Youth: A Problem for Whom?

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Introduction

The question posed in the title provides a central focus for this examination of what is happening to youth in Australia in the 1990s. The ‘problem’ of/for youth is likely to be socially constructed in different ways by governments, such other organisational players as schools, employers and the business sector, the community in general, and of course young people and their families, as well as by scholars and researchers. In this paper, three main perspectives on the current ‘youth problem’ in Australia are presented. The paper starts with a brief description of the portrayal of youth as a major social and political issue in the media during 1992 and related state and federal government responses (drawing specifically on the reporting in the Melbourne Age over about a three-month period). There is then some discussion of academic, mainly sociological, approaches to the study of youth in western societies and the significance of such concepts as transition, dependence and marginality in this literature and some analysis of what is happening in the current circumstances. This is followed by the presentation of some findings from a recent research project I have been conducting with the Brotherhood of St. Laurence in Melbourne. The study provides us with some understanding of the experiences of young people themselves (and their parents) as they find themselves facing the combined effects of current economic and employment difficulties and government policy changes in the areas of education and training, social security, and family support.

The ‘Youth Problem’ in the Press

The period in which I followed the press closely runs from early 1991 to late 1992. This was a period in which youth was one of the key media topics in Australia and during which youth became the focus of collective action by the Federal and Victorian State Labor Governments, and by the Liberal/Country Party Federal Opposition, all of which were facing impending elections.

There are four main phases in relation to the press coverage of youth and youth-related issues. There is a phase up to mid-June 1992, the ‘pre-problem’ phase; then there is a two-week phase from mid June to the end of June, where there was a high level of press attention, when youth was constructed as a major social issue, and this seems to be media determined; then from 25 June to the end of July is the Summits phase, when organised political responses to the problem that had by then achieved a high level of public attention provided the main stimulus to and subject matter of continued press coverage; and finally the coverage returned after this to the kind and level of reporting that was typical of the period prior to this somewhat unusual episode. I will give some examples of newspaper items, headings and text from the three key phases.
Phase One. Here the forms of coverage are the largely factual reporting of statements by politicians and others on separate single occasions, with little comment on context and no continuity over time. There were a few background research articles or commentary pieces, all painting a negative picture of life for young people, some linking this to the lack of jobs for young people, others to the gap between demand and supply of tertiary and further education places. Three (that appeared in January, February and April 1992) are worth noting: two of them, the first and the last, took a fairly sensationalist stance, talking about violence, crime, drinking, fights, suicide, etc., ‘the trouble [that] is brewing’ among ‘discarded youth’ and the second adopting a sober analytical tone and talking about a ‘betrayal of youth’ and the creation of a state of ‘enforced dependency’ and ‘alienation’. The disconnectedness of the individual items is clearly illustrated by the fact that it was in January the newspaper published for the first time the youth unemployment figure in the western suburbs of Melbourne, a figure of 44%, in a somewhat subdued, largely factual article about school-leavers returning to school, a figure not mentioned again until April, but which later became a much cited and politically contested statistic.

In Phase Two, youth is being created as a major problem issue. Here we have headings across a whole page or pages of the paper, such as ‘The Plight of Our Unemployed’ (15 June), which focused on the effects of unemployment on families and youth, with several articles over two pages, an editorial page column and a short piece on page 1 leading into the subsequent material. (Almost the same page heading ‘The Plight of the Jobless’ was used again on 25 June.) This very substantial coverage came somewhat unannounced, though in the previous day’s Sunday Age (which has its own editor and journalists) there had been an editorial entitled ‘Teen jobless: time to get to work’ making a number of policy recommendations and a page 3 spread consisting of three pieces on the situation of youth.

The message during this phase was that there was a serious shortage of youth employment with education and training as the main solution for young people. These pieces were overwhelmingly negative, highlighting the human costs of the current economic situation, using emotive language: ‘outcasts’, ‘lost families’, ‘trapped at school’, ‘alone in a crowd of jobless’, ‘recession robs teens of hope’, ‘promising student loses his way in mire of poverty’, but with a single exception on one day, (16 June) where there were three good news stories (announcing various government promises of assistance). Overall the approach taken was to deal with general conditions, though without much analysis of the sources of these conditions, and to talk in terms of categories of people and their situations rather than reporting particular disconnected stories about individuals as sad cases treated in isolation from their social context (which is more usual for the media).

Phase Three. The Government Summits phase (three separate one-day Summits were held to which a selection of public figures was invited, all of which received extensive publicity). There were three separate highly intensive episodes around each of the three summits and not much in between.
Kirner’s Summit in late June. (Joan Kirner was the Labor Premier of Victoria.) Three quarters of page 1 on the 26 June was devoted to the Victorian Government Jobs Summit and included a good news and a bad news story - the announcement of youth trainee jobs and a reported ‘crisis of confidence among victims’. The following day, two separate columnists evaluated the Summit as a strategy unfavourably, and one article exposed some contradictions in state policy regarding schemes to assist unemployed youth.

