Inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions - *Response*

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CCI
Knowledge Influence Support

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Inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions

Terms of Reference

Managing the demands of study and part-time or casual employment is part of everyday life for the majority of Australian school students. The impact of potentially competing demands is not well known, and there is little provision of information or guidance to schools or employers on the effect this has on the lives of young people generally, and more specifically on their career development and prospects for successful transitions. The committee's review of the impact of combined study and work on the success of youth transitions and Year 12 attainment will focus on:

- providing opportunities to recognise and accredit the employability and career development skills gained through students' part time or casual work;
- identifying more flexible, innovative and/or alternative approaches to attaining a senior secondary certificate which support students to combine work and study;
- support that may be required to assist young people combining work and study to stay engaged in their learning, especially where work and study intersects with income support;
- the potential impact on educational attainment (including the prospects for post-compulsory qualifications and workforce productivity); and
- The effectiveness of school-based training pathways and their impact on successful transitions, including opportunities for improvement (particularly in relation to pathways to employment for disadvantaged young people).

ABOUT CCI

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia (CCI) is the leading business association in Western Australia.

It is the second largest organisation of its kind in Australia, with a membership of over 5,000 organisations in all sectors including manufacturing, resources, agriculture, transport, communications, retailing, hospitality, building and construction, community services, finance, education and training.

Most members are private businesses, but CCI also has representation in the not-for-profit sectors and government sector. About 80 per cent of members are small business, and members are located in all geographical regions of WA.

OVERVIEW

A strong education system is essential to provide young people with the knowledge, skills, understanding and values necessary for work and life. The level of an individual's skills influences their chance of getting and retaining a job that provides for self-sufficiency and fulfilment. Employers need skilled people if their organisations are to be productive, innovative, profitable and surviving in an increasingly competitive and changing world. A country's skill base is a critical national asset, contributing to economic achievement, standards of living, social cohesion and individual well being.

A strong secondary system aims to provide learning opportunities for students which build on the critical skills developed throughout the primary years. The secondary system also has an important role to play by providing information and guidance for young people into further employment, education and training.

Work related skills are acquired in various parts of the education and training system, including schools, vocational education and training (VET), at university and through informal on-the-job training. Schools supply the foundations for all later learning by providing the basic literacy and numeracy skills essential for continuous lifelong development. Part-time or casual jobs, whilst a student is still in secondary or higher education, continue the process by engendering important life and employability skills that are so highly valued by employers.

Schools also participate in the VET system through a VET in Schools (VETIS) programs and through Australian School-Based Apprenticeships. VET programs offered in schools have developed into an established part of mainstream senior schooling across Australia and provide students with an alternative to the traditional academic pathway through secondary school. Vocational education and training delivers employment related skills across a broad range of vocations. VET is of critical importance to employers because of its contribution to the development of skills and skilled labour that can help employers grow their business.

The Australian University sector is diverse and provides a mix of research and teaching across the professions. Employer demand for higher level skills, driven by increasing competitive pressures, changes in market demand and technological changes means the higher education sector has become an increasingly important training provider for industry. However, the practical component of workplace experience and the consequent development of employability skills are just as important in the university graduate.

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

A key objective sought by CCI is to promote models of learning that link educational activities and work so that all students regardless of their post-school destination have experience of the workplace.

In 2002, the Australian Chamber of Commerce & Industry and the Business Council of Australia determined, in consultation with industry sectors across Australia, the skills required not only to gain employment but also to progress within an industry and to contribute meaningfully to enterprise strategic direction. These have become known as employability skills and are identified within an Employability Skills Framework. CCI will continue to encourage the implementation of employability skills across schools, training, and higher education and employment sectors.

TERTIARY BOUND STUDENTS

Senior secondary tertiary bound students have less opportunity to participate in school/workplace programs because of the greater demands of a more academic pathway. Many gain the employability skills through involvement in out of school part time or casual work. The hours spent in the workplace are usually constrained in a bid to achieve academic success. The life and employability skills gained in the workplace are just as important to employers of university graduates as for employers of VET or direct entry young people. An example of a program that is working successfully for tertiary pathway students is the Transition to Registered Nursing Program. This program involves a partnership between CCI (on behalf of its members in the private health sector); the Department of Education and Training of WA; the Catholic Education Office of WA; the Association of Independent Schools of WA; and Curtin University of Technology.

The origins of the program related to concern from the private health sector of the number of graduates leaving the health system because it was different to their expectations. The university had problems with the attrition rate and the school sectors were unable to access adequate work experience opportunities for their students to test their career assumptions.

An additional favourable aspect of this program is that it enables tertiary entry pathway students to access a structured workplace experience during their school holidays, as well as the experience counting as a subject equivalent towards secondary

graduation. Too many tertiary pathway school students do not have access to meaningful, structured, work experience because of the nature of their studies.

