



## **Inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions**

Pat O'Connell, Executive Officer on behalf of the Board and members of :

**Frankston Mornington Peninsula Local Learning and Employment Network**

**Peninsula Local Community Partnership.**

### **Background**

Frankston Mornington Peninsula Local Learning and Employment Network Inc (FMPLLEN) which includes Peninsula Local Community Partnership, is a community based organisation servicing an area which has higher than State average levels of transitions of young people to part time and casual work on exit from secondary schooling. Many of these young people leave school and continue in jobs gained whilst at school.

Based on the research of ACER, the Dusseldorp Skills Forum and others, these transitions are less likely to result in long term career outcomes and sustained employment for young people, particularly young women.

### **Current Projects (School Leavers in part time and casual work; Post school options for young people with special needs; working in Indigenous community organisations)**

One of the key issues identified by FMPLLEN in its 2009 -11 Strategic Plan consultation with members including Peninsula LCP members was the need to develop credit arrangements for school students in part time and casual jobs for a range of reasons but in particular, as a means of assisting young people to achieve a better balance between the demands of school and work.

Our recent focus groups with young people in part time and casual work indicate that for some young people, a part-time job enables them to complete their education by reducing the burden on the family/household. For others, the financial imperative is less strong but the social imperative (the family's values) is very strong.

It is generally recognised by our member organisations that major sectors of our local community, because of their own experiences and heritage, value employment more highly than further education. A job, including a part-time job, is viewed as a successful transition from education.

FMPLLEN, PLCP and member organisations are now engaged in developing a range of small programs with schools and individual young people to address both the drift from school to unsustainable employment and the conflict that arises between school and part time employment.

At the same time, we intend to develop similar programs for those young people who take on increased responsibility within the school including those who engage as volunteers/paid casual

workers in schools in peer tutoring, organising functions for students, providing newsletter and information sessions for students and attending school Board meetings.

All secondary schools in our area are actively involved with FMPLLEN and all recognise that this contribution by students is part of what makes a healthy functioning school.

In addition, we are working with parents and key agencies to develop part time work/school and post school employment options for young people with a disability and culturally relevant part time and post school options for young Indigenous people.

### **Responses to the terms of reference:**

#### **a) Providing opportunities to recognise and accredit the employability and career development skills gained through students' part time or casual work**

Processes for accrediting skills are in place in a range of school programs but they vary from school to school both in quality and in the frequency/regularity with which they are used. Credit is given almost exclusively against vocational education and training subjects in VCAL and to some extent, VET programs in the VCE. There is no evidence of a similar process being used with "academic" subjects in VCE nor of regular time allowances being made for young people who work part-time to sustain their participation in education.

In terms of the application of credit processes, the credibility of the accreditation processes when applied to vocational education subjects may also be problematic. Young people and their parents together with local employers may not be convinced that a certificate around employability skills from the student's school or VCAL provider as the Registered Training Organisation will hold weight in the employment market. It was suggested that Skills Stores and related industry based programs may provide a more appropriate vehicle for accreditation because they come from the employment sector and have a direct relationship with employers.

In addition, it is suggested that schools and other education organisations would be supported to implement accrediting processes by the introduction into school reporting processes, an additional area which acknowledges explicitly the link between community involvement/personal development including paid and voluntary work of students and the contribution these activities make to successful and rounded education of young people.

#### **b) Identifying more flexible, innovative and/or alternative approaches to attaining a senior secondary certificate which support students to combine work and study**

Formal studies related to employment and working life are largely restricted to those young people who undertake vocational education and training in schools and Careers education is often, by necessity, heavily focussed in senior years on higher education choices and transitions. Otherwise, it appears that transition to work may be considered at the time young people undertake work experience but that it is not considered routinely unless and until the transition is imminent, despite the fact that virtually all students will be seeking to make this transition within a short time of finishing school, even allowing for higher education.

There is an opportunity to address student's work and study issues by first addressing the need to build transition to work/planning for employment into all key subject areas, rather than into vocational education subjects only. This might also assist in addressing some key Careers education issues which are currently addressed only in those schools where Careers education is a shared responsibility of all teachers and Careers information is considered in all subject areas. An FMPLLEN member suggested

it might also assist in lifting the profile of Careers Education and the role of the Careers Teacher by amending that role to include a professional development role with all staff in the school.

In a similar vein, it has been suggested that Occupational Health and Safety is generally taught to those undertaking VET in Schools or as a precursor to work experience and is not referred to as a general part of everyday working life in the working environment of students – the school. It appears that Occupational Health and Safety legislation may be considered to be more relevant to the adults working in the school (school is the workplace of teachers and other adults, including volunteers) and that the students also working in the schools but under supervision, do not need to have the same awareness of Occupational Health and Safety rules and regulations. Issues such as bullying of students by students, wearing of the required clothing and footwear, use of equipment etc tend to be addressed as social/behavioural issues in schools and as Occupational Health and Safety issues in workplaces.

