



*Submission to the House of
Representatives Inquiry
into Combining School
and Work*

Brotherhood of St Laurence
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Brotherhood of St Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy Vic. 3065

ABN 24 603 467 024

www.bsl.org.au

For further information or to discuss this proposal, please contact:

Michael Horn
Senior Manager
Research & Policy Centre
Brotherhood of St Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy Vic. 3065
Email: mhorn@bsl.org.au
Ph: (03) 9483 2496

Background

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the BSL continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery, and advocacy with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, new programs and practices for implementation by government and others.

The Brotherhood has a long history of research and service delivery focused on ensuring the successful transitions of young people and, in particular, disadvantaged young people. Our research record encompasses longitudinal research on the life chances of young Australians (Taylor & Nelms 2006, 2008), studies on young people's transition to work (MacDonald 1999) and studies of their position and disadvantages in the labour market (Marsh & Perkins 2006; Tresize-Brown 2004).

We have completed evaluations of the Brotherhood's own services such as Parents as Career and Transition Supports (PACTS), the transition support service for parents (Bedson & Perkins 2006). In 2006 we produced the Brotherhood Social Barometer 'Challenges facing Australian youth' (Boese & Scutella 2006) that examined how well equipped Australian young people are (or are not) to negotiate successfully the transition through school and beyond.

Our research and services focus on those people at greatest risk at key life transition stages considered critical to their future wellbeing. The second of these transition stages is Through School to Work. Accordingly, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry being conducted by the Standing Committee on Education and Training into the now common experience of Australian students balancing the demands and benefits of combining study and employment and, in particular, the opportunities for and needs of disadvantaged youth in this context.

Introduction

Over half of Australia's secondary school students now work part-time while studying full-time, and the level of student part-time employment has increased rapidly over recent years. Between 1983 and 2003 the proportion of 15–19 year olds in part-time employment increased from 28% to 66.5% (Australian National Schools Network 2008). This trend is not unique to Australia: it is also evident in the United Kingdom (Hodgson & Spours 2001) and the USA (Staff & Mortimer 2007). It reflects a number of social and economic trends, including expanded operating hours of the retail trade, strong economic growth and increasing youth consumption (Hodgson & Spours 2001). However, for many young people the driver for combining work and study reflects a more immediate material need to work as a means to contribute to family income or to education costs that fall outside those provided 'free'.

It is now recognised that part-time work as a component of the transition from school to working life is an almost universal experience and an important policy issue (Hodgson & Spours 2001). While there is research exploring the possible negative impact of long hours of work on school achievement (Staff, Mortimer & Uggen 2004; Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley 2003), there is no agreement that there is a causal relationship (Hodgson & Spours 2001; National Research Council 1998). In other words, many young people who are not succeeding at school pursue part-time work as an important step towards the workplace. At the same time, a moderate level of part-time work has been found to facilitate educational attainment, especially for youth who are struggling at school (Staff & Mortimer 2007).

There are other benefits for young people in working part-time while at school. They can gain independence, build confidence, make new networks and develop a CV that assists them in getting more secure work in the future (Hodgson & Spours 2001). These young people gain experience in working and learning at the same time, an important attribute in the 21st century labour market. Research demonstrates that meaningful part-time work while at school has a positive effect on the

prospect of gaining an apprenticeship or a full-time job rather than being unemployed (Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley 2003).

Students from backgrounds of lower socioeconomic status are less likely to gain part-time jobs, yet they are more likely to depend on part-time work as the first stepping stone into work (Australian National Schools Network 2008; Dockery & Strathdee 2003). For migrant school students, the benefits of accessing part-time work may be significant in offsetting several disadvantages. Being from a non-English speaking background decreases the odds of getting an apprenticeship or traineeship (Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley 2003). The overall unemployment rate for refugee and newly arrived young people is disproportionately high, with refugees having the highest rate (Ransley & Drummond 2001). Migrant youth do not have the established networks through which most young people gain their part-time jobs (Dockery & Strathdee 2003). At the same time they may face additional responsibilities in post-compulsory schooling because of family expectations and responsibilities (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2005; Omar 2005).

This inquiry also provides a significant opportunity to better support homeless youth in developing pathways to a more secure future. For those youth who are homeless, remaining engaged with school is important in avoiding the transition to both chronic homelessness and long-term unemployment (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2002). If students do not have access to a stable home and as a consequence must work, there are important possibilities in supporting their combining of school and work so they can address the complexity of their situation.

Accordingly, the Brotherhood of St Laurence commends the Commonwealth Government for establishing an inquiry into the combining of work and study by Australian youth. Our comments against the inquiry's terms of reference follow.

Providing opportunities to recognise and accredit the employability and career development skills gained through students' part-time or casual work

The Brotherhood suggests that the opportunities already exist for employability and career development skills to be recognised and accredited. However, this does not occur because for the most part schools are not aware of the involvements of students beyond the school gates. In Victoria, the Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) initiative provides an example. MIPs are intended to support senior students (15 years and over) to:

- make a smooth transition from compulsory schooling to further education, training and employment
- develop skills to manage their pathways throughout their working lives
- and develop their knowledge, understanding and experience of opportunities in education, training and employment.

Despite a considerable focus on MIPs as a central tool, there appears to be little, if any, attention to the part-time work of students, how it could be integrated into their senior program, or how it may be a barrier to their transition. Instead the focus remains on careers advice, subject selection and job seeking skills.

