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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Education and Training
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing regarding your invitation to provide comments to the Inquiry into *combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions*.

Young people's participation

I recommend that the Committee take into account the views of young people in considering options and developing its recommendations. Our experience suggests that approaches to supporting students in balancing study and work, and the transition from full time study to full time work, are likely to be more effective if they reflect young people's interests, aspirations and concerns.

I encourage the Committee to include consultations with young people as part of the Inquiry. We would be pleased to assist the Committee to engage with young people.

I also recommend the Committee discuss these issues with the new Australian Youth Forum, whose role is to bring the views of young people and youth sector organisations into the national public debate.

Children and young people's views

The Commission, as part of its work on the school leaving age in 2008, spoke with young people between 10 and 23 years about some of the issues being considered by the Committee.

These young people identified the NSW OTEN Year 10 equivalent course, which provides self-paced learning in a non-competitive environment, as an example of an appropriate alternative to traditional school. The Committee could consider extending such an approach to more senior levels, to assist those students who need to combine work and school. The Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) is another model of flexible learning for the Committee to consider. The QCE can be attained through a range of learning options, including senior school subjects, workplace and community learning, vocational education and training and university subjects undertaken while at school.

We also found support among these young people for extending vocational education as part of school work, including outside normal school hours. Students at risk of disengaging told us that school work directly relevant to life, now or in the immediate future, would keep them engaged. Students, particularly the less academically-oriented, would be helped to stay engaged at school by broadening the school curriculum to incorporate more vocationally-relevant content.

Ways to recognise and accredit a broader range of experiences should be considered, such as the broad based learning options available under the QCE, and South Australia's Step Up Community Learning, in which various community learning activities are accredited towards the South Australian Certificate of Education.

The early school leavers the Commission spoke with about the school leaving age strongly supported students being able to move to an apprenticeship at 15 years if they desired. They suggested that a student who would rather be, for example, working in retail or hospitality was likely to gain little from being at school and to be disruptive to other students.

To help improve the engagement of such students, there is scope to combine apprenticeships with schooling, including targeted approaches for those students most at risk of leaving the school system early. I believe that education systems could do more to improve students' understanding of the vocational value of schooling, particularly where school learning may not appear immediately relevant to some students' life aspirations. This may require a revision of the curriculum to increase the vocational and broader life skills content.

Young people who had left school to enter the fulltime workforce told us that, for them, looking for a job had been a fulltime occupation in itself. It may not be possible for a young person to continue fulltime education or training at the same time as they are actively seeking work. The current economic downturn is likely to exacerbate this situation, at least for lower-skilled young people.

Young people suggested to us that organised sessions be offered to assist them in their search for work, together with more targeted careers counselling. They thought these were useful steps to help students get what they want from school and to help them transition to the workplace, without having to disengage from school completely.

Students could be given more targeted counselling and more support to help them with their job search after school, including career and job search advice. More flexible school timetabling arrangements can help students better manage balancing school with job search needs. For instance, students could attend school part-time, attend job interviews during standard school hours, or timetables could be arranged so that students have one or two days or afternoons a week with no classes.

Providing the foundations to support successful transitions

Transition from full time study to full time work is a long-term process not limited to a few years around the end of secondary school. Successful transition is dependent on the skills and experience developed and acquired throughout schooling and from early work experiences, as well as the supports received in their first years of full time work.

The Commission's 2005 report *Children at Work* presents the findings of research based on input from 11,000 children and young people across New South Wales. It is available at <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/publications.cfm?itemID=78FB286FE1FC4D521F46B908A2374156>. *Children at Work* shows that children's early work experiences lay an important foundation for successful transitions to post-school working lives.

Working can have many benefits that help young people better manage the transition from school to work. In their words:

'Being able to make my own money and spend it. I feel independent'
(14 years)

'I can gain experience from what I do and understand what work is like'
(15 years)

'Working is great, you get great experience and some idea of what you want to become in the future'
(13 years)

'...I have learnt quite a lot so when it's time to get a proper job I will be ready'
(15 years)

'Gives a sense of responsibility and makes me feel more grown up'
(14 years).

The *Children at Work* report also found that development of work-related skills should start at beginning of secondary school, since young people start working in the early to middle secondary years. The school curriculum could provide learning from Year 7 onwards that helps build the skills needed to prepare young people for when they transition to full time work.

Supporting children at work

Integral to supporting students at the start of their working lives is appropriately regulating children's employment. In December 2008 the Commission released *Making the working world work better for kids*, outlining a preferred approach to promoting their well-being at work. The report is available at

<http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/publications.cfm?itemID=78FB286FE1FC4D521F46B908A2374156>.

This report recommends consistent regulation across Australia in those areas of work where children may need specific attention, including:

- setting a minimum age for the performance of certain types of work
- balancing working arrangements and schooling obligations
- setting other limits on working hours in order to protect a child's well-being and development
- imposing some special duties on employers in matters such as supervision.

Consistent regulation in such areas will assist young people balance school and work, enabling them to both work and meet their schooling requirements. More broadly, it will provide safeguards to help young people have positive working experiences which give them the skills and motivation needed to better transition from school to work.

I encourage the Committee to consider findings and recommendations of *Making the working world work better for kids*, including supporting a nationally consistent, clear regulatory approach to children's employment.

With your approval we would like to place a copy of this submission on the Commission's website. Making work such as this publicly available is one way of demonstrating our accountability to the children and young people in our jurisdiction. Your consideration of this request at the appropriate time would be much appreciated.

If you need any further information, or to discuss seeking children and young people's views on the issues covered by the Inquiry, please contact Ms Maj-Britt Engelhardt, Manager, Policy

Yours sincerely

Gillian Calvert
Commissioner
19 January 2009

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