

TOOLKIT

# Humanising food delivery work in Australia

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# Contents

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3

At a glance

---

4

Project overview

---

5

Being a food delivery worker

---

6

Interactions during food delivery

---

7

What can we all do to improve food delivery?

---

7

Platforms and algorithmic management

---

8

What can platforms change to improve food delivery?

---

9

Policy-makers and infrastructure

---

10

How can policy-makers improve food delivery?

---

11

Resources for food delivery workers

*“People should be more conscious that we are also people. We are not like robots who deliver food. We have problems, issues, and these people treat us as if we are nothing.”*

**Carlos** Biomedical Science Student, Peru

# At a glance

## Background



In the 'gig' economy, businesses utilise digital platforms to manage labour who perform tasks



Work is paid per piece, and issued through algorithmic management



Workers are independent contractors – excluding them from benefits of employees



Workers must provide their own equipment (e.g., phone, battery, vehicle/bicycle)



Temporary migrants are three times more likely than citizens to deliver food<sup>1</sup>



Despite “essential” status<sup>2</sup>, little is known about the unique experiences of migrant food delivery workers



This study explored the interactions and relationships of this cohort – focusing on how food delivery cyclists respond to their circumstances



This report offers a toolkit to improve food delivery

## Research findings summary

- + Many start food delivery as it is more appealing to other jobs available to them – enjoying social aspects and opportunity to know Australia
- + Most are highly educated temporary migrants, who are studying or cannot find work in their profession
- + Workers usually enjoy delivery – until something goes wrong – realising they are without support
- + Platforms are only one of many stakeholders who are complicit in exploitation of this cohort – others include customers, restaurants, education agencies, landlords, and strangers
- + In the absence of formal supports – workers create communities of practice to educate each other and offer support at times of crisis
- + Platform workers creatively use agency to solve issues and seek justice

*“We immigrants do the jobs that Australians don’t want to. You don’t see Australians doing Uber Eats... I’ve only seen Brazilians, Indians, Colombians, some Europeans... being an immigrant in Australia comes with a lot of fear of breaking the rules, of not being able to survive economically... and they take advantage of that. That’s why platforms have the luxury of paying \$5 per order, because there is so much demand from [international] students.”*

Anita Lawyer, Colombia

1 McDonald, Paula, Williams, Penny, Stewart, Andrew, Mayes, Robyn, and Oliver, Damian (2020) *Digital Platform Work in Australia: Prevalence, Nature and Impact*. Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Available at: [eprints.qut.edu.au/203119/](https://eprints.qut.edu.au/203119/)

2 For more see: [theconversation.com/delivery-workers-are-now-essential-they-deserve-the-rights-of-other-employees-134406](https://theconversation.com/delivery-workers-are-now-essential-they-deserve-the-rights-of-other-employees-134406)

# Project overview

## Methods and data

### This project was designed to:

- Focus on experiences of temporary migrants who deliver by bicycle (in South East Queensland)
- View worker experiences with hospitality lens

### Data was collected in Brisbane, Australia:

- Using an ethnographic approach
- From face-to-face and digital participant-observation, shadowing workers by bicycle and car and semi-structured interviews
- Between September 2020 and September 2021

### Participants:

- Include 27 delivery workers and 10 key stakeholders
- Primarily partnered with Uber Eats
- Consented to participate according to university ethics procedures – names are anonymised

## Acknowledgment

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship. We are grateful to the workers, community leaders, and other key stakeholders who shared their time and experiences with us.



























## About us

**Dr Tyler Riordan** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at UQ Business School. This report is based on his doctoral thesis which applied a lens of hospitality to worker experiences in the platform economy.

**Associate Professor Richard Robinson** is a Research Fellow at UQ Business School. He was a supervisor on this project, and his research focuses on hospitality and tourism workforce policy and planning.

**Associate Professor Gerhard Hoffstaedter** works at the School of Social Science at UQ. He was a supervisor on this project, and his research focuses on development studies, and refugee and immigration policy.

