



## Recession politics and the need for an Intergenerational Youth Compact

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Completing high school makes a significant difference to young people's opportunities in life. Scores of research studies demonstrate that this priority really matters. These compelling findings provided the impetus for the decision made by COAG, on April 30, under which young people who have not completed a Year 12 certificate or an equivalent VET qualification will be required to participate in education or training programs as a pre-condition for receiving Youth Allowance.

In announcing this decision, the COAG ministers failed to acknowledge critical changes in the nature of the senior secondary experience. Unless these changes are taken into account, the proposed policy is unlikely to succeed. Over the past two decades, we have seen a huge increase in the percentage of teenagers who are seeking to combine senior study and part-time employment. We are seeing new approaches to high school completion, which include new combinations of learning, in and out of school, and new combinations of study and employment. Associated with these changes we see new opportunities for extended completion, and more flexible timetables. Over time, changes such as these are contributing to a new consensus among parents, teachers, students and employers about what is 'going on' now, and what will be involved in increasing the proportion of young people who gain a Year 12 qualification.

The changes over time are profound: they could be described as a new paradigm: however, it may be more appropriate to talk about *shifting settlements* rather than changing paradigms. In a legal or political sense, a 'settlement' is an agreement reached after a period of negotiation. In relation to senior secondary schools and high school completion, negotiated agreements are needed on numerous issues, including, for example, what subjects students should study, what choices they might have, how their performance will be assessed and reported, what kinds of certificated of achievement might be issued, and how the results they achieve might be used for purposes such as admission to tertiary study. One could say that a settlement around high school completion exists when there is a taken-for-granted or dominant way these things are done, that is accepted as legitimate by most stakeholders.

Any settlement about the final years of schooling is likely to persist for several years, but if there are major changes in social and economic circumstances affecting young people and their families, the settlement may start to break down. This is best understood by looking at the shifting settlements we have lived through:

- Settlement 1: A small, talented minority completes years 11 and 12. The senior years culminate in a University admission exam;
- Settlement 2: Almost all young people complete year 11-12 courses, which are designed to prepare graduates for diverse futures. Only a small, disadvantaged minority leaves early;
- Settlement 3: The boundaries between school and work are blurred, and many young people are exploring new combinations of education & work, or taking a slow track towards a year 12 qualification or its equivalent.

The approach represented by Settlement 1 dominated everyone's thinking for decades. This settlement, however, could not withstand the pressures created by the rapid rises in youth unemployment of the late 1970s. Between 1977 and 1997 more than half of all full-time jobs for teenage males and more than two thirds of all full-time jobs for teenage females disappeared. The collapse of the youth labour market that followed the 1982 recession led to a period of disruption. Time-honoured traditions were threatened as state curriculum and assessment authorities debated the options. Parents, employer groups, and Universities expressed divergent views. Nevertheless, a new settlement around the purposes of senior secondary schooling was forged, and between 1982 and 1991, high school completion rates across Australia doubled.

Yet even now, the position represented by Settlement 2 is not accepted as legitimate by all parties. Some high-fee private schools pride themselves on persisting with a Settlement 1 model. Rather than adopting an inclusive approach, these schools recruit high-performing students and strive to maximise their University admission scores, hoping to place their students in prestigious courses. The fractures and tensions between Settlements 1 and 2 still bubble along under the surface. Nevertheless, the pedagogical arrangements that support Settlement 2 are now well entrenched across Australia's secondary school system.

Continuing changes in social and economic conditions are provoking yet another settlement shift, but this one is affecting a wider age group. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that across the 15-24 year old age group, as the availability of full-time jobs has fallen, the numbers of young people working part-time while studying either part-time or full-time has increased quite rapidly. In Settlement 3, *the boundaries between school and work are blurred*.

Over half of Australia's teenagers are juggling the demands of study and part-time employment, and the proportions combining study and work have increased substantially over the past two decades. Recent ABS data indicate that 66.5% of Australia's 15-19 year olds are working part-time, and that 79% of these are studying on a full-time basis (ABS, 2005). Further research is needed to gain a clearer understanding of the strategies that young people, their families, their schools, and their employers might use (or are using) to manage the competing demands of study and work. Existing research, however, indicates that:

- Above an initial threshold, the more hours per week a student works, the more likely s/he is to drop out of school (Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley, 2003). This is consistent with US research indicating that part-time employment reduces students' engagement with study (Marsh & Kleitman, 2005);
- However, part-time work offers strategic benefits for students who want to enter full time employment upon leaving school. Recent Australian labour market analyses indicate that casual employment increases the likelihood of continued labour market attachment (Buddelmeyer & Wooden, 2007);
- This finding is consistent with Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) research which found that students who work during HS are more likely to be employed when they leave school than those who have not participated in part-time work while at school (Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley, 2003).

These findings present a conundrum: student employment has negative effects on high school completion rates, but positive effects on the chances of post-school employment. Any solution to

this conundrum must include both 'protective' and 'productive' elements. Students need to be *protected* against excessively long hours of work, against injury and abuse, and against employers who do not allow rostered time off for major assessments. In addition, the school-work nexus should be a *productive* one. Young people want jobs that provide " ... an enriching, rewarding and mutually beneficial experience for both the employer and the employee." (Lake Tuggeranong College SRC). Through their part-time employment, young people should gain basic employment skills, and where possible, higher-level vocational and technical skills.

