



## COMBINING SCHOOL AND WORK: SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL YOUTH TRANSITIONS

1. **Opportunities to recognise and accredit employability and career development skills gained through part-time or casual work.**
2. **More flexible, innovative or alternative approaches to attaining a senior secondary certificate through combining work and study.**
3. **Support to assist young people combining work and study, engaged in learning despite dependence on income.**
4. **Impact on educational attainment**
5. **Effectiveness of school-based training pathways, impact on transitions especially including for disadvantaged young people.**

A report **How Young People are Faring '08**<sup>i</sup> revealed that 7 in 10 young people aged 15-19 years were in fulltime education and a further 16.6% were in fulltime work, the latter were more likely to be males. As well, of 15-19 year olds in full time education, 0.9% were in fulltime work, 27.3% were in part time work, 4.3% were seeking work and 37.7% were not in the labour force. About 1% combines part time work and part time study. Variations from state to state and at different year levels are a given. College teachers in the ACT state that between 60% and 80% of all students are involved in part time work during years 11 and 12.

An important factor in whether or not 15-19 year olds have the opportunity to be involved in part time work is the level of availability of local work opportunities for young people. Those in metropolitan areas clearly have greater access than those in regional, remote and isolated communities.

Anecdotally, opportunities also depend to some extent on cultural background and perceptions about particular groups. In some communities where families own businesses, employment of family members is the norm; some students see little hope for themselves. As one young Lebanese student commented to the CEO of ACE when discussing work options, 'Who's going to employ me Miss – my name's Mohammed.'

However, casual observations at shopping centres and fast food outlets, to name two, indicate the extent to which 15-19 year olds are involved in the labour market.

Students comment that they enjoy the work, the responsibility, the relative freedom accorded to them because of the responsibility they have undertaken and, of course, the money. In discussion they report that they appreciate the level of trust given to them by business owners and notice when they are given special recognition and training, and they are clearly pleased when given positions of responsibility.

There is also evidence that there is a slow but steady increase in parents' positive regard for the training and skills agenda, yet many teachers explain their emphasis on academic programs, even for low achieving students, on the will of parents for their children to attend university.

Parents usually comment about the importance of part time work for their children, concerns as they try to increase the working hours and the likely impact on their education. The work also increases social activity and the circle of friends and age groups.

In cases where parents acknowledge that their child is 'difficult' or 'troublesome' at school, they contrast this with the positive experiences of work and, say, team sports or wider family and friendship groups. They question why when their child's presence is so valued in the latter and so difficult in the former.

While some senior secondary schools incorporate aspects of students' experiences into course recognition, this is generally for students involved in 'elite' activities.

Victoria's VCAL is making an important contribution to valuing students experiences outside school and the statistics for retention in that state are an important indication that they may be on the right track.

However, in many secondary schools, the problem is that an insufficient proportion of staff really understand why the work and skills agenda is so important; they do not understand how easily it can be incorporated into their teaching and student welfare/pastoral care responsibilities; they do not know enough about the new pathways and opportunities to be in the position to advise students; they continue to believe that if the skills agenda suits any students at all, then it suits students who are uncooperative or whose academic achievements of themselves mean they are likely to drop out. There is still a perception that troublesome students are those best suited to VET courses, but failing that, should leave school and get a job – they have no real idea of what that really means for the life chances of those students.

With insufficient accurate information about the school to work ad training agenda, teachers are simply unable to positively influence students or their parents about beneficial and more relevant pathways that may lead to further study through ongoing skills development through a range of reputable and recognised training bodies.

The availability of on the job skills training is also affected by the economic climate and there is already being reported that employers are reducing new training opportunities (ie for school leavers) in favour of retaining older workers.

Teachers comment on the extent to which some senior students of necessity have to work to support themselves through senior secondary school. They also express concern about the number of hours being worked while at the same time trying to manage a full time study load. The evidence is that few undertake part time study and part time work.

For definitional purposes, it is worth noting that part-time work extends to 35 hours a week.

Some senior students are now able to complete their senior secondary studies over 3 years, instead of two.