## Participant profiles – food delivery workers

Pseudonym	Country	Professional background	Visa	Vehicle
Carlos	Peru	Biomedical Science student	Student	
Li	Panama	Family business (service)	Student	
Anita	Colombia	Lawyer	Student	
Juliana	Colombia	Doctor	Bridging	
Jose	Colombia	Electrician	Bridging	
Diego	Colombia	Chemical Engineer	Student	
Ricardo	Colombia	Underwriter	Student	 
Leticia	Brazil	Biologist	Student	
Fernanda	Brazil	Dentist	Partner	
Oscar	Mexico	Mechanical Engineer	Student	 
Sara	Colombia	Financial Engineer	Student	 
Manny	Colombia	Business Administration	Student	
Peter	Macau	Communications (Student)	Graduate	
Catalina	Colombia	Business Administration	Student	
Omar	Colombia	Engineer	Bridging	
Maria	Colombia	Accountant	Student	
Juan	Mexico	Bank Chain Manager	Student	
Ashfin	Iran	International Business Management	Student	
Olivia	Brazil	Lawyer	Student	
Yang	Burma	Carpentry (student)	Unknown	
Hiro	Japan	Economist	Partner	
Anthony	Colombia	Lawyer	Student	
Carolina	Colombia	Industrial Engineer	Student	
Vijay	India	Business Administration	Student	
Pamela	Chile	Transport Engineer	Partner	
Liam	Australia	None	No	 
Nathan	Australia	Chef	No	

### Key

 Bicycle  Car  Electric bicycle  Electric scooter  Moped  Motorbike



*“When I arrived I couldn’t find a job... it was an illusion that people tell you to come to Australia, but it’s not true... that’s why everyone starts with Uber Eats... it’s the only thing that you can work 20 hours and you’re sure they are gonna pay you.”*

**Pamela** Transport Engineer, Chile

## Being a food delivery worker

### Why do people start delivering food?

- Work is fun and high flexibility is attractive – role is more appealing than alternatives
- Easy to sign-on, with fast access to cash



### What are the downsides?

- Food delivery is gruelling and dangerous work
- As independent contractors, workers lack training, employee benefits, and other supports
- Flexibility is limited – customers typically order at mealtimes and weekends
- Workers struggle to earn minimum wage
- Platforms regularly change conditions and processes without notice – order allocation is not transparent
- Workers can be ‘deactivated’ without recourse
- Migrant workers are often abused
- E-bike theft is common – taking workers livelihood

### Key takeaways

- Food delivery riders are typically:
  - highly skilled – yet much of the role involves unrecognised and underpaid tasks
  - well-educated temporary migrants
- Food delivery workers creatively utilise unpaid waiting time to socialise and educate each other
- Most enjoy the role until something goes wrong – realising they have limited support from platforms and governments
- Many migrants are disillusioned with Australia due to negative experiences in platform work and during COVID-19

# Interactions during food delivery

## Who do workers interact with?

- Customers, restaurant workers, and platforms
- Other important stakeholders – pedestrians, drivers, wildlife, and the public

## What are the positives?

- Most customers and restaurant workers are friendly – some offer free food and drinks
- Some workers enjoy ‘contactless delivery’

## What are the negatives?

- Some restaurant staff degrade delivery people – further alienating migrant workers
- Restaurant information and opening hours are sometimes inaccurate
- Some customers and members of public abuse workers – some women were sexually harassed
- Inappropriate infrastructure leads to conflict between workers and other public space users

## Key takeaways

- Delivery interactions are important source of human contact for marginalised workers
- The behaviour of all stakeholders can improve or detract from the wellbeing of workers
- Workers enjoy most interactions, but sometimes feel like others lack respect and dehumanise them
- Digital platforms accelerate criticism and abuse

*“I was going to give him the bag and it broke in front of the customer and everything fell in the floor... I told the guy ‘I’m sorry. It wasn’t my fault, the restaurant didn’t close the lid properly...’*

*He took it really well, but he was like, ‘what do I do now?’ And I’m like, ‘just call Uber and tell them you have an issue and they will give you a refund. But with the food, there’s nothing I can do.’”*

**Diego** Chemical Engineer, Colombia



# What can we all do to improve food delivery?



## Customers

- Be kind to workers and tip in cash
- Give high ratings and positive feedback
- For complicated delivery locations – leave clear instructions in plain English
- Receive orders at entrance to apartment buildings
- Advocate for improved worker rights



## Restaurant staff and managers

- Treat workers professionally and with respect
- Reconsider packaging – particularly liquids
- Give high ratings and positive feedback
- Have food ready on workers arrivals
- Offer appropriate parking and waiting zones
- Remember workers are an unrecognised extension of their brand and service chain



## General public and other road users

- Give time and space to workers to deliver safely
- Recognise conflict often stems from inappropriate design of infrastructure and inadequate public space
- Be aware that workers must follow instructions given by platforms, in a specific order
- Be patient with human workers who may not be familiar with local laws and cultural expectations
- Assist workers who are or have been abused

# Platforms and algorithmic management

## How is platform work structured?

- Platforms issue instructions via smartphones – work is managed through algorithmic management and automated decisions<sup>3</sup>