This means that knowledge and understanding of Occupational Health and Safety is not common among all young people and their families and their understanding may be completely dependent on how well OH&S is observed in the workplace they enter as a paid employee.

In light of information published by the Australian National Schools Network and the alarming levels of workplace injuries among young people, an innovative and desirable step might be an Occupational Health and Safety charter for students whose workplace is in schools and other education organisations. This then can be used to guide decisions by educational organisations, which, according to FMPLLEN members is currently the case, but also to inform students/families about the sort of uniform required, footwear, the ratio of teachers to young people in “hands on” classes, the use of hand tools, scientific, information technology and other equipment by students, student amenities, student behaviour and a range of other factors that impact on the school as a workplace for young people.

Senior students with an appropriate level of understanding of the issues would require an avenue and process for raising concerns and/or student representatives with a role in monitoring Occupational Health and Safety as it applies to the students in their workplace. This is a minimum requirement in most workplaces and while it may create some concern for the administration of schools and other educational organisations, they may benefit by being able to actively engage the student body and families in solutions to issues raised.

As discussions continue around a National Curriculum, it seems timely to develop a unit of education that deals with preparation for working life and to embed elements of it in all senior curriculum, rather than treat it as a separate subject. It needs to include recognition of current competencies etc for those students who are combining paid and voluntary work and school and a recommended minimum standard of Occupational Health and Safety training for all students as a basis for a safe and healthy work environment for young people, within schools and other training organisations as well as in paid employment.

As suggested earlier, it needs also to be a valid part of school reporting processes and like other subjects such as VET in Schools, part time work in particular, should be measured and evaluated in terms of its contribution to the ENTER score of students undertaking VCE. As with VET in Schools, it is suggested that additional points towards the ENTER could then be made available.

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning offers many good examples of schools and other organisations who have developed individual arrangements which support students to continue school based studies and use their part time work as a complementary “unit” of their learning. FMPLLEN members would like to see this practice become routine.

**c) 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**

The support needed by young people might include official recognition by schools, parents and other providers that this is another means of completing Year 12 or the equivalent. It is a school retention strategy with each young person effectively retained within the system. In tandem with this, and for the purposes of crediting workplace learning and ensuring a reasonable workload, young people need to be able to negotiate an individualised learning plan that takes account of all the learning they are doing and a plan that is endorsed by their school or education provider, their parent or guardian (as required) and, if required, counter endorsed by the education authority or accreditation provider.

These same young people will be entering into individual employment agreements in their workplaces, often without any outside support. At the point of developing this plan, young people could benefit from advice on their rights at work, rates of pay and conditions in the workplace. This system is currently in place for school based apprenticeships, structured work placements and work experience because they are recognised parts of curriculum and they have the additional benefit of built in safety features for young people in the areas of Occupational Health and Safety and pay rates.

This recognition by authorities that the sum total – work and school – contributes to the educational outcome of young people would be a big first step in supporting young people who combine school and work and at present, generally do so under the radar of the school or authority and with little or no protection in the workplace from exploitation or dangerous working conditions.

This change in attitude to students who have part time and casual work needs to be teamed with more flexible time tabling arrangements which allow for some time away from school during regular school hours in the same way as provision is made for students on structured workplace learning or in school based apprenticeships.

Incentives, or the removal of funding disincentives, for example any disincentives which apply to accepting part time students, may assist schools and other educational organisations to develop more flexible timetabling arrangements in the senior years and individualised learning plans with young people.

The barriers to combining school and work are generally administrative barriers – school timetables focus on the optimum use of resources and facilities during school hours by an optimum number of students and a minimum number of teachers because government school funding leaves little room for flexibility. Academic programs such as the VCE may require certain mixes of required subjects and viable numbers of students which may limit choices by individuals.

Staffing numbers may be adversely affected if schools acknowledge that certain students are not attending on certain days because they are in employment.

Youth and other allowances may be impacted by changes in the earning capacity of young people.

These barriers in the main would be removed if all senior students who held an official individualised learning program were considered full time students (retained in the system) and in the process of completing Year 12 or its equivalent.

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

FMPLLEN evidence does not indicate an adverse impact on educational attainment for those young people who achieve a balance between work and school. Anecdotally, schools report improved performance by the majority of young people who achieve a part time or casual job, provided that the part time work is limited to a reasonable number of hours. Based on suggestions from members, young people with up to 10 hours of part time work can generally achieve a balance between school and work. Again anecdotally, those young people who struggle with the balance between school and work and the competing demands also tend to be most at risk of leaving school early and most in need of support if engagement with school is to be maintained.

Return to school after a period of employment is not an option according to young people interviewed by FMPLLEN in a recent small group discussion. One of the young people described it as indicating to other young people that you are a “loser” – you have failed at work. It is therefore vital to support at risk young people while they are still connected to the education system.

