

NAB QUARTERLY BUSINESS SURVEY

JUNE QUARTER 2017



Key points:

- The quarterly NAB Business Survey gives a more in-depth probe into the conditions facing Australian business than the monthly survey, and also provides extra information about how firms perceive the outlook for their respective industries.
- **The June quarter saw another improvement in business conditions (an average of trading conditions/sales, profitability and employment),** consistent with the strength seen in the monthly Survey, driven by an increase in all three components. Business conditions jumped to +13 in Q2, which is well above the long run average of +1 and is its highest level since early 2008 – suggesting a recovery in activity from the slowdown witnessed over 2016. A testament to how engrained the recovery in business activity has become is the fact that business conditions are now positive in all industries, including retail which has lagged behind in the current upturn. **Business confidence on the other hand has been a little less buoyant, holding at +7, although that is still slightly above the long-run average for the series.**
- **Leading indicators only recorded a modest improvement at best in the quarter, but are holding at levels that suggest continued expansion in the next 12 months.** Forward orders lifted a little further, as did expectations for business conditions in the next 3 months. The longer-term outlook (next 12 months) for conditions pulled back slightly, but is still at very elevated levels. **Capacity utilisation rates were higher** (at 82.2% compared with long-run average of 80.6%), which bodes well for labour demand and future capital expenditure. Consistent with that, both **employment expectations and capex plans (next 12 months) remained at solid levels** – the latter being in stark contrast to the most recent read on investment expectations from the ABS Private Capital Expenditure Survey. Aside from better employment conditions, **there are other signs of a tighter labour market, with labour costs lifting and more firms indicating that it is more difficult to find suitable labour than it was a year ago** (p6).
- Looking at the construction industry in more detail reveals a partial rebound in residential construction conditions in recent quarters, while non-residential conditions are looking especially strong (see p11 for details).
- **More firms indicated that they were comfortable with the current level of the AUD, compared to the previous quarter** – the Survey was conducted when the AUD averaged \$US 0.75 (1 cent lower than the previous Survey), although the currency has subsequently strengthened.
- **The Survey is suggesting only a slow build of inflationary pressures, but the trend is more reassuring.** That said, input costs still appear to be rising faster than final product prices (particularly labour costs), suggesting a degree of margin compression – the Survey's margins index remained negative in Q2, although it has improved considerably. Product price inflation was relatively subdued, at an annualised rate of 0.9%, while retail inflation was very weak – pointing to a relatively modest CPI outcome for Q2.

Table 1: Key quarterly business statistics*

	2016q4	2017q1	2017q2		2016q4	2017q1	2017q2
	Net balance				Net balance		
Business confidence	6	7	7	Trading	11	12	17
Business conditions				Profitability	7	9	11
Current	7	9	13	Employment	3	6	10
Next 3 months	16	19	21	Forward orders	1	5	6
Next 12 months	24	28	27	Stocks	3	4	4
Capex plans (next 12)	22	28	26	Exports	2	2	0
	% change						
Labour costs	0.5	0.4	0.6	Retail prices	0.0	0.2	-0.1
Purchase costs	0.3	0.3	0.4	Capacity utilisation rate	81.1	81.9	82.2
Final products prices	0.2	0.2	0.2				

* All data seasonally adjusted, except purchase costs and exports. Fieldwork for this Survey was conducted from 22 May to 8 June 2017, covering around 900 firms across the non-farm business sector.

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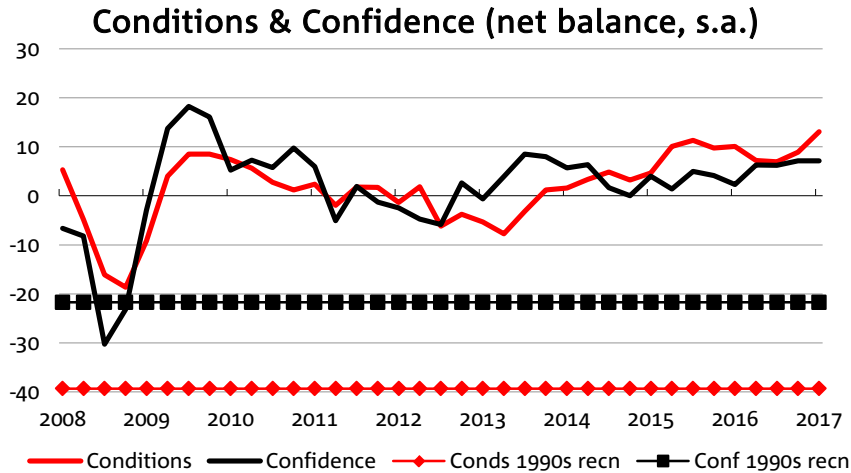
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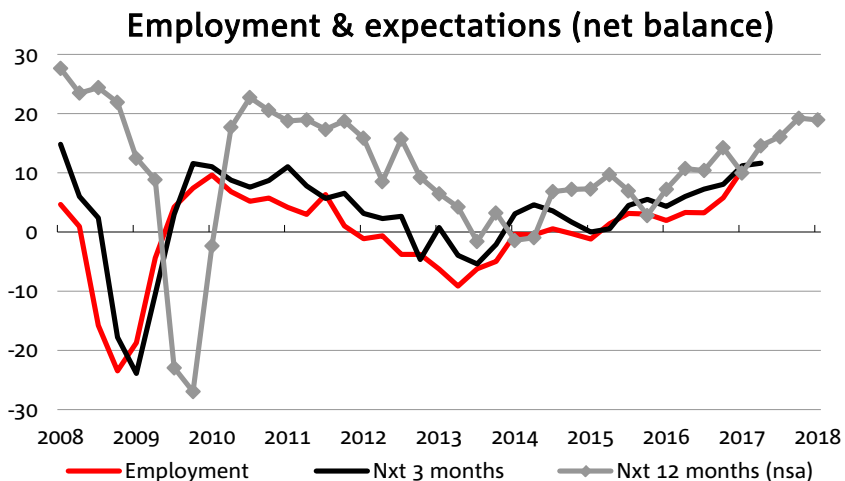
SUMMARY CHARTS

Leading indicators remain solid. Inflation measures slowly turning up.

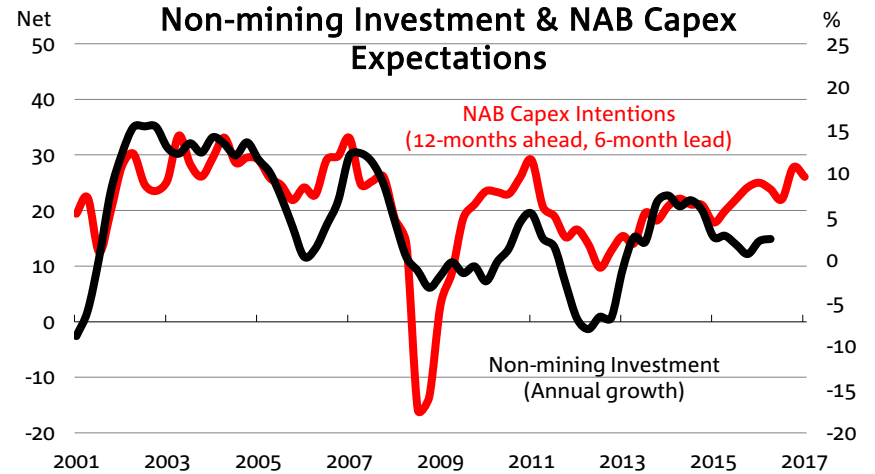
BUSINESS CONDITIONS JUMP TO THEIR HIGHEST SINCE 2008. CONFIDENCE IS STEADY AT ABOVE AVERAGE LEVELS



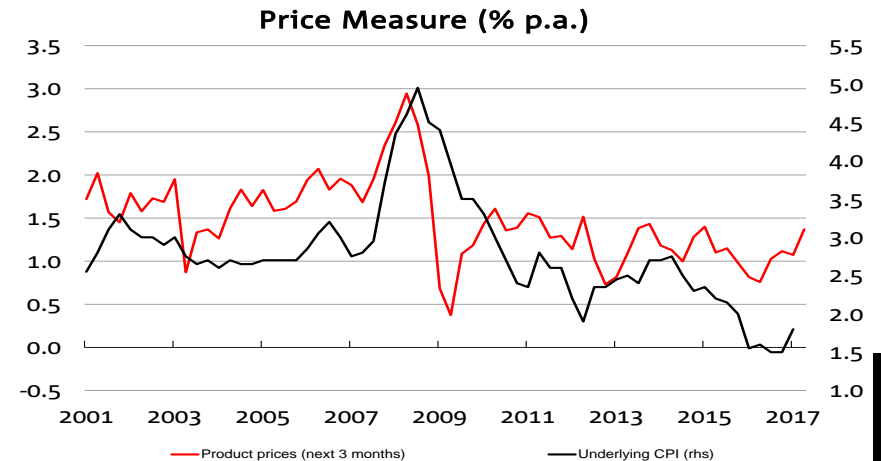
EMPLOYMENT INTENTIONS FOR NEAR AND LONGER-TERM SUGGEST MORE IMPROVEMENT IN THE LABOUR MARKET