## What are the issues?

- Platforms designed overseas often do not account for local circumstances
- Workers are frustrated when things go wrong, as they are unable to contact human managers
- Platforms hide practices behind algorithmic management – workers cannot access data
- Some feel dehumanised by platform work

## What are the benefits?

- Instructions are easy to understand
- Rapid onboarding and payment
- Some workers like “not having a boss”

*“There were many [navigation] issues because of the river. Software doesn’t take it into account. You have to be very localised. But people in the US, they’re not thinking of that which makes it more dangerous, especially when they are migrants who don’t have knowledge of the city and rely on the app.”*

**David**  
Food Delivery Platform Manager

## Key takeaways

- Workers feel that platforms take advantage of them – treating them as interchangeable
- Platform business models are dependent on migrant labour
- Delivery workers conduct additional non-remunerated labour – waiting time is unwaged
- Workers improve platform processes – despite earning below minimum wage
- The biggest concerns for workers relate to transparent decision making and fair payment

<sup>3</sup> For more see: [theconversation.com/algorithms-workers-cant-see-are-increasingly-pulling-the-management-strings-144724](https://theconversation.com/algorithms-workers-cant-see-are-increasingly-pulling-the-management-strings-144724)

# What can platforms change to improve food delivery?

## What should platforms consider further?

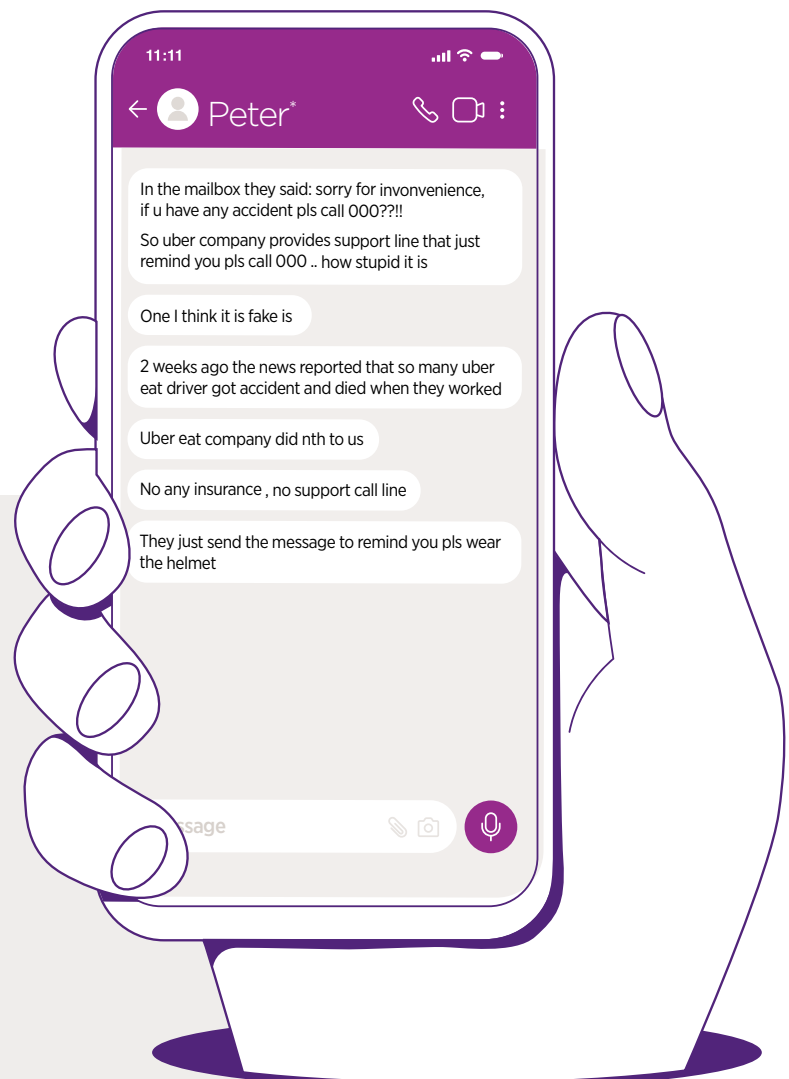
- Provide fair and transparent pay, with paid waiting time and benefits like sick pay and superannuation
- Adhere to Fairwork Principles like Fair Conditions, Fair Contracts, Fair Management, and Fair Representation<sup>4</sup>
- Offer transparent order information
- Share more financial risk and provide insurance to all workers – including compensation following accidents
- Offer workers information on their rights and ongoing education – including in-person safety training
- Incorporate human intervention before automated deactivation decisions
- Limit recruitment of new workers to ensure equity
- Offer 24/7 helpline for delivery workers
- Allow worker feedback on customers and restaurants