Supporting students who are combining work and study places considerable pressure on schools, especially government secondary schools, but also Catholic systemic schools. Both of these systems unquestionably carry a higher proportion of students in the at risk category. For many of the students who are at risk of leaving school, the time required to assist them at school and beyond school can be considerable as the issues that have to be resolved are usually complex – including poor literacy and numeracy, poor social and organisational skills and poor work related skills.

In addition, for schools to be able to incorporate recognition of the real value of what students who are engaged in part time work – what they learn from work, or as a result of work - would also take considerable time on the part of teachers and/or employers. Unfortunately, the work cannot be undertaken by willing but untrained staff. Usually a team of teachers with administrative support are needed if the task is to be done well. Work experience, work placements and other recognised VET programs indicate that for most secondary schools, timetables, personnel vis a vis the time required to make and follow up high quality placement place severe restrictions on what can be achieved. There is some evidence that school managed VET completion rates are as low as 20 percent in some areas which does not augur well for work experiences that young people organise for themselves outside of school hours. It is the norm for VET teachers and careers advisers to say that there is insufficient time to do the task well and as early as possible to guide young people in the career and thus subject choices they are required to make.

One way of giving adequate and fair recognition of work experiences of 15 to 19 year old students who are also engaged in study that may be useful has been described as a *skills eco system*<sup>ii</sup> incorporating

- Business settings
- Institutional and policy frameworks
- Predominant mode of engaging labour (eg 'casual' employment)
- The structure of jobs, including job design and work organisation
- The level and type of skills formation.

Also important would be the length of time the student was involved in particular work settings and perhaps some form of structured reference to allow comparability. However, it needs to be recognised that not all employers use a deliberate process for giving any employee, let alone a young employee, the skills and supervision required to perform well. Much may simply take place through a process of incidental mentoring by other more experienced workers, who may also be in the 15 to 19 year age group. Despite criticisms of some employment practices by chains such as, say, McDonalds, many parents and the young employees themselves comment favourably about the training they receive.

As noted earlier, it is important to note several factors associated with combining school and work. The first is that students in large metropolitan areas have a good chance of completing their secondary education. These students are also more likely to be involved in school managed VET and work related programs. They are also more likely to be able to access part time work opportunities and a variety of these. Even in large metropolitan areas, the lower the SES status, the greater the

reduction in all opportunities. When isolation (in rural and remote communities) all factors act against the interests of students in the 15-19 year age group, to the extent that only one in five is likely to complete senior secondary schooling and few have easy access to school-managed and/or local employment chances.

In order to ameliorate these effects, care should be taken in the development and staffing of schools for students. Only by agreements between governments at state and commonwealth levels are the life chances of disadvantaged students, and particularly Indigenous students, likely to be improved. It is hard to avoid the associated costs for local provision and while a more cost effective measure may be to support students to acquire education and employment skills outside their local communities this has in fact led to long term fracturing of those communities. The current discussions about funding for infrastructure development may offer some case studies to be mounted such that school students, local young people who are unemployed and respected community members might work cooperatively in the interests of the community at large. An important factor must be the development of skills that have longevity and transferability.

While many highly motivated and successful students may undertake part time work in addition to a full study load with no real need or interest to use this as part of a study package, there are many other students for whom recognition of their paid work experience would provide many useful elements. Included would be documentation of work readiness skills and demonstrated aptitude; recognition of prior learning as part of a formal school organised VET program; coordination of post school pathways to ongoing study – full time or part time; a guaranteed minimum allocation of ‘points’ or ‘credits’ towards formal certification.

While there are many difficulties associated with what should be a nationally consistent scheme, decisions need to be made as a matter of urgency mainly because the number of students affected is likely to rise. However, there is also the matter of designing ways to reduce the multiple disadvantages being experienced by students for whom access to part time work is very difficult, if not impossible because of location or other disadvantages. Included in this group, by the way, is the increasing number of 15 to 19 year olds who care for adults and therefore have little chance of part time work, full time study or access to the income that would likely benefit themselves and their households.

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<sup>i</sup> Foundation for Young Australians *How Young People are Faring '08*, 2008

<sup>ii</sup> Lewis, P *The Labour Market, Skills Demand and Skills Formation* 6/2008, Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, p 11