Identifying more flexible, innovative and/or alternative approaches to attaining a senior secondary certificate which support students to combine work and study

As a result of changing social and economic factors and a range of policy initiatives, the percentage of young people who move to the senior years of secondary school in Australia has increased dramatically over recent decades. Yet the infrastructure and perspective of many schools is relatively unchanged. This remains the case despite the broadening of curricular opportunities. In this context, the traditional, academically based, senior school certificate leading to university entrance has remained the norm around which school structures, staffing and processes (timetabling in particular) are arranged, with alternative approaches still accorded lesser status at

the periphery. This must be addressed if young people's combination of work and study is to be supported and the educational benefits realised.

Beyond schools, the ability to attain a senior secondary certificate outside of the school setting would be significantly enhanced if constraints on funding to non-school providers were addressed. In the current context, partnership arrangements that would enable schools to work collaboratively with other education providers to provide specialised, integrated employment and education models for those students who do not wish to progress directly to university are consistently hampered by the inability of schools to release sufficient funding to the non-school provider. Particularly for those schools that are less able to generate income beyond that provided by government, issues of cash flow can lead to student resources being 'absorbed' into other school costs and becoming unavailable for release. At the same time, non-school providers do not get access to the infrastructure resources that schools also receive. All young people should be entitled to 12 years of full funding, regardless of whether their learning takes place in a classroom, a workplace, or the community.

Support that may be required to assist young people combining work and study to stay engaged in their learning, especially where work and study intersect with income support

For all young people, it is important that meaningful support be available throughout their school years. However, in terms of this inquiry, the Brotherhood supports the call from the Australian National Schools Network (Australian National Schools Network 2008) for an Intergenerational Youth Compact. Rather than just ensuring support for young people to remain engaged in their learning while balancing the demands of education and employment, there must also be a commitment by schools and employers to create more supportive conditions. Such a compact would protect students from long or inappropriate hours of employment as well as unsafe and unjust employment conditions. It would also address institutional constraints in educational settings that create unsustainable levels of stress for young people, such as have been demonstrated by the work of the Youth Research Centre (Wyn 2008).

The Brotherhood argues that a central concern in regard to support, and the greatest risk of negative consequences from combining work and study, concerns financial hardship. Given that all young Australians are compelled to engage with the educational system for a sustained period of their childhood and teenage years, government has an obligation to provide a truly free education, and adequate income support system, so full-time students do not have to work excessive hours for little or no educational gain. At the same time, the current Youth Allowance regulations have been suggested to offer a disincentive to secure the benefits part-time work can provide in skills development and work experience, because support is reduced when earnings rise above a certain level. The management of Youth Allowance needs to be reassessed in the context of the Henry Tax Review to ensure it provides an incentive for optimal levels of engagement in part-time work, particularly for those young people who are living independently at an early age.

A further income-related issue that should also be addressed by the inquiry is the issue of credit provided to young people. The Brotherhood believes that financial services providers and others, including telecommunications providers, should have more rigorous responsible lending obligations imposed upon them. Many young people who are working while still at school are encouraged to use credit, including but not limited to credit cards, because finance providers believe they can afford credit, and have the expertise to manage it, if they have a job.

Potential impact on educational attainment

In large part, the question of the impact of combining school and work on educational attainment reflects the continuing focus in many school settings of a traditional, discipline-based pedagogy. The advent of integrated School Based New Apprenticeships demonstrates the potential for different pedagogies that maximise positive impacts while minimising negative impacts. The Brotherhood continues to demonstrate the importance of integrated education models that merge applied education, meaningful employment and personalised support for senior school students. Applied learning models enhance confidence and motivation, lead to increased commitment to

learning, and develop generic skills that are valued in the workplace, including problem solving and teamwork (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2006).

Such an approach is vital for all students in a context where the ability to innovate and adapt to changing market demands is increasingly significant. In this model the positive impact of combining work and school is strengthened, as the ability to successfully merge work and study can contribute to the development of a healthy worker–learner identity. At the same time, the benefits of integrated applied learning pedagogies have been demonstrated for those young people at risk of disengaging from school. The Brotherhood applauds innovations such as the new Queensland Certificate of Education that provide much greater flexibility to integrate applied learning pedagogies by recognising a range of learning experiences, in a range of contexts including those provided by part-time work, and the individualisation of the duration of senior learning programs.

Effectiveness of school-based training pathways and their impact on successful transitions, including opportunities for improvement (particularly in relation to pathways to employment for disadvantaged young people)

As noted above, the opportunities for part-time student employment are not equally distributed. Students in rural areas, from low socio-economic status communities or from refugee or migrant backgrounds may be less able to access part-time jobs than those who live in areas with greater employment opportunities or whose families provide them with higher stores of social and cultural capital. It is imperative that, for those students who would benefit from opportunities to gain part-time work while studying full-time, job creation processes are investigated. The policy agenda of increased community–schools partnerships has much to contribute, but this agenda must move beyond token demonstrations of partnership to enable the development of safe, meaningful employment opportunities that benefit communities, young people and their families in the long term. The Brotherhood argues that current streams of income support, such as Youth Allowance, could be strengthened to seed such initiatives, especially given the likelihood of lessening sustainable employment openings for young people in the current financial crisis.

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