## Key takeaways

- Platforms currently hold power over workers – yet they are distanced from responsibility for safety and transparent decision-making
- Platform business models are designed to extract value from workers with inadequate remuneration for labour performed
- Workers cannot contact platform support – leaving them feeling abandoned – particularly at times of accidents or customer conflict
- While ‘multi-apping’<sup>5</sup> is technically possible, it is not practical or profitable for workers to deliver simultaneous orders for different companies

*“I prefer something that I’ll feel more worth. A company that will treat me as a person, not as a number.”*

Leticia Biologist, Brazil



<sup>4</sup> For more see: [fair.work/en/fw/principles/fairwork-principles-location-based-work/](https://fair.work/en/fw/principles/fairwork-principles-location-based-work/)

<sup>5</sup> Multi-apping – accepting more than one order from multiple companies at the same time





## Policy-makers and infrastructure

### What are the challenges?

- Complex realities of platform work are detached from regulatory discussions
- Imbalance of power between independent contractors and platforms – many food delivery workers are in precarious financial and living circumstances
- Risks are outsourced to workers – current approaches do not reduce key safety concerns
- Platforms are only one of many stakeholders which exploit migrant food delivery workers
- City, public, and transport infrastructure is often unsuitable for food delivery work – e.g., cyclists regularly encounter obstructions on footpaths
- International students are unclear if time worked (e.g., logged on to platform) or hours engaged conducting deliveries, contribute to their visa working conditions

### Key takeaways

- Digital platforms are not exceptional, and should be regulated like other businesses
- Regulatory focus on employment status and wages overlook key inequities of platform work
- Workers need to have stronger voice and rights to unionise
- Policy decisions should incorporate unique circumstances and vulnerabilities of migrant workers
- Workers felt abandoned by governments during the pandemic – with no support some workers relied on platforms to survive
- Discussions around ‘future of work’ need to include workers and address ‘hidden’ labour

# How can policy-makers improve food delivery?

## What should regulators consider further?

- Current emphasis on contracts overlooks other key areas of exploitative work – more focus needed on Principles of Fairwork like Fair Pay, Conditions, Management, and Representation<sup>6</sup>
- Platforms should absorb more financial risks
- All data should be made available to workers who collect it
- Establish platform work education and worker rights initiatives
- Full access to bodies such as Fair Work

## How can we make food delivery work safer?

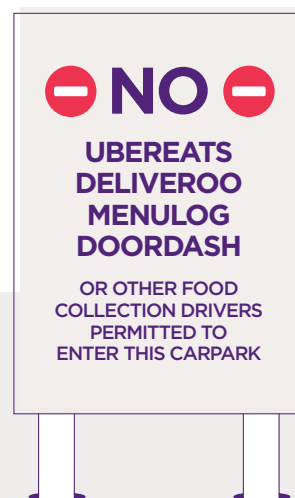
- Include workers in decision-making processes
- Move focus from personal protective equipment and worker education (administrative controls) to more effective elements of hierarchy of controls<sup>7</sup> (elimination, substitution, engineering)

## What can local government, urban planners and property managers do?

- Better enforce rules regarding footpath advertising signs
- Incorporate dedicated car parking and waiting zones for delivery workers near restaurants
- Add dedicated cycling lines that cross busy inner-city zones between restaurants and high-density neighbourhoods
- Offer secure bicycle parking

## What are some best-practice examples?

- Queensland laws allowing riders to cycle on footpaths contribute to worker safety – other states could benefit from such approaches
- Recently established Victorian Government *Fair Conduct and Accountability Standards and Gig Worker Support Service*<sup>8</sup>



<sup>6</sup> For more see: [fair.work/en/fw/principles/fairwork-principles-location-based-work](https://fair.work/en/fw/principles/fairwork-principles-location-based-work)

<sup>7</sup> For more see: [worksafe.vic.gov.au/hierarchy-control](https://worksafe.vic.gov.au/hierarchy-control)

<sup>8</sup> For more see: [engage.vic.gov.au/inquiry-on-demand-workforce](https://engage.vic.gov.au/inquiry-on-demand-workforce)

# Resources for food delivery workers<sup>9</sup>

## Platform worker and migrant supports

### Fair Work Ombudsman

[fairwork.gov.au/find-help-for/independent-contractors/gig-economy](https://fairwork.gov.au/find-help-for/independent-contractors/gig-economy)

