Shifting settlements, blurred boundaries 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. Policies and practices that increase high school completion rates and facilitate effective transitions from school to work are critically important in what we now call ‘excluded communities’. There are years of consistent data supporting the idea that this priority really matters. However, over the past two decades, new concerns have emerged, reflecting new economic and social circumstances. These concerns reflect new ways of thinking, or new settlements. 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, 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, but 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 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.

ABS data indicate that 38% of Australia’s young people do not continue with further study once they have left school. These young people will, during their lifetimes, earn much less than their classmates who complete studies at TAFE or a University. Some of these young workers are better off than others: they gain secure, full-time jobs, and some gain apprenticeships. However, one in four of them (or one-eighth of the total cohort) are ‘not fully engaged’: they are underemployed, or are unemployed, or even out of the labour market altogether within a year or two of leaving high school. These are the most disadvantaged young people in our society. Many of them leave school without completing Year 12, and many of them are further hindered by the fact that they have never worked at all. Longitudinal research by Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley (2003) suggests that, for students who go directly from school to work, participation in part-time work increases their chances of actually gaining an apprenticeship or a full-time job, rather than being unemployed.

It makes sense for today’s high school students to use part-time work as they design their own futures. Over time, their engagement with work increases, so that at some point they consider themselves to be workers who may study part-time, not students with part-time jobs. However, success in school still counts, so young people lead hectic lives as they juggle the competing demands of study and employment. An indication of what young people might like to do (if they were able) is evident in recent trends from South Australia. Because of the modularised Year 11-12 curriculum and the availability of re-entry high schools, one in three SA students has chosen to do Year 11-12 on a part-time basis. There are also students who begin full-time Year 11-12 studies, but later opt for what is called ‘extended completion’. Researchers from the University of South Australia have estimated that approximately 40 percent of SA students now take more than two years to complete Years 11 and 12. In effect, a ‘slow road’ has emerged. Students alternate in and out of school, experiment with TAFE and with work, and may finish, eventually. More and more students are now following these patterns, both at the secondary and tertiary levels.

A policy conundrum: 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). From this perspective, part-time student employment should be discouraged. However, part-time work offers strategic benefits for students who want to enter full-time employment upon leaving school. Studies indicate that students who have been employed during HS are more likely to get a job when they leave school. So, from this perspective, part-time employment is beneficial.

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. 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). Alternative approaches to educating these young people need to be put in place;
   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; and
   d) Part-time student employment is a precursor to effective labour market attachment. 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.

**An Intergenerational Youth Compact**

The Australian National Schools Network is proposing the adoption of an Intergenerational Compact that will connect these initiatives and the people who manage them into a mutually supportive network. Through this network, different agencies will be able to share information and support each others’ strategies. The following principles guide this initiative:

1. 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 paths that lead
to their adult lives is something that requires joint effort from teachers, parents, employers, and others in the community.

2. 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.

3. Providing quality education and learning opportunities for all young people is fundamental to building a society of competent adults. The worksite should also be a place of learning for young people who are starting out. Within our schools, there is a need to adopt flexible approaches that respond to the pressures involved in juggling school and work. Teachers and other school staff should provide guidance to young people on how to combine study and work effectively.

For further information: Regarding the Inter-generational Youth Compact For inquiries, e-mail Margaret Vickers – mhv@uws.edu.au Or for information, go to www.ansn.edu.au

References
