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Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training

Inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Combining School and Work. This submission is made on behalf of the 22 Catholic school employing authorities and the 287 Catholic schools in Queensland. Individual schooling authorities and schools may choose to make separate submissions as well.

Preamble

It is an observation from secondary schools that, in increasing numbers from Year 10 through until the end of Year 12, young people in schools take up part time jobs. In fact in many schools the student who did not have a part-time job would be the exception rather than the rule. Students take on part time employment for many reasons. No doubt they often seek increasing independence from parents, both financially and in broader life arenas. There is an almost tangible expectation that young people will have part-time employment. Few would appear to work because of financial necessity or to provide for the everyday needs of life; not many would be working to contribute directly to their family finances; many work to provide for the wants of the age group – to save for a car, the school formal or semi-formal, to pay for “schoolies” week celebrations at the end of senior secondary schooling. Few appear to be saving towards their future education. Their part-time jobs, even for the most able students, are often in the retail or hospitality / fast food area, not in diverse areas requiring specialised skill or training. At the same time there are some great examples of young people who are quite disenchanted or disengaged from school, not doing particularly well, who receive plaudits for their part-time work efforts in these very areas.

The impacts of work for young people in school are not easily measurable: it can boost their self esteem; contribute to their economic well being; develop their independence; instil a work ethic and habits of work; improve their organisational skills and impart particular work skills. At the other end of the scale part-time employment can impinge on adequate study time, eat into sleep time and open vulnerable young people to unscrupulous practices from some few employers. The reality is that combining school and work is a part of life for many senior secondary school students. This review is to be commended for its intent to consider the impact of combined school and work on the success of youth transitions and Year 12 attainment.

QCEC response to focuses identified for the review:

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

In a world where there is increasingly intense focus on formal accreditation and certification of attainments it makes sense to try to recognise and accredit skills gained through part-time work. This is no simple task however. It is useful here to divide students' part-time work practices. For the vast majority, their part-time work occurs extraneously and separately from their schooling and study. They find their jobs independently (although employers might approach schools in recruiting for part-time positions) and undertake their work quite separately from their schooling. In other instances their part-time work is integral to and bound to a course of study being undertaken by a student. School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SATs) fit into this latter category. Under this arrangement young people continue in their schooling while undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship, usually on a one or two day per week basis. They must be guaranteed a minimum of 48 days of paid work per year and receive relevant off-the-job training towards a given vocational certificate. In excess of one thousand students from Queensland Catholic schools were signed up for School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships in 2008. In similar ilk, many VET certificates offered by schools also require a component of structured work placement in a related industry or work experience as part of their completion. The difference here is that such work placement is not paid and under legislation in Queensland (Education (Work Experience) Act 1996) cannot exceed 30 days per year. Definitions of what constitutes part-time work come into play here. It might be useful for the Inquiry to determine whether unpaid and voluntary work fall within the terms of reference. Both have potential to add to a young person's repertoire of skills but documenting and equitably evaluating the outcomes is potentially complex for both paid and unpaid work where it is not linked to a formal qualification such as a SAT or VET certificate.

In Queensland, under the Queensland Studies Authority, there exists the capacity for a student to undertake a workplace or community learning project which contributes one credit towards the Queensland Certificate of Education. This has potential to provide some minor recognition of work skills developed in the workplace. The reality is however that the process of applying for recognition of the learning project and fulfilling the paper work requirements is probably not within the capacities of many individual students. Neither are the incentives great.

This highlights two dilemmas recognised worldwide in attempting to accredit skills gained outside of an institutionalised education and training setting:

1. on the one hand avoiding a mere paper chase to accumulate credits towards a qualification that is ultimately worthless because it has no substance, and
2. on the other hand forming a mechanism for accrediting that is ultimately fair, equitable, simple and achievable.