INVESTMENT INTENTIONS ARE STILL SOLID, SUGGESTING A FURTHER UP-TICK IN NON-MINING INVESTMENT

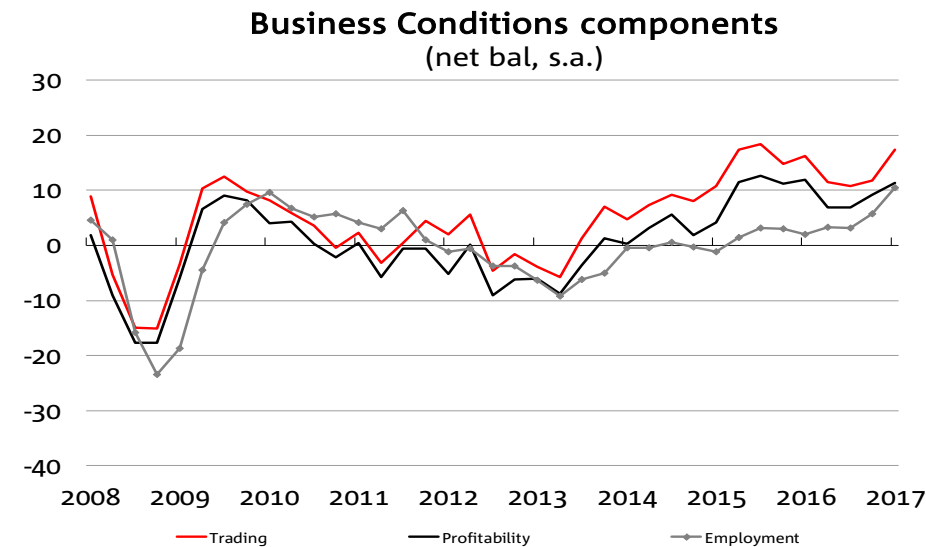
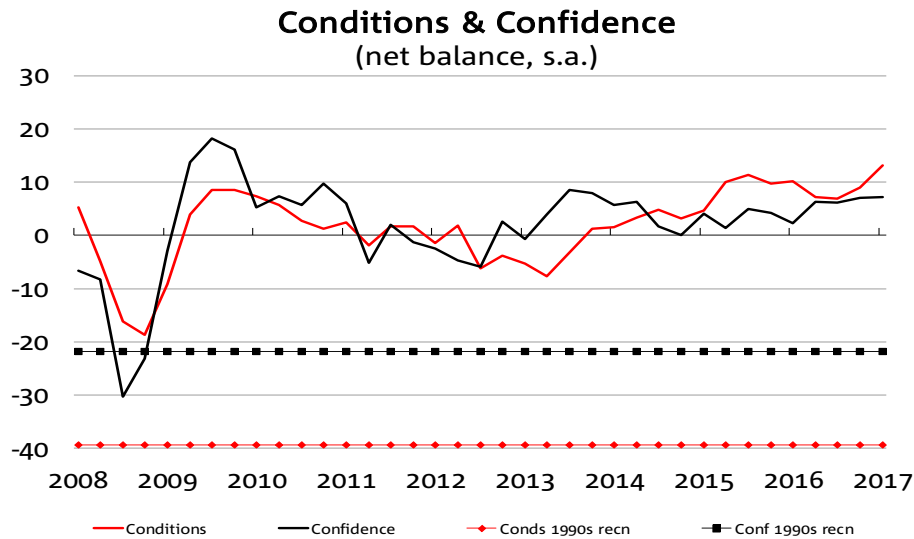


PRICE MEASURES IN THE NAB SURVEY ARE SUBDUED, BUT ARE STARTING TO TURN A LITTLE HIGHER



BUSINESS CONDITIONS AND CONFIDENCE

The 2016 slowdown in conditions looks to have been temporary

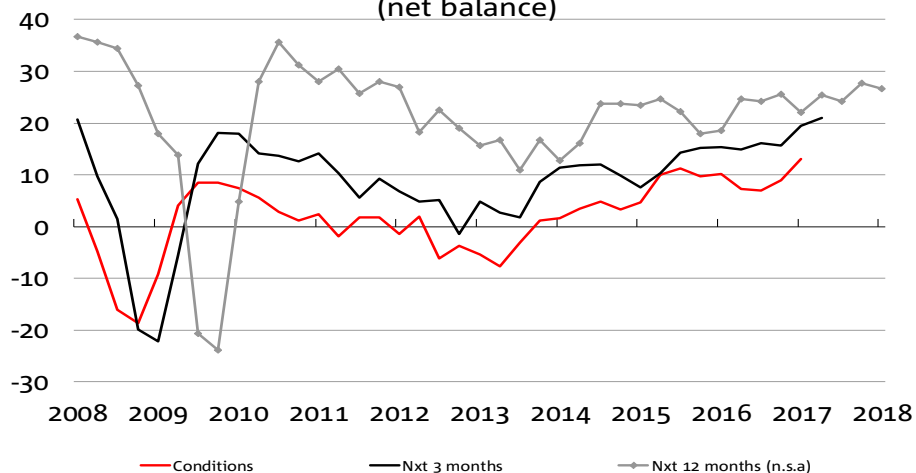


- Business conditions jumped higher in the June quarter (up 4 points, to +13), which is the highest level since early 2008 and well above the long-run average for the series (+1). In addition to being at lofty levels, business conditions are also positive across all industries in the Survey, which indicates that the recovery in (especially non-mining) business activity has become well engrained – despite the recent resilience of the AUD and a tightening of credit conditions. In terms of the components, the improvement during the quarter was driven by all three components (trading, profits and employment), although trading conditions (sales) improved the most and currently has the highest index. Employment conditions have now all but caught up with profitability, having lagged behind the other components during the early stages of the recovery.
- By industry, only mining and wholesale (both down 4) failed to see an improvement in business conditions in Q2. In contrast, the biggest gains came from construction (up 14) and retail (up 5). Official retail sales data has been fairly subdued, but has been better than expected in recent months, although orders were weak in Q2 (see below). In contrast, the improvement in construction comes despite recent falls in residential building approvals, although the pipeline of construction remains large. In levels terms, construction became the best performer in the quarter (+18 points), while major services industries (namely FPB services and personal & recreation services) continued to do well – although the gap between the best and worst performing industries has narrowed. Retail is still the worst performer, but has moved back into positive territory (chart on p13).
- **Business confidence** did not follow conditions higher, but has held relatively steady at solid levels in recent quarters. The confidence index stayed at +7 index points – which is a little above the long-run average. Despite firms reporting very solid levels of trading conditions, a vast majority of them also indicated that customer demand is still the largest constraint on their confidence levels, followed by government policy considerations. By industry, business confidence is positive across the board, although three industries recorded a decline in Q2 – wholesale (down 4), retail (down 1) and finance/ property/ business services (down 1). Meanwhile, the biggest improvement was in construction (up 6), suggesting that firms are not buying into some predictions in the market for a severe correction in housing (NAB's expectation at this stage is for an orderly adjustment). Construction is now reporting the highest level of confidence (+19), followed by mining (+13). Personal services is lowest (+2), despite solid conditions.
- **Forward orders** were slightly stronger in the quarter (up 1), to be well above the long-run average for the series – pointing to reasonable momentum for business in the near term. Orders are highest in construction (+24), while orders are lowest in retail (-2) – the only industry to see a negative orders index for the quarter.

OTHER LEADING INDICATORS AND INVESTMENT

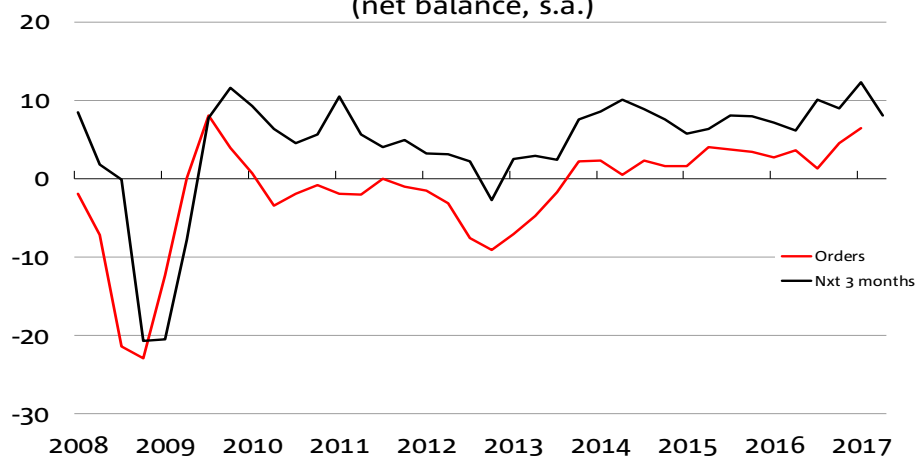
Leading indicators are largely upbeat, suggesting a continuation of positive trends

Business conditions & expectations
(net balance)

