

Australian Parliament – House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Education & Training

Inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions

Terms of Reference

Managing the demands of study and part-time or casual employment is part of everyday life for the majority of Australian school students. The impact of potentially competing demands is not well known, and there is little provision of information or guidance to schools or employers on the effect this has on the lives of young people generally, and more specifically on their career development and prospects for successful transitions. The committee's review of the impact of combined study and work on the success of youth transitions and Year 12 attainment will focus on:

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

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South East Local Learning & Employment Network Inc.**

16th January 2009

Introduction

Two major and interrelated changes that occurred over the last three decades of the twentieth century together provide the context for this study of student-workers in Australia. On the one hand, there was an enormous increase in the school participation rate, especially during the 1980s, and at the same time significant changes in the youth labour market, with the disappearance of a high proportion of full-time jobs and an equally large growth in part-time employment. The precise nature of the relationship between these two sets of changes is not easily determined, and has been the subject of some debate. Nevertheless, throughout the period, a consistent response in government policy in the domains of education and the labour market has been to emphasise the importance of schooling as preparation for work.

(Robinson, 2001)

This quote is from one of the few, substantial studies available of the impact on part time work on schooling in Australia. The points made here in the introduction to the report remain relevant today. The two key elements noted – higher school retention rates and changes in the labour market (particularly the youth labour market) are currently, if anything, more pronounced and emphatic.

Retention rates, rather than in reaction to an economic recession (as was true in the '80s and '90's), have been built towards higher levels (at least in Victoria) through deliberate state government policy linked with innovative and flexibly structured local community initiatives such as the establishment of Local Learning & Employment Networks in the mid 2001 and the development of a broader and more flexible range of curriculum options at the Senior School level (such as the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning or VCAL)¹. The emergence of the 'new' labour market (flexible, demand driven and built around part time and casual work) has also developed as a result of deliberate government policy, in this case workplace relations policy.

As a result – in late 2008 - we had historically high school retention rates in Victoria², education policy settings which, at the State & Commonwealth Government levels, encourage further retention based on 'targets' (90% retention in Metropolitan Melbourne by 2010) and a very large student-youth workforce participation rate, all part-time and casual workers.

¹ Other states have followed suit, albeit with slightly differing emphases or structures – see for example the new South Australian SACE and the STEPUP component

² Particularly so, for times of strong economic growth.

A wildcard has now entered the equation – since October 2008, the instability in financial markets and the consequent low liquidity has led to a significant downturn in economic activity, not just in Australia but across all of the nations Australia trades with. We can therefore assume a much lower level of economic activity in the short to medium term and need to begin thinking through what the impact of this economic slow-down might be on young people at school and in work and what sort of policy response we might craft.

Experience from other times of economic slowdown has shown that there are two key impacts of a recession on young people –

- **higher retention rates and lower workforce participation rates**

It is likely that young people will stay on in school in increasing numbers and it is equally likely that young people at school (and, for that matter, university) will work fewer hours.

The outcomes of these two impacts are likely to be that the cost of education funding will increase for Government and available income for young people and their families³ will decrease.

We would argue that it is in THIS context that the issue of young people and part time work should be viewed.

Part Time Work, School Students & the South East of Melbourne

Anecdotally, it is a strongly held view in the South East that part time work levels for young people are high – ranging between 60% - 70% and working between 12 and 16 hours a week on average. Based on our conversations with school teachers, trainers, employers and young people themselves, we agree with this estimate. However, we would point out that the spread of young people combining schooling with part time work is uneven and there are large pockets of young people who do not work or work very little. What linkages there are across the patterns of labour force participation in the South East with socio-economic status, or education sector attended or geography is unknown.

It should also be noted, however, that working young people are quite visible and those not working much less so. What the actual, local percentage of young people who work part time and attend school in the South East of Melbourne is not clear on the data we have available, nor are we any the wiser on links between work force participation and other, personal factors.

Certainly, the available data we have been able to access is confusing and, on the surface, contradictory.

³ If the young people are not paying for their own mobile phone or entertainment costs, for example, it is their parents who will.

According to one data-set provided by the Southern Regional Youth Action Network and supplied by the Victorian State Government⁴, an average of 94% of young people between the ages of 15 and 17 in the South East of Melbourne do SOME paid work during the week (ranging from less than 14 hours up to 45 hours). This seems improbable.

A data set from the same source, *Labour Force Status (15 to 17 years old)*, shows only slightly less than 20% of young people of school age working part time, a further 4% working fulltime. Again, this seems quite unlikely but at the other end of the scale.