Hewson’s Summit in early July. (John Hewson was the leader of the Federal Opposition Coalition and subsequently somewhat unexpectedly the loser in the 1993 Federal Election.) Over some four days this attracted sustained national and State coverage in the form of front page and inside reports, and columns on the editorial page, a combination of factual reporting and evaluations (negative and positive) by experts, interest groups and journalists.

Keating’s Summit later in July. (Paul Keating was and is the Labor Federal Prime Minister). Over three days, newspapers gave front page and inside detailed coverage. Again there was a mixture of factual and evaluative material, and both good and bad aspects were noted.

Then as a major media event, youth more or less disappears.

Two main patterns can be discerned over the whole period. The first is the sharp contrast in amount, character and apparent purpose of material between the occasional, unconnected, individual, mainly news item pieces in the earlier phase and the sustained, informed and coordinated commentary given in the latter phases, which was presumably the result of planned editorial policy. The second is the highly sociological approach that is taken in the second and third phases, where unemployment/enforced school retention/insecurity in respect to teenage jobs is seen as a socially caused problem affecting many young people and not simply the fault or concern of the individual. Language reflects this orientation and the impression is strongly conveyed that the causes of the problem are powerful external social forces, such as changes in industry, business and the economy, and structural unemployment, that only governments can control; individuals are seen as powerless. There is a strong moral message accompanying this analysis, that all this is bad not only for the victims but for society as a whole, and that action must be taken to deal with it. The main target of this message of persuasion is government, but business is also given a role to play and their initiatives are commented on favourably whenever they occur.

Since 1992, though from time to time these issues have been revisited, this has taken the form of one-off articles, not anything like the kind of sustained, in-depth coverage that occurred in the press in this particular period. The source of the problems faced by youth still seems to be society, and more specifically the
economy and changes in employment opportunities. Responsibility therefore continues to be seen as lying primarily with government, rather than with the individual young person.

**The Sociology of Youth**

Western societies, following industrialisation, created the modern notion of the child and during the 20th century academics and others have identified the further separate category of adolescents/ce or youth. Children and young people like those at the other end of the age-defined life course have been socially constructed as categories requiring special kinds of institutional provision and management (Turner 1989). The institutions of family, education, welfare and law enforcement were those with primary responsibility for the young and until relatively recently they were seen as exercising control over children and young people more as separate agencies rather than as parts of a complex framework of diverse and not necessarily consistent government policies and provisions.

It is generally acknowledged that writers and researchers on youth have often uncritically adopted the dominant cultural conception of their societies that youth constitutes a problem of some sort. This idea of youth as a problem can take several forms. For instance, Jamrozik (1988; Boland and Jamrozik 1987) described some six different characterisations, ranging from those which emphasise the special needs, deficiencies or disadvantages of young people because of their age, which may mean they require particular services and opportunities, reflecting the idea of youth as having problems, (a ‘socialisation’ orientation to youth), to those conceptions which express concern about youth more as posing a problem for others, as being a threat to social order (in other words a ‘control’ orientation). In the former case, young people are seen as ‘dependent’, in the latter, as ‘deviant’, with appropriately different societal attitudes and responses.

All youth at some stage are dependent, while youth as such may or may not be regarded as potentially deviant, but rather only some subcategories of youth that attract public attention get defined as deviant. There is then a dual notion of youth in modern societies: on the one hand, all youth need assistance and attention from society, and from those institutions and adults specifically concerned with those in the age-determined statuses of children and young persons (namely the family, schools, employers, the health system, etc); and, on the other hand, the idea that society requires additional and specialised provisions to deal with some youth who are of concern as failing in some way or who pose a threat either to themselves or to others, as measured against the relevant expectations for and perceived capacities of those who have not yet reached adulthood.

Although children of say up to twelve years are rarely regarded as responsible for their actions, there is considerable confusion about the age at which young persons have reached adulthood and could or should be held accountable. There is a much greater tendency to treat both children and young people whose behaviour is
somehow problematic as victims or casualties of social conditions, reflecting an understanding of their lack of power. But the older the young person and the more threatening the behaviour, the greater the likelihood that some responsibility will be attributed to that person and the less willingness there will be to see all the blame lying elsewhere, whether with adults or with society generally.

Governments, policy-makers, researchers and academics have always had to concern themselves with those who because of various kinds of deficiencies or disadvantages - intellectual, locational, economic, cultural, familial, psychological - encountered problems in making the transition from dependent child maintained by others to self-supporting adult. Typically up until the 1980s government agencies and researchers concerned with young people and the process of growing up have concentrated their efforts on those in already pre-defined problem categories such as under-achievers, early leavers, migrants and others from non-English speaking (NES) backgrounds, those in low income and sole parent households, and rural populations. What is most significant, however, about the present period is that youth as a phase of life and the circumstances surrounding it are widely perceived as problematic for all those experiencing it and for those in the various institutions, including government, whose job it is to manage both the people and the processes. The press reporting during 1992 which I described earlier illustrates nicely the emergence of such a construction. It may also be useful to extend the concept ‘marginality’ (Chapman and Cook 1988; Coffield et al. 1986), a term generally designating a problem minority (with unemployment, class or racial characteristics), to describe aspects of the social position of young people in general.

