

Young people's successful transition to work:

What are the pre-conditions?

The Smith Family Research Report
September 2014



everyone's family

Introduction

Young people face a range of challenges as they leave school and transition to work or study. There is an array of choices and with the changing nature of the labour market these have become increasingly complex. This report draws on the latest research and intelligence from key stakeholders and practitioners¹ to identify:

- the diverse employment challenges faced by young people
- which groups of young people may face particularly difficult transitions
- the preconditions necessary to achieve successful transition.

It concludes that despite the complexity and challenges, there is a body of evidence which identifies the preconditions for young people making successful transitions to work. There is also consensus on how these preconditions can be cultivated.

What are 'transitions to work'?

The term 'transitions to work' is often used to describe the coming of age events which all young people experience as they leave school, consolidate skills, develop a sense of job readiness and make decisions about life and career.

Common challenges for young people's transitions

Each young person's journey in navigating this stage of life is very individual, however there are some shared experiences.



Every young Australian will face the challenge of:

- adjusting to new institutional and social surroundings as they leave school
- assuming the civic, financial and community responsibilities associated with becoming a citizen and adult
- the personal, emotional and psychological journey of moving from late adolescence to early adulthood
- adapting and diversifying their strategies for job searching and labour market entry, in line with the changing nature of the employment market.

¹The qualitative insights in this report are drawn from in-depth interviews conducted from June to August 2014 as part of a national consultation process convened by the The Smith Family on young people's transitions to work. The interviews included young people, employers, employer industry associations and representative bodies, educators, social welfare organisations, labour market intermediaries, employment support providers, and community organisations.

Dual challenges of high unemployment and underemployment

Young people experience higher levels of unemployment than any other age group. The national unemployment rate for those aged 15 to 24 years is consistently double that of the average national rate for 15 to 64 year olds (Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) 2014). Young people represent less than one-fifth of the total labour force, yet comprise more than one third of all unemployed people (BSL 2014).

Young people are also particularly affected by underemployment.² Australian Bureau of Statistics' working hours data highlights that the youth underemployment rate in Australia is extremely high (11.8 percent for young men and 15.9 percent for young women), compared with other countries in the OECD (3.9 percent for young men and 6.1 percent for young women) (Healy 2013).

A report by the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA 2013) indicates that both unemployment and underemployment amongst young people have worsened since the global financial crisis.

While young people generally have been identified as a group at risk of long term marginalisation from the labour market, there are also sub-groups who face additional labour market disadvantage. Young people who face the greatest challenges to both labour market entry and sustained participation (ie long term employment) include those:

- from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background (Schultz 2013)
- from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Circelli & Oliver 2012)
- with disabilities (Yu 2010)
- who are newly arrived migrants (Centre for Multicultural Youth 2009)
- with underlying mental health issues (Ferguson 2008)
- with crime and justice issues (Macourt 2014).

Narrowing of entry-level opportunities

Systemic changes across the Australian labour market have been a major cause of the unemployment crisis facing young people. Over the last twenty years there has been a reduction in the range and availability of full-time entry-level job opportunities and young people have been disproportionately impacted by this (Anlezark 2011).

The shift away from the traditional primary industry and manufacturing sectors towards the service sector and new industries has "precipitated a collapse in the labour market of full time jobs for young people" (Cuervo & Wyn 2011:3).

There are four main ways that changes in the patterns of employment across the Australian economy have impacted on young people seeking to move from school to work or from higher education to work.

1. Employment growth has occurred in sectors of the economy which do not have well-developed career structures spanning entry level through to higher level roles.

The labour market has experienced strong growth in the knowledge sectors, typically in business services and specialist technical roles. However, new jobs in these sectors usually require higher skill levels, attract higher wages and require greater levels of professional and managerial experience as a prerequisite for entry (Sissons & Jones 2012). Many knowledge sector jobs are also located in multi-national global businesses and have been relocated to overseas head office locations (Livingstone 2014).