### Australian Taxation Office

[community.ato.gov.au/s/article/a079s0000009GmyAAE/working-for-a-food-delivery-service](https://community.ato.gov.au/s/article/a079s0000009GmyAAE/working-for-a-food-delivery-service)

### H&R Block

[hrblock.com.au/tax-academy/tax-deductions-delivery-riders](https://hrblock.com.au/tax-academy/tax-deductions-delivery-riders)

### Transport Workers Union

[twu.com.au/delivery-riders-alliance](https://twu.com.au/delivery-riders-alliance)

### Young Workers Centre

[youngworkers.org.au/gigworkers](https://youngworkers.org.au/gigworkers)

### Maurice Blackburn Lawyers

[mauriceblackburn.com.au/social-justice/workers-rights](https://mauriceblackburn.com.au/social-justice/workers-rights)

### Migrant Workers Centre

[migrantworkers.org.au](https://migrantworkers.org.au)

### 1800 QSTUDY International Student Support Hotline

[eqi.com.au/student-support/hotline](https://eqi.com.au/student-support/hotline)

## Health and wellbeing

### Headspace

[headspace.org.au](https://headspace.org.au)

### Lifeline

[lifeline.org.au](https://lifeline.org.au)

## Cycling safety and transport

### Queensland Government

[qld.gov.au/transport/safety/rules/wheeled-devices/bicycle](https://qld.gov.au/transport/safety/rules/wheeled-devices/bicycle)

### Cycling and the law: bike laws across Australia

[insiderguides.com.au/cycling-and-the-law](https://insiderguides.com.au/cycling-and-the-law)

### Bicycle Queensland

[bq.org.au](https://bq.org.au)

### Cycling Brisbane

[cyclingbrisbane.com.au/bike%C2%A0safety/bike-maintenance](https://cyclingbrisbane.com.au/bike%C2%A0safety/bike-maintenance)

### Safe Work Australia

[safeworkaustralia.gov.au/deliversafely](https://safeworkaustralia.gov.au/deliversafely)

### WorkSafe Queensland

[worksafe.qld.gov.au/laws-and-compliance/compliance-and-enforcement/industry-interventions-and-campaigns/transport-and-storage-industry-interventions-and-campaigns/ensuring-health-and-safety-in-food-delivery-services](https://worksafe.qld.gov.au/laws-and-compliance/compliance-and-enforcement/industry-interventions-and-campaigns/transport-and-storage-industry-interventions-and-campaigns/ensuring-health-and-safety-in-food-delivery-services)

## Community support and food relief

### Community plus+

[communityplus.org.au](https://communityplus.org.au)

### Communify

[communify.org.au](https://communify.org.au)

### Community Friends

[communityfriends.org.au](https://communityfriends.org.au)

### Foodbank

[foodbank.org.au/find-food](https://foodbank.org.au/find-food)

## Further reading

For access, email [t.riordan@business.uq.edu.au](mailto:t.riordan@business.uq.edu.au)

Riordan, T. (2023). *Mediated hospitality: how migrant workers navigate interactions in and beyond the platform economy*. PhD Thesis, School of Business, University of Queensland. [doi.org/10.14264/ccfb1bc](https://doi.org/10.14264/ccfb1bc)

Riordan, T., Robinson, R. N. S., and Hoffstaedter, G. (2022). Seeking justice beyond the platform economy: migrant workers navigating precarious lives, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 31:12, 2734-2751, DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2022.2136189

Riordan, T., Robinson, R., and Hoffstaedter, G. (2022). Contactless delivery: Migrant experiences in the platform economy. In I. Ness (Ed.), *Platform Labour and Global Logistics: A Research Companion*. New York: Routledge.

Riordan, T., Hoffstaedter, G., Robinson, R. N. S., & Pryor, E. (2020). Delivery workers are now essential. They deserve the rights of other employees. *The Conversation*.

*“My first day was terrible. Very terrible. Especially when you don’t know how to ride in the city. I mean, which route is better? Which one is more easy? Which one is more faster? Where the customer stays? Some places [it] is quite difficult to know where to do delivery. You need to know the city, or meet the [other] people who do delivering.”*

Li Works in family business, Panama

9 Queensland-based resources have interstate equivalents

## Contact

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Plain text and Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish and Vietnamese  
translations of this report are also available.

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[business.uq.edu.au/humanising-food-delivery-work-in-australia.pdf](https://business.uq.edu.au/humanising-food-delivery-work-in-australia.pdf)