The sociological literature on youth has mainly relied on the concept of ‘transitions’ to provide a useful framework for analysing the social situation of being a young person in a society like ours, while recognising the situation is a dynamic one, as the growing up process for adolescents is accompanied by a range of social changes (for an early Australian example of this approach, see Poole 1983). Within the transitions framework, a number of separate processes or transitions can be distinguished as the individual moves from childhood to adulthood, from dependence to independence, from being part of a family and residential unit into which he/she is born to setting up relationships and a place to live of one’s own, from being a student within the educational system to being a member of the paid workforce (Wallace, 1987; Harris, 1988; Hartley, 1989). Whether the notion of transition is of passing through a single sequence of stages or of negotiating a number of separate and not necessarily inter-related changes of status and situation, this is the most popular sociological framework for the analysis of youth. (For an example of the value of the ‘transitions’ approach for comparative, cross-national studies of youth and social change, see Chisholm et al. eds. 1990).

For all young people, there are multiple transitions to be negotiated more or less successfully and for each young person, the transitions may occur in different ways and in different sequences; in addition there may be alternative pathways through these transitions for individuals with different personal and social characteristics,
such as income or class, race and ethnicity, gender, geographical location, ability, etc. It is however worth noting that the theoretical treatment of these multiple social divisions or dimensions of existence and inequality are handled rather differently by different writers: Jamrozik (1987;1988) makes it very clear that for him class is the primary structural basis of society and age, race and sex are of secondary significance; by contrast, Wallace (1986a; 1986b; 1987) and Jones (1988) in England and Wilson and Wyn (1987), Hartley (1989) and Maas (1990) in Australia, among others, argue for all these elements to be seen as equally important and implicated in social processes of growing up in complex and interrelated ways.

In different periods, these transitions have been easier or more difficult to achieve, and the 1980s in most western societies has been a period where the main transition from school to work has become far less straightforward and routine for the majority of young people. Writers in England from the early 1980s on and more recently in Australia talk of young people experiencing transitions as ‘broken’, ‘fractured’, ‘dislocated’ or ‘disrupted’ (Roberts,1984; Wallace, 1987; Polk and Tait, 1990; White, 1990). Structural changes in the labour market and in the types and levels of occupational skill demanded, related changes in education, both at school and post-school levels, and various other government policy changes in, for example, income support, all these have had a profound impact on the lives of many young people, causing at the least a delay in entry to the workforce and for most a prolonging of the period of dependency on family and/or state. All these changes, as well as the current recession, have brought the school to work transition back into focus as the primary determinant of young people’s lives and the principal concern of young people themselves and their families (Roll, 1988; Dwyer and Wilson, 1991; Winderlich 1991; Poole 1992; Winefield et al. 1993).

A distinctive characteristic of the 1990s has been the acceptance by all political parties, by governments, by business and by the community that the problems young people are facing are societally-caused, complex and interconnected, and will require structural solutions and ones in which the government plays a major role. The most dramatic evidence of this public consciousness and the priority that is being given to it is visible across the whole spectrum of policy-oriented writing and debate. It has been a constant topic in the newspapers and other media, and in speeches of politicians, particularly during the period leading up to the 1993 Australian Federal election. It is in widely diverse documents and discourses, ranging from at one extreme, formal, official, government-sponsored reports relying on research, expert advice and consultations (for example, in Australia, the Carmichael, Deveson, Finn and Mayer reports all of which were government-sponsored and concerned with future directions for education and training); at the other end, we have overtly propagandist writing of the ‘moral panic’ variety.

One such example is Richard Eckersley’s (1992) paper for the Australian Commission of the Future, entitled Apocalypse? No!: Youth and the Challenge to Change, which as one might imagine carries a ‘youth as threat’ message as well as ‘youth as problem’. This argues in highly emotive terms and with very sparse and
selective data, that society is in crisis, that a whole generation of (young) Australians are being subjected to ‘cultural abuse’ (1992:12), the dramatic effects of which are evidenced by high rates of suicide, drug abuse, crime, violence, mental illness, and behind which lies general pessimism, alienation and despair, and a profound cultural crisis in Australian society. It is unclear what the purpose of pieces such as this is intended to be, but it certainly feeds powerful emotionally-based concerns into the public debate, which may or more likely may not assist in the generation of better policy responses by governments and others. Another is the recent emergence of the notion of a ‘youth underclass’ (see, for instance, Bessant 1994; White 1994) which again carries the suggestion that some youth are in some sense separate from and ‘outside’ society and have, consequently, moved beyond the reach of normal institutional and moral controls. Although, by contrast with Eckersley, this kind of analysis emphasises structural rather than cultural aspects of the current situation of young people, it has the same tendency to encourage the view that there are highly undesirable and even dangerous elements among contemporary youth and hence to provoke highly negative and exclusionary responses.

My study

The study that I have been involved with needs to be set against this general background. Like a number of recent British and Australian studies of youth (such as Wallace 1987, Hutson and Jenkins, 1989, Hartley, 1989 or Jones and Wallace 1992, as contrasted with perhaps White 1990 or the earlier 1980s studies of marginality and unemployment), the focus of my study is not on some pre-defined problem category or categories (such as low income families, school drop-outs, homeless youth, or those living in areas with high unemployment), but on a cross-section of ‘average’ or ‘normal’ young people: the subjects of the study were fifteen to nineteen year olds who were all living with their families and still attending secondary school. But it is a cross-section that contains sufficient diversity across the range of major social variables i.e. class, gender, ethnicity, age, household type.