2. Employment growth has occurred in sectors characterised by insecure forms of employment.

Growth in sectors such as retail, hospitality, personal services and cleaning typically occurs when an economy is strong (Cully 2003). Over the last twenty years, the Australian economy has experienced strong and consistent growth, relative to many of its Western counterparts. As a consequence, employment growth has spiked in these service sectors. Employment in these sectors is often casual, short term, irregular, seasonal and not generally connected to more permanent or longer term career paths (Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work 2012).

While debate continues over the impact of casualisation on long term career formation (McLachlan et al 2013), there is evidence that the growth of casual work may be particularly problematic for young people. Many part time job opportunities for this group occur in industries which are highly casualised such as retail (Watson 2013; Cuervo & Wyn 2011). These types of job roles typically offer: limited opportunities for further formal and transferable skill development; truncated options for career development through promotion; and little assurance of ongoing employment when consumer demand declines.

3. Traditional labour market entry point positions for young people have been in decline.

Australia may have been insulated from some aspects of the global financial crisis, however many export-oriented industries have had to manage the impacts of a stronger Australian dollar. Employers in a range of industries including retail, manufacturing, engineering and building, have expressed a reluctance to recruit and train employees unless they have a strong belief they can offer ongoing work. Apprenticeships and traineeships are therefore generally only offered where the job function is considered critical to operation (Group Training Australia 2012).

Since the mid-1970s, there has been a decline in the apprenticeship system in Australia, particularly in traditional and technical jobs such as electrical trades, the metals sector and the building and construction industry (Toner 2003). The recruitment models for many lower to intermediary skill level jobs have also changed, with a large proportion of basic entry level jobs requiring not

² Underemployed workers are employed people who would prefer, and are available for, more hours of work than they currently have.

just Year 12 or equivalent, but a strong academic record of performance at high school, and/or a Certificate IV (at a minimum). Apprenticeships have historically offered an entry level opportunity for early school leavers, but in the current Australian labour market this is no longer the case (Cuervo & Wyn 2011).

4. Large organisations have changed their recruitment, appointment and staff management practices.

There has been a decline in formalised large-scale recruitment and induction in both public and private organisations. Entry points which may have offered stewardship and training for young people directly from school into full time employment (eg apprenticeships) and from higher education (graduate recruitment) have declined (Graduate Careers Australia 2013). Formalised induction processes, in which employers resource and train staff to specifically oversee, manage and provide intensive guidance for a group of new labour market entrants have also declined (Brown & Scase 2005).

The ability of organisations to manage, administer and supervise formal workplace learning has also been constrained for a range of reasons, including workplace restructuring and a decline in line management (Van Buren et al 2011). While all employees are affected by these shifts in human resource management practice, the loss of mentorship and pastoral care that these schemes may have provided, has particularly weakened the ability of employers and young employees to develop long standing relationships.

Detachment from the labour market and education

More than a quarter (27 percent) of all young people aged 17 to 24 years are not engaged in either full time study or work (COAG Reform Council 2013). While some evidence suggests that many young people experience periods of unemployment (Anlezark 2010), or may temporarily and voluntarily 'withdraw' from any work or education/training activity (Vandenbroek 2014; Hillman 2005), this detachment can pose a significant long term risk for the young people affected. Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from families with a long history of parental unemployment, appear to be particularly at risk of becoming disengaged from the labour market and/or study (FYA 2013).

A persistent pattern of unemployment increases the risk of long term unemployment. If a young person experiences sporadic periods of employment, cycling in and out of the labour market in casual employment, this can increase their risk of long term unemployment and the likelihood of employment in low skilled jobs during their entire working life (Pech et al 2009). For some young people, withdrawal from study or work may be a transitory state and represent an unremarkable life stage event. However, evidence suggests that shortening the length of periods out of the workforce will significantly reduce a young person's risk of long term economic insecurity and labour market marginalisation (International Labour Organisation (ILO) 2012).