Current ABS data indicate that 38% of Australia's school leavers enter full-time or part-time employment directly, without enrolling in further study. Many of these young people come from backgrounds of social exclusion and economic hardship: they need to gain a secure foothold in the labour market in order to support their families. Yet they may also live in remote-rural or poor-urban regions where job opportunities are scarce. In these geographic locations, school-based and/or community-supported employment and training opportunities may also be needed. Since having a job during high school significantly increases the chances of being employed later on, new policies and programs that support young people who are combining school and work are urgently needed.

Public policy has not kept pace with the level of student participation in part-time work. There are four key issues that need to be addressed through policy reform. They are:

- a) Long hours of part-time student employment appear to lead to early school leaving and low retention rates. However, this can be countered if additional supports are provided to help students balance the demands of work and study;
- b) Institutional constraints make it difficult for traditionally-structured high schools to support young people who are juggling study and work (some also must juggle family responsibilities);
- c) Young people are not well protected at work. An unacceptably large proportion of high school students report suffering physical injury or verbal harassment in their workplaces; &
- d) Part-time student employment is a precursor to effective labour market entry. However, opportunities for part-time student work are inequitably distributed. Therefore, students from low-income regions, and students receiving Youth Allowance, suffer negative impacts which may reduce the likelihood of their gaining full employment.

Young people living in disadvantaged areas experience more difficulty in obtaining work, because they are competing for jobs that are similar to those sought for by their adult peers; (NSW Commission Children and for Young People, 2005). Recent studies show that student workers often find it difficult to balance the demands of study and employment; they rarely know what their rights are, and many of them suffer injury or harassment at work. They need to set work rosters that fit with their studies, yet they are uncertain about how to negotiate with their employers.

### **Responses to these issues, and a Parliamentary Inquiry**

In every state and territory across Australia, one can identify numerous policies and programs that are responding to each of these issues. The following list is indicative but far from complete:

- Queensland has initiated broad-ranging Education and Training Reforms for the Future and the new Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) includes opportunities to gain credit for out-of-school activities, including employment and community service. It allows nine years to QCE completion;
- NSW has several Senior Secondary Colleges that provide extensive VET with work-based learning options, and re-entry or second chance programs;
- South Australia offers re-entry schools and also operates high schools where extended completion is the norm – an estimated 40% of all senior-secondary students in South Australia take 3 years or more to complete the SACE;
- Victoria pioneered the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs), and offers the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) as an alternative to the VCE.

In addition to programs such as those offered by school systems, schools, and local communities, important initiatives have also been established by unions and employers. See, for example, the exemplary materials developed by the NSW Teacher's Federation to help young people juggle competing demands and understand their rights at work. < <http://www.studentsatwork.org.au> >

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training has established an inquiry titled *combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions*, which will be operating throughout 2009. Teachers, parents, employers and schools are encouraged to make submissions to the Committee, and students are especially asked to check into the Inquiry website, and complete a short questionnaire designed to tap into their experiences.

In response to this Inquiry, the Australian National Schools Network is proposing the development of a national *Intergenerational Youth Compact (IYC)*. Through this initiative, the ANSN is promoting a number of pilot sites that exemplify and implement the following principles:

### **Principles underlying an Intergenerational Youth Compact (IYC)**

1. Providing high-quality learning opportunities for all young people is fundamental to building a society of competent adults. Worksites should be places where young people gain basic employment skills. Wherever possible, workplace contexts should also support the acquisition of higher-level vocational and technical skills. Youth employment should not be 'skill free'. It should include training components that lead to recognised credentials;
2. Our schools must provide flexible programs that respond to the pressures involved in juggling school and work. Flexible timetables, opportunities for extended completion of year 12, and second chance options need to be widely accessible;
3. Young people need guidance on how to combine study and work effectively. Teachers, ancillary staff, employers, unions, and other community agencies should all contribute to delivering 'joined up' programs. Students who work should be encouraged to provide peer support for each other within the school context;
4. Young people have a right to live, study and work in safe environments. As they take their first steps into paid employment, it is their right to be protected against harassment, exploitation, and physical injury;
5. Additional resources are required to provide effective transition support for young people who are from socially and economically excluded communities. No single program or policy can meet the diverse needs of these young people. Indigenous youth, refugees and recent immigrants, homeless and under-supported youth, and young people from remote rural communities must be supported through programs that are crafted and integrated locally, resourced both locally and centrally, and designed to meet their needs; and
6. The whole community is responsible for the wellbeing of our young people. Responsibility includes being compassionate, respectful and helpful. Helping young people to manage the many transitions along the diverse pathways that eventually lead towards adult lives requires joint efforts from teachers, parents, employers, students, and others in their communities.

For further information regarding the Inter-generational Youth Compact go to [www.ansn.edu.au](http://www.ansn.edu.au), or write to Prof Margaret Vickers [mhv@uws.edu.au](mailto:mhv@uws.edu.au).

For submissions to the House of Representatives Inquiry into combining study and work, go to [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/schoolandwork](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/schoolandwork).

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