



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

*Professor Erica Smith, University of Ballarat, 23 December 2008*

This submission is based on a series of research projects which I have managed, on students' part-time working. The projects have been funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research and the Australian Research Council, over a ten year period. These projects included the following co-researchers: Wendy Patton, Annette Green, Paul Comyn & Lou Wilson. A full listing of the research projects including weblinks to reports and papers is given at the end of this submission. The ARC project on student-working involves research with university, and to a lesser extent, TAFE students as well as school students, while the NCVER projects were confined to school students, apart from one project which followed up school-leavers and therefore captured some who were at university. All projects were national in scope and most involved quantitative and qualitative elements.

The submission provides responses to the terms of references and raises a number of other issues, viz:

- Preparation for part-time working
- Broader awareness of the nature of school students' part-time jobs
- The role of student part-time working in breaking the cycle of poverty and deprivation
- The 'transition' effect
- Advantages for industries

### **Response to terms of reference**

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

Our research has shown that part-time work by school students develops employability and technical skills to a considerable extent. While the policy focus has often been upon how education providers can develop employability skills, it is clear that many develop such skills through working itself. Employers of very young student-workers have well-developed systems in place for this purpose. The development of employability skills is somewhat curtailed by the fact that many students working in typical student workplaces (such as retail and fast food) work primarily alongside other young people and may not experience the benefit of adult mentoring that might occur in a broader range of workplaces. The documentation of such skills is a problematic matter. We found in our earlier research that many students are not interested in having their working skills 'captured' by the education system. They wanted to keep their work to themselves. Less academic, indigenous and NESB students more likely to want their skills documented. However, since we asked this research question several years have passed and I am aware that school systems are developing varied systems for documenting employability skills that may overcome this resistance.

Our current ARC Linkage project is looking at the effects of part-time working on career development through administration of a survey to cohorts of students in Years 10, 11 and 12, but as it is a longitudinal study we don't yet have the data to show conclusively what the effects are. Our qualitative research has given mixed data. While some students are able to use their part-time jobs to help them understand the world of work and inform career decisions, others are not or choose not to.

One serious danger of using part-time jobs in a formal sense to document development is the danger of excluding those who do not work. Some young people cannot find jobs or are not permitted by their parents or by other responsibilities to work. These students may be in equity groups or in isolated rural areas or at boarding school. Such students may be assisted by school-arranged working experiences. There is also the fact that jobs vary in their potential for development. Some jobs are quite restricted, and some employers (a minority) do not treat their student-workers well, any more than they treat their non-student workforce well. These issues all need to be addressed sensitively when thinking about 'capturing' working experience for educational purposes.

Another issue to consider is the difference between working and learning. While useful skills and knowledge are developed at work, the experience is not the same as formal education. Therefore care should be taken not to 'count' periods of work as equivalent to units of study. While it's tempting to do this, particularly in order to assist 'non-academic' students, it could lead to a narrowing of education opportunities. Students work as well as study; there doesn't seem much point in trying to substitute one for the other.

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

Our research has shown that many schools try hard to offer flexible timetables that allow students to undertake part-time work including school-based apprenticeships/traineeships or placements. Also some States offer part-time enrolment in senior secondary qualifications as a matter of course. In my experience, although I have not researched the issue systematically, SA and Qld are most advanced in this area.

- 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;

My view is that the understanding of the issue among senior educational policy-makers has advanced over a ten-year period so that working by school students is now fully accepted. It is perhaps only at some school and individual teacher level that there is less understanding and a feeling that students should not be working. With more understanding it is more likely that students will not get penalised if for some reason their work obligations interfere with their study.

However it is very important to note that major employers of school students expect students to put their study first. It is very unlikely therefore that work obligations would interfere with study obligations. In my research experience it is only smaller

employers that might put unreasonable pressure on students to work when they should be studying. It has been reported to us that some students prefer to be at work than at school, and major employers are aware of this and do not permit students to work when they suspect they should be at school.