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The timing of withdrawal from educational activities can also increase a young person's risk of long term detachment from the labour market. Early school leavers, for example, are a group who achieve poorer labour market outcomes in the long term. National statistics show a 20 percent gap in Year 12 attainment between students from the lowest and highest socioeconomic backgrounds. Further, over 40 percent of young people aged 17 to 24 years from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds are not in employment or study (COAG Reform Council 2013).

"It is widely recognised that younger people who do not complete secondary education are likely to find it much more difficult to find full time, permanent employment. These young people will face continuing higher levels of unemployment than their peers, a reduced likelihood of returning to full time education, more part-time and insecure work, a shorter working life, lower incomes and an increased likelihood of ending up in poor quality jobs with few opportunities for career development. Non-employment impacts can include increased levels of depression, living in lower quality housing and a greater likelihood of early parenting" (Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work 2012).

Young people who do not enter any form of post-secondary education or training face long term labour market risks, with potentially life-long social and economic impacts. These young people are the most disadvantaged in terms of employment, health and wellbeing by the time they are in their mid-thirties – "once the normative point of transition into post-secondary education has passed, there are few opportunities to revisit this transition point" (Cuervo & Wyn 2011).

For interventions to be effective in improving transition to work outcomes for young people, they need to be provided in a timely manner, otherwise the opportunity for them to have a substantive impact may pass.

Wider societal and economic costs result from low levels of high school completion. The consequences of early school leaving include lower income and economic growth, higher costs of public related services including health care and employment services support and increased social welfare (income support) costs. Conversely long-term savings can be made from investments in reducing early school leaving (European Commission 2013).

What enables young people's labour market attachment?

The labour market challenges facing young people are complex and any response must be informed by understanding the multi-dimensional circumstances which either strengthen or undermine their successful transitions from education to work.

While a range of issues may create the labour market conditions which serve to disadvantage young people, there is strong consensus on the core drivers and preconditions which underpin successful transitions to work. Five core preconditions are necessary for the positive and sustainable engagement of young people in the labour market:

- stable economic supports
- supportive relationships and networks
- a capacity to assess new employment opportunities, on both the supply and demand sides of the labour market
- provision of supports for the formation of job readiness and employability skills