The purpose was precisely to explore what was actually happening to those subject to the current economic and social conditions and the effects of government policies that academics, experts and others are all so concerned about and of which they are offering their own interpretations and assessments. The project was initiated in 1989, well before the 1990s recession, the publicity given to the ‘youth problem’ and the official recognition of its structural causes. The project was designed so that it would be possible to investigate the situations of a reasonably representative section of young people and hopefully to be able to document the differential impact of the various aspects of the current environment on individuals in different social circumstances. As a study being conducted jointly with the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Melbourne, a welfare agency with a primary commitment to addressing poverty and inequality, we made sure that the sample included some who would fit the traditional characterisation of ‘disadvantaged groups’—those living in sole parent, low income and NESB
households. It was expected that members of such groups would undoubtedly be among those most negatively affected by many of the features of the current situation, specifically high unemployment and the financial pressures associated with keeping teenage children at school.

However, the study was to have a much broader focus than on particular groups or on economic disadvantage alone, although the latter would undoubtedly be a crucial element. The complexity of the factors and processes involved and the significance of the multiple dimensions of social difference and inequality would suggest that one might find considerable diversity within the population in respect to both experiences of and responses to current conditions. How different sub-groups are affected by various aspects of prevailing social and economic circumstances is likely to be highly variable and judgements about which categories are the most seriously affected by particular changes in their situations are not necessarily easy to make. The likelihood is that some different sources and consequences of social disadvantage are being produced in this changing environment for young people and their families.

Some details will be given briefly on the subjects of the study. Sixty-eight students in Years 10, 11 and 12 in two state secondary schools were interviewed and thirty-six of their parents. The schools were located in the western and north-western region of Melbourne. All the interviews took place in the latter half of 1990 before the end of the school year. In 1992 we approached all those students who were in Years 11 and 12 in 1990 and would have been likely to have been out of school for at least one year and any Year 10 students who had left school for a follow-up interview. Of these we succeeded in interviewing forty students. The data described here are based mainly on the information obtained in the first interviews, but where the later interviews revealed significant changes had occurred over the two-year period, these differences are noted.

The majority of the students (70%) were aged fifteen or sixteen. There were very similar numbers of males and females. The ethnic breakdown was into two large groups, Australian-born with Australian-born parents, and those of European origin, with a small number of Asians and other ethnic groups. In 1990, all except two were living with at least one parent, typically mother, and the other two were with their grandmothers. Fifty-one (75%) were living with two parents, and in 42 cases this was both natural parents. Twenty-two were not living with their fathers. Fifteen were living in sole parent households, and in eleven of these the parent was dependent on social security. On the basis of household income, four categories were identified. A comparison of income size showed that 29 out of the 68 (about two fifths) were in the highest income group for this study ($500 or above nett weekly income, and since this was around the average weekly wage at the time, it is not ‘high’ income in the usual sense). At the other extreme, 12 (or just under 20%) were in the under $300 income group. (The poverty line in December 1990 for a couple with two children was $353). When income size and source was combined with household type, this showed that most of those in the higher income group were in two-wage, two-parent households and two thirds of
those in the lowest income group were living with one adult on government benefits or pension. In between were two other groups, the lower still at near poverty level because of low income and/or number of dependants (12 in this group also) and the other slightly better-off (15 were in this group). The data on parental occupation reinforces the picture of these households covering the low to middle socio-economic range, with only one quarter coming from higher administrative, professional or para-professional backgrounds. Seven fathers and twenty-three mothers were not in paid work, including unemployed, workcare recipients and those on invalid pensions, and seven mothers on supporting parent benefit; there were also seven full-time housewives.

In general, the economic and family situations of these young people suggest that they were not among the most disadvantaged sections of their age group, although a substantial proportion were in households living on below average incomes. They were all living with members of their families, and three quarters were in two parent households. And, although necessarily based on subjective data, the impression gained was that for most (and remembering that the teenage years are typically the most difficult), family life was at least tolerable and there was no evidence of serious conflict or incompatibility with parents. Relationships appeared to be reasonable in the majority of cases, with more favourable statements being made of the relationship with mothers than with fathers and by female as compared with male students.

