



**Response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Education and Training Inquiry
Combining school and work: Supporting successful transitions
January 2009**

Background

Mission Australia is a national community services organisation. Our vision is to see a fairer Australia by enabling people in need to find pathways to a better life. Mission Australia delivers a range of services that help Australians in need to achieve pathways:

- to strong families and health, happy children
- through a successful youth
- away from homelessness
- to skills and qualifications
- to sustainable employment.

In 2007-08 we supported close to 28,000 young people through close to 100 youth-specific services spread throughout all states and territories. In addition, we supported a significant number of young people through our homeless, employment and training services, including over 17,000 through our Job Network services. Our youth services focus on supporting young people to make 'successful' transitions, with many of the young people we work with having interrupted educational and employment histories for a range of reasons. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry and this submission will focus in particular on enhancing the transitions of those most at risk of making a poor transition. It will include both a framework for promoting successful transitions and examples of initiatives which have been successful in promoting such transitions for young people.

Mission Australia's programs and advocacy are informed by our Research and Social Policy Unit which identifies existing and emerging social needs and assists in developing innovative and effective responses to these needs. There are a number of publications from the Research and Social Policy Unit which are of relevance to this Inquiry. Mission Australia conducts the largest annual survey of young Australians which identifies the values and concerns of those aged 11 to 24 years. In 2008, over 45,500 young people, including two and a half thousand Indigenous and close to 400 who were homeless or in

insecure housing, participated in the seventh annual survey, providing some unique insights on young Australians. In addition, in late 2006 Mission Australia published the findings of a three year research project on the economic and social participation of young Australians. These findings were published as an integrated suite of publications and are Attachment A (known collectively as the Youth Employment Strategy). In 2008 a report entitled *Working for renewal* was also published by Mission Australia, documenting the evaluation findings of its UREEP social enterprise and transitional labour market program. UREEP supports highly disadvantaged people who experience systemic unemployment to engage with the mainstream labour force. A significant proportion of its participants are under 25 years. *Working for renewal* is Attachment B.

Foundations for ‘successful youth transitions’

Critical to this Inquiry is an understanding of the factors which contribute to ‘successful youth transitions’ and a framework for thinking about young people’s ‘progress’ towards achieving such a transition. Such a framework needs to reflect the diversity of young people across a range of factors. The Youth Employment Strategy (Attachment A) offers some useful insights in these areas, in particular the *Participation Continuum* publication (number 4, orange coloured).

The *Participation Continuum* identifies nine factors which provide the foundations for social and economic participation and hence ‘successful’ transitions. These factors are:

- Connectedness – to family, peers, significant others, community
- Physical and mental wellbeing
- Social and emotional resilience
- Affordable and secure housing
- Appropriate education and training
- Employability skills – a set of personal attributes and skills that prepare young people for employment and further learning. These include the ability to communicate; work in a team; problem solve; self manage; and embrace technology.
- Rewarding and secure employment
- Financial security
- Aspirations/goals.

These factors come into play at different stages and to varying degrees in the transition journey but all must be considered if the goal is a successful youth transition. Narrowly focusing on those that specifically relate to school and work for example, (and the ‘balancing’ of the two), without being mindful of the importance of other factors such as connectedness and housing, will result in the failure to achieve the desired outcomes relating to employment and education.

The *Participation Continuum* (p. 4-5) also identifies a continuum for young people which provides a generalised indication of where young people might be at any point in time, whilst also recognising that where they ‘fit’ along the continuum can (and does) vary over time. The Continuum is useful in being able to think about the diversity of young

people moving through transitions, rather than treating them as a homogenous group. It also enables for more targeted responses depending on where young people are on the Continuum.

The Continuum has six 'components/stages' with at one end 'fully engaged/actively engaging' young people who have generally achieved or are close to achieving a successful transition. In the main, for these young people the nine factors are woven together to form a strong foundation and they participate in society to a degree that satisfies them. They are able to balance education and work successfully.

Further along the continuum ('precarious engagement') are young people who may have had problems at home or school or with finding a stable job. With support and early intervention they are capable of negotiating their way, albeit more circuitously and having taken a little longer. They are likely to find balancing education and work more challenging.

Young people who are most distant from social and economic participation and are significantly challenged to make a successful transition (identified on the Continuum as 'disengaging/marginalised') are dealing with a complex mix of issues such as family conflict and breakdown, early school leaving, homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse, poor mental health and experience of juvenile justice or state care. These young people live at the margins, managing to survive but ill-equipped and generally unable to stabilise or improve their personal circumstances. Their choices are limited and likely to remain so without professional intervention. They have issues in all or most of the nine participation factors and require a multi-layered support system which provides a surrounding network of assistance if they are to ultimately make a 'successful transition'. They find balancing all the dimensions of their lives – including education and employment – very challenging, if not currently impossible.