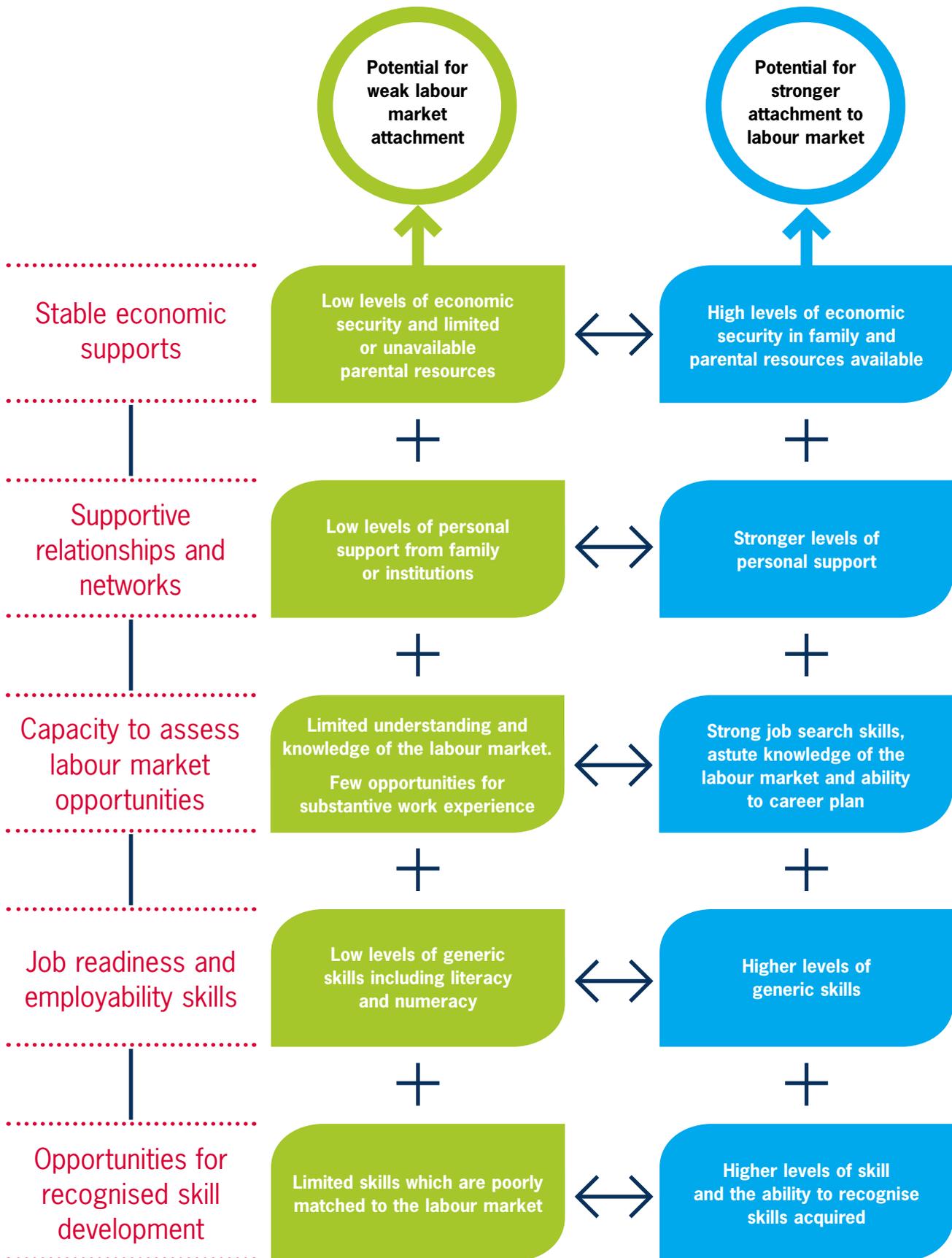
- the opportunity to undertake skill development which is formally recognised and valued by both the labour market and the jobseeker.

These preconditions span both the demand and supply sides of the labour market. Stakeholders agree that improving the labour market and training options for young people requires change not just to the quantum and composition of skilled workers (education and training and labour supply), but to the recruitment and management of labour as well.

The following discussion and diagram describes two 'absolute' scenarios. One path leads towards strong labour market and education/training attachment amongst young people. The other path shows the stepping stones to less successful attachment or engagement with the labour market or sites for skill development (education and training). The pathways diagram highlights that there are multiple factors that can create the foundation for a positive transition to work, or alternatively constrain the labour market opportunities available to young people when leaving school.



The preconditions for labour market attachment



Stable economic supports

Unemployment, and particularly long term unemployment, has a negative impact on the economic security, health and wellbeing of both individuals and families. Research also emphasises that a cycle of poverty is deeply connected to unemployment and labour market disengagement, by inhibiting young people's ability to develop skills and find employment.

Young people's social and economic contexts are important for understanding the likelihood of them being long term unemployed. To meet the responsibilities associated with participation in employment, education or training, young people require a network of stable economic and social supports. A lack of tangible financial and economic support within a family can directly impact a young person's transition to work. The social and economic circumstances of parents, can impact the earnings, educational outcomes and occupational status of the next generation (Vinson 2008).

Young people living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities face employment challenges on multiple fronts including:

- less access to and information about employment (Vinson 2007)
- increased likelihood they will need to find work quickly in order to contribute to family income
- greater likelihood of obtaining poor quality employment which is short term, seasonal and unsustainable (ILO 2012)
- an increased chance they will undertake education or training programs for which they may not be physically or emotionally suited (Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work 2012).