Forty young people were re-interviewed in 1992. Half were then nineteen and the others either one year older or one year younger and there were twenty-one females and nineteen males. Thirty-four were living in the same household, four had changed but were with relatives, and two were living apart. Twenty-three were living with both parents, twelve were in sole parent households, and five were not living with parent(s). When each individual respondent’s household income level in 1992 was compared with that in 1990, the level was higher in twenty-four cases (often because of the wages of the young person and/or siblings), lower in twelve cases and similar in the remaining four. Information on the individual young people’s own incomes revealed that, as they grew older, not surprisingly their income levels rose. (While in 1990 most had no more than $30 per week, in 1992 only 10% were in this situation, and 50% had between $30 and $100, and 25% between $100 and $300.) However, for half of the 1992 group the main source of income was Austudy or Job Search Allowance, and only around one-third were in a position to afford to live independently. It has been widely observed that a compounding factor for young people and their families is that current government policy is to treat young people under 21 years and not in paid employment as primarily the financial responsibility of their parents. The levels of benefits paid are below the full adult level and in the case of those aged under eighteen they are means tested against parental income. Since the early 1980s the relative value of direct income support payments to this age-group (with the exception of those receiving the Youth Homeless Allowance) has declined (Thomson 1993:86-7).
The interviews produced a large volume of mainly qualitative data on a whole range of topics - school, education, training, employment and unemployment, the role of government, family life, leisure, growing up, adulthood and the future. Much of this data was coded so that it could be statistically analysed and general patterns identified. But the full report of the research also includes many of the responses of the students in the original words, though these are not included in this paper. Turning to the major findings of the study, the responses of the fifteen to nineteen year students in four main topic areas will be presented: education and training; employment; unemployment and other current problems; and the role of government with respect to education, unemployment, youth and families.

**Education and training**

The most striking finding with respect to attitudes and expectations about education was that, despite some reservations about school, the overwhelming majority intended to stay at school until the end of the final year (year 12) and over one half believed most or all should complete year 12. For this group the reasons for staying on were so strong that they outweighed the various aspects of school that students clearly found unattractive - the boredom, homework, some teachers, rules, and the Victorian Certificate of Education (which was and is highly contentious). They were convinced that education was the only route to jobs for almost everyone, not only in present economic circumstances but in the future, though the majority considered that more students would leave earlier if there were more jobs. A minority thought there were individuals who lacked the aptitude or ability to gain from staying at school and others (mainly males, Australian-born and from the bottom income group) believed there were still alternatives (mainly apprenticeships).

A very high proportion (over 90%) had plans for further study, and a surprisingly large number (more than two-thirds) mentioned university, and more young women than young men. The majority indicated an intention to go from school into full-time study, though there was a gender difference here with more males than females expecting to go straight into full-time jobs. The follow-up study was important here as a test of actions rather than expectations, particularly given the impact of the recession which worsened in the period 1990-92.

The decisions about which forms of further or higher education to aim for seemed to be made largely on one or other of two grounds: either there was a general sense that university (which by then some understood to incorporate Institutes of Technology and Colleges of Advanced Education, but others did not) was a good thing or a preference for a particular occupation which was known to have a specific educational qualification as its prerequisite (requiring either study in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector or university). Though most students appeared to have access to career advice, there was little evidence that they had obtained any detailed knowledge about the different post-school courses available in different institutions or any appreciation of the need for careful
consideration of different options. As the area of further and higher education becomes more diverse and complex and more young people seek post-secondary education, this is going to become even more essential if young people are to make appropriate and realistic choices.

There was almost universal acceptance of the necessity to get as much education as possible in order to gain access not only to career jobs but increasingly to any jobs; in other words these students have absorbed the current message from teachers, politicians and various experts. For some, however, this was clearly an expedient and instrumental reason for more education, regardless of whether the education was interesting or enjoyable in itself. For others there was considerable doubt about job prospects even with further education qualifications and considerable pessimism about the future for particular individuals and for young people in general.

We have, therefore, a group of young people who were determined to stay on at school, whether they liked it or not, and to seek further education and who accepted that this was the only course open to them, but who expressed considerable concern about their employment chances. And yet they were remarkably undemanding and uncritical both about the education they have received and will receive and about the fact that whatever they do there is no guarantee of a decent job or any employment security.

The follow-up interviews revealed that thirty-four of the forty stayed at school until the end of year 12 as expected and only four individuals had expressed such an intention and then did not do so; five males and one female either had repeated or were still repeating years 11 or 12. Thirty-seven had left school. Of these, twenty-seven were attending or had attended university, TAFE or other college, four had done short courses and six reported no post-school study of any kind. There was substantial variation in post-school experience when compared with 1990 expectations. Of twenty-four who had said they planned to go to university, thirteen (ten females) had done so and eleven had not, though six of these had taken a non-degree course (five of the six being females), and two, both males, had obtained jobs. Three were still at school. Six of the thirty-seven who had left school had so far done no post-school education or training courses. Although there were changes in preferences and expectations regarding further study between 1990 and 1992, there was no evidence of post-school experience generally leading to a substantially reduced value being given to tertiary and further education.

**Employment**

Consistent with their higher education plans, most of these students in 1990 were aiming for higher white collar jobs: thirty-six of the sixty-eight named administrative, managerial, or professional occupations and a further fifteen named para-professional (75% in all). At the same time they recognised that the jobs they would be likely to get on leaving school (and for many this would
hopefully be part-time temporary jobs while they were studying) were far more modest, with well over three quarters thinking in terms of semi- and unskilled manual and sales/service jobs. Students who had at least one parent in a professional or para-professional job were most likely to want a professional job themselves, while students whose parents were in lower white collar or manual occupations considered a wider range of occupational possibilities, though at least one half still nominated jobs of a professional or para-professional kind. Parents seemed to hold fairly similar views to their male student children, but they were significantly less ambitious or optimistic than their daughters in the case of their female children (only slightly over one half expected their daughters to gain professional or para-professional jobs). Both students and their parents perceived education and qualifications as the primary determinants of higher status jobs, while parents also ranked motivation as a significant factor.