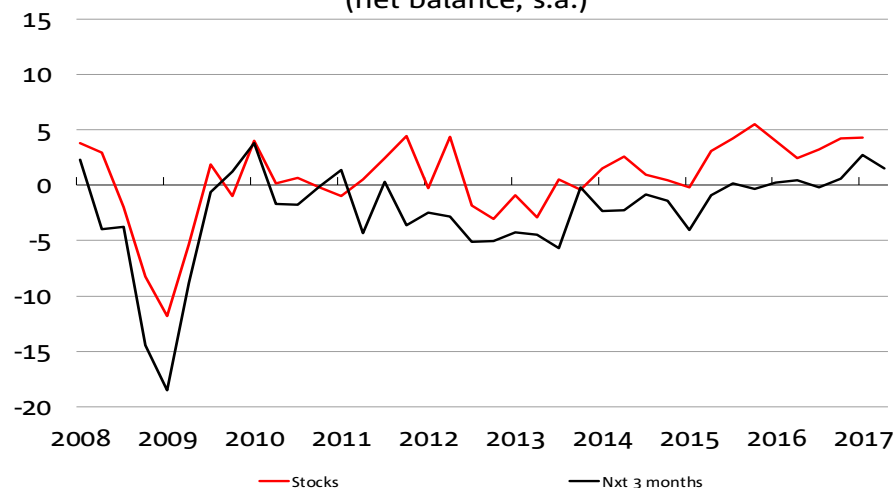


- In the quarterly survey, firms provide responses regarding their expectations for business activity going forward. Consistent with better conditions at present, firms also lifted their expectations for activity in the near term (3 months). Longer term (12 months) expectations eased, but are still at high levels. Overall, leading indicators from the Survey clearly point to an improving economy, at least in the near-term. That said, we continue to anticipate a number of headwinds over the longer term, particularly as the dwelling construction cycle peaks and consumers show further restraint. This means that Survey indicators for retail and construction need to be monitored closely (12 month ahead expectations for conditions in these industries are currently holding up although we note a weakening in retail sales in the month of June according to the NAB Cashless Retail Index).
- Expectations for forward orders (3 months ahead) were a little softer in Q1, but are still at solid levels. Near-term expectations for profitability lifted, while longer-term expectations (12-months ahead) are well up from previous lows.
- Stocks can be another indicator of near-term activity. The stocks index was steady in the quarter, but is still slightly below recent highs. Nonetheless, the long-term trend shows a gradual improvement in response to strengthening trading conditions and positive orders. Firms had previously been reluctant to restock given uncertainty around the outlook, as well as cost and other competitive pressures. The gradual improvement might suggest a slow shift in firms attitudes around the outlook.

Forward orders & expectations
(net balance, s.a.)

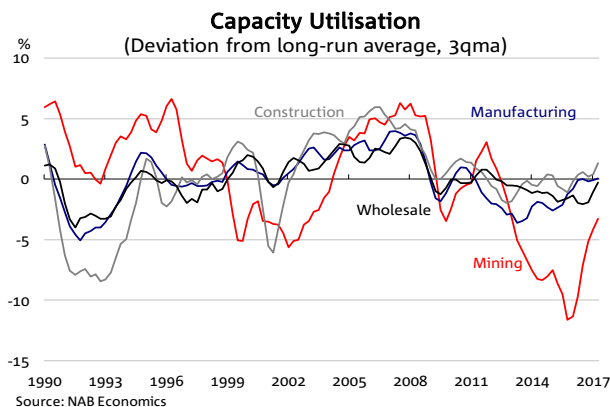
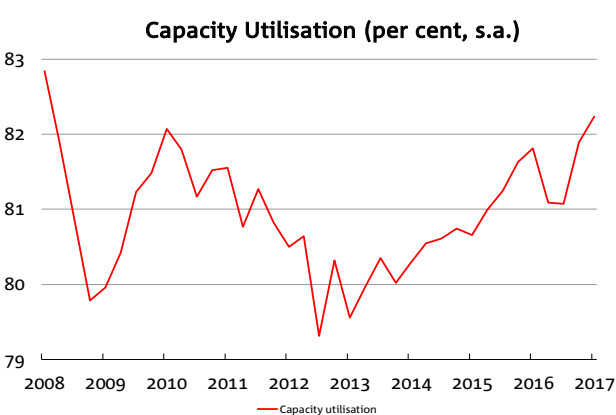


Stocks
(net balance, s.a.)



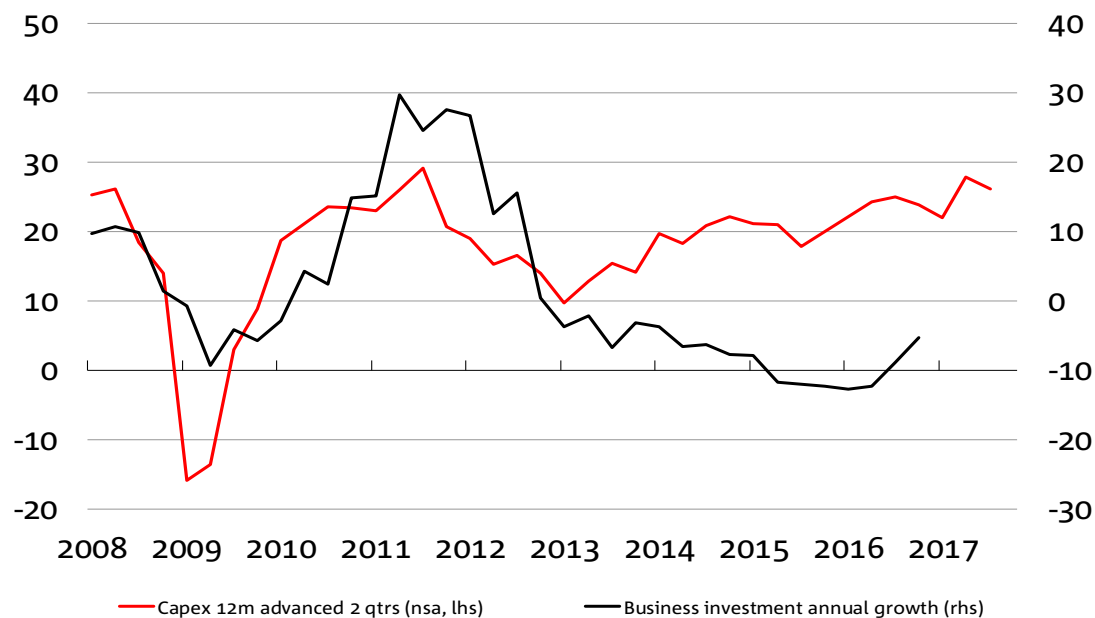
OTHER LEADING INDICATORS & INVESTMENT

Capacity utilisation at a multi-year high, supporting capex and labour demand



- **Capacity utilisation** rose further in Q2, to 82.2%, reaching its highest level since 2008. Less spare capacity is consistent with the solid (or improving) result in the Survey with regard to labour demand and business investment.
- Mining and wholesale are showing capacity utilisation rates that are furthest below the long run average (in trend terms), although both have improved with mining bouncing back particularly strongly in line with additional commodity production in the final stages of the mining investment cycle. Meanwhile, FPB services and retail are highest above. With capacity utilisation now up from their 2012-13 lows, there is growing evidence of pass-through to investment decisions. Capex spending measures from the NAB Survey are looking robust, especially when it comes to spending intentions (see below).

Business Investment & Capex Plans

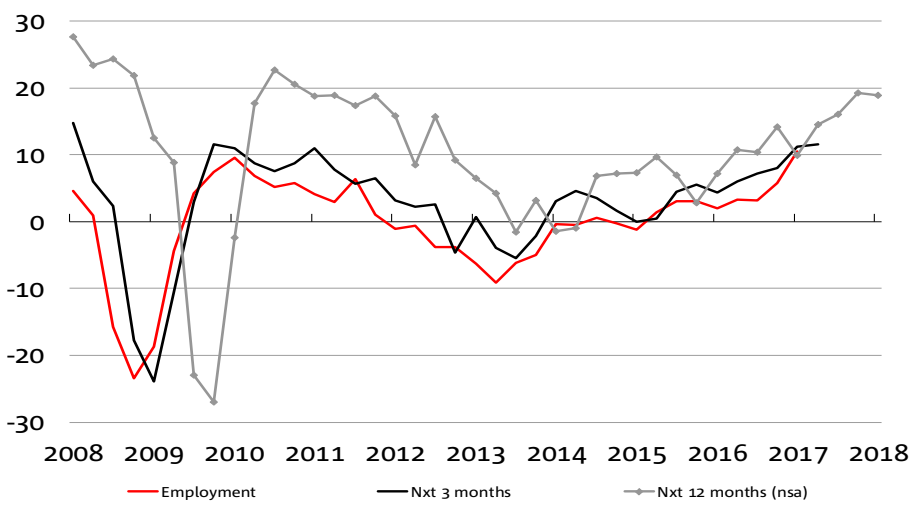


- According to the **capital expenditure** measure included in the NAB Survey, investment activity eased slightly in Q2, but is sitting above the long-run average. Transport (up 6) and mining (up 4) saw the biggest improvement in capex during the quarter, while personal services deteriorated the most (down 5). Nevertheless, the capex index is positive for all industries but retail, and was especially strong in recreational & personal services (+16).
- When asked about their **future capex plans**, firms in the NAB Survey remain more upbeat than the ABS Capex Survey, although this partly reflects the differences in the industry mix across the two surveys, with the ABS version not including key services industries such as health, education and some community services. The NAB capex index for the next 12 months suggests investment growth should already be stronger and holding at relatively elevated levels. That said, the National Accounts have been suggesting better non-mining investment. Meanwhile, firms reported a slight drop in their **required rates of return** for new investment, although it is remained stubbornly elevated, suggesting that other factors are offsetting highly accommodative monetary policy.