Mission Australia's 2006 review of Commonwealth, State-Territory and local initiatives aimed at enhancing the social and economic participation of young people identified some effective models for those who are most marginalised and at greatest distance from making a successful transition. These models tend to be intensive, comprehensive and highly flexible but are generally local (rather than systemic) initiatives that rely heavily on philanthropic funding, often making them financially fragile and vulnerable to closure. Mission Australia is able to provide further details on those models which have been shown to be effective in supporting the most marginalised of young people and continues to recommend expanded funding at a systemic level for these programs.

Homeless young people

Data from Mission Australia's annual National Youth Survey as well as other research highlights some of the particular school and work challenges facing homeless young people. In the 2008 survey, homeless respondents were more likely:

- To be unemployed or looking for work
- Not to be studying.

than respondents who were in stable housing. 27% of homeless young people compared to 20% of those in stable accommodation were looking for work/unemployed, whilst more significantly 41% of homeless respondents compared to 17% of those in secure housing were not studying (either full or part time). Given the importance of educational participation, the level of non-participation in education by homeless young people, whilst understandable does not augur well for a 'successful' transition. Enhanced collaborations between educational and community service organisations to both prevent young people becoming homeless and supporting them to remain in education should they become so, is essential.

Of interest is the fact that close to half of the homeless respondents were employed (either full or part time). This is a major achievement given the challenges they face but Mission Australia's experience working with this group indicates that maintaining such employment is enormously difficult, particularly as they continue to have many issues to work through. Those homeless young people able to secure employment often experience insecure attachment to the labour force due to the range of issues they are dealing with.

Any efforts to enhance the successful transition of disadvantaged young people, such as those who are homeless, need to include integrated and holistic responses (addressing not only educational but other related needs) as well as provide opportunities to re-engage with education and training in flexible ways as required. Re-engaging with education and training 'greatly enhances (homeless young people's) ability to make incremental changes that stabilise their lives, interact with peers and mentors and take an active role in determining their future' (Youth Employment, Education and Training Initiative, 2007). Current educational arrangements do not necessarily allow for easy re-engagement by homeless or other disadvantaged young people.

Flexible options for promoting successful transitions

Mission Australia has significant experience in developing and implementing programs which promote successful transitions, especially for young people who are at risk of making poor transitions. One such example is the *Learning Unlimited* initiative which is run in South Australia.

I. Learning Unlimited

Learning Unlimited is an umbrella initiative which has a very diverse range of activities which respond to the needs and ages of the young people involved and the community in which it is being run. It involves significant partnerships with a diverse range of organisations, including mainstream education and employment. Central to the program is the creation of an environment where not only educational goals can be achieved but in which the personal needs and barriers to learning (including the ability to cope with transition/s) of each young person can be dealt with in a safe environment. This environment allows broader barriers to participation such as mental illness, drug use and homelessness to be identified early and managed with the support of other stakeholders and services.

Key components of the *Learning Unlimited* initiative include:

- i. Off-campus accredited education: Young people work towards the South Australian Certificate of Education (Yr 11/12) or nationally accredited modules recognised by TAFE. Each student is supported with a one-on-one case worker, and the program is delivered 'off campus' in a 'youth friendly' environment and in small groups. There is a multi-discipline support team to work with participants on the range of issues they are dealing with. Educational delivery modes reflect the needs of the participants and there is significant opportunity for involvement in the community and in other employment/training type activities. An important difference from some of the other 'alternate educational' initiatives that are available for this target group is that they receive 'mainstream' accreditation and therefore are better placed to make a successful transition.
- ii. Parent Education Program (PEP): works with young parents to enable them to achieve an accredited education/training option (yr 11/12) (in a similar way to the off-campus program). In addition there is a significant parent education component to the support provided. Young parents require particular targeted support if they are going to remain engaged (or re-engage) with education and make a 'successful' transition. This support needs to address not only their requirements as students but also as parents.
- iii. No Opportunity Wasted (NOW): is an Indigenous specific initiative which works with young people and their families to develop opportunities and pathways regarding further education, training and employment. These type of initiatives are very important given the significant gap between completion of Yr 12 by Indigenous and non Indigenous students.
- iv. RISE: is an early intervention model working with young people aged under 16 years who are at risk of disengaging from mainstream education. It focuses on enhancing living skills, basic accredited literacy and numeracy skills and supports the re-engagement of students with the education system.
- v. Recreational and adventure program: this is also an early intervention initiative which works with 11 to 16 year olds and their families and engages them in positive recreational and adventure activities to increase their self esteem, confidence and family connectedness. These outcomes are critical for continued engagement with education.