Again, from the same data sets, over 80% of 15 to 17 year olds report an income of between \$1 - \$249 and a further 10%+ report an income between \$250 - \$599 per week.

The available data tells us a conflicting and contradictory tale. There is perhaps some truth in the view that the higher 'income' figure quoted comprises two factors – the high level of young people on 'income support' and the high level of young people in 'cash in hand' jobs. The second view – if vindicated - is of more immediate concern, particularly with regard to health and safety.

Impact of Part Time Work

Whatever the percentage of young people who actually work part time, there are also conflicting views on the impact of that work on young people, their schooling and their post school career pathways.

In our experience, there is a strong view held by many educators that part time work is NOT good for a student's school work. It is common to hear from them that part time work interferes with learning and that many students suffer in their school results because of their part time work load. Some students also express this view and go further to loudly decry the impact of part time work –

Paid work clearly appeared to have been the least enjoyable way of experiencing the workplace. Nevertheless, as the original report shows, almost 90% of students liked their jobs at least 'a bit'. However the negative comments about paid jobs were often quite strongly worded. These negative experiences of a minority of student workers might account for the largely negative views about part-time jobs held by a number of education department officials.

Smith and Green, Supplemental Report, 2002

We have found similar, negative attitudes from teachers with regards to Australian School Based Apprenticeships (ASBA's), which also have a strong component of part time work and we would argue that the continuing low

⁴ Hours Worked by Age and LGA (15 to 17 years old)

uptake of part time apprenticeships and traineeships are a direct result of the poor 'image' of part time work (and, in particular ASBA's) in the minds of educators.

In recent times, however, our experience has been that ASBA programs (both integrated and non-integrated) are beginning to be more accepted by educators. We can track this acceptance through the increased demand from teachers in our region for professional development support on ASBA's. Our judgement that the root cause of resistance by educators to structured (and less structured) part time work by students is a low level of information.

It should be noted in the context of this discussion that the vast majority of ASBAs across Victoria are 'non-integrated programs', that is not linked to the young person's school program in any way. On most occasions, school teachers are not even aware that their students are undertaking a reasonably advanced skills training qualification such as a Certificate III in Retail Operations. This has been certainly been a common theme in retail (fast food) ASBA programs in recent years.

What the few studies that exist agree on is that – within certain bounds – there is no harmful impact of young people working part-time during their school years. In 2001, 50% of students⁵ worked on average 8.5 hours a week and '... the study suggests that the learning outcomes of part-time work may be greater than those of other means of experiencing workplaces.' (Smith & Green, 2001).

In an article in The Age newspaper, Dr Ainley, Deputy Director of ACER, stated that when part time work hours increase to over 12 hours a week '...it seems to have a slightly negative effect on performance at school - that is, on the chances of completing year 12.' (The Age, 21st June 2004)

Dr Ainley's caveat – *'that is, on the chances of completing year 12'* is an important one. At the time of the article, the VCAL had not yet been established and so reference to 'completing year 12' is actually referring to year 12 as an entry level qualification to university or further, higher education. It is arguable that – for those vocationally minded students who have remained at school to benefit from the broader vocational training opportunities available, 12 or even more hours a week of (relevant) part time work would be of greater benefit for them and their future career pathways than for tertiary study minded VCE students. Indeed, Dr Ainley makes this point explicit later in the article when he indicates that greater hours of part time work are a strong indicator from the student that they prefer the workplace to the school yard.

More recent studies have shown that outside of those bounds (number of hours worked) difficulties do arise -

⁵ Not including students working in a family business, which comprised a further 10% or so.

In a survey conducted by the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) of 324 workers under 18 years, 60.6% of respondents listed 'having difficulty combining work and study' as one of the three most important issues (7).

Young People and Work (website)

http://www.womhealth.org.au/healthjourney/young_people_work.htm

One study in particular argued that part time work was an unmitigated good, again within the limit of hours of around 8 to 9 hours work per week –

Compared with students who had not had a part-time job while at school, student workers did better in the post-school labour market. They were both significantly less likely to be unemployed when aged 19 and significantly less likely to experience lengthy periods of unemployment, and, in some instances, more likely to earn slightly higher hourly wages. Australian school students who work part-time gain a knowledge of the labour market and develop skills and contacts which provide them with some advantage in that labour market, at least in the early years after leaving school. Having a part-time job while at school is one of the ways in which a young person can achieve a smoother transition into later full time employment.