LABOUR MARKET

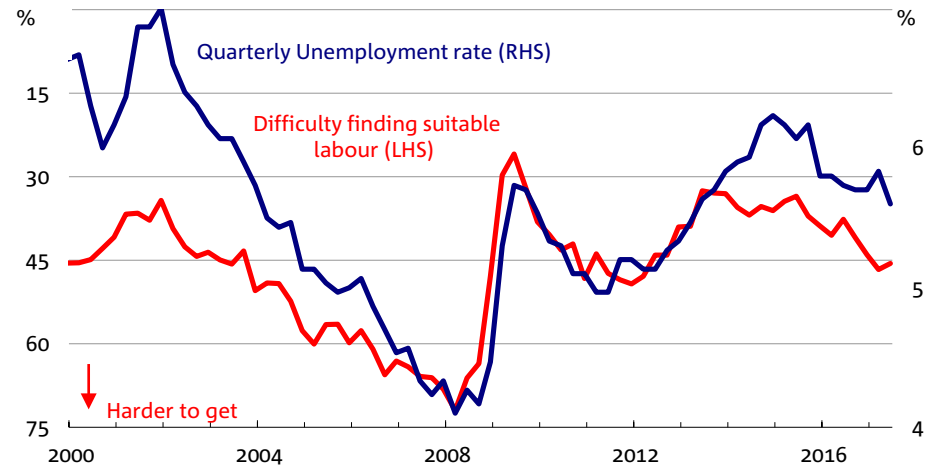
Job creation has been strong, and hiring intentions remain elevated

Employment & expectations (net balance)



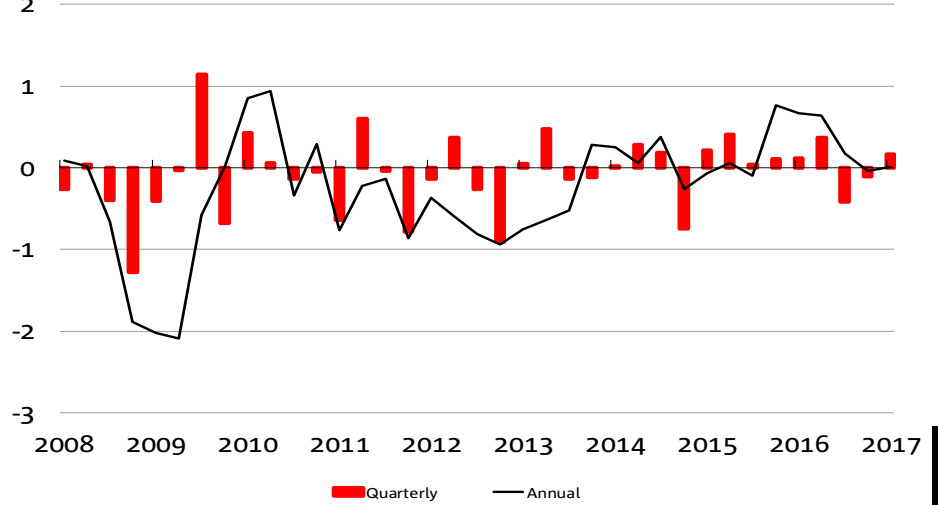
- The employment index from the Survey continued along its track of gradual improvement, and is back close to its pre-GFC peaks. The index gained ground in Q1 (up 4 to +10 index points), suggesting rates of employment growth that, if sustained, should lead to some improvement in the unemployment rate in the near-term. Average hours worked also rose in the quarter.
- Near-term employment expectations were slightly stronger too at +12 index points (from +11), which is above its long-run average level. At the same time, longer-term expectations held steady at a multi year high. Again, these outcomes suggest that the unemployment rate could see a gradually improvement in the longer-term, although NAB's forecast is for the unemployment rate to remain relatively steady given solid population growth and anticipated headwinds to job creation – including a peak in the residential construction cycle.
- On a positive note, firms have been suggesting that it has become more difficult for them to find suitable labour – reflected in a clear trend within the NAB Survey measure since around mid-2015. Given the elevated rate of underemployment in Australia, that result suggests that even though there continues to be a fair degree of slack in the labour market, there may be a lack of workers with the right skills to match employers' needs.
- That said, there are signs of a modest pick up in labour costs (p8).

Unemployment rate & labour constraints



Sources: ABS; NAB

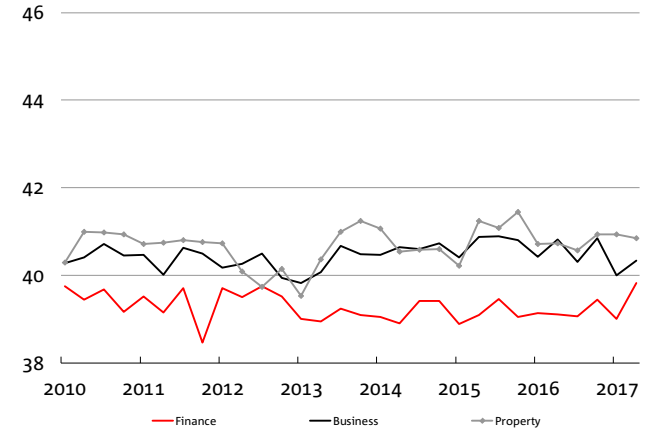
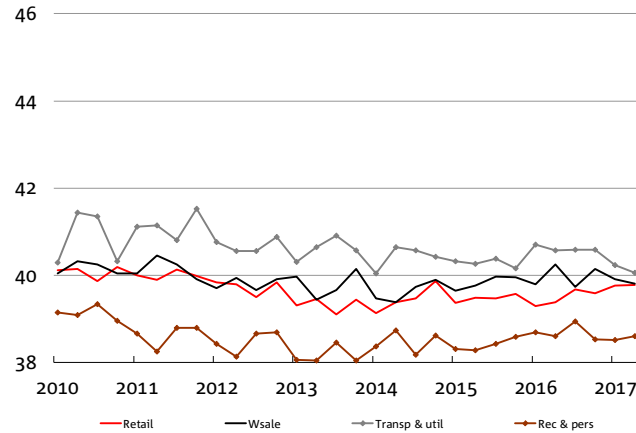
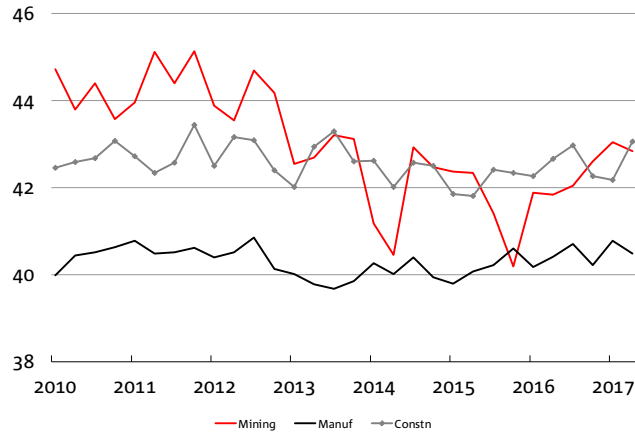
Change in average hours worked (nsa)



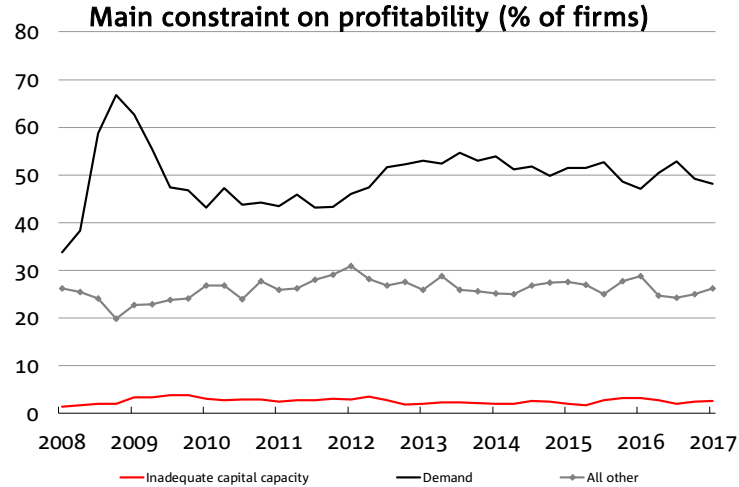
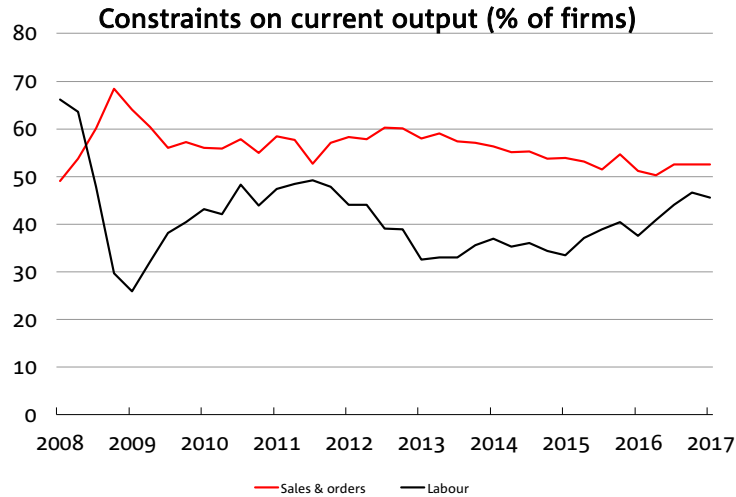
LABOUR MARKET (CONT.)

