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Inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions

Submission prepared by Professor Marie Brennan and Dr Katherine Hodgetts

School of Education, Centre for Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures and Hawke Research Institute,
University of South Australia.

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School of Education

University of South Australia

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The information submitted here is drawn from findings of the Australian Research Council Linkage Project *Pathways or cul de sacs? The causes, impact and implications of part-time senior secondary study, 2005-2007 (ARC #LP0455760)*. In the course of this project, staff and students from 14 South Australian case study schools were surveyed and interviewed to gain an understanding of the experience and outcomes of participation in senior-secondary study in the part-time mode. This followed a major statistical background study, conducted by Prof Eleanor Ramsay for the Department of Education and Children's Services. Further information on both studies and publications arising from them will be provided on request.

We first present in brief some key findings from our study as background to flesh out the issues facing the Inquiry before moving to specific findings related to the Terms of Reference.

The Background study conducted by Ramsay for DECS, SA, drew on 2003 census data and showed:

1. Significantly, part-time senior-secondary students were over-represented in schools at the lowest two levels of the DECS' Index of Educational Disadvantage; and under-represented in those at the highest two levels
2. Part-time study is **not** simply an effect of SA's adult re-entry schools. Part-time senior-secondary students **are** highly concentrated within 7 schools (including 4 adult re-entry schools), yet younger part-time students are the majority of part-time students overall, represented in some 64 other schools at Year 11 and in 93 other schools at Year 12 level.
3. Part-time study is **not** simply an effect of Year 13 students. In 2003, about 1/3 of part-time SACE completing students may have been in Year 13.
4. **Older part-time students (20 years and over) are** highly concentrated in a small number of schools and more likely to be in Yr 11 than Yr 12
5. **Younger part-time students (20 years and under) are** represented in a larger number and wider range of schools and more likely to be in Yr 12 than Yr 11
6. Part-time senior students are more likely to be female than male (but not by a great deal); the higher proportions and larger numbers of females are more marked amongst the older grouping of part-time senior students.

The expectation that paid employment underlies the choice of going part-time at School was not endorsed by the many students in our *Pathways* study. Clearly, paid work is part of the reality of senior secondary student lives but participation in paid work of itself does not account for the phenomenon of part-time study. Indeed, more part-time students reported **stress** and a **desire to reduce SACE workload** as reasons for choosing part-time study than paid work commitments. The reasons given by students for part-time included re-entry into school, poor health, juggling paid work, unpaid care and other responsibilities with study, and as a strategy to increase tertiary entrance scores.

Comparisons with full-timers in their cohort are interesting. Paid employment was undertaken by 61.2% of part-timers compared to 48.7% of full-time students. Caring responsibilities were also a

stronger feature of those enrolled part-time, with 53.8% needing to offer care compared to a still significant number of 43.7% of full-timers. Participation in community activities was also strong among part-timers, with 50% of them engaged compared to 32% among full-timers. 72.9% of part-timers contributed unpaid work in the home or business, compared to 59.3% of full-timers. Full-time students were more likely to be involved in VET studies (FT19%: PT13.9%); while part-time students were more likely to receive Centrelink benefits (FT 35.7% PT45.8%).

What this suggests is a set of changes to the overall landscape of young people, with participation in multiple institutions a 'normal' part of life. Part-timeness in this sense reflects the increasing complexity of senior secondary students' lives, cross-sector engagements, participation in a range of learning sites and leading to negotiation of multiple identities other than 'student'. Significantly 70% of part-time respondents reported that they felt part-time study would help them complete; and 60% reported they would recommend part-time study. Most tellingly, approximately 30% indicated that without the option of part-time study they would simply not be at school.

It was found that the counting of part-time students is complicated by:

- **Different definitions** of part-timeness for different purposes and agencies
- The notion that some students are **retrospectively accredited** with SACE units for learning achieved outside the school (these students may appear on early census reporting as part-time and may not be enrolled in a full SACE load throughout the year)
- Some schools' **reluctance or inability to report students as part-time** at census time because of resource implications (considered unfair since it is argued that part-time students do not require proportionally less resources, especially staff time) or because of
- The **timing of data collection** (students shift to part-time at different points during the year).
- The fluidity of the increasing use of **individual case management** in some schools, which means that a particular student's workload may be regularly re-negotiated

There is a pervasive assumption (in the community, in schools, and in many agencies) that part-time students are the exception, not the norm. This is reflected in ABS data on retention which counts only full-time students (part-time students are not included even as FTEs). During the course of the *Pathways* project, significant input from the findings was made into new policies in South Australia including into the Review of the Senior school certificate (SACE), its development, school leaving age, and new policies on senior schooling and VET. It is noteworthy that the new SACE (due for transitional commencement in 2009) will help to address the inclusion of a range of activities by young people.

