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Inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions

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Over half of Australia's high school students are juggling the demands of school and part-time employment & the proportions combining study and work have increased substantially over the past two decades. Recent ABS data indicate that 66.5% of Australia's 15-19 year olds are working part-time, and that 79% of these are studying on a full-time basis (ABS, 2005).

Further research is needed to gain a clearer understanding of the strategies that young people, their families, their schools, and their employers might use (or are using) to manage the competing demands of study and work. Existing research, however, indicates that:

- Above an initial threshold, the more hours per week a student works, the more likely s/he is to drop out of school (Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley, 2003). This is consistent with US research indicating that part-time employment reduces students' engagement with study (Marsh & Kleitman, 2005);
- However, part-time work offers strategic benefits for students who want to enter full time employment upon leaving school. Recent Australian labour market analyses indicate that casual employment increases the likelihood of continued labour market attachment (Buddelmeyer & Wooden, 2007);
- This finding is consistent with Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) research which found that students who work during HS are more likely to be employed when they leave school than those who have not participated in part-time work while at school (Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley, 2003);
- LSAY research looking at young people who do not go to University found that while participation in part-time work increased the likelihood of being employed full-time two to four years after leaving school, school completion did not substantially improve the labour market outcomes of this group (Marks, 2006).

The Marks (2006) study should not be interpreted as meaning that 'high school completion does not matter', since (a) those who completed year 12 gained full-time work more rapidly than those who had not, and (b) high school completers are better qualified to re-enter further education and training. Nevertheless, having a full-time job at age 20-22 seems to be strongly influenced by establishing a track record during high school and sustaining a foothold in the labour market, and from this perspective the Year 12 qualification may have a lower imperative than is sometimes suggested. However, it is important to note that demand for low-skilled labour has declined both in Australia and overseas—nearly three quarters of new jobs in the period 1990–2003 were taken up by university graduates. Only one in eight of jobs available over this period went to job seekers without post-school qualifications (Kelly, Bolton & Harding 2005).

The above findings present a conundrum: student employment has negative effects on high school completion rates, but positive effects on the chances of post-school employment. Any solution to this conundrum must include both 'protective' and

'productive' elements. Students need to be *protected* against excessively long hours of work, against injury and abuse, and against employers who do not allow rostered time off for major assessments. In addition, the school-work nexus should be a *productive* one. Young people want jobs that provide " ... an enriching, rewarding and mutually beneficial experience for both the employer and the employee." (Lake Tuggeranong College SRC). Through their part-time employment, young people should gain basic employment skills, and where possible, higher-level vocational and technical skills.

Current ABS data indicate that 38% of Australia's school leavers enter full-time or part-time employment directly, without enrolling in further study. Many of these young people come from backgrounds of social exclusion and economic hardship: they need to gain a secure foothold in the labour market in order to support their families. Yet they may also live in remote-rural or poor-urban regions where job opportunities are scarce. In these geographic locations, school-based and/or community-supported employment and training opportunities may also be needed. Since having a job during high school significantly increases the chances of being employed later on, new policies and programs that support young people who are combining school and work are urgently needed.

For the 42% of young Australians who go from school into full-time study at a University, TAFE College, or other institution, having an employment track record also matters: most of them will work part-time during their tertiary studies. Developing effective strategies for juggling school and work matters for all young people, but those from poor and excluded communities have additional needs. These include the need for flexible approaches to support extended completion¹ of high school, the recognition of alternative Year 12 qualifications and accreditation for skills developed at work, and opportunities for second chance education.

The *Terms of Reference* provided by the Standing Committee on Education and Training call for a comprehensive response to these issues. The ToRs are summarised here as follows:

ToR #1: Recognise and accredit employability skills gained through part-time work

ToR #2: Identify flexible alternative approaches to attaining the senior secondary certificate which support combinations of work and study

ToR #3: Help young people who study and work to remain engaged in study: review ways in which school-work combinations may intersect with income support

ToR #4: Examine (and ameliorate) the impact of part-time employment on educational attainment (school completion, post-school qualifications) and examine issues related to workforce productivity

ToR #5: Examine the effectiveness of existing school-based training pathways, and identify opportunities for improvement, especially in relation to disadvantaged young people.

