo, Male)*

## Financial Independence

Financial independence and the promise of self-employment is often touted as one of the greatest aspects of the gig economy, and especially so with Uber driving<sup>12</sup>. However, our research demonstrates findings that contradict this narrative. First, the proportion of immigrants driving in the city on weekend nights (both the city, and drunk passengers were amongst the worst aspects of the job according to all respondents) was significantly higher than non-immigrants driving at these times. So too were drivers relying on a single income considerably more likely to work these undesirable hours than those who had spousal support, or who were retired. This suggests that those with fewer economic, or social and cultural assets, were most likely to drive at undesirable hours that were more likely to be profitable than other times (early mornings were the most desirable times to drive according to most our participants). Such a finding is important in light of broader questions of 'autonomy' and 'control over work' that are often associated with the benefits of Uber driving. On the contrary, our findings suggest that Uber drivers are not as free to choose their operational hours. Instead it appears that drivers in this study were obliged to work at more profitable times instead of when they would prefer to work.

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<sup>11</sup> (ABC News, 2017)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.uber.com/au/en/drive/>

*I don't know if it's going to work for me given the amount of hours I can put in, which isn't that many, but I guess I'll work that out in the next two years (...) I need to get into the Friday, Saturday nights because I don't want to be wasting my time for the money, do you know what I mean? It has to be busy or I'm not doing it...It's pretty hard to make a normal hourly rate from Uber. So with adding quiet times to that I'm not doing it, because you will be working for something like \$5 an hour by the time you take away all your costs and stuff, for the quiet times. So it's not worth it.*  
(Uber Driver #19, 36yo, Female)

Another finding that contradicts the narrative of driver autonomy and control over work is that only half of the respondents knew their business expenses and legal obligations as Uber drivers. That is, half the respondents could not clearly recall what they were grossing, and/or how much money they were spending on expenses (petrol, tax, maintenance, fines, registration). This finding is even more surprising given that most drivers interviewed in this project were full-time drivers (35+ hours a week). It is also surprising because it suggests that many drivers may struggle to accurately report their income on quarterly tax statements which is required under Australian law.

Part of the reason for this lack of business knowledge may be because many of the Uber drivers did not view Uber as their primary job, even though it was their primary source of income. That is, roughly half the respondents had other sources of income on the side (often online sales and professional start-ups) that they had hoped would become profitable in the near future. Another likely explanation is that many drivers with families considered their income through Uber as 'extra pocket money' to support the family, and thus were less likely to run their driving business as strictly as those who relied on the income from Uber alone. While a lack of business awareness is not necessarily incommensurate with running a profitable business, its risk is compounded by the fact that some 30% of drivers interviewed did not know any other Uber drivers, and many more relied on online forums and chat groups for information about how to run their business. Without advice from other drivers or mentors it is difficult to understand how these drivers hope to build a profitable driving business.

Nevertheless, the other half of drivers interviewed had a reasonable or excellent grasp of their income, expenses, and legal obligations as contractors. Most of these drivers kept spreadsheets with hours and trips taken, and most drivers scrutinised their invoices from Uber for not uncommon accounting "glitches". Some of these drivers also had dedicated accountants to help them maximise profitability of their business.

*I should have brought you my spreadsheet. Yeah, I'm really spreadsheet friendly. Very, very proactive about making sure I separate my money into what I need to do every single week so there's no nasty surprises when you have to do the GST and everything like that...So 50 per cent I keep and spend, whether it be on childcare fees and things like that. Fifty per cent I put into an account, separated into three separate accounts. Thirty per cent tax, 10 per cent super, 10 per cent GST. (Uber Driver #12, 45yo, Male)*

Third, despite most (75%) drivers being aware of, and using, other ridesourcing applications (like Ola, for instance) that take a smaller commission from the total fare, most admitted they struggled to make much money from these alternate sources and relied on Uber to serve as a central source of income. Only one driver said he used Ola more than Uber as a primary source of income. This suggests that while there are a variety of digital platforms, there are only a few that are pragmatically viable for workers who need “gigs” to pay the bills. While roughly half of the drivers received an income in addition to ridesourcing, although almost all drivers agreed that that Uber was their most valuable source of income. Consequently, we find that the drivers were quite reliant on Uber as a primary source of income, and while they had other options, very rarely were these options reliable or secure because (as explained earlier) of overarching issues in underemployment and commission based jobs that don’t offer regular incomes.