In relation to terms of reference:

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

Throughout the Pathways project, a number of case study schools were found to be using part-time study as a 'reactive' strategy, offering part-time school engagement as a last resort option only in the case of failing students or those at risk of non-completion. Other schools were identified as supporting 'proactive part-timeness', in which study load reduction was encouraged as an option

that could be actively chosen by students in order to help them successfully manage their in and out of school commitments (especially those relating to paid work or caring responsibilities).

Our findings suggest that proactive part-time engagement supported achievement and completion in school contexts characterised by:

Flexible timetables

For many part-time students, work commitments mean that they are unable to attend school more than two or three days per week. Traditional school timetables in which classes for one subject are held across four or five days are therefore often incompatible with part-time engagement. To combat this issue, 'proactive' part-time schools have moved towards providing condensed classes (longer lessons on a single day, often combining core courses), and offering others offline (after hours). However, it should be noted that some of these schools have tended to provide only non-academic subjects in this modified manner, reinforcing a deficit perception that only less able students engage with school part-time.

More flexible subject offerings across the curriculum would support students engaged with paid work (and those who cannot afford to travel to school five days per week) to remain engaged in part-time study. It is understood, however, that this will be more easily accommodated by larger schools, although some of the most innovative arrangements were developed by rural schools.

Innovative communication strategies

As many part-time students do not attend school (including homeroom and specific subjects) every day, communication with them can be difficult. Without clear communication channels, it is noted that part-time students can become disconnected from their teachers, peers and subjects, and feel isolated from the broader school community. In 'proactive' part-time schools, this issue is addressed through innovative communication strategies involving, for example, SMS dissemination of notices and digital information displays on school grounds.

Communication between students and school staff

In many circumstances, teachers are unaware of the wealth of out of school experiences their students, particularly those engaged in paid work, bring into the classroom. The opportunity for teachers to talk with students about their out of school lives enables teachers to understand and build on students' experiences and, potentially, to investigate ways of accrediting their work-related knowledge. Feeling that teachers understand the load they are balancing also appears to support students' sense of connection to their school community. In turn, such open lines of communication can enable to students to seek the support of school staff in dealing with work related issues and disputes – support that may otherwise be inaccessible.

Communication between schools and employers

In one school that appears to be particularly effective in supporting proactive part-timeness, the school leadership facilitates discussions (held after hours on school premises) between school staff, parents and local employers. These discussions have resulted in the sharing of calendars (outlining, for example, peak school assessment times and peak trading times) in order to develop a mutual understanding of students' in and out-of-school commitments. This process is in line with the Intergenerational Youth Compact proposed by the Australian National Schools Network, in that it

encourages schools and employers to work together in fulfilling their responsibilities to young people.

Flexibility around attendance

In schools proactively supporting part-time engagement there is generally flexibility regarding attendance. In contexts where part-time students are expected to go through onerous signing in procedures to explain their absences, it was found that these students feel that they 'stand out' and are viewed in a negative light – encouraging a deficit perception that exacerbates the existing difficulties they face in balancing work and school. It seems issues of duty of care must be balanced with efforts to include and support part-time students. Formally, to comply with some legislative requirements, flexible attendance normally requires formal permission from parents or guardians for young people under 18 years; this was often done as a letter signed by all parents at the beginning of the year, reducing any

Flexible assessment options

The inability of many part-time students to be present at all lessons also affects traditional assessment procedures. At proactive part-time schools, structures are in place to enable students to submit assessments via email or online portals. The latter of course requires internet access at home (which is not available to many of the poorest students) or at local libraries (which may be difficult to access in rural areas or in those urban areas not well served by public transport).

3. 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

Policy frameworks around counting/supporting part-time students

- A range of definitions and census requirements means it is difficult to quantify and assess the number of students engaged with school in the part-time mode. This information is needed in order that schools and systems may come to understand the breadth of the phenomenon and the extent of supports that are needed.
- Accurate data pertaining to part-time students would also enable schools to understand and support the relationship between reduced study load, student achievement and successful post-school transitions. Such data would allow investigation of the role of part-time study in the retention/completion nexus.
- Data around part-time student experiences and outcomes could inform 'best practice' guidelines for schools. Guidelines of this kind would ideally support schools in providing for part-time students without restricting their capacity to offer tailored programs and strategies in response to the needs of specific student communities.

School supports

In addition to the strategies identified in the section above, our findings suggest that schools can support students engaged in both work and study through the provision of:

- Individual case management. It is no longer appropriate to expect that students will be counselled with regard to their subject choices before the school years begins, and then work throughout the next year to complete those subjects. Now, students' hours of paid

work often fluctuate throughout the year, and students' workloads need to be regularly re-negotiated. Negotiation and monitoring of this kind is most successfully achieved through the provision of individual case management. Where part-time students are case managed their progress is monitored and difficulties addressed before they become insurmountable, and they retain a close connection with a responsible staff member. This process requires the resourcing of qualified and skilled 'teacher navigators' who have adequate time to work with students case-by-case in an ongoing manner.