¹ Extended completion refers to patterns of attendance under which students at the post-compulsory stage may take more than the minimum number of years to complete a particular qualification (for example, they may take three years to complete Year 11 and Year 12).

Already, across Australia, one can identify numerous policies and programs that are responding to each of these issues. Each jurisdiction can point to examples. The following list is indicative but far from complete:

- Queensland has initiated broad-ranging Education and Training Reforms for the Future and the new Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) includes opportunities to gain credit for out-of-school activities, including employment and community service. It allows nine years to QCE completion;
- NSW has several Senior Secondary Colleges that provide extensive VET with work-based learning options, and re-entry or second chance programs;
- South Australia offers re-entry schools and also operates high schools where extended completion is the norm – an estimated 40% of all senior-secondary students in South Australia take 3 years or more to complete the SACE;
- Victoria pioneered the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs), and offers the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) as an alternative to the VCE.

In addition to programs such as those offered by school systems, schools, and local communities, important initiatives have also been established by unions and employers. These are usually designed to help young people understand their rights at work and develop generic employment-related skills. Without 'reinventing the wheel', we need to ask (a) what goals and principles should underlie our policies and programs, (b) what are the gaps and problems in our current provisions, and (c) what strategies might allow us to improve on what is currently offered to young people?

In response to this Inquiry, the ANSN is proposing the development of a national initiative, under the title of an *Intergenerational Youth Compact (IYC)*. The three sections below discuss the goals, the gaps, and the strategies for the proposed IYC program.

(a) Principles underlying an Intergenerational Youth Compact (IYC)

1. Providing high-quality learning opportunities for all young people is fundamental to building a society of competent adults. Worksites should be places where young people gain basic employment skills. Wherever possible, workplace contexts should also support the acquisition of higher-level vocational and technical skills. Youth employment should not be 'skill free'. It should include training components that lead to recognised credentials (ToR #1, #2);
2. Our schools must provide flexible programs that respond to the pressures involved in juggling school and work. Flexible timetables, opportunities for extended completion of year 12, and second chance options need to be widely accessible (ToR #2);
3. Young people need guidance on how to combine study and work effectively. Teachers, ancillary staff, employers, unions, and other community agencies should all contribute to delivering 'joined up' programs. Students who work should be encouraged to provide peer support for each other within the school context (ToR #3);
3. Government policies for income support should facilitate combinations of study and work, and be compatible with extended school completion. (ToR #3);

4. Young people have a right to live, study and work in safe environments. As they take their first steps into paid employment, it is their right to be protected against harassment, exploitation, and physical injury (ToR #4).
5. Additional resources are required to provide effective transition support for young people who are from socially and economically excluded communities. No single program or policy can meet the diverse needs of these young people. Indigenous youth, refugees and recent immigrants, homeless and under-supported youth, and young people from remote rural communities must be supported through programs that are crafted and integrated locally, resourced both locally and centrally, and designed to meet their needs (ToR #5).
6. The whole community is responsible for the wellbeing of our young people. Responsibility includes being compassionate, respectful and helpful. Helping young people to manage the many transitions along the diverse pathways that eventually lead towards adult lives requires joint efforts from teachers, parents, employers, students, and others in their communities.

(a) Gaps and problems with current provisions

ToR #5 proposes the need to examine the effectiveness of existing school-based training pathways, and identify opportunities for improvement, "especially in relation to disadvantaged young people".

The major problem with Australia's provision of transition support is that too many disadvantaged young people completely miss out. Further investigation is needed into the nature and extent of this problem. Better counselling and improved information systems may be part of the solution. In some cases flexible senior secondary programs or re-entry colleges may exist within a particular geographical region, but little is known about them outside of their immediate contexts, so students are unaware of opportunities that might be available. However, it also seems likely that there are many regions in which there is no access to flexible or "alternative" senior secondary schooling, and little or no access to second-chance or re-entry opportunities.