Bearing all this in mind, as well as the previous question about flexible approaches to completion of the senior secondary certificate, I don't see that further support is needed. Perhaps some attempt could be made to educate small employers about the issue but it is a notoriously difficult task to access this sector of the economy.

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

The impact of part-time work on educational attainment is difficult to establish. While some studies have shown a negative impact on grades when more than about 10 hours a week are worked, it is hard to tell whether this is a result of the part-time job or whether the students working long hours are not particularly engaged with schooling anyway. Our research has shown a substantial minority of students working quite long hours in Year 12, for example<sup>1</sup>, and these could well be students who are not particularly interested in academic achievement. In some cases they may already have commenced their 'full-time post-school jobs' and are fitting in schooling around them. In general, though, school students work around 9 or 10 hours a week and this is the standard working week that many major employers of school-student-labour offer.

On the positive side our research has indicated but not proved that working part-time has encouraged students to complete their schooling when they otherwise might not have done. This is particularly but not only the case when the part-time job is a school-based apprenticeship/traineeship. Self-efficacy developed through working may combat feelings of under-achievement at school.

Where the part-time job involves a qualification as in an apprenticeship/traineeship, whether school-based or independent, it can lead students directly into higher-level qualifications. Working experience while at school can help students apply more confidently for university study, because they know they will be able to remain with their employers, or more easily get other work, to support themselves while at university.

Some major employers see the student workforce as their main recruitment route for full-time staff and managers, and our research shows that managers talent-spot student-workers from a very young age. Some employers offer school-based Australian traineeships on a very selective basis, to those they wish to retain into senior management roles. These part-time traineeships lead onto higher level qualifications eg certificate IV and/or Diploma.

Our research with university students reflecting on their careers as part-time workers through school and into university has shown that they are able to articulate many advantages of working part-time such as: development of generic skills, development of a range of technical skills, greater understanding of how businesses are run, a wider

---

<sup>1</sup> 4.6% working 16-20 hours a week and 6.5% working 21 hours + (2000 data).

friendship circle, the development of self-confidence and the development of time management skills. Employers have indicated that when recruiting full-time staff including graduates they look for a substantial employment history in part-time work.

- 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 am assuming that this point refers to school-based apprenticeships and traineeships rather than VET in schools that is not employment-based. Our studies have shown that school-based apprenticeships and traineeships are outstandingly successful compared with other forms of engagement with workplaces (such as VET placements, ordinary part-time jobs etc) in the development of generic skills and in the provision of good on-the-job training and close attention of an adult worker. In some cases they are successful in guiding students into the industry that the school-based apprenticeship/traineeship is in. They particularly assist disadvantaged young people eg those from low SES or lower academic achievement. However there are some problems. Participation in these programs tend to 'crowd out' other workplace-related activities – for example we found that these students were less likely than others to experience a range of industry areas through work experience etc – and therefore narrowed the range of workplace experiences. It would therefore be advantageous if schools insisted that work experience was undertaken in a different industry area from the school-based apprenticeship/traineeship. Also participation in school-based apprenticeships/traineeships can disqualify students from direct entry to university depending on the combination of subjects selected.

### **Other important issues**

- Preparation for part-time working

The activities of school careers officers tend to be focused on full-time post-school work and other post-school activities, or on VET in schools activities. There does not seem to be much explicit preparation of students for part-time jobs at the ages at which they are likely to begin working (which it is typically at age 14 or 15). There are exceptions of course to this generalisation. While sensitivity must be employed in regard to those who cannot look for or find work (see above) it seems sensible that schools should play a role in preparing students for part-time working. Such activities could include skills development in job-seeking, OH&S, rights at work, responsibilities as a worker, etc. There are some useful resources such as the NSW Teachers' Federation web site 'Students at work' <http://www.studentsatwork.org.au/>