The lack of suitable labour is a growing constraint, despite loose labour market

Average weekly hours worked by industry (nsa)



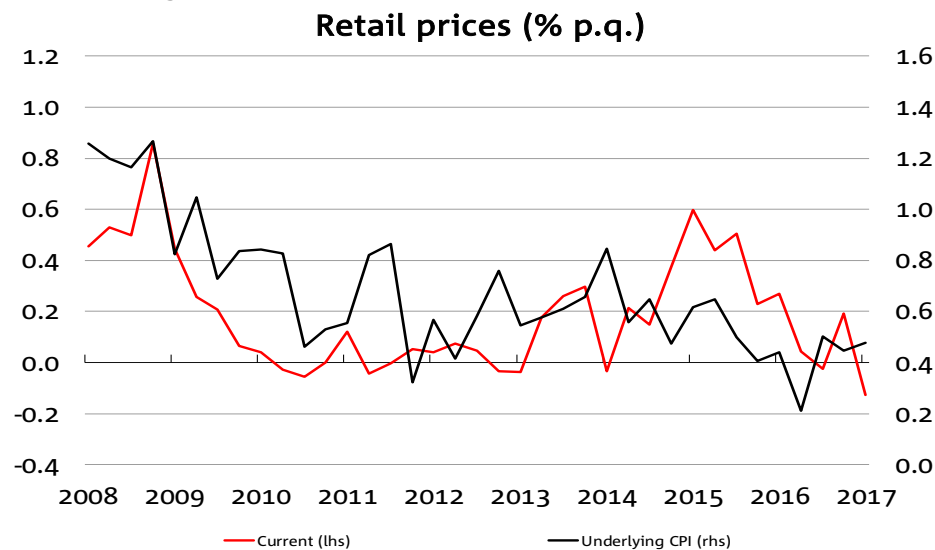
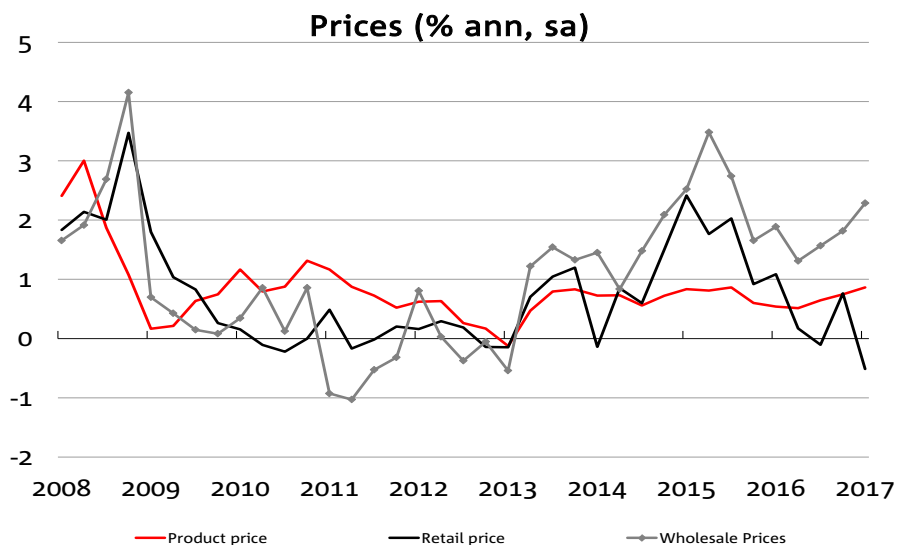
Major constraints on firm output & profits



INFLATION PRESSURES

Inflation picture is mixed, but with some tentative signs of a lift (outside retail)

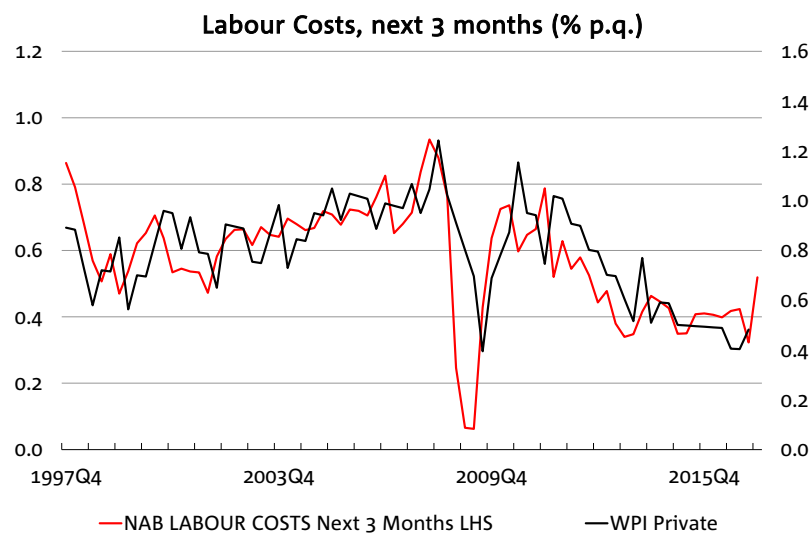
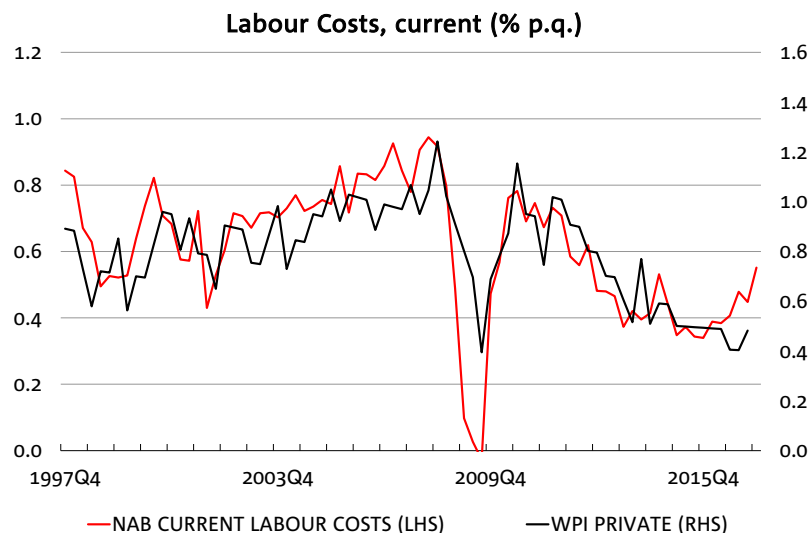
- Underlying inflation has been below the RBA's 2-3% target since early 2016 and is expected to remain subdued for the time being. That said, the Q1 underlying CPI outcome came in a little higher than RBA expectations, while recent hikes in utilities prices are likely to have a notable impact on headline CPI in Q3 – with some flow on impact for core inflation. The broad picture on inflation provided by the Business Survey appears to point to a tentative lift in price pressures as well, although outcomes vary considerably across sectors. Inflation pressures emanating from the wholesale and retail sectors remain well down on their 2015 peaks, although the former is still well above the average for the other industries and appears to be picking up again. Meanwhile, the retail price index has continued to push lower, suggesting that either competitive pressures or subdued demand (or both) are stifling their ability to pass on higher costs to consumers at this stage – retail labour and purchase costs are also running ahead of final product prices (see below).
- Growth in final product prices rose slightly to 0.9% annualised (was 0.7%) and a 0.2% quarterly rate. Both purchase cost and labour cost inflation are running faster than that and accelerated slightly in Q2 (at a quarterly rate of 0.4% and 0.6% respectively). Very few industries saw a notable acceleration in price inflation for final products, but retail prices slowed considerably (down 0.3 pts). In levels terms, wholesale price inflation was strongest in the quarter (0.6%), followed by mining, personal services and finance/ property/ business service prices (all 0.3%). In contrast, transport and retail price inflation was weakest at -0.1%. Looking forward, inflation expectations for the next 3 months picked up, although it still suggest that very subdued price pressures will persist, with final price inflation expected to be at around an annualised rate of 1.4% (1% for retail inflation).
- Even though input costs are still growing faster than final prices, firms are now reporting much better profit margins than they have for a number of years – although the index is still in negative territory. Wholesale and personal services were the only industries to report a non-negative margins index in Q2 2017. Retail is still seeing the worst profit margins, consistent with the weakness seen in product prices during the quarter.