In a study of Youth Allowance recipients (Lamb & Robinson, 2001) the most common reason given for early leaving school involved dissatisfaction with aspects of study at school. This was cited by 40 per cent of the sample. Respondents were almost equally divided between those who saw their course as irrelevant or boring, and those who felt discouraged because it was difficult. High-school aged Youth Allowance recipients are almost universally from low-income families. What this finding indicates is that many of these students found the standard Year 11-12 program offered in their local high school did not fit with their perceptions of what they wanted or needed. What is also implicit in this outcome is that information and advice about access to alternative provisions is not readily available to these young people. It appears that most of them left the education system altogether, rather than transferring to another school or college.

One in eight of Australia's 15-24 year olds is neither engaged in full-time education nor in full-time work (Foundation for Young Australians 2008). Many young school leavers are in part-time work which is often casual. While they are seeking full-time employment, they often lack the skills that sustainable full-time careers require. Most of these young people are from backgrounds of low socio-economic status (Foundation for Young Australians, 2008).

An issue that requires more investigation is that many of our existing school-based training programs passively align themselves with the dominant employment fields that teenagers naturally fall into. Not all young people *want* careers in retail sales and fast food, but those are the jobs that are readily available to them. School-based traineeships (SBT) in Retail or in Hospitality are commonly provided as part of the senior curriculum: these may give schools and businesses easy access to the training subsidies that come with SBTs, but they do little to introduce young people to more demanding, high-skill careers.

A more promising approach is evident, for example, in the Brisbane North District, through the *Healthy Futures* program, and the *Accountancy traineeships* programs offered there. Local education officers from DETA focused on identifying fields where there was significant unmet demand for new employees, and where work-based training could be developed leading to advanced vocational qualifications. These programs are proposed (below) as pilot sites for study by the Standing Committee during this Inquiry.

(a) Strategies for improvement

In response to this Inquiry, the ANSN proposes the development of a national initiative, under the title of an *Intergenerational Youth Compact (IYC)*. The IYC would be based on three components:

1. *IYC Hubs*, which would bring employers, teachers, parents, students, and others in local communities together. Following the *IYC Principles* outlined above, they would examine the impacts of combining school and work, engage students in a dialogue about learning, identify gaps and problems in relation to school delivery, community services, and workplace regulation, and develop improved forms of transition support for young people.
2. *A national IYC network*, through which educators, employers, parents, and students could learn about and learn from a wide range of initiatives that are being implemented around Australia through the *IYC Hubs*.
3. *Employer and Union commitment to IYC principles*. This is perhaps the most audacious component of the proposal. It would demand high-level leadership from peak bodies. The intention would be to create a recognisable 'badge' for youth-friendly employers, and for unions that give high priority to protecting young people's rights.

ANSN suggests that as the Standing Committee begins its Inquiry, it might focus on pilot sites where programs that are consistent with the principles of the *Intergenerational Youth Compact* are already being implemented. Educators who represent these sites will be attending the Roundtable meeting on 2 February. Three possible pilot programs or 'sites' have been identified by ANSN, but we emphasise that these are not the only locations in which IYC-related work is being done. These are briefly described as follows:

Adelaide and Mt Gambier HS, SA: In South Australia, provision for the senior secondary school certificate (SACE) to be undertaken on a part-time basis has been available since the introduction of this credential in 1992. Most schools have used

this option 'reactively', allowing study load reductions only for students at risk of SACE failure. In contrast, Mt Gambier High School has adopted an innovative and proactive approach, and has integrated study-load-reduction within a suite of strategies aimed at supporting student well-being. Pushing through Years 11 & 12 on a full-time basis is no longer the norm at Mt Gambier: extended completion, and a closer integration of school-based and work-based learning is now supported by the school and by its community.

Alongside the Mt Gambier HS pilot, the Re-Entry Colleges of Adelaide could be viewed as a second IYC pilot. There are four adult re-entry high schools in the suburbs of Adelaide, strategically placed to maximise access across the greater metropolitan area. These adult second-chance schools were established as a social justice commitment by the State Government, to open study and employment opportunities to adults who had not completed their secondary education. Approximately 6,000 adults have accessed second chance opportunities each year since the early 1990s. While the initial focus on catch-up education and completion of secondary education through the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) was similar at each site, the development and educational programs have differentiated since then and they now vary in their specialisations and structures.