Supportive relationships and networks

While family, extended family and peers are important sources of personal support, young people require additional emotional and psychological supports in the current labour market environment. Research points to the role that schools and employers might play in working closely with young people to motivate, engage and manage the job expectations of young employees and future jobseekers. The need for young people to imagine and identify their own career aspirations represents a key underpinning of them developing self-esteem. Young people often require additional emotional and psychological supports to clarify and distil these goals because they lack the social, economic and

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personal experience required to conceptualise realistic goals and identify the steps required to achieve them. For young people facing additional disadvantages and those who have a challenging family history, the need for additional personal supports is intensified.

Personal and emotional support can be one of the most meaningful and important aspects of a positive school to work transition...

Human resource management services which employers might have historically provided to young people to encourage retention, have experienced a decline. Employers historically played a strong role in developing novice workers into longer term employees through the apprenticeship model, however in the last two decades this has changed (Smith 2004). Recent national research identifies that emotional and psychological supports that lie beyond family and peers are needed for young people to adjust to working life. *"We know why many young apprentices drop out. Sometimes they're lured away by more money elsewhere, and sometimes they just change their minds about the choice they have made. But often it's because they have no source of advice and support, which can lead them to choose the wrong trade or become disheartened about an unsatisfactory workplace"* (Apprenticeships for the 21st Century Expert Panel 2011).

The experience of labour market intermediaries such as employment support organisations and recruitment agencies in this field is instructive. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth employment support services for example, the provision of one-on-one career management, advice and counselling is seen as an essential part of a successful transition to work experience (Bretherton et al 2012).

Personal and emotional support can be one of the most meaningful and important aspects of a positive school to work transition, because more and more young people are experiencing anxiety-related conditions. *"Mental health and anxiety are now huge issues amongst youth. As a consequence, we have case managers who will accompany some young people to job interviews. The case managers often don't even say anything when they are there. They are just there to be a personal and moral support, and employers understand that and appreciate that as well, they really do. We have found this approach has made the strike rate for employment just that little bit higher, and it makes a huge difference for the young person affected"* (youth support organisation).



There is also evidence that school-based provision of careers counselling and work experience programs which guide and develop a sense of career identity amongst young people have declined. Twenty years ago, high school students usually participated in a number of intensive work experience programs, at junior and senior secondary school milestone points. These tended to be organised, managed and coordinated by a dedicated careers counsellor. It is now more typical for careers experience programs to comprise only one work experience session which the student organises, and a single career and personal counselling session in six years of high school (Rothman & Hillman 2008). While the reasons for this shift are not fully known, a lack of resources, increased work intensification amongst teachers and the pressures associated with the final years of secondary school, are all identified as reasons for the decline of these support services within schools.

The need for better school-based careers support services is advocated strongly by employer organisations such as the Business Council of Australia (BCA). In March 2014, it convened the first roundtable forum between young people³ and fifty CEOs. As Catherine Livingstone, President of the BCA states *“We need to make some sort of intervention*

*now...(this memorandum of understanding will allow us) to work better with schools, and to create a better work experience experience, and will allow us to start opening up young people’s thoughts and aspirations about the roles that they could have.”*⁴

Capacity to assess labour market opportunities

For young people to successfully transition to work, both the employer and jobseeker must be able to recognise and value the opportunities that can emerge from building a longer term employment relationship.

Positive transitions emerge when young people understand how to undertake astute job searching, begin to develop understanding of the labour market and how it works, and cultivate an ability to develop and set realistic career goals. Career planning and the provision of good planning advice, form an essential part of helping young people to properly ‘attach’ to the labour market (Sikora & Saha 2011). Providing young people with the opportunity to develop networks with potential employers deepens their understanding of working life and career planning (Mann 2012).

³ The Foundation for Young Australians and The Smith Family jointly facilitated the participation of the young people involved in this forum.

⁴ Interview with Catherine Livingstone, Radio National Saturday Extra, 29 March 2014. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/saturdayextra/new-bca-pres/5349972>

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Australian researchers corroborate the value of contact with multiple employers through meaningful and well-coordinated work experience. Increased knowledge and understanding of the labour market is deeply enhanced when young people have the opportunity to develop networks with potential employers (Polidano & Zakirova 2011).