LABOUR COSTS (DETAILS) AND EXPECTATIONS FOR AUD, RATES AND INFLATION

Wage pressures are showing tentative signs of lifting in the near-term

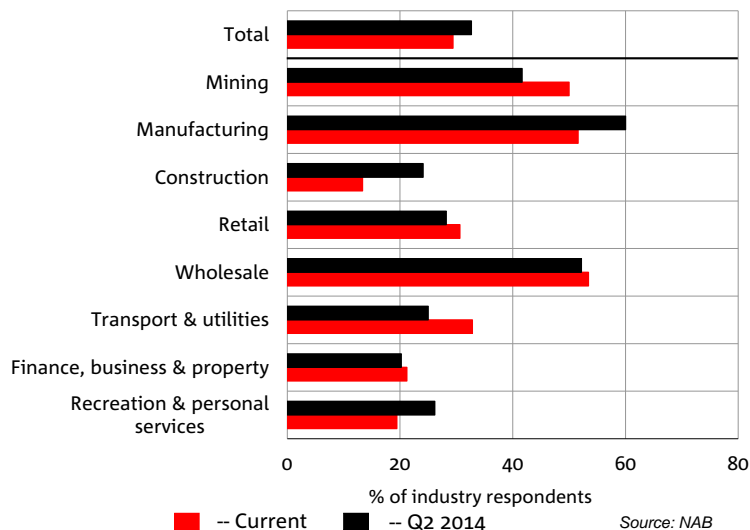
- Annualised growth in labour costs accelerated to 2.1% in the quarter (from 1.3%), which is still below the series average of around 2.8% since 1989, but points to a tentative uplift in wage pressures. Wage cost pressures have been relatively muted during the recovery in business conditions, despite a steady lift in the level of employment conditions and reports of greater difficulty finding suitable labour – although consistent with elevated levels for the official underemployment rate. The Survey’s measures of expectations for labour costs (next 3 months) also picked up, although it is still well down on levels seen in previous years. Wage increases under EBAs are expected to average 2.4% over the next year, or 1.6% after allowing for productivity offsets.
- On average, businesses are now pricing in around a 65% probability of a 25bp rate hike in the next 12-months. In contrast, NAB Economics view is that the RBA will keep rates on hold for the foreseeable future, with hikes not currently expected until mid-2019. NAB Economics remain cautious about the medium-term outlook given the likely impact from flattening resource exports and slowing residential construction on growth and the labour market. There are also significant headwinds to consumption that need to be overcome. Exchange rate expectations in the Survey (6-months-ahead) dipped to US\$0.737, which is a little lower than at the time the Survey was taken.
- In another sign that inflation expectation are gradually turning, 69% of respondents are expecting inflation to remain below 3% (a little less than 12-months ago), while almost a quarter (23%) are expecting inflation of 3-4%. However, only 4% of firms believe inflation is a serious problem (up modestly from last quarter), while 30% believe it is a minor problem (down from Q1).



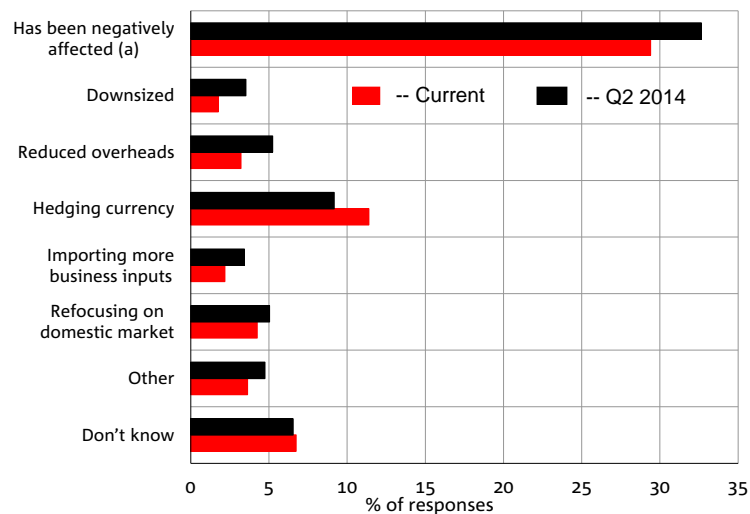
	Mining	Manuf	Const	Retail	Wsale	Trans	Rec. & pers.	Fin. prop. & bus.	Aust.
Expected EBA growth	1.4	2.3	2.9	2.3	3.0	2.1	2.5	2.2	2.4
Productivity offset	0.6	1.3	0.8	0.6	2.7	0.5	0.6	0.2	0.8
Net EBA growth	0.9	1.0	2.0	1.7	0.3	1.6	1.9	2.0	1.6

Not all industries are reporting a benefit from AUD depreciation

Has been negatively affected by level of Australian dollar



Responses to negative effects of level of Australian dollar



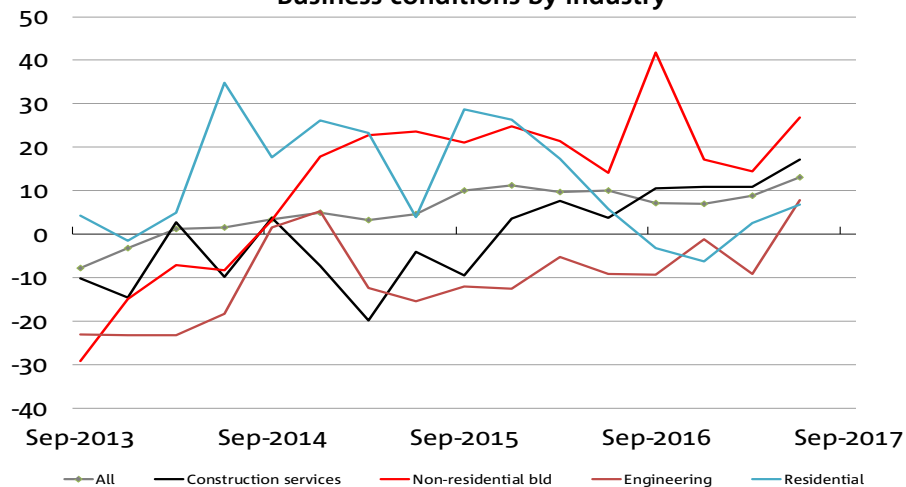
- In NAB's Quarterly Business Survey, we have asked businesses how they have been affected by the level of the Australian dollar, and what strategies they have been using to mitigate the negative impacts. The interviews for this question were conducted between 22 May and 8 June, when the exchange rate averaged \$US 0.75 and 63.9 on a TWI basis. The AUD/USD was almost 2 cents lower, while the TWI was 4% lower than the average seen during the Q1 survey period. That said, the AUD strengthened towards the end of the period and is currently sitting around \$US 0.79.
- According to the survey, a little more than a quarter of non-farm businesses reported an adverse impact from the AUD at current levels. That is slightly lower than Q1 2017, and is still down on levels seen in mid-2014 – prior to the big depreciation of the AUD. The magnitude of the improvement since mid-2014 seems relatively small, which is likely to be underestimating the true benefits of the depreciation for the economy. A reason for this is the notable disparity in currency effects across industries, although interestingly a number of our industry groupings report more negative AUD impacts now than when the currency was much stronger – these are offset by industries that are naturally expected to see an improvement such as personal services, professional services and manufacturing (the three highest weighted industries in the Survey).
- These trade competing industries have clearly improved, along with the construction industry which has reported notable benefits from AUD depreciation since mid-2014 – possibly reflecting the benefits of a lower AUD to foreign investors in the industry. Surprisingly, the mining industry is not pointing to benefits from AUD depreciation, despite the fact that commodities tend to be priced in USD while much of the cost is incurred in AUD. Other industries to see strain from AUD depreciation include retail and wholesale, which can tend to be highly reliant on imports – even more so following an extended period of AUD strength – similarly the case for transport.
- In terms of how businesses are responding to the negative effects, hedging remains the most common strategy and has gained in popularity as the AUD has depreciated. In contrast, other strategies to counter currency risk have generally waned in popularity, including downsizing and cost cutting. By industry, recreation & personal services and transport seem to have the highest share of firms that are uncertain about what strategies to employ to manage currency risk.