Illawarra, NSW: Illawarra Senior College serves a large area bounded by Southern Sydney to Nowra to Moss Vale, and as such is not a local school. It is designed to provide a 'second chance' opportunity for students to succeed where they have not done so previously. The College operates a mature learning environment - students do not wear a uniform, are on a first name basis with staff, and interact with staff in a climate of mutual respect. The College offers a broad curriculum, has a strong VET focus and has excellent welfare programs in place. The College has a strong Careers program with each student being "case-managed". It caters to over 500 students from age 15 and above. Approximately 30% of the College students are of mature age and 50% of students are re-entering education after a break. The school operates a four day week with an extended day on those four days. This provides opportunities for students to manage part-time work and study commitments, improved opportunities to meet family commitments, and increased time for study, assignments, and catch-up etc.

Brisbane North, Qld: In the Brisbane North District, concerted efforts are being made to increase the number of school-based apprenticeships and traineeships in high schools, by developing closer links between schools, industries and employers. Projects such as *Healthy Futures* are building on collaboration between local employers who are experiencing skills shortages – especially in the Aged Care field. As noted above, the Brisbane North work-based training programs are designed to lead to advanced vocational qualifications. Their achievements are fully accredited in terms of Certificate II and Certificate III qualifications.

The innovative nature of this work is made possible through the curriculum reforms embedded in the new Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). During Year 10, every student sits down with his/her parents or guardians, teachers, and school mentors to discuss post-compulsory options, including school/life balance. For each individual, this leads to the formulation of a Senior Education and Training Plan. Students then register with the Queensland Studies Authority, and from that date

they have nine years in which to complete the requirements of the QCE. The new QCE allows recognition of a wide range of learning experiences: not only academic study, but also work experience, extra-curricula activities, extension activities, individual projects, and out-of-school qualifications.

Concluding comments

The pilot sites described above have a number of features in common. All are located in communities of low socio-economic status, and all seek to improve opportunities for disadvantaged students to learn, work, and qualify for stable and worthwhile careers. All provide flexible school programs that respond to the pressures involved in juggling school and work. Flexible timetables, opportunities for extended completion of year 12, and second chance options are available. Individual students are engaged in a dialogue about the curriculum, and individual case management often plays a key role. The programs are diverse and even within each program, the diversity of the students is respected. There is no assumption that 'one size fits all'. Yet despite the complexity and diversity of these settings, they are becoming repositories of systematic knowledge about 'what works' for young people whose lives involve messy combinations of study and work.

Should the Standing Committee choose to study pilot sites such as these, it will no doubt locate other sites where effective innovations are in place. For example, ANSN is also supporting significant initiatives in particular communities through its Big Picture Schools. The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) has urged the Victorian government to recognise the 'worker-learner' path that most young people now follow. One example of the BSLs work is the Community Services Leadership project, which recruits refugee youth into a service-learning program, implemented through VACL (Victoria's year 12 'alternative' program). Many other examples are likely to come forward at the Round Table session on 2 February 2009.

The development of a *National IYC Network* would make it possible for educators, employers, parents, and students to learn from each other. More importantly for this inquiry, such a Network would provide an ideal opportunity to develop policy 'from the bottom up', by drawing on the collective knowledge of those who have developed, led and managed successful pilot sites.

In conclusion, it is important to re-iterate that this Inquiry is addressing a problem that affects over half of Australia's high school students aged 15 and over. Many of them are not disadvantaged students, and they too have a right to safe conditions at work. They too need support as they seek to balance the competing demands of study and employment. The danger is that long hours of teenage labour in low-skill contexts could have a deleterious effect on the development of our nation's social and economic capital. The challenge, therefore, is to encourage employers, schools, parents and young people to join forces and establish successful integrated programs to maximise the potential of all these students.

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