Various reports (including LSAY reports) indicate strong and positive outcomes for young people in full time employment compared to those in part time employment. Part time work while at school is valued by employers as an indicator of the young person’s commitment to work and willingness to work and there is some evidence around the part time to full time transitions of young people which supports this.

However transition from part time to full time work is not a given and young people in part time and casual work require support when seeking advancement to full time work. This support is generally not available for young people who are in part time employment. Unless the young people maintain their personal networks through the school such as those provided by their MIPS co-ordinator or transitions worker, there is no agency which has a responsibility or is funded to support young people who remain at risk of poor long term outcomes because they are unable to do better than part time and casual employment.

FMPLLEN recognises there is a significant gap in support and services for young, early school leavers who enter part-time work as their primary occupation but that an outcome in part-time work is often considered a successful transition for the purposes of meeting funding guidelines. These young people will require significant support according to the evidence available if they are to successfully move to full time and sustainable employment.

**e) 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).**

School based training pathways provide alternative modes of learning for young people, choice and different measures of success – all of which are critical to engaging young people at school. Currently, most training pathways tend to be industry specific and share a common core of workplace skills.

These pathways need to be measured and evaluated by Government in the same way that other pathways in education are measured and evaluated. For example, there is not an expectation that young people who take History in VCE are necessarily seeking a career in that area whereas there appears to be an expectation that a training pathway will not only prepare young people broadly but will also lead to a specific employment outcome.

This may create an impression among young people (and their families) that vocational education is a means of pigeon holing young people – those who do hospitality will work in the hospitality industry. However, the skills gained in hospitality include essential life skills as well as transferrable skills and hospitality training may simply be a good vehicle for the engagement of disengaged young people. School based pathways seem most effective when they allow for both students who have determined

their chosen career path and those who are still looking, in the same way as a generalist academic pathway caters for a vast range of young people.

From our evidence locally, it appears that employers value VET in Schools participation as one of a range of indicators of a young person's readiness to work and suitability for a job. Increasingly, VET training is conducted in schools which are Registered Training Organisations with staff who may not have recent industry experience and with facilities and resources are well short of industry standards. These issues need to be addressed if VET in Schools and related employment pathways are to be an accepted means of transition from school to employment.

School based apprenticeships and traineeships offer young people the opportunity to combine work and school and provide a very successful transition to employment based on FMPLLEN evidence. However, the uptake of school based programs is very much dependent on the flexibility of the school to put in place arrangements that do not disadvantage those young people who undertake school based apprenticeships. In particular, the mix of subjects these young people are required to undertake and the timetabling of these subjects can be problematic, leaving young people having to make up classes in an attempt to keep up with their peers. It has been suggested that the school based apprenticeship and traineeship programs are best delivered as an individualised learning program with the same value as other learning programs. Based on FMPLLEN evidence, there is the required flexibility in the majority of VCAL programs who support school based apprenticeships and traineeships.

Young disadvantaged people may require multiple opportunities and significantly longer periods of training together with intensive literacy and numeracy support and workplace experience to achieve a successful transition from school. They may also require a very much reduced workload in school in order to keep them attached.

They may also need a new range of pathways and people in mentoring and support roles once they exit school – for example, we are examining the possibility of providing young Indigenous people with the opportunity to explore pathways to employment in Indigenous-controlled organisations, with Indigenous mentors, as well as pathways in mainstream organisations.

Members here work with families who have not had long term, unbroken periods of employment and whose understanding of the employment market is rudimentary. It becomes critical in working with the young people from these families that members acknowledge and address this lack of understanding of and experience in employment and workplaces.

Members also work with young people with special needs, some of whom have parents with special needs, and it is clear that many of these young people will struggle to find employment in the current labour market without a sustained period in a transitional program that combines school and work and emphasises the workplace culture and real work output.

From our evidence, the transition from a highly supported school or training based program to open employment is not working well and at best, a small number of these young people will achieve part time work with larger employers with the capacity to provide workplace support for them.

In our view, while effective in engaging students, the school based and training/organisation based programs for young people with special needs, and in particular for young people with a mild intellectual disability, must be complemented by a transitional stage between school and open employment. Discussions with parents indicate that this transitional stage needs to be enterprise based, with real work output; it needs to work with local industry and reflect the opportunities in the local labour market.

This enterprise based training and employment needs to be funded on a different model from those currently on offer by the State and Commonwealth departments responsible for disability funding. It

needs to be based on an education, training and employment model and should be considered as such, rather than a health or welfare model. This brings it into line with Trade Training Centres in schools and similar initiatives and better reflects the value of these young people as potential workers in the economy

**Pat O'Connell**

**Frankston Mornington Peninsula LLEN and Peninsula Local Community Partnership**