All stakeholders are represented on a management working party that administers the recruitment, selection, off-the-job training and support for students and host organisations.

As the program is generally unfunded, the goodwill and support of all parties is predicated on overall successful outcomes for all concerned. Many other industry sectors have indicated that they would be willingly supportive of the initiation of similar programs to fit their scope.

The program will undergo an evaluation process for a number of years as the students graduate from university and enter the workforce.

Feedback from the students and their parents has been of the most positive nature. Telephone interviews with students who are in the first cohort to graduate from university and from program students commencing university this year indicates the following:

- prior knowledge and understanding of the course assists them in their university studies;
- they already have knowledge of how hospitals and aged care facilities operate and have acquired an ability to communicate at the right level with staff and patients;
- the students, who came from schools across the systems/sectors, bond during the program, which continues through university and enables them to support each other, both socially and academically; and
- the program, including units of competency gained through the training, equips the students to access part-time employment within the industry during their university studies.

DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

While Indigenous and disadvantaged groups have access to employment, education and training, they encounter difficulties as a result of low education levels and the lack of role models and mentors to support them.

Education and training policy should maximise the potential for all Australians to become competitive in the employment market.

The integration of career education and employability skills into education and training programs will assist Indigenous and disadvantaged groups to engage in career pathways and higher education study options that lead to meaningful and satisfying employment. Programs that help prepare these young people for the workplace and develop the ability to access part time and casual employment whilst still at school are vital.

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS POSED BY THE INQUIRY

- **Providing opportunities to recognise and accredit the employability and career development skills gained through students' part time or casual work**

Part time or casual employment allows students to develop a range of skills which complement the skills learnt within school or higher education and aid the development of life skills. Participation in part time or casual work whilst still studying also aids the development of a number of *soft* and *transferable* skills such as: communication, punctuality, discipline, initiative, time management; team work and problem solving. This acquisition, through workplace experience, is highly valued by employers, thereby potentially contributing to an employment outcome for the student.

While it is essential that students are provided with opportunities to gain recognition for the employability and career development skills gained through part time or casual work, other factors must be taken into consideration. Consultation with CCI members has indicated great support for exposure of young people to part time or casual work, which imparts both a growth in maturity and an understanding of the workplace. However, the additional reporting responsibilities and paperwork associated with a formal accreditation process would not be practicable or acceptable to industry or schools, particularly in times of general staff specific skills shortages and teacher shortages. An additional factor is validation of the workplace and the work undertaken. Where the workplace has formal structures and processes in place, there is a system to monitor and record essential data. However, in other situations there is no reliable monitoring process. This has recently been highlighted by the difficulties encountered by the WA Curriculum Council in obtaining valid data from schools for accreditation of the 20 hours of community service required by each student to achieve secondary graduation.

In addition, although part time or casual work is extremely valuable to students, it is important that the time in the workplace does not interfere with the pursuit and satisfactory achievement of the more traditional academic subjects/courses such as English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, economics and languages for those students with the aptitude and ability. The lure of 'big' money for untrained positions during the resources boom in Western Australia caused many students at senior school and university level, who did not have strong school, parent or peer encouragement, to opt out of further studies. The fall in the numbers of students enrolled in the more challenging subjects/courses is a matter of continuing concern.

As part of the formal application process for employment, the resume plays an important, though understated, role. After examination of the educational and training qualifications, the employer will next turn to employment details, whether part time,

casual or full time. It is essential that the student has learnt to accurately monitor and record information relating to the type of employment, duration, tasks performed and skills acquired, together with the correct contact details for relevant referees. Formal and recent involvement in sport and/or community activities should also be comprehensively documented as this can provide an employer with information on the level of commitment, skills and achievement in pursuits outside the requirements of education.

Recommendation 1:

Instead of a formal recognition or accreditation system, CCI advocates a process which teaches students to monitor and record tasks undertaken within the workforce and to accurately and concisely present this on their resume.

- **Identifying more flexible, innovative and/or alternative approaches to attaining a senior secondary certificate which support students to combine work and study**

A number of states throughout Australia are already implementing more flexible, innovative and/or alternative approaches to attaining a secondary school certificate. For example within Western Australia, Sevenoaks College permits senior secondary school students to attend school for their lectures only, and have flexible hours and options.

From 2009, it will be a requirement of the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) that students complete a minimum of 20 hours of community service. The Community Service Program will help students understand the importance of contemporary community values and ensure that young people understand their rights and responsibilities as active members of society.

The new Courses of Study, introduced by the WA Curriculum Council, provide alternative pathways and recognition of unit equivalence for VET and Endorsed Programs that can meet up to 50 percent of secondary graduation requirements. Any formal VET qualifications achieved whilst at school will be recorded on the graduation certificate.