- Strategies to ensure continued connection to the school community. Our findings suggest that part-time engagement is more likely to be successful if students remain connected to their school and its community. Case management, counselling, a variety of communication options and supportive staff all facilitate this connection.
- A shift away from seeing full time enrolment as the norm. Where supports are not provided (e.g. flexible timetabling, innovative communication strategies, responsive teaching and learning strategies that facilitate students' participation without demanding their physical presence) the burden of supporting part-time students may fall on specific teachers and result in resentment. At the same time, part-time students may be made to feel they 'stand out', and may be reluctant to ask for the support they require. Structural supports for part-time students at school and system levels would make the accommodation of part-time students the norm, rather than the exception. Our findings suggest that schools in which supportive structures make part-time and full-time students are indistinguishable usually avoid the (often self-fulfilling) deficit perceptions of students with reduced study loads.
- Monitoring of part time student achievement. As outlined above, it seems that part-time students can experience difficulties that ultimately in result in school-leaving if their progress and load are not carefully monitored by responsible school staff.
- Focus on student-teacher relationships and communication. A clear finding from the Pathways project is that student-teacher relationships, involving clear communication, support and sharing of students' out-of-school experiences, are essential to the successful negotiation of young people's school and work commitments.
- Understanding of Centrelink requirements. An understanding of Centrelink requirements is important in order that schools and school staff can work with young people to meet relevant criteria. This may be particularly important, for example, in the case of rural students who need to earn a certain amount in paid work before they are able to qualify for Youth Allowance – necessary for them to support themselves if they move to the city to attend university. A combination of work and study in the senior secondary years may assist transitions in this case.
- Addressing teachers' concerns about part-time study. In areas of high youth employment, there can be concern that if students go part-time at school to accommodate their work commitments they will increasingly prioritise paid work and be at risk of dropping out of school. This belief can result in schools excluding part-time study as an option in order to encourage school retention. It seems that this position is unreasonable, particularly given that some workforce participation during school can increase the likelihood of securing work post-school. Addressing teacher and school beliefs around the ways in which balancing work and study can assist transitions seems imperative.

Funding/resourcing supports

- Funding models calculated in terms of Full Time Equivalent students (FTE) do not adequately support part-time students, who *do not* require proportionally less resources (especially staff time). Often part-time students require *more* teacher time and counselling support in that their study load and choices need to be regularly re-negotiated, their external workplace learning may need to be calculated for accreditation, and they may require academic follow-up and counselling to support them in managing a range of study, workplace and other demands. The calculation of student numbers in terms of FTEs may make schools reluctant to allow part-time student engagement as these students require more input but attract fewer resources. State Employers need to consider the advantages of retaining students connected to school and provide staffing using different formulae that might include additional support for students undertaking part-time study, or mixed institution study eg TAFE and School where the school is the institution providing the bulk of counselling, support, planning and balancing activities for young people.
- The timing of data collection with regard to student numbers also complicates provision for part-time students, as many shift to part-time at different points in the year and therefore change in terms of the supports they require.

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

- The findings of the Pathways study indicate that 28% of part-time student respondents believed that they would simply not be able to remain engaged with school if part-time enrolment were not an option. Given the documented health, social and economic benefits associated with school completion it therefore seems imperative to support and resource part-time provision as a means of supporting school retention.
- The Background study for the Pathways study, conducted by Prof Eleanor Ramsay, demonstrated that a very significant group who are part-time come from backgrounds of low socio-economic status, and this is the group most likely to complete school. Thus, if retention is to improve along with success, a significant proportion of young people will require access to completion through part-time and mixed modes, and their educational attainment will rely on support which can largely only come from school sources.
- Data from one rural South Australian school with a particularly effective part-time strategy suggest that academic outcomes have risen *in line with an increase in part-time students* over recent years. *Mt Gambier High School* reported at a 2006 conference that
 - Over one third of their senior school is part-time
 - they package subjects for VET students and students at risk – so although full-time in load they have a part-time commitment on campus
 - All students, even full-time ones, are part-time on campus because of their Uncommitted Lesson and Off-Campus Policy
 - Part-time students have increased dramatically since 1997.

Their results, after changing their ways of working with students to ensure all had individual discussions over the balance of activities in their lives, were amazing: the number of As went from 1.8% total enrolments to 29.6%. Merit Certificates went from 0 in 1997 to 40 in

2004/2005. Retention rates went from 31% to 83%. Failures at Stage 1 went from 7 times the state average to 0.8% below.

Through a focus on student well-being, and staff dedicated to assisting students in managing all aspects of their lives, part-time study has arisen in this context as a distinct 'success strategy'. In this school, the senior secondary certificate is regularly completed over a three year period, allowing students to manage health and family commitments as well as those relating to study and paid work. Proactive planning and education in time management and self-organisation equip students with both the skills needed to manage diverse aspects of their lives while maintaining mental health and academic standards. These aspects become an explicit topic of discussion, including developing their own understanding of and purposes for engaging in education.