

Round and round or fully rounded?

How can we improve youth transitions



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Abstract

Successful transitions from school to work result from a complex mix of institutional settings, opportunity structures and personal effectiveness. Policy needs to work on all of these simultaneously: Australia needs both systems to work and to be fair, and young people who are confident and competent. On the basis of school completion rates, and their consequences in terms of teenage unemployment and the youth labour market disadvantage, Australia performs relatively poorly compared to other advanced economies and has improved little over a long period. A wide range of innovative transition programs has had little impact. We need to shift to a universal structure of separate senior high schools. These can take advantage of larger grade cohorts and economies of scale to offer 15–17 year olds wide curriculum choice that can satisfy the full range of personal and vocational interests. They can provide adult teaching styles and discipline policies, and support services such as remediation, counselling and welfare for those who struggle the hardest. Little is likely to change unless this occurs. TAFE is not the answer.

Introduction

Work, said Oscar Wilde, is the curse of the drinking classes. It may well be, and this is a view towards which I am increasingly sympathetic since abandoning wage labour some three years ago. But in modern societies it is also a key determinant of identity, happiness, well-being, health and civic engagement. And it seems to be important to enjoy your work, even if, as Richard Layard points out, bad work is better than no work (Layard, 2004). The unemployed are generally poorer, unhappier, unhealthier and less likely to vote than those who work. For young people everything that we know about

the transition from dependent student to responsible adult says that extended periods, or successive periods without work, are not to be recommended as a national policy option¹. Moving smoothly from school to paid work, either directly or via education and training, is good for young people's personal development and good for the economy. We seem to have agreed as a country that this is something that Australia should aim for, for all young people.

The problem is that however hard we have tried, and whatever we have tried over the last decade or so, little has changed (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2007). Certainly the outcomes that we achieve are not as bad as those in a country such as Italy. But they are at best average, are well below those of OECD best practice countries such as Norway, should be better given our wealth and the health of our labour market, and have scarcely improved since the mid 1990s. Teenage unemployment in Australia is far higher than it should be given overall levels of unemployment, and around ten times the level experienced in Denmark, which leads the OECD both to believe that it is simply unacceptable for any young person under the age of 20 not to be provided with the skills and qualifications that will ensure a secure future, and to put this belief into effect. This has little to do with the nature of Australia's labour market, which is extremely youth friendly compared to other countries' labour markets. The reason is that each year the education system continues to pump far too many poorly qualified and inadequately skilled young people onto a labour market that has little need for them. Put simply, we have far too many early school leavers, and Year 12 completion

¹ ACER longitudinal research on this point can be found in Lamb et al. (2000) and Marks et al. (2003).

rates are far too low. One result of this, given that we have a labour market in which skills and qualifications are at a premium, is that the unemployment penalty experienced by young adults who have not completed Year 12 or its equivalent is among the highest in the OECD (Sweet, 2006a). This is simply not good enough.

In trying to improve outcomes for our young people, the research literature suggests that we look at four sets of factors². The first are structural and institutional features of the education system and the labour market: pathways and qualification systems; wage structures; arrangements for cooperation between employers, governments and unions; employment protection and the like (e.g. OECD, 2000). The dominance of this type of analysis in comparative studies of youth transitions does much to account for the fascination of many policy makers in developed economies with apprenticeship systems over the last 30 years, despite the very great difficulties that almost all countries including Australia have had in trying to create large-scale apprenticeship systems for youth along the lines of those found in the German-speaking countries.

A second set of lessons about transition outcomes can be found in the sociological literature. This teaches us that family background and gender matter everywhere, but little about where they matter least³. It is, however, a literature that focuses the attention of policy makers upon the importance of trying to achieve not just good outcomes, but also fair outcomes. The sociological literature is also important for showing us that social capital –

trust, cooperation, relationships and networks – is important: families that have wide networks help their children to get jobs; good cooperation between schools and local firms improves work-based learning programs. However, in most countries policy makers have been much slower to focus upon these factors than upon institutional and structural factors.