While increased knowledge and understanding of the labour market is universally perceived to improve young people's job search skills and career planning skills, very few Australian institutions are appropriately equipped to provide this service to young people. Research highlights that more systematic approaches to work preparation would ideally be provided while students are still in school settings and by teachers and educators who have the capacity to provide well-informed advice, supports or information regarding labour market engagement (CIPD 2012). There has been a strong decline in the ability of schools to rally resources or support for work experience programs (Lamb & Vickers 2006). This is despite the fact that career advice and programs designed to lift the knowledge and awareness of the job market amongst young people are highly valued by students, regardless of their background (Rothman & Hillman 2008).

Employers also need to be able to recognise the benefits and opportunities associated with developing a long term employment relationship with young and entry level employees. As a representative of a national employer organisation notes, the need for employers to employ and commit to the skill development of young people is an essential precondition for young people's positive transitions to work. *"In the current environment there is little doubt that businesses are operating on much leaner budgets, and there is immense pressure to compete. This can sometimes create a perception amongst employers that young people represent a greater risk because there are too many unknowns and their skills and abilities are not always easy to verify from the outset...The provision of sustainable employment opportunities for young people is possible, but the problem at the moment is that there is no real sense of what works and no shared evidence base from which to draw."*

A CEO of a national employment services organisation highlights that there is immense good will amongst employers and a desire to employ more young people, but limited knowledge about how best to achieve this operationally, administratively and in human resource terms.

"There has never been a shortage of employers who are willing to give a young person a go when they can. I've seen so many employers over the years try to find a spot for a young person, because they see the value in developing the next generation, but what they need is support or a 'go to' person when things don't go as planned. Employers need knowledge and resources in navigating the challenges of employment as well."

Job readiness and employability skills

Employability skills are identified by all stakeholders as a core precondition for labour market entry. The *Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework* (CSfW), a guiding document developed by the federal government, asserts that improved employability skills can only emerge when education and training providers, employers and individuals participate in the process of skill formation. The CSfW acknowledges that new labour market entrants require not just basic literacy and numeracy in order to perform at work, but also need a broader knowledge and understanding of society and how it works, and a composite set of abilities, often described as 'life skills'. The CSfW also reflects the labour market demand for 'job ready' workers who have acquired not just formal education and training, but have contextualised this learning in workplace environments: *"An individual who has only ever applied their skills in a classroom setting will need to learn about the protocols and expectations of a work situation, and gain practical experience in applying their skills in a work environment before they can demonstrate their skills at the same stage of performance within that work context"* (Commonwealth of Australia 2013: 6).

Lifting young people's job readiness is a high priority for a number of reasons. Firstly, the need for employability skills is universal amongst employers. Employers require the generic 'soft' skills for almost all job roles in the contemporary labour market, including unskilled and entry level positions (Bartlett et al 2012). As Bowman (2010) notes: *"It is only relatively recently that generic skills have received explicit attention in all forms of education...This greater prominence is in response to economic, social and technological change and high demand for these skills by industry."*

The need for a baseline level of generic skills represents one of the most important priorities for improving transitions to work for young people, argues the General Manager of national youth employment services organisation: *"Employability is the key challenge, it represents the highest priority given the current labour market conditions. Developing a sense of 'world of work' readiness. Employers not only expect it, they require it. Employers need young people who are able to fit in with the needs of the business, people who can work with other people, they need people who can communicate and they need people who are willing to learn."*

The notion of employability highlights that young people face a double disadvantage in becoming 'job ready'. They have less life experience and are in the process of building rather than consolidating 'life skills'. Young people also have less workplace-level experience and therefore less opportunity to contextualise knowledge gained through formal schooling.

Opportunities for recognised skill development

The diverse transitions which young people make between education, training and work are complex. On the one hand, skills acquired through formal education and training do not always equip young people with job-readiness skills nor technical skills in areas of employer demand. An “over-emphasis on credentials” does not improve employment outcomes for young people when the labour market continues to be defined by job structures which are precarious, uncertain and short term (Wyn 2009.)