Endorsed programs are a new and innovative component of the WA education system. Endorsed programs offer Years 10, 11 and 12 students the opportunity to use workplace learning, VET stand alone and nationally accredited courses, university studies, community organisation and personal development programs to meet the completion requirement of the WACE. Some of the currently endorsed programs include; Girl Guides WA, Surf Life Saving WA, Black Swan Theatre Company and Rotary WA. The programs can be delivered in a variety of settings by community organisations, universities, training organisations and workplaces.

The *Transition to Registered Nursing Program*, supported by the education sectors and industry, provides a valuable career experience, alternative pathway to university and training that enables paid part time work opportunities within the industry for tertiary bound students. It could be considered as a model for other industry sectors.

Recommendation 2:
Due to the nature of the changing environment, it is essential that schools offer more flexible, innovative and alternative approaches to attaining a senior secondary school certificate. States, systems and schools should look at best practice models in similar schools throughout Australia and implement options which will benefit their school and local environment, whilst maintaining educational integrity. Better use of school facilities after hours may also be an option to support students to combine work and study.

- **Support that may be required to assist young people combining work and study to stay engaged in their learning, especially where work and study intersects with income support.**

Centrelink currently provides a relatively flexible system of income support by allowing a student or their parent/s to earn up to a certain amount before their payment is affected. Once the student/parent reaches this income threshold, payments are reduced accordingly. Centrelink has also recently introduced the income bank which allows students to accumulate up to $1,000 of any unused portion of their fortnightly income free area. The accumulated income bank credits can be used to offset any income earned that exceeds the fortnightly income free area. This type of flexible support means that students will be able to stay engaged with their learning while also working to earn some additional money.

However, more support may be required for families that rely on this income in order to help students stay engaged in their learning.

Students at educational and socio-economic disadvantage who lack reliable role models may be assisted by a mentor or buddy program.

Recommendation 3:
The current system appears responsive to the needs of young people generally. However, there will be disadvantaged young people that could be assisted with special measures and advice and support of a mentor or buddy program.

- **The potential impact on educational attainment (including the prospects for post-compulsory qualifications and workforce productivity)**

Research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Education at a Glance*, in 2007 indicates that people completing secondary education were more likely to be employed (80 percent) than people who do not complete secondary school (63 percent). This finding illustrates the importance of completing secondary schooling. However, placing an increasing importance on the formal recognition and accreditation of work undertaken outside of school parameters may lead to disengagement with the school system for some students. For example, students may opt to take the 'easier' option of completing part time or casual work at the expense of more academic subjects.

Recommendation 4:
CCI advocates recognition by students, schools and employers of the need to balance the commitments and priorities of school and work to ensure that neither impinges on the other. There will be differing priorities for the academic and non-academic students, those with socio-economic disadvantage, educational disadvantage and those with special needs that will require different approaches and levels of support.

- **The effectiveness of school-based training pathways and their impact on successful transitions, including opportunities for improvement (particularly in relation to pathways to employment for disadvantaged young people).**

Research conducted by the National Council of Vocational Education Research (NCVER) in 2006 into '*Have school vocational education and training programs been successful?'* indicated that students who participated in VET programs at school and left school after Year 11 have much better outcomes than students who leave school after Year 11 without having participated in VET programs.

Interestingly, the research noted that retention of students in VET programs dropped from Year 11 to Year 12, potentially indicating that school VET programs facilitate a student's transition into the workforce possibly through the work experience component of the program.[1]

This research concluded that school based training pathways are effective and do have a positive impact on successful transitions into the workforce. However, it must be noted that very few students undertaking VET courses transition into higher education.

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[1] Anelzark, A, Karmel, T. Ong, K. (2006) Have School Vocational Education and Training Programs been Successful? NCVER, Adelaide.

VET programs are also extensively used to good effect at Education Support Centres. A latest example of a valuable employer supported program is the *'Spice for Life'* program where students with special needs access structured training over 3 years in Coles Supermarkets. This, and similar programs, allow disadvantaged students to gain work experience in a variety of different roles, providing them with valuable life skills, an education outcome, positive self-worth and possible employment opportunities.

Some Indigenous programs are also proving highly successful, but a number do not continue because of a lack of funding. It needs to be recognised that, in some areas of special need, the intensive support required does not enable large numbers to be delivered in outcome results. The success should rather be measured in terms of overcoming the special generational, ethnic or other barriers and the impact on surrounding communities.

Recommendation 5:
Disadvantaged young people will particularly benefit from school-based training pathways and participation and achievement will enable them to play a productive role in the community and the workplace. It is important that an acceptable level of job readiness is achieved before entering the workplace and, in some instances, cultural awareness programs for workplace supervisors will be necessary. Bad experiences will adversely impact on both the young person and the workplace. Special provision should be made for those whose disadvantage level requires intensive support and the success of the program should not necessarily be assessed on outcome numbers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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