Robinson, 1999

Our own survey of reasons for and outcomes of part time work by students (undertaken in 2004 by the South East LLEN Youth Advisory Panel) clearly provide an almost complete list of the now well known 'soft skills' and a smattering of more technical skills – these included

- Learning people skills, customer service
- Get taught about what you have to do.
- Be organised
- Money handling
- Responsibility
- Routines
- Schedule
- Punctuality
- Computer skills
- Learning first aid
- PR skills
- Problem solving
- Endurance
- Learning to be good at the job you're doing
- Efficient

Part of difficulty around part time work is reported to us by parents, rather than the young people themselves. Anecdotally, parents tell us that it of major concern to them that their children are working LATE at night some nights and long hours within those late nights. This seems particularly true of young people working in the fast food industry and it is often stated that the young people in question must choose between these long hours and late nights or

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give up their jobs – there is reported to be little room for compromise. It would be interesting to do an analysis of timesheets, hours worked and time-span of shifts for young people 15 to 18 to see how widespread late shifts were for young people working part time.

It seems clear that a little part time work is no bad thing and that up to around 9 hours a week can be beneficial for students of all types of career leanings. If our 'gut feel' estimate of the majority of young people in the South East are working 12 to 16 hours a week then this points to potential youth skills, engagement, attainment and retention problems.

Accreditation of Part Time Work

Analysis of our local research and a review of the other available research and existing programs is that it would be very difficult – and unnecessary - to additionally accredit part time work as part of a study program.

Our research, cited earlier, with a group of young people in the South East of Melbourne, strongly confirmed the notion that accreditation of part time work was unnecessary and not desirable.

The findings of this research indicated that these young people felt that part time work

- should be acknowledged but not go towards their grade

and that

- Not undertaking part time work may become a disadvantage if it is being assessed or offered extra accreditation;

And finally

- That perhaps the 'academic' elements of work (such as work education programs and, by extension, VETiS) could be graded or accredited

These views – in approximate form – are mirrored in what research current exists on this question.

Currently, there exist two national modes of accreditation of part time work.

The first is through a school based part time apprenticeship or traineeship in which has an inbuilt requirement for one or two days work per week. The successful completion of an ASBA hinges on completing this part time work element.

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The second mode is through Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) where a Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) is sometimes⁶ part of the formal requirements of the VETiS course.

A further, local accreditation mechanism in Victoria is through the VCAL program, whereby a work placement (and a VETiS program) is a requirement for completion of Intermediate and Senior programs⁷.

A further, mooted, mechanism for the accreditation of part time work might be through the proposed '*job ready certificate*', details of which have yet to be fully announced by the Commonwealth and which we might expect to contain a separate⁸ element of certification, or statement of satisfactory completion, around part time work, perhaps completed by the employer.

Taken as a set – ASBA's, VETiS programs, VCAL and (nationally) VCAL *like* programs and a comprehensive Job Ready Certificate – there does not (with an important caveat) seem to be any further requirement or necessity for the accreditation of part time work.

The caveat is the lack of mandatory SWL as part of a VETiS program.

It is our strongly held view that SWL ought to be a required component of all VETiS programs. It seems ludicrous that a program with the avowed aim of work skills development does not, in most cases, require any work place attendance. A young person might secure a – say – Certificate II in Automotive Technology without ever having stepped into a workshop to have some direct workplace experience in plying that trade.

Where to from here?

This submission is an interim one – because we feel we do not have enough concrete data to answer some of what we consider to be the important questions underpinning the inquiries focus.

The gaps in our knowledge – in the data – are considerable and we would seek, at least locally, to rectify this and have a more considered picture of young people combining part time work and schooling within the next few months. In particular we would be interested in tracing, where possible, the post school impacts of combining school and work –

Our questions would include –

⁶ In fact, only rarely – in the vast majority of cases of VETiS programs accredited in Victoria, SWL is optional.

⁷ The other, preliminary, level is called Foundation VCAL and is flexible enough to accommodate early school leavers returning to school, migrant and refugee youth with poor language skills and young people with learning difficulties who may have low levels of formal learning. In these instances, a formal work placement and VETiS program is not required but some form of work place engagement is mandated.

⁸ Optional

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1. What proportion of young people are combining school and part time work, in what areas are they working and how many hours a week are they working?
2. What are the linkages, if any, between socio-economic status, training background of the family, school sector attended, post code and other personal data with the pattern of students combining school and work?
3. What linkages currently exist between a young person's part time work and their VETiS study?
4. What proportion of students are working part time in the VETiS area they are studying?
5. What benefit do the two (part time work and VETiS) offer each other, if any?
6. How many young people remain in the broad occupational area of the part time work they undertook AFTER their schooling-study days?
7. What impact does a VETiS or ASBA program have on a student's post school career pathway?

Over and above the gaps in our data, however, there are other, pertinent policy questions to consider.