## Safety

Very few drivers in our research reported feeling unsafe when driving; in fact almost all of them reported feeling safe. Only one driver reported feeling unsafe when driving for Uber after being physically assaulted by a passenger. Interestingly, all other drivers reported feeling more or less safe, despite most recalling at least one confronting experience with an aggressive passenger at one point or another. Further analysis, however, demonstrates that drivers had either normalised (as an ordinary part of the job), or had mitigated safety risks by implementing risk management strategies (often unconsciously). For instance, many drivers reported assessing drunk and/or risky passengers on the way to a pick up by “always arriving with locked doors” and looking for any weapons, drinks, or vomit on (or around) the passengers before opening the doors.

Moreover, several immigrant drivers reported being very good at “not talking” to certain [racist] passengers, or playing music at a higher than normal volume to reduce to possibility for awkward or racially charged interactions with these customers. Also, as mentioned earlier, drivers with more flexibility simply avoided driving nights and other undesirable times where they may be more likely to have to confront unsavoury passengers, or drive in the city. Some white Australian drivers also mentioned that some passengers have commented with relief that they have a ‘white’ or ‘Aussie’ driver, which also indicates some underlying racial tensions that Uber drivers face. Overall, while our data only hints at underlying safety concerns, we caution drivers, regulators, and policy makers to be careful with these results and ensure that there are adequate protocols in place to protect independent contractors — like these Uber drivers — from physical and verbal threats to their safety, as well as the time/income lost by drivers recovering from these occupational hazards.

## Conclusion: Families, Financial dependence, and [in]flexibility.

This report has presented data from interviews with twenty-four Uber driver-partners in Brisbane. Most of the drivers interviewed were happy with their role as an Uber driver-partner. By and large, drivers were evenly split between enjoying the social aspect of the role (i.e. meeting new people, and learning about their local communities) and the flexibility of the job. Nevertheless, as we have pointed out in this report, this concept of flexibility is more complex than it first appears. Many of these drivers have dependents, and many of these drivers rely on Uber as their primary source of income which means that drivers often have little choice over when they drive. Moreover, many of these drivers come from previous occupations where they were underemployed, worked in poor conditions, paid inconsistently, or on a commission only basis. For many of these people, Uber offered a better chance for regular income – despite the low rate of pay. However, while Uber helps some people organise their work and private lives, it appears to only benefit certain types of workers; generally those with some form of economic, social, and/or cultural resources to draw upon. For a significant proportion of drivers, however, Uber does not appear to be a sustainable avenue of income generation — a conclusion that is supported by a report from the Rideshare Drivers Association of Australia that at least 50% of rideshare drivers quit after three months (2018). To be sure, there are stories of drivers making a better living thanks to the opportunities of Uber, however, the reality is that these drivers are highly motivated with a clear business plan. For at least half of the Uber drivers interviewed, a comparable business sense was not evident. While this is problematic for the drivers, it is as Rosenblat (2018: 72) points out, quite beneficial to Uber who recruit a fleet of drivers willing to do jobs that others will not.

Overall, this report outlines how flexibility is conceptualised by drivers as either (a) a form of being able to work full-time hours and make a more liveable income than before or (b) being able to work around caring responsibilities. As such, flexibility is critically underpinned by economic and social circumstances. Similarly, we found that if drivers are immigrants, or from a single income household they are considerably more likely to work on Friday and Saturday nights which are more profitable, but also more risky in terms of safety. We have outlined how a considerable proportion of the drivers were using the flexibility of Uber to support their partners who were pursuing higher paid careers. We also outlined how widely drivers report distrust and uncertainty about Uber's commitment to drivers because of (i) poor driver support and the lack of the right to respond to unfounded allegations (ii) poor income rates, and (iii) a lack of industry support. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the research for us was how few of the drivers had a clear understanding of business expenses and their legal obligations as driver-partners. Finally, we have pointed out how a wider concern for safety has perhaps become 'second nature' to these drivers as they internalise risk management strategies to avoid risky or abusive passengers.