On the other hand, there is strong consensus that participation in formal education and accredited forms of training, particularly Certificate IV and diploma level, produce better employment outcomes for young people in the long term. Young people who participate in any form of Vocational Education or Training (VET) achieve better employment outcomes in the long term, when compared to young people who have not participated in any type of accredited post-school education and training (Woods 2008). While the ease with which individuals successfully find a job varies, participation in recognised forms of training improves the ability of young workers to sustain labour market engagement, reducing the periods of unemployment or the intervals between jobs, particularly when these skills are seen as highly transferable. Higher levels of education are

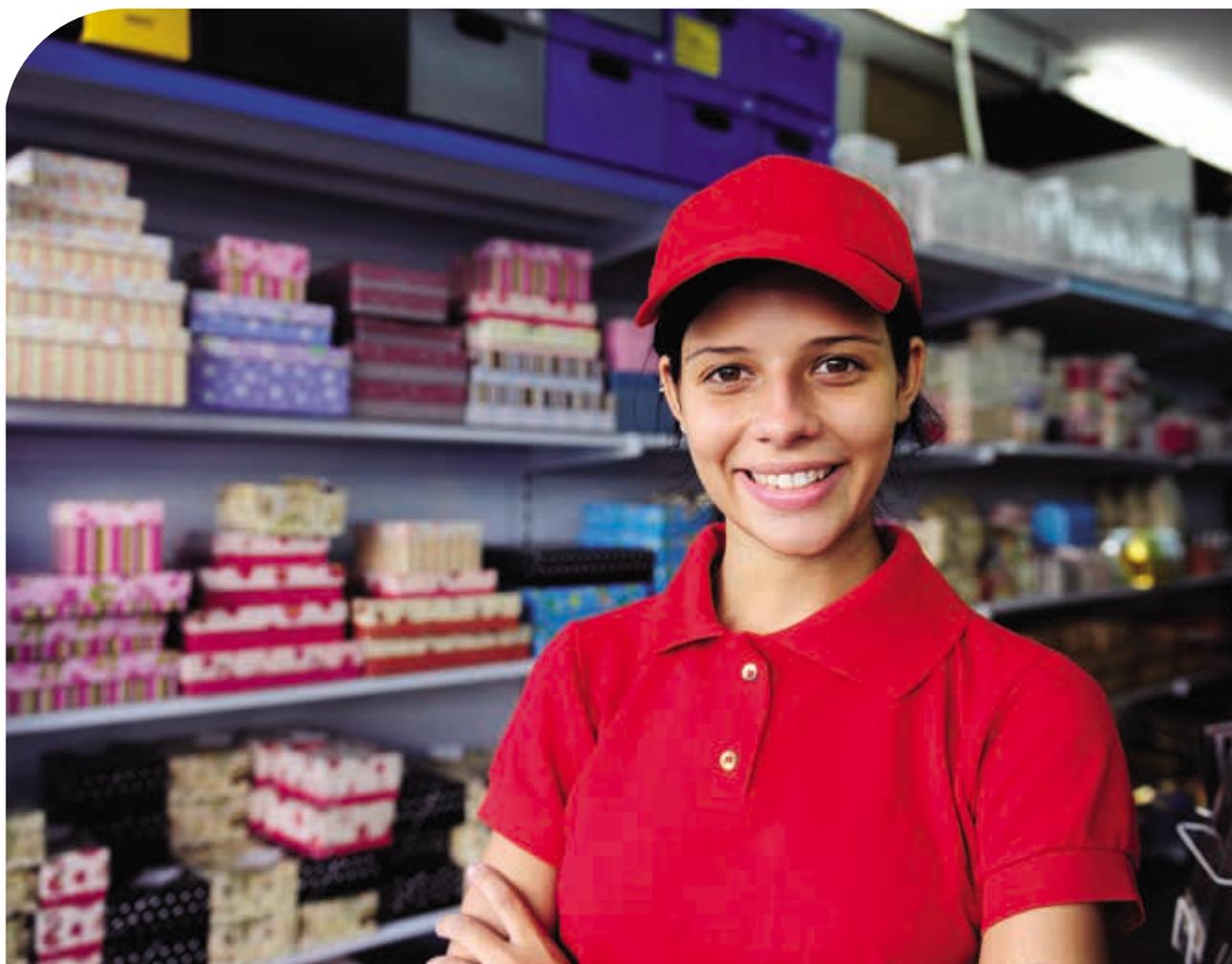
connected to employment outcomes which attract better pay and more job security (OECD 2007).

