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## **Older workers in Australia: The myths, the realities and the battle over workforce 'flexibility'**

**Chris Kossen,**

School of Humanities and Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Southern Queensland,  
Toowoomba QLD, Australia

**Cec Pedersen**

School of Management & Marketing, Faculty of Business, University of Southern Queensland,  
Toowoomba QLD, Australia

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## Abstract

A decisive 2004 fourth term win for the Howard Government and control over the Senate provided the Australian government with a mandate to further deregulate the labour market in the name of 'flexibility'. This paper uses a critical perspective to challenge the wisdom of neo-liberal market economics as the driving force behind the rapid expansion of non-traditional 'flexible' forms of work and the persistence of a deficit model/perspective that continues to devalue the human capital value of older workers. It is argued that these trends will contribute to ongoing under utilisation of 'older' labour and intensification of skill shortages, in part, as a result of lack of investment in maintaining human capital. In responding to Australia's rapidly ageing workforce the Howard Government has adopted modest measures designed to counter age based discrimination and encourage workforce participation. However, participation rates among older workers in Australia have remained one of the lowest among Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries. This paper argues that the Government's labour market deregulation policies are reducing the availability of jobs that provide sufficient working conditions and remuneration to make workforce participation attractive. The erosion of employment conditions associated with 'flexible' workforce reform leads to underemployment, an employment outcome that often fails to meet the needs of many older workers. More recently, however, the Government has embarked on reforms that appear to provide genuine incentives aimed specifically at attracting workforce participation by older workers, but unfortunately these are by and large confined to those aged 60 years and over.