While these perceptions of the increasingly critical nexus between further education and permanent full-time jobs in the mainstream occupations reveal a widespread realisation of the changed nature of the labour market and the employment situation, the issue is: how realistic are these expectations and ambitions for young people from these sorts of socio-economic backgrounds and attending schools of this kind, given the remarkably high percentage of students aspiring to university and a high status career occupation? Of the twenty-four who said in 1990 that they intended to go to university, in 1992 thirteen (mostly females) reported that they had actually done so, while a further fifteen had some further education but of a non-university nature, three as apprentices. There was thus a clear pattern of post-school educational experiences being below the level expected.

Occupational experiences also differed from the picture presented while these young people were still attending school. Ten had had a full-time job at some point since leaving school, fifteen had had part-time jobs and the others had had none. Four, all males, had intended to do an apprenticeship but did not and three of these were unemployed. A total of twelve were unemployed at the time of the follow-up interview. Apart from three apprentices, one person in a para-professional job and three in clerical jobs, the other eighteen currently in employment were all in sales/services or semi- and unskilled-skilled employment. Twenty-three had changed their views about the jobs that they expected to end up in, but for most this involved a change of area and only for nine did this entail significantly lowering their sights. This is of concern, because, given the actual post-secondary educational experience and the likely future educational prospects of these young people, in many cases their 1990 occupational goals were too ambitious.

Unemployment

In a period of high unemployment generally and one in which the age-group to which these young people belonged was particular affected, unemployment had a
very significant presence in the lives of the students we interviewed. Some of the households contained parents or siblings who had lost their jobs and the threat of future unemployment was a major concern for these young people and their parents. Over three quarters of those interviewed in 1990 knew at least a few people who were unemployed. Over half of the students believed that they might be unemployed at some time, and all gave reasons to do with the economy and employment situation. A similar proportion of parents anticipated that their children might in future experience unemployment (and for the majority this would not be their children’s fault). The majority of students would go on unemployment benefit if they were unable to get work, but a higher proportion of the lower two income groups and a lower proportion from the other two income groups. All those from households that lived on government support would accept unemployment benefit.

There was evidence that there was still only conditional acceptance of unemployment benefit being available to all those who are not in paid work. A similar proportion (about one third) overall and of those in the highest and in the lower income groups thought only a few people or none deserved unemployment benefit. The largest single cause for people being unemployed in the opinion of the students was the scarcity of jobs (62%) and other factors cited which do not attribute personal responsibility were lack of education and qualifications and retrenchment (mentioned particularly by parents). A significant minority did offer reasons that implied some deficiency or fault in the unemployed person, laziness being the one that attracted the largest response, though a few mentioned ‘dole-bludging’. The justifications offered for not supporting unemployment benefit in all cases were the danger of people becoming over-dependent on the government, or being unwilling to put sufficient effort into finding a job.

These students' attitudes and judgements were far harsher in the main than one might have expected, when set against the students' own knowledge of unemployment in their area and among family and friends, and the broader context of a severe economic decline that was colouring their views of their future in all aspects.

At the time of the second interview, twelve young people were unemployed. Three of these were among those who had expected to go to university, three had expected to get apprenticeships and four had expected to go straight into other jobs, and two had anticipated they might be unemployed. Twenty of the forty had been unemployed at some time, and for thirteen individuals this had lasted for more than six months. In 1992, a higher proportion anticipated that they would at some time be unemployed (75% compared with around 50%). While some students in 1990 considered individual personal failings to be among the causes of unemployment, these were not mentioned in 1992, when the economy was seen as the primary factor.

Questions were also asked about the situation of young people generally, about their concerns and about their views of adulthood. These elicited responses from
these young people which confirmed the crucial importance of a job and worries about the uncertainty of this in the economic circumstances of the 1990s. Interestingly, parents revealed different concerns: more of them were troubled about drugs, alcohol, violence, crime and a declining moral climate than the employment situation of their children, and this was particularly characteristic of those in two-parent, two-income households.

However when asked to make a relative assessment of the importance in life of one’s family as against either money or having a decent job, a slightly larger majority of students judged jobs to be of high importance than judged the family so (84%: 79%), and money came third. Girls placed less importance on money than did boys, but both sexes gave similar rankings to family and to jobs. When only the top ratings for the three are considered, the family received the highest proportion (35%). There was a tendency for the family to receive higher ratings from those from higher income households and for money to be rated more highly by those in the lowest income group, but family was ranked ahead even in this group. Family was evaluated more highly by parents than by students.

When asked to rank five aspects of adulthood, the attribute that attracted the highest number of first rankings from both students and parents was ‘being sensible and responsible about things’; after this, however, came two attributes, ‘having a proper job’ and ‘enough money’, which were consistently given greater significance than marriage or ‘living in one’s own place’, again providing evidence of the central place these concerns occupy in the minds of these young people. There were no noticeable differences in the patterns of responses given by young people in 1990 and in 1992.