Having a suite of offerings within Learning Unlimited allows the particular needs of young people to be more effectively met.

The impacts of the *Learning Unlimited* program include:

- Improved education, employment and community participation outcomes for disengaged young people.
- Increased wellbeing of participants across a range of indicators.
- Increased family and community connections.
- More integrated educational, employment and social support network/s in communities with high proportions of disengaged young people.

In 2007, around 800 young people participated in the range of *Learning Unlimited* initiatives. For those involved in the off-campus educational program in 2007, the context of the outcomes and impact identified below is of young people who have been

severely disengaged from mainstream schooling. The outcomes include:

- 60% passed their year 12 South Australian Certificate.(SACE)
- A young parent achieved two perfect scores toward her SACE and was presented with a certificate of merit by the Minister for Children's and Education Services at Parliament House.
- Amongst the 2007 students: 3 are studying at TAFE with a further 2 completing a women's education program at TAFE, 5 are employed; 2 are in adult learning programs; 1 is doing a vocational education program, 1 is participating in a foundation course for university, 2 are working at Green Corps; 2 have returned to *Learning Unlimited* educational programs and 1 is completing a City of Onkaparinga (Local Government) Leadership program.
- Qualitative feedback from 2007 participants includes: "I am the only person in my family to have year 12" "I wanted to go back to school so I wasn't the dumbest mum in my own kid's class."

Initiatives such as Learning Unlimited are a cost effective way of enhancing the capacity of young people at risk to make a successful transition. It is an example of how partnerships between education and non-government community services organisations can achieve better outcomes than either could individually. They are the type of program which Mission Australia would advocate should be available regardless of where a young person lives. They require both flexible program and funding arrangements between a range of players if they are to be successful.

2. Social enterprises and transitional labour market programs

Mission Australia's experience is that for some young people who are at the most vulnerable end of the Participation Continuum, social enterprises and transitional labour market programs can play a significant role in helping them make a 'successful' transition. Mission Australia's Regional Environmental Employment Program (REEP) and the Urban Renewal Employment Enterprise Program (UREEP) have both achieved significant and positive outcomes for highly disadvantaged people, including young people, thereby supporting them to make a 'successful' transition.

UREEP is a transitional labour market program which offers opportunities for disadvantaged and workless Australians to engage with the mainstream labour force and build their work capacity. Through working on commercial trades-based jobs in small crews under the oversight of a qualified trade supervisor, UREEP trainees develop their life and social skills, establish a new supportive peer group and gain qualifications in trades. Operating in the disadvantaged Neighbourhood Renewal areas of West Heidelberg and East Preston in metropolitan Melbourne, it provides participants with on and off-site accredited training in industries in which there are skills shortages. Participant training is supported by a twelve month traineeship placement that includes structured workplace mentoring, workplace and classroom based education and training, personal support/life coaching and support to obtain permanent employment beyond the traineeship.

A 2008 evaluation of the program (see *Working for renewal*) showed 71% of participants have made the transition to sustained employment or education. In addition, 86% of participants experienced some form of positive personal development as a result of participating in the program. As with Learning Unlimited, UREEP and REEP require collaborations with a broad range of stakeholders if they are to be effective. Mission Australia would argue that transitional labour market programs can play an effective part in supporting the successful transition of young people experiencing or at risk of experiencing poor transitions and would urge consideration of broader funding to support such programs.

Conclusion

Mission Australia would urge that the Inquiry consider an integrated framework such as that provided by the Youth Employment Strategy in its deliberations on 'successful' transitions. Such a framework identifies not only the range of issues which are fundamental to ensuring such a transition but also provides a way of understanding the diversity of young people and where they may 'sit' along the transition pathway.

Mission Australia would also urge that consideration be given to increased policy and programmatic support for initiatives such as Learning Unlimited and transitional labour market programs which have been shown to be effective in enhancing the transitions of young people at risk of making poor transitions.

References

- Mission Australia (2008) *National survey of young Australians 2008: Key and emerging issues*. Mission Australia, Sydney, NSW.
- Mission Australia (2008) *Working for renewal*. Melbourne, Victoria. Jointly published by Mission Australia, Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development and The Centre for Public Policy, Melbourne University.
- Mission Australia (2006) *Youth Employment Strategy* Mission Australia, Sydney, NSW.
- Youth Employment, Education & Training Initiative (YEETI) (2007) Opportunities for young people in the Homelessness Service System to participate in employment, education and training. *Parity*, (20 (1), 41.