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

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry 'combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions'

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your inquiry into combining school and work, and on the issues you have raised in the Committee's terms of reference.

I was appointed as Western Australia's inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People in December 2007 pursuant to the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (the Act). Under this Act, I have responsibility for advocating for the half a million Western Australian citizens under the age of 18 and for promoting children and young people's entitlement to live in a caring and nurturing environment and to be protected from harm and exploitation.

In performing all functions under the Act, I am required to have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and the best interests of children and young people must be my paramount consideration. I must also give priority to, and have special regard to, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

It is with these responsibilities in mind that I submit comment on the inquiry into 'combining school and work.' The comments I have made aim to highlight issues, and to encourage the Australian Government to consider the needs and views of children and young people as it steers public policy into the future.

I would also emphasise the importance of consultation in this process, particularly with children and young people. As mentioned above, one of my primary roles as Commissioner for Children and Young People is to encourage the participation of children and young people in the making of decisions that affect their lives and to encourage government and non-government agencies to seek the participation of children and young people appropriate to their maturity.

I have outlined some key points for your consideration in order for you to make practicable recommendations to government on flexible approaches to completing high school which promote a healthy balance of work and study for young people.

Learning and Work

The recent *How Young People are Faring '08* report produced by The Foundation for Young Australians highlights a number of important key findings relevant to your inquiry. The report provides important information on how successfully the education and training system is working to meet the needs of young Australians as they make the transition from school to further study and work. It provides the most up-to-date analysis of the effectiveness of transitions, including information on who is doing well and who is not doing so well in negotiating the various post-school pathways. This report identifies areas that may need attention to help improve student outcomes and transitions. Some of the findings include: http://www.fya.org.au/downloads/FYA_HYPAFReport_ONLINE_68pp.pdf.

- Despite a decline in teenagers opting for the labour force rather than full-time education, full-time employment rates for this group have remained fairly constant, supporting the view that full-time job opportunities for young Australians have fallen over the last 15 years.
- Education and training is important to making a smooth transition from school to full-time work. Of those in full-time work in their seventh post-school year, almost 90 per cent of Year 12 completers and about 70 per cent of early leavers followed an education and training pathway on leaving school.
- A third of early school leavers are only marginally attached to the labour force in their seventh post school year, and one in 20 have been in that position for most of the time since leaving school.
- Around 200,000 teenagers in any one year are not engaged in full-time learning or full-time work.
- Social and economic disadvantage hinder participation in learning and work.
- Australia is below many other OECD countries in terms of levels of participation in education and attainment of upper secondary education.

Young People's Views on these Issues

In October 2008, a consultation was undertaken with children and young people seeking their views on the future generally. The event *Dialogue with Youth* was part of the Brilliant West Week and participants were asked to provide advice on ways in which government can assist in achieving youth aspirations. The students presented a number of commonly occurring themes. Interestingly, the ten recommendations fell within three clusters relevant to your inquiry: tertiary education; secondary education and general educational support. The following recommendations were put forward by the group for consideration by stakeholders and decision-makers. These recommendations are of particular relevance to your review in helping to identify more flexible approaches to completing high school which promote a healthy balance of work and study. The report of the outcomes can be found at: <http://dialoguewithyouth.scitech.org.au>

1. free or subsidised university
2. more scholarships and financial support for poorer students
3. more flexibility in school timetable to give more choice
4. reduced tax for students on part-time wages
5. better subsidies for housing costs
6. improving technology to improve access to education
7. making it more worthwhile to be a (science) teacher – pay and conditions
8. study support for students who are failing
9. more support for students in tutoring
10. creating peer support and study groups

Young People's Experiences

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People undertook a study (*Young people speak about their experiences of work*: <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/uploads/documents/ATCChildrenatwork.pdf>) which revealed that young people are working more than ever before, that most are happy to do so, but there are concerns around safety, freedom from bullying or exploitation and the relationship between work and study. Following this study, a discussion paper was produced (*Making the working world work better for kids*: <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/uploads/documents/Making%20the%20working%20world%20work%20better%20for%20kids.pdf>) which focused on issues distinct to children and young people and which should be considered as part of your inquiry into combining school and work.

West Australian research has found young people are often open to exploitation in the workplace. *Vulnerable Workers: Young People* was part of a program looking into the conditions and obstacles faced by vulnerable workers - in this instance the special problems faced by those in the 15 to 19 year old age bracket, a group with an increasing presence in the workforce. It found casual and/or part time work is increasingly prevalent amongst school aged children and tertiary students. A snapshot of the youth labour market in WA confirms that young people aged 15-19 years of age are predominantly employed in low skilled, part time or casual positions in the retail sector and are usually combining employment with education, i.e. school, TAFE or university. Refer to the full report which brings together findings of research papers relevant to your review. http://www.commerce.wa.gov.au/LabourRelations/PDF/Publications/FEA_Discussion_Paper_3_Vulnerable_Workers_Young_People.pdf. The study found young people are vulnerable because:

- They often had less experience of the workplace and consequently a lower awareness of their employment rights and obligations.
- Their level of knowledge about pay and conditions put them at a distinct disadvantage when entering employment.
- They are predominately casual or part time employees with less job security, lower training opportunities and have lower expectations about their treatment in the labour market.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training should also consider the recent *Inquiry into the Fair Work Bill 2008* which aims to deliver a new framework for workplace relations. The new Bill should consider, at all times, the best interests of young people and the need to deliver a range of protections and provisions for flexible working arrangements that aid school transitions and the employment experience of young people.

The WA Auditor General recently produced a report *Responding to changes in attraction and achievement in Vocational Education and Training (VET)*. The report makes a number of recommendations to help Education Departments and Colleges address findings pertinent to your inquiry, which include a decline in institutional based training enrolments and the lack of focus on student retention and achievement, one of your focus areas (see full report at http://www.audit.wa.gov.au/reports/report2008_07.html).

Conclusion

I fully support the committee's review of the impact of combined study and work on the success of youth transitions and Year 12 attainment. In particular, areas which focus on:

- providing increased 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;
- supporting 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 when working; 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).

I believe a national approach is required that minimises the conflict between work and school arrangements and safeguards young people in their career development. A new national approach should also aim to simplify the process of accreditation through work experience and reduce compliance for employers.

The review should also consider the impact of the global economic downturn on children and young people, and the effects this may have on their rights and opportunities given the tightening labour market. I am concerned that the current economic climate will impose further restrictions for children and young people that will continue to exploit and take advantage of this vulnerable group of workers. I strongly advocate for close monitoring of this impact to ensure that children and young people continue to be offered appropriate employment opportunities but that are protected from exploitation.

Another concern I have is the limited opportunities for Aboriginal children and those living in regional and remote Western Australia. Any review needs to be cognisant of the affects of geographical location, the resulting lack of choice for some school leavers and also the opportunities this may afford to participate in local employment programs. For example, a number of remote communities are looking to their students to take on key roles in their towns such as rangers and lifesavers. In these areas, sustainability is paramount. On a recent trip I undertook to a remote community, the new local swimming pool was closed due to a lack of suitably qualified staff. In these circumstances, offering local training would be better placed to ensure sustainability and improved outcomes for children and young people.

I urge the Australian Government to work in partnership with and give voice to children and young people's perspectives and to embed these views in decision-making and policy development.

I welcome the opportunity to review the findings from your inquiry in identifying and examining flexible approaches to completing high school which promote a healthy balance of work and study for all young Australians.

Yours sincerely

MICHELLE SCOTT

Commissioner

January 2009