SOME INDUSTRY DETAILS: CONSTRUCTION

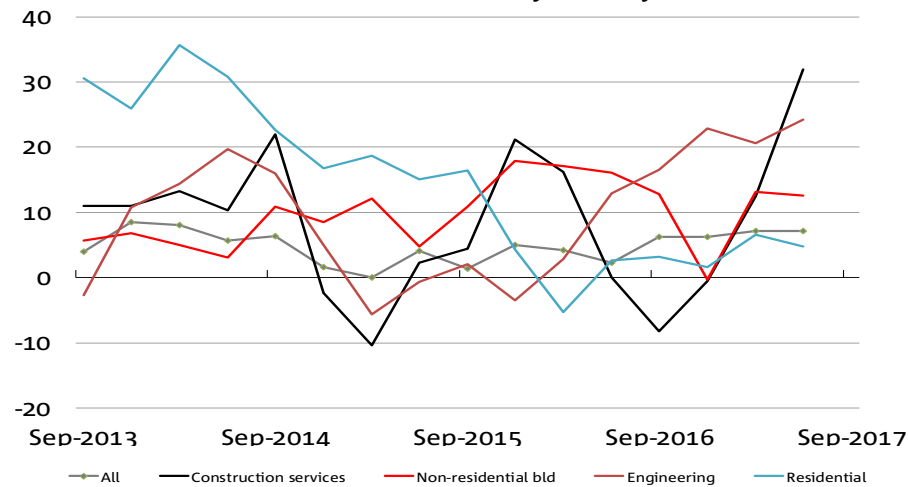
Conditions in all construction subsectors strengthened

- Business conditions for the construction industry jumped sharply higher in the June quarter, driven by an improvements across the board (residential, non-residential, engineering and construction services). Engineering conditions lifted back into positive territory, but continue to look relatively soft, along with residential construction. Soft residential conditions (and confidence) have been a surprise given the ongoing boom in residential property markets, although there have been some indications that the market is cooling (while apartment oversupply concerns and tightening credit conditions have likely contributed). Confidence is positive across all the subsectors, but construction services are looking especially strong.