**The role of government**

In the public debate around the economy and unemployment at the present time, it seems to be taken for granted that government is a major, if not the major, player. Governments and contenders for government recognise this and have made these issues central in their various policy agendas. The three Summits are particularly dramatic evidence of this.

It therefore seemed appropriate to seek the views of these students and their parents about the kinds of roles and responsibilities a government has for various categories and areas of need and for the population as a whole in current circumstances. Surprisingly, this is a largely neglected area of research in studies of youth, which is acknowledged but not remedied by Jones and Wallace in their latest (1992) book on youth and citizenship.

Students were familiar with the most directly relevant Australian government schemes and agencies - Austudy, Commonwealth Employment Service, Department of Social Security, Unemployment Benefit and Job Search Allowance, Family Allowance (or Child Endowment).
Thirteen households in 1990, mostly sole parent households, were reliant on social security payments from government for their income (nine of these fell into the lowest income group) and in 1992, nine out of the forty young people were living in households supported by social security. In 1992, for half of the young people, Austudy or Job Search Allowance was a major source of income. In 1990, about one third of the families received Austudy and/or the state education allowance that was paid at the time and they said they found these payments financially very helpful. In 1990 the financial costs associated with maintaining older teenage children at school, which were admitted by most parents but not necessarily by their children, were not, however, regarded either by students or their parents as a primary consideration in influencing the decision whether or not to stay on at school. A number of students and parents believed that governments should offer financial assistance at least to those in need if not to all, if it was government policy to keep young people longer in full-time education.

More generally, about two thirds of the students but only one third of the parents believed that the government had a responsibility to ensure that everyone had a good standard of living. There was some support for both a more universalist social democratic approach and for more selective redistributive measures, while a minority of students but the majority of parents wanted the types and targets of welfare to be limited so as not to undermine individual incentives and self-reliance. When asked to identify the particular categories which government should help, all the usual examples of ‘deserving poor’ were mentioned - poor, aged, sick and invalid, homeless, disabled, low income-earners. Another question posed a choice between the family and government as to which should take primary responsibility for dependent and needy people. The majority (70%) in response to a direct question considered that the government should be doing more for either families or young people or both. The kinds of assistance for youth that were suggested covered the range of more jobs, more financial support and improvements to education and training. In the 1992 follow-up, there was an increase in the number supporting more government assistance to various sections of the population. At the same time, there was some ambivalence in the young people’s attitudes. While three-quarters of them made suggestions as to positive actions for the government to take, one half also expressed views that suggested a degree of political disinterest and/or scepticism about what the government could or should do.

Another question asked in 1990 posed a choice between the family and government as to which should take primary responsibility for dependent and needy people. About half of both students and parents thought both should be involved, around one quarter saw this as a responsibility of the family, and only a small proportion named the government alone.
Conclusion

In conclusion it is worth remembering that, in presenting current data on the ‘youth problem’, the empirical study that is being reported concerns a group of young people which excludes individuals from the more obviously disadvantaged sections i.e. homeless, unemployed, early leavers, and those with disabilities or seriously disturbed family backgrounds. It did include low income families and sole parent households, and contained students from a range of levels of educational achievement and socio-economic status. Also, careful comparisons need to be made between the material that came from the first interviews of students and their parents in 1990 and that which was derived from the smaller number of young people whom it was possible to re-interview in 1992. The follow-up interviews two years later provided the means for checking expectations and aspirations against reality, since at the time of the follow-up study all the young men and women had had at least some time out of school (even though at the time of the second interview there was a small number who had left and then returned to complete year 12). Whatever plans these young people had had while at school and however realistic or not they were, the later situation that they encountered with respect both to further education and employment would be likely to have further altered their circumstances and probably reduced even further the chances they had of putting their original intentions into practice.

It is also the case that the role of the key variables of class, gender and ethnicity, which it was anticipated would significantly shape the experiences and situations of these young people and which therefore influenced both the sample selection and the analysis, was more difficult to trace and was more subtle and variable than expected. In particular, it seems that in current circumstances and in a group like this, gender on many issues is less likely to show up as a significant single factor than are income, household composition or ethnic background. However, what this kind of study shows, is that there is considerable empirical support for the theoretically-based argument that these key components of identity and social existence need to be looked at in combinations not as separate and separately-measurable variables. As the analyses of other researchers such as Wallace (1987) who are sensitive to the differences in the ways in which pathways through the various transitions to adulthood are arranged and in the ways these are negotiated by young people of different gender, ethnicity and socio-economic or class background show, there are a number of complex and differentiated patterns operating here affecting the processes of getting economic independence, leaving home and establishing adult relationships, and the order in which these occur.

Of the broader issues that are raised, there are three in particular that bear on the subject of the state and public policy with respect to youth in the current socio-economic context that deserve attention in these concluding comments.