The complexities of these issues cannot be overlooked. Limited experience with the development of the QCE in Queensland to date (the first QCEs were awarded in December 2008) has demonstrated how difficult it is to be both fair and simple in developing criteria for recognition of workplace learning. The simple promise of the original *Queensland Certificate of Education- Expect Success* (2005) document to recognise "160 hours of workplace learning... that focused on employability skills and is endorsed by an employer" has proved much more complicated in its delivery and has certainly not really opened up the opportunity for employability skills and workplace learning in a general setting to be recognised at this stage.

Some employers might be well-placed to make determinations about the skills of a young person in the workplace; the impost of that task on them as well as the difficulties of determining and reaching comparable standards have to be recognised. Without training and understanding it is difficult to expect consistent judgments from employers.

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

There are in existence in Queensland mechanisms that ostensibly enable credit to be gained for a senior certificate from skills gained while working. With respect to the QCE the mechanisms cannot be regarded as simple and they offer limited incentive for students to pursue the credit. School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships have more established mechanism of support for the student and the completed school portion of a SAT contributes credits to the student's QCE. Employers are generally supportive of SATs but concern is expressed about the inconvenience and limited viability of a one day per week employment arrangements dictated by inflexibility of many school timetable. It is not easy for schools to overcome these inflexibilities. In truth, while these mechanisms are effective, SATs account for only a small proportion of the part-time and casual work undertaken by school students.

In practice in Queensland there is little opportunity to recognise the contribution of part-time and casual work, outside of school linked programs such as SATs and work placement, to a student's skill development. From a future employment perspective, employers often seem inclined to ask questions about a young person's previous part-time and casual employment and to consider this in their decisions. The extent to which employers consider or respect formalised school accreditation of separate employability skills is unclear.

Some special consideration might be given to the perspectives of those young people most disaffected by school. These young people are often quite proud of their achievements in the workplace despite their lack of success in, and disengagement from, school. Whether they would consider it desirable to interlink school and work via formal accreditation may prove to be a topic for fruitful investigation. There is some evidence, both anecdotally from schools and in research to suggest that this group prefers to keep their work lives separate from school.

- **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;**

Most young people manage to combine school and work quite well. Many are well aware of their rights as well as their responsibilities. They sometimes need help with their organisational skills – notifying employers well in advance of their school and study commitments (eg accommodating exam timetables and the realisation that work rosters and schedules cannot be changed at the last moment). They need help with establishing the parameters of their employment and the expectations and conditions under which they work. That done, many employers are accommodating of young peoples' study needs, and have been even more so in times of labour shortages and low unemployment.

Young people do benefit from mentoring and pastoral care in relation to their work / study needs. (The yawning student who has not finished an assessment item because they had a 1.00am close in a fast food outlet needs assistance with organisation and planning. The

student who cannot stay awake during school because the manager has threatened to sack them if they do not work many consecutive closes needs assistance with negotiating the terms of their employment). Mentoring and pastoral care are part of the functioning of Catholic schools and an overt awareness of the impacts of part-time work on young people in schools assists in promoting the effectiveness of that care.

Those young people who rely on the income from their part-time employment to support themselves independently from parents while in school form a small minority, but these students need special care and mentoring to complete schooling. Social welfare agencies beyond the school may well need to be involved here as well.

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

It goes without saying that overwork, especially successive late shifts and “closings”, can have a detrimental effect on a young person’s learning, not to mention their overall health. In Queensland the *Child Employment Act 2006* sets strict conditions for employment of *school-aged* children who are under 16 years of age. The introduction of this legislation has provided significant protection for young people up to Year 10 in school, working part-time and casually. School-aged students cannot work for more than 12 hours in a school week or more than 4 hours on a school day. Similar protection for students during senior secondary schooling is a more vexed issue. In Queensland young people must be “learning or earning” up until age 17 or until they attain a QCE or VET certificate 3. There is no limitation on young people working full-time although obviously students are encouraged to remain at school until the end of Year 12; arguably with justification then, there is no mandate as to how much part-time work students may perform while remaining in school. Teachers will express concerns from time to time about the hours being worked by individual senior school students, their concern resting on both the study and health impacts of too much work. This concern is confirmed by the ACER longitudinal study, *The Effects of Part-Time Work on School Students*, (Lyn Robinson, 1999) noting that the end of school results obtained by Year 12 students were a little lower for those who had been intense workers during Year 11 and during Year 12 than they were for non-workers in those years.