- Broader awareness of the nature of school students' part-time jobs

There is a worrying consensus among many stakeholders that the jobs that students do while at school are menial, boring, and sometimes dangerous and exploitative. Students' jobs in fact seem to offer interest to most young people, and many offer career paths so that students are already working in supervisory capacities before they leave school. Jobs are available in fast-growing industry sectors and at hours that suit students. Good training opportunities are available and major employers have created specific roles within their organisations that allow for high degrees of interest and

responsibility for those students who desire it. The industries offer excellent promotion prospects to well-paid full-time careers in managerial and professional roles. Thus the jobs should not be seen as ‘pocket-money’ jobs but as a legitimate and important part of the economy and of young people’s working careers.

- The role of student part-time working in breaking the cycle of poverty and deprivation

Although I have not researched this issue specifically, a reasonable amount of evidence has emerged during our research that the availability of part-time work for students can sometimes assist families where other members are unemployed. As well as the income that the student brings to the household, the experience of having a worker in a household otherwise without regular work can be very advantageous to a family. Some evidence has emerged during the research projects that employers are aware of disadvantaged young people in their locales, and try to give them a chance. Part-time work can also be highly beneficial for school students from NESB migrant families, ensuring swifter development of English language skills and integration into Australian life. For example in researching with a fast food chain I have interviewed several workers now in management positions who migrated without English language skills in their teens and reported that it was in their jobs that they developed English skills most quickly.

- The ‘transition’ effect

Part-time jobs are often retained a long time after leaving school. Many university or VET students remain with their school part-time employers (either at the same location or having transferred) and many ex-students continue with their school-day jobs, either with the same number of hours or with increased hours either while looking for another job or as a career. Many even keep up their part-time jobs at the weekend while working in other full-time jobs during the week. In Smith & Green (2005) we found that of the 53% of respondents who had been working part-time immediately before leaving school, 44% continued in their part-time jobs for 18 months or longer after leaving school – a very high proportion. Thus the part-time jobs held while at school act as a cushion against possible unemployment or disruption, providing a familiar anchor during times of transition.

- Advantages for industries

Our research has shown that part-time jobs can (although often do not) lead to subsequent full-time jobs in the same industry area. This has implication for industries having difficulty attracting labour. If these industries do not make part-time jobs available, then they lose a potential source of recruitment. (Of course in some industries the immaturity of teenagers makes it impossible or illegal for school students to be employed.)

Published reports are as follows:

Smith, E. & Green, A. (2005). *How workplace experiences while at school affect career pathways*. Adelaide: NCVET.

<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1606.html>

Smith, E. & Comyn, P. (2003). *The development of employability skills in novice workers through employment*. Adelaide: NCVER.

<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/992.html>

Smith, E. & Wilson, L. (2002). *Learning and training in school-based new apprenticeships*. Adelaide: NCVER.

<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/908.html>

Smith, E. & Wilson, L. (2002). *School students in workplaces: Their views about working and learning*. Adelaide: NCVER

<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/839.html>

Smith, E. & Green, A. (2001). *School students' learning from their paid and unpaid work*. Adelaide: NCVER.

<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/706.html>

The current project is funded by the ARC Linkage program: 2006-8, Smith E. & Patton, W., *Changing the way that Australians enter the workforce: part-time working careers of young full-time school and tertiary students*, ARC Linkage grant, \$94,142.

Published papers from this project so far are as follows:

Smith, E. (2007). How employers in the fast food industry make use of student labour. *Managing our intellectual and social capital. 21<sup>st</sup> conference of the Australia and New Zealand Academy of Management (ANZAM)*, Sydney, 4-7 December.

Smith, E. & Patton, W. (2007). A serendipitous synchronisation of interests: employers and student-working. *Evolution, revolution or status quo? The new context for VET*. 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Australian VET Research Association, Victoria University, Footscray Park, Vic, 11-13 April.

<http://www.avetra.org.au/publications/24-Smith.pdf>