1. The first concerns views about the education-labour market nexus. Although there seems to be a fairly accurate perception of the changed labour market for teenagers and the disappearance of low skilled jobs, it is much less clear
what knowledge young people have about the wide range of kinds and levels of courses at the various further and higher educational institutions, and the numbers and types of jobs that are available, and how they relate to different levels of educational and training qualifications. The impression that one gets from these data is that these young people believe that it is a question of getting 'more education' and that this will lead to a more or less unlimited supply of jobs and a wide choice. The reward for more years of study is access to 'better jobs' and this seems to be an undifferentiated concept, such that all the high status and professional occupations that a group such as this would not previously have aspired to are now seen as possibilities (albeit possibilities that look somewhat less likely once young people have left school and find themselves in the competition for places on further education courses and for jobs). And there are certainly important gender aspects to all this which this study and other comparable research has established.

The message that education is the only route to a worthwhile job has been well learnt, but neither education and employment nor the relationship between the two are as simple as the message implies. For substantial sections of the population, both those in this age-group and their parents, problems are only being postponed until the point when the formal education phase has been completed and entry is sought to the full-time workforce. The concerns expressed by those interviewed in this study related only to possible difficulties in obtaining places in TAFE and the universities, not with what might happen later. There are important implications here for schools, colleges and universities, careers advisory services, particular relevant government departments, and governments generally.

2. A second issue is how to explain the apparent contradiction between knowledge about unemployment and attitudes to unemployed people and government assistance at a time of persistent high unemployment. On the one hand, there is widespread awareness of the extent and source of unemployment currently, which is consistently portrayed by the media, by politicians and experts as the result of national and international economic forces that are hard if not impossible to control, and this is confirmed by personal experience of family members, friends and acquaintances losing their jobs and being unable to find others. On the other hand, at the level of attitudes and judgements about those individuals who find themselves out of work and about their entitlement to financial support from the government, there was still a remarkable persistence of the traditional opposition to 'welfare' both for themselves and for others and belief that though it might be deserved, the universal right to financial support from the state, even of the limited kind currently available, would undermine individuals' self-respect and motivation.

One possible element in this may be that, while practically everyone recognises that the labour market is changing and that this is a prime cause for some of the structural unemployment, in adopting education as the best
strategy for the future, young people and their parents are committing themselves to a course of action that demands personal application and sacrifice in the present for a future benefit and carries with it considerable uncertainty. One of the ways in which they may reassure themselves that it will pay off is to re-emphasise individual factors involved in making this work, motivation, diligent study, a positive orientation, family support, etc. with the corollary that not all students will have these advantages and one’s best protection in a competitive situation is to aim to be better than the others. This way of thinking, however, depends on value-judgements about positive and negative attributes and more and less worthy categories of people, and hence maintains an individualistic conception of social differentiation and social life. And this is precisely what underlies the well-entrenched division in liberal and welfare state societies between deserving and non-deserving forms of dependency.

3. The third issue is how to make sense sociologically of government policies and provisions across a number of areas affecting youth, which appear to be often inconsistent and uncoordinated. With respect to youth, that is those under the age of twenty-one and for some purposes, up to the age of twenty-five years in the case of students, the major aspects of their lives are specifically regulated by the state: the state determines the forms and levels of education, including both schooling and the various types of post-school education and training; minimum age of entry to the labour market, articulation between job-training and employment, and age-related wage levels and other conditions of work; availability, eligibility and levels of income support for those not in paid work either because they are in full-time education or because they are unable to obtain a job; the disappearance of full-time jobs for teenagers and the extension of the period in full-time education for most young people, in combination with a very limited scheme of financial assistance for this age-group, means that under current economic circumstances for all but high income households, government policies have effectively reduced the opportunities for young people to leave home and set up independently, except in extreme cases of family violence or breakdown, and this has consequences for the majority of families, and not only those on low incomes.

To explain what is happening here, we have, on the one hand, 1970s Marxist theories of the state which deny any monolithic structure to the state and talk instead about multiple apparatuses and arenas, with contested and contradictory policies and practices. On the other, we have less theoretically complex but perhaps at present quite persuasive analyses which regard the actions of governments as highly pragmatic and primarily economically-driven, usually responding to short-term exigencies, without much evidence of overall planning and coordination or of being influenced by either rational or ideological considerations. Much of what has happened in the youth policy field during the 1980s and early 1990s seems to fit the latter model,
particularly as this was the period of financial and economic pressures, of the dominance of economics, and of economic rationalism specifically.

But at the same time, it is clear that in this field at least, governments were increasing not decreasing their responsibilities for regulating and financing a whole range of services and provisions, they were not withdrawing and leaving these areas to the ‘private’ sector, which in this context would mean for some purposes the family and for others business. Although the Hawke preference in the 1980s for a corporatist approach certainly entailed collaboration between business and the employers’ bodies, the unions and government, in respect to the policy areas of relevance here, government remained the senior partner and this was the pattern also during 1992, as what happened both back-stage and front-stage at the Jobs Summits clearly demonstrated. However, having won an election on what are possibly, probably, going to turn out to be rhetorical rather than real commitments to social justice and to the need to counteract the negative effects of market forces in the restructuring of labour and industry and in determining employment levels and opportunities, there seems to be little prospect of the current Australian Labor government moving in the policy directions that this study confirms are clearly needed.
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