Obviously “overwork” in outside employment can impact on school results and consequently entry opportunities into tertiary education. By the same token, initiation into the workforce via a part-time or casual job while in school can open pathways into further work or training after school. Whilst it might appear attractive on face value to impose limits on the amount of part-time work that senior secondary students can undertake, caution is needed to ensure these did not form a disincentive to remaining at school.

In a further example of the pull and push between school and part-time employment, principals of some Catholic schools in regional mining areas of Queensland found retention of school students working part-time, particularly those doing school-based apprenticeships, challenged by the lure away from school to full time work while labour shortages existed during the heights of the mining boom.

There are limited statistics to hand as to how many young people in secondary schools have part-time jobs. Certainly the Next Steps Destination Study of Year 12 school leavers 2007 (conducted April- May 2008) shows that 75% of post school students are combining their further

study with some form of employment. A similar level of employment may be transposable to Year 12 students in school¹.

- **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).**

This last issue sits somewhat outside of the previous focuses of the inquiry in that it now deals not with part-time and casual work but with school based training pathways, identified discretely in the foregoing.

With the exception of school-based apprenticeships, most young people do not regard their part-time and casual jobs as representative of their employment ambitions longer term. They are, rather, a means to a financial end. Students do glean an understanding of the world of work and some knowledge of areas they might enjoy or entirely dislike in future work – all experience that serves them well later. Whether these jobs should form any part of a formal pathway or whether students see them contributing to their ultimate careers is debatable.

What is more apparent is the impact of training pathways formed by school-based apprenticeships². The most recent destination study of Year 12 school leavers in Queensland, *Next Steps 2008*, shows that school-based apprentices and trainees were three times more likely to undertake apprenticeships and traineeships after leaving school than other Year 12 graduates. Data from Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts indicates satisfactory completion rates of apprenticeships post-school, confirming the authenticity of this pathway from school to work.

It is known that students, particularly indigenous students, benefit from the provision of mentoring while they are undertaking SATs. Anecdotally, employers and Local Community Partnerships (LCPs) report the increased success of SATs where schools are actively involved in monitoring the students³. Whether and how a school might be involved in a student's part-time or casual work or what mechanisms could be developed to otherwise formalise pathways from that work to further work or training is a much more complex issue.

Conclusion

Part-time and casual work is a reality of life for the majority of young people in senior secondary school in Queensland. Where that part-time employment is linked to a formal school-based training program, the recognition and accreditation of the skills and competencies gained is reasonably straightforward. These pathways most usually incorporate some form of

¹ Billett and Ovens 2006 loosely predict up to 70% of both male and female students in their final years of schooling in both city and rural communities are estimated to participate in paid part-time employment.

² School-based traineeships are dealt with separately here since they may be completed while at school and are not necessarily directly linked to further vocational training post-school.

³ There is an interesting dilemma here for schools – the school is not formally part of a training contract for a SAT so cannot intervene in the student supervision in training.

institutionalised learning that enables reasonably consistent and equitable processes. In contrast part-time work undertaken on an ad hoc and independent basis by school students presents far greater challenges to the development of consistent, equitable and valued mechanisms of accreditation. The passing of two decades since discussion started in Australia about recognition of part-time work for accreditation purposes highlights not an antipathy to proceeding but more the complexity of the mechanisms required to effect that accreditation in a meaningful manner.

Recommendations

- 1. Further research be conducted on the real demand from students and employers for accreditation of skills gained from part-time work.**
- 2. If that real demand exists, significant resourcing will be required to develop a mechanism for recognition and accreditation that is workable, equitable and held with due regard by employers or further education and training institutions.**