While we acknowledge that our sample size is too small to draw any causal inferences, we have flagged some considerable elements for future research and examination. For example, much more work needs to be done to disentangle the terminology and application of ‘flexibility’<sup>14</sup>. As we have shown, flexibility needs to be critically assessed against the socio-cultural reality of Australian workers since it is heavily entwined with economic necessity, family caring responsibilities, and the deteriorating quality of other jobs in Australia. We have also highlighted some important questions about identity amongst these workers, and the relationship to economic, social, and cultural capital. These assets play a considerable role in framing Uber drivers’ outlooks, earning potential, and life satisfaction.

Questions about insecurity, and insecure work were also essential to these findings; while most of these workers were satisfied with their role as driver-partners, almost all of them reported some form of insecurity. We suggest that the poor quality of jobs on offer in the Australian labour market has contributed to the rise of Uber as a viable alternative to these *bad jobs*. While more research needs to be done to confirm this relationship, it suggests that the problems identified in this report go beyond Uber itself to broader issues for the Australian labour force. While some believe gig work promises to liberate workers from the monotonous routine, and arbitrary management structures of the ‘9-5 workplace’, the data in this report suggests that Uber drivers are still bound by the routine cycles of passengers travelling to and from the city (for work, or pleasure), and from the management of passengers who rate the drivers.

## Future Research and Recommendations

This report serves as a foundation for future research into gig work, and the nature of on-demand work. It will inform future discussions with regulators and policy makers on the subject of the future of work. Economists at the University of Queensland are endeavouring to conduct a quantitative survey on Uber drivers. The results of this quantitative survey will be analysed alongside the results of this project to compile an in-depth mixed-methods report that can clarify some of the relationships we have highlighted here.

Meetings with key stakeholders in the transport and ridesourcing industries in Queensland all agree that ridesourcing offers incredible potential to the Australian economy, consumers, and drivers. However, the benefit to drivers, as this report demonstrates, is complicated thanks to the high job insecurity and low rates of remuneration. It seems clear that while drivers value the opportunity Uber provides them, certain regulations over income rates, and organisational support and transparency are essential to providing a standard of work in the ridesourcing industry that we expect of all workers in Australian society. While the Queensland Government is

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<sup>14</sup> Lehdonvirta, 2018; Bourne & Forman, 2014; Lambert, Haley-Lock, & Henly 2012.

currently establishing a Personalised Transport Ombudsman to “provide a complaints resolution service for the industry including customers, driver and other parties”<sup>15</sup> we are concerned about the ability of this public servant to challenge the operational practices that underpin Uber’s business model.

Fundamental to the problems affecting Uber drivers in this report are issues of (1) low income rates (2) a perceived lack of due diligence from Uber into rider complaints and reviews of drivers, and (3) a perceived lack of industry and council support for drivers operating in the CBD. These issues may require definitive changes in Queensland and Federal law as to the obligations of those who outsource labour to independent contractors. As such, we reflect Stewart & Stanford’s (2017: 432) call to:

...ensure that the blurring of the relationships between intermediary and worker...does not deny their workers of the sorts of protections that have been considered basic rights in Australian society.

The lack of certainty as to the legal obligations of intermediaries to contractors is paramount to the issues faced by Uber drivers in this report. The only way to guarantee a reasonable income rate and conditions of work for drivers is to have them recognised as workers with clearly defined legal rights under local, state, and federal law. Regardless of the manner in which governments define the working relationship between Uber and its “driver-partners” (i.e. whether driver-partners retain their status as independent contractors or not) if Uber drivers are not protected by industrial regulations they will continue to be subject to sub-par working conditions and protections.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.tmr.qld.gov.au/business-industry/Taxi-and-limousine/Queenslands-Personalised-Transport-Horizon/Personalised-transport-industry-reforms-stage-3>



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