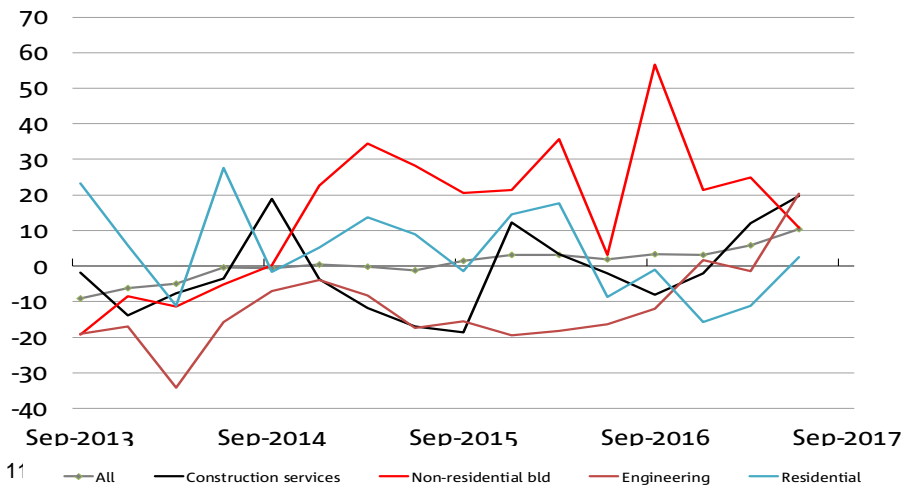
Business conditions by industry



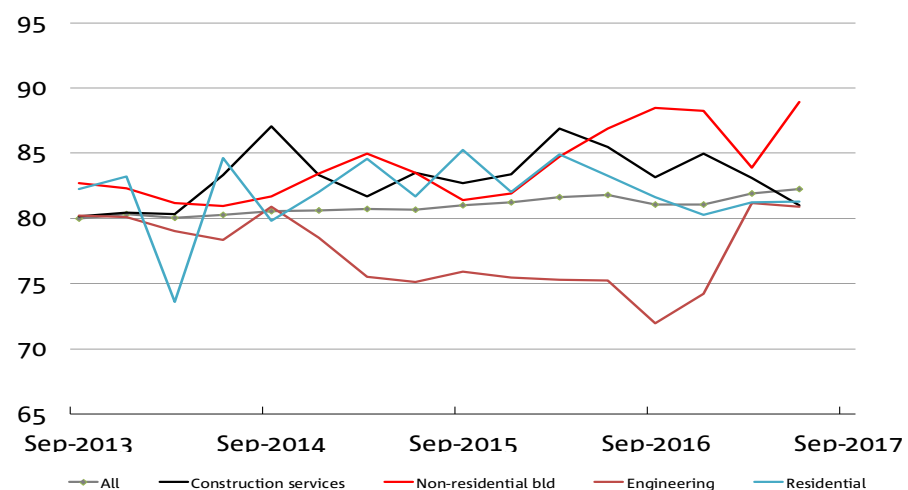
Business confidence by industry



Employment conditions by industry



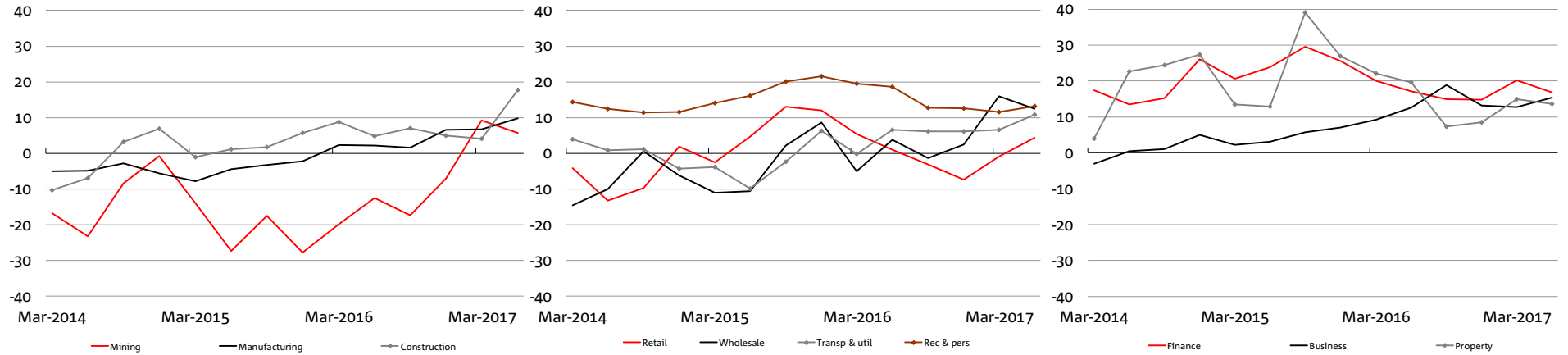
Capacity utilisation by industry



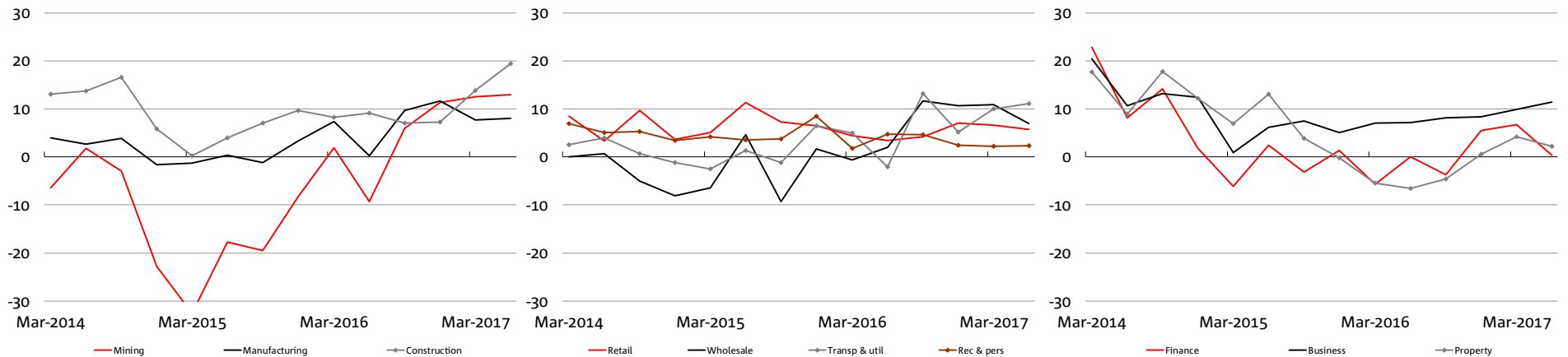
MORE DETAILS ON INDUSTRY

Mining is no longer a drag, while other underperformers are also lifting

BUSINESS CONDITIONS BY INDUSTRY (NET BALANCE): 3-MONTH MOVING AVERAGE



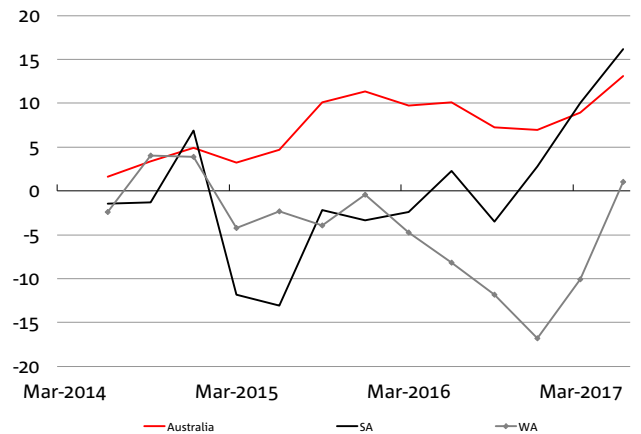
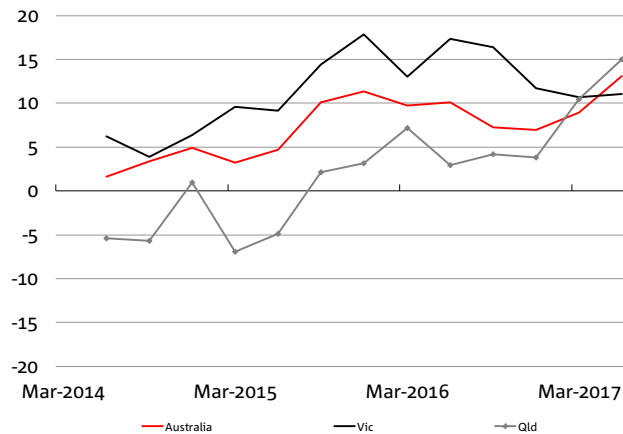
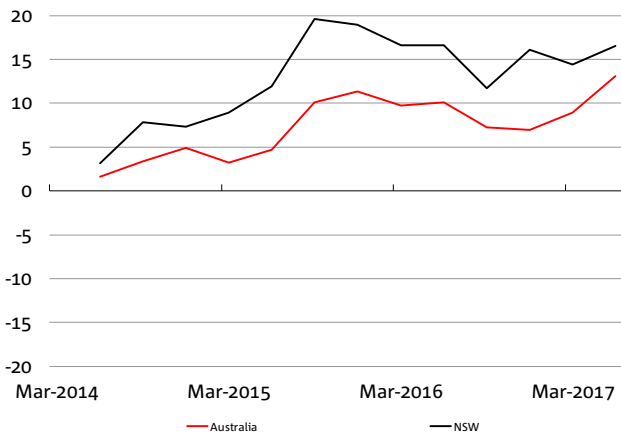
BUSINESS CONFIDENCE BY INDUSTRY (NET BALANCE): 3-MONTH MOVING AVERAGE



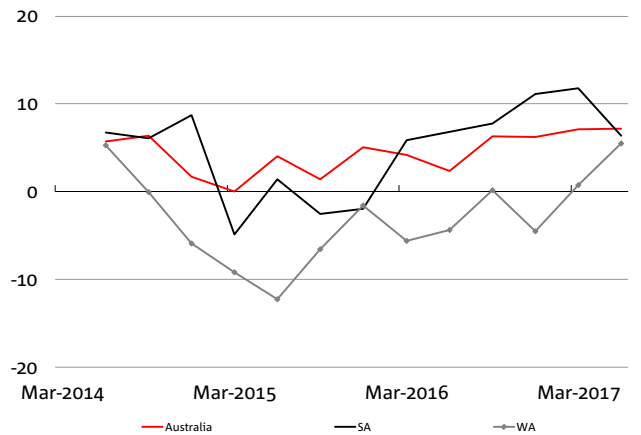
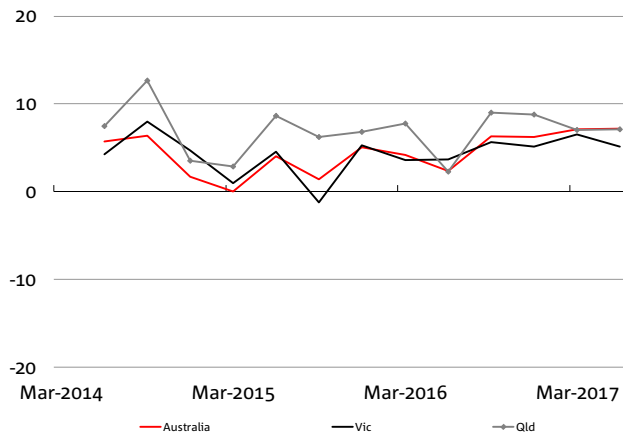
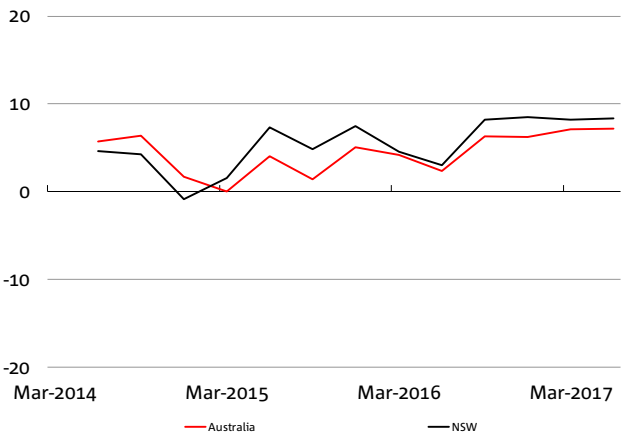
MORE DETAILS ON STATE

NSW the best performer, but mining states clearly improving

BUSINESS CONDITIONS BY STATE (NET BALANCE): 3-MONTH MOVING AVERAGE



BUSINESS CONFIDENCE BY STATE (NET BALANCE): 3-MONTH MOVING AVERAGE



DATA APPENDIX

	Quarterly					Monthly				
	2016q2	2016q3	2016q4	2017q1	2017q2	2017m2	2017m3	2017m4	2017m05	2017m06
Confidence	2	6	6	7	7	7	7	13	8	9
Conditions	10	7	7	9	13	10	14	13	11	15

	Quarterly					Monthly				
	2016q2	2016q3	2016q4	2017q1	2017q2	2017m2	2017m3	2017m4	2017m05	2017m06
Trading	16	12	11	12	17	13	21	17	15	21
Profitability	12	7	7	9	11	11	15	14	10	15
Employment	2	3	3	6	10	6	6	8	7	7

	Quarterly ^(a)					Monthly				
	2017q1	2017q2	2017q3	2018q1	2018q2	2017m2	2017m3	2017m4	2017m05	2017m06
Conditions	9	13				10	14	13	11	15
Conds. next 3m	16	19	21							
Conds. nxt 12m	26	22	25	28	27					
Orders	5	6				2	4	3	3	4
Orders next 3m	9	12	8							

(a) Quarter to which expectation applies. Business conditions next 12 months not seasonally adjusted.

	Quarterly ^(a)					Monthly				
	2016q3	2016q4	2017q1	2017q2	2017q3	2017m2	2017m3	2017m4	2017m05	2017m06
Capacity utilis.	81.1	81.1	81.9	82.2		81.4	81.8	81.3	82.5	81.9
Stocks current	2	3	4	4		3	3	6	3	5
Stocks next 3m	0	0	1	3	2					

(a) Quarter to which expectation applies. All data are seasonally adjusted.

	2016q2	2017q1	2017q2		2016q2	2017q1	2017q2
Constraints on output (% of firms)*				Main constraints on profitability (% of firms)*			
Sales & orders	52.6	52.6	52.4	Interest rates	2.1	1.5	1.3
Labour	44.0	46.7	45.5	Wage costs	10.1	11.0	11.1
Premises & plant	22.0	24.0	22.9	Labour	8.8	10.6	10.6
Materials	9.3	8.9	11.5	Capital	2.1	2.5	2.7
				Demand	52.8	49.3	48.1
				All other	24.2	25.0	26.2

* not s.a.

DATA APPENDIX

	Quarterly ^(a)					Monthly				
	2017q1	2017q2	2017q3	2018q1	2018q2	2017m2	2017m3	2017m4	2017m05	2017m06
Empl current	6	10				6	6	8	7	7
Empl next 3m	8	11	12							
Empl nxt 12m	14	10	15	19	19					

(a) Quarter to which expectation applies. Employment conditions next 12 months not seasonally adjusted.

	Mining	Manuf	Const	Retail	Wsale	Trans	Rec. & pers.	Fin. prop. & bus.	Aust.
Expected EBA growth	1.4	2.3	2.9	2.3	3.0	2.1	2.5	2.2	2.4
Productivity offset	0.6	1.3	0.8	0.6	2.7	0.5	0.6	0.2	0.8
Net EBA growth	0.9	1.0	2.0	1.7	0.3	1.6	1.9	2.0	1.6

State Tables

	Quarterly					Monthly				
	2016q2	2016q3	2016q4	2017q1	2017q2	2017m2	2017m3	2017m4	2017m05	2017m06
Business conditions										
NSW	17	12	16	14	17	16	17	18	11	16
VIC	17	16	12	11	11	13	15	10	12	17
QLD	3	4	4	10	15	10	20	13	11	19
SA	2	-3	3	10	16	22	11	13	19	15
WA	-8	-12	-17	-10	1	-12	3	2	2	1

	Quarterly					Monthly				
	2016q2	2016q3	2016q4	2017q1	2017q2	2017m2	2017m3	2017m4	2017m05	2017m06
Business confidence										
NSW	3	8	8	8	8	7	5	11	11	8
VIC	4	6	5	6	5	5	6	12	4	6
QLD	2	9	9	7	7	9	13	13	13	12
SA	7	8	11	12	6	13	9	13	3	7
WA	-4	0	-4	1	6	4	8	7	7	15

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