The first is consider the role of schools, and in particularly 'career & transition services' within schools, in supporting and directing students DURING their schooling around their choices of part time work, particularly as the research indicates that young people continue their part time work for some time after leaving school and, in some cases, for the duration of their further study.

It is important to ensure that careers in the industries in which students typically work, both during their school years and subsequently, are given equal prominence with other industry areas, in terms of advice and information provided to them while at school.

Smith & Green, 2005

Secondly, and more broadly, is the issue of how combining part time and work and schooling, a seemingly permanent feature in our youth-schooling landscape, can be better managed and supported as part of an integrated suite of work placement, work readiness, employability and skills development programs.

Originally, of course, this was the role of VETiS. However, over time the sharp front of work place skills and engagement which was a prominent feature of the VET in Schools programs from their inception in the early 1990's has been replaced by a more 'certification' focused training regime, led by schools and training organisations.

The new 'leading edge' of work place engagement and learning for young people in Australia is part time work set, currently, within a free and flexible market environment.

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In 2006, Dr John Spierings, then of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, addressed the South East LLEN Annual General Meeting⁹ and, within a broad ranging presentation on youth skills, retention and training issues raised the 'drift of VET in Schools, as touched on above, by wondering if VETiS was in fact a 'taste of life' for students or a 'mask' held up by schools to hide the lack of relevance and engagement by their other programs or a genuine vocational pathway? In addition, Dr Spierings wondered out loud on the value of VETiS programs, pondering whether VET in Schools programs provided authentic learning or instrumental skills?

In his presentation, Dr Spierings pointed out that VETiS is in a 'forever' battle with the ENTER benchmark in the mind of senior students and that we have over the past few years see a decline in the number SWL hours young people are engaging in. Accreditation and formal qualifications are competing in a policy environment with true workplace learning – and losing that competition!

Dr Spiering's also presented a challenge of a new vision of structured workplace learning – what if, he said, we developed the next generation of SWL and

- Sequenced casual & part-time work into the equivalent of a full-time job
- Provided customised support & mentoring
- Provided a one-stop gateway to work & skills
- Provided flexibility & minimised risks for employers
- Established a school-based labour hire agency
- Treated casual work in a new & dynamic way

In the same presentation he talked about the need for support, mentoring and monitoring of young people POST school and pointed out that in 2005 six month after leaving school –

- 23% of Year 12 completers
- 40% of Year 11 leavers
- 45% of Year 10 leavers

are all not fully engaged.

To come back to a point made very early in this submission, the impact of the financial crisis gripping the Australian (and world) economy is going to impact on the availability of work – part time, full time or casual – for young people.

We would strongly be recommending the piloting of an engagement and support service for senior (year 10, 11 and 12) students in school to:

1. Directly support and encourage school retention to year 12 for those young people most at risk of early school leaving and subsequent disengagement;

⁹ Unpublished presentation, John Spierings, DSF to SE LLEN AGM, May 2006

2. Liaison with school careers services to support them to re-calibrate some of their advice & support to students combining schooling and work;
3. Undertake a pilot re-visioning of structured workplace learning into a modern context as outlined by Dr Spierings above.
4. Particularly seek to engage young people on career support and training choice issues BEFORE they left school and subsequent to their leaving school for a period of 12 months or until they are secure in a new employment or training pathway, which ever comes first.

We would also suggest that this work be undertaken by community based intermediaries who have strong relationships with but are not necessarily formally linked to schools, such as Local Community Partnerships which already have a responsibility for VETiS based structured workplace learning facilitation.

Recommendations

Out of our interim response to the Inquiries terms of reference, we have the following preliminary recommendations –

1. The Standing Committee on Education & Training of the Australian Parliament recommend the development of comprehensive datasets reviewing the nature and impact of combining school and work on the performance and pathways of young people in Australian schools.
2. That in any research, particular attention be paid to the linkages to and relevance of VETiS programs to part time work choices made by young people and the impact of VETiS programs, long term, on young peoples career pathways.
3. That a minimum of 20 days structured work place learning per year be mandatory for all accredited VETiS programs, as is being considered currently by the Commonwealth.
4. That a comprehensive Job Ready Certificate be developed for all students exiting schooling (not just Year 12 completers) and that this certificate include a review and evaluation of any part time work undertaken by the student, preferably signed off by the employer.
5. That all part time apprenticeships and traineeships undertaken by young people still at school be ‘integrated’ into their school program.
6. That intermediary organisations, such as the South East LLEN, are supported to pilot a program seeking to support young people combining part time work, engage careers and transition professionals in better understand how best to work with students combining schooling and work, provide support to students working and studying AFTER they leave school and bringing together part time work and VETiS programs.

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