Third, the literature points us to psychological research, including educational research to the extent that this concentrates upon the characteristics of individuals (rather than the characteristics of systems or societies). Perhaps the most important lesson from this type of research is that educational achievement in early adolescence is a very important correlate and determinant of educational and labour market outcomes. If, by the age of 14 or 15, ACER longitudinal research tells us, you still cannot read well and your mathematical skills are low, your chances of not completing high school, of not obtaining a post-school qualification, and of becoming unemployed, rise accordingly. (Given this, it is surprising that so much of attention within national literacy and numeracy policies has been directed at those who are young and so little at those adolescents whose basic skills put them at risk of early school leaving.) Another very useful set of lessons comes from vocational psychology, which focuses upon career choice and career development. This tells us that young people who have high self-esteem, who are confident and who understand themselves, who have a good understanding of educational and work opportunities, who focus upon their future education and work, and who are able to plan and to make decisions, achieve better transition outcomes than do young people who show the reverse characteristics.

Finally, there is the youth research literature. I find much of this turgid and jargon-laden, but it is important to read it if only for one reason. In its contrast between the notions of structure and agency, it forces us to consider two quite different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, policy approaches: on the one hand trying to build opportunity structures, whether institutional or sociological, that facilitate effective and fair transitions to work; and on the other hand, as is relatively common in the Nordic countries, trying to create young people who are confident and competent, and able to manage their lives and careers in a changing and challenging world.

Why have attempts to achieve better outcomes over the last decade or so generally been less than successful? It is not as if we have not tried. Indeed the list of innovative Australian programs would be longer than in many other countries: VET in schools; workplace learning; school-based apprenticeships; school–community partnerships; transition brokers; mentors; school leaver tracking; career advice initiatives; local learning and employment networks. And alongside these program initiatives there have been reforms to upper secondary certificates in all states.

The problem is that we have mostly concentrated upon a programmatic approach. Often there has been little coordination between multiple programs and less than optimum coordination between the different authorities that administer – read own – them: schools and TAFE; community groups, governments, employers and unions; state and Commonwealth governments; education, labour and welfare portfolios. But the main reason, it seems to me, that we have not been able to improve the proportion of each cohort deciding that it is worthwhile continuing their education to the end of Year 12 or its equivalent, is that we have not paid serious attention to

2 These are summarised in Sweet (2006b).

3 Although many in the Nordic countries would argue that family background and gender have a smaller relationship to transition outcomes there than in, for example, the Anglo-Saxon or Mediterranean countries.

the types of institutions within which these programs are delivered. We have not created institutions that can foster a joy in learning among the full range of young people after the age of compulsory schooling, not just among those who find academic achievement easy; and we have failed to create a single centre of responsibility for managing young people's transitions.

Alongside a small set of OECD countries that also have relatively poor upper secondary completion rates – Ireland, New Zealand, much of the United Kingdom – Australia is unique among OECD countries in continuing to locate upper secondary education within the same institutions that lower secondary education is found in. Elsewhere there is a clear divide between lower and upper secondary education. This divide recognises that adolescents aged 15, 16 or 17 have different needs from 11 year-olds and should be treated differently. They need a more adult learning environment, not one based upon the discipline demands of 12-year-olds. As the post compulsory years are the point at which vocational interests are starting to become more differentiated and clearer, young people at this age need a wider range of curriculum choices that allows the full range of vocational opportunities to find expression. And those who struggle the hardest need a range of specialised support services such as counselling, career education and guidance and remedial classes. None of this is easy to achieve in the Year 7–12, or 8–12, high school. Discipline policies in these are based upon the lowest common denominator, adult teaching and learning methods are hard to implement, and small cohort sizes make a curriculum containing a wide range of general and vocational subjects, suited to the needs of all students, not just those with higher education aspirations, impossible to introduce at a reasonable cost.

I do not believe that the answer lies in trying to beef up TAFE as we know it. Most young people aged 16–17 who choose to leave school and go to TAFE are given, other than through its apprenticeship streams, courses that offer very low-level qualifications of the sort that result in few labour market returns, and the drop-out rates from these seem to be very high indeed. And so if TAFE is to have a role, it needs not to be in competition with schools, but completely integrated into the structure of senior school certificates.

The answer must be for Australia to take a deliberate decision to shift to a different model of upper secondary education: to create a genuine education revolution in which all young people move, at the end of compulsory schooling or shortly after, to an institution designed for their needs and able to offer them a choice of subjects and a way of learning that suits all of their aspirations and expectations. The evidence from the ACT and Tasmania shows that switching to this model can result in a rapid increase in the number of young people who stay at school and in hence in educational participation rates. Studies that have been carried out of such senior colleges, senior high schools or senior campuses (Anderson et al., 1980; Keating et al., 2005) show that students enjoy them, that they are cost-efficient and that they can offer a wider range of curriculum choice than can the standard high school.

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