There is also value in interventions which encourage early school leavers to engage with accredited training, even when this vocational training occurs at the level of Certificate I or II. While young people may need to undertake further higher level training to achieve their identified career aspirations, participation in school based VET programs appears to strengthen the ability of early school leavers to transition to the labour force (Circelli & Oliver 2012), and therefore reduces the risk of these young workers disengaging entirely.

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Can longer term attachment to the labour market be cultivated?

A range of evidence identifies that the preconditions for successful transitions to work for young people can be cultivated. The consultations undertaken for this report provide insights on the ability of both demand (industry and employers) and supply-side institutions (education and training providers) to address the employment crisis facing Australia's young people. Stakeholders identified that a comprehensive response to all five preconditions for success is achievable, with strong consensus on the formulation of this response. Four key elements were identified as high priorities for improving young people's transitions to work:

- greater collaboration and coordination between all levels of government
- facilitated partnership or brokerage between young people, the labour market and employers
- individualised case management for some at risk young people
- school as a key player in any approach.

Greater collaboration and coordination between all levels of government

Stakeholders argue that the social and economic inclusion of young people is more likely to be achieved if federal, state and local governments can align a range of specialised youth policies which address the five preconditions for a

successful transition to work. A wide range of policy and program structures are relevant to these inter-governmental discussions including: employment, education, training, health, labour market and economic policies. For example, state governments are responsible for the provision of many key support services which will facilitate and enable labour market entry. Most obviously, the provision of foundation education (schools) and much post-school training, but also other vital services (eg health care, mental health support and housing). Meanwhile, the federal government has responsibility for higher education, economic and labour market policies and income support. Local governments play a role in the provision of social and community services for young people.

The issue of career support, advice and counselling services was raised by a number of interviewees as 'emblematic' of the inter-departmental and inter-governmental complexity that can surround transition to work service provision. For example, education departments (state level), employment service providers (federal level) and local governments (through youth service hubs) all recognise the importance of career support and advice for young people, and while each have their own program structures to support this goal, there is often very little or no communication between these institutions.

Stakeholders affirm the need for a greater level of coordination between youth policy and program outcomes, so that current gaps in service provision can be better identified and addressed. *"Every layer of government needs a long term strategy and policy to address youth inactivity and unemployment. Every level of government has a role to play in supporting young people at risk of being disengaged"*

(national provider of employment services). One interviewee described the fragmentation between federal, state and local government responses to youth transitions as the “constitutional crisis of youth unemployment.”

Facilitated brokerage between young people, the labour market and employers

Stakeholders expressed strong support for an intermediary partner to play a role in building and developing career pathways for young people. An independent broker can mediate between the interests of labour market supply (education and training providers and young people) and demand (employer need and areas of skill shortage in the labour market). *“Schools and employers find it difficult to work together, despite the best of intentions, because of the different ways the sectors operate. Both sides need support to develop workable and mutually beneficial solutions”* (industry association representative).

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Employment and training brokerage for young people, stakeholders argue, is not just about sourcing education, training and employment placements. Astute and meaningful brokerage requires working with individual young people to inspire, manage and match their career aspirations, while working simultaneously with employers and schools.

A national youth support organisation described the immense impact of a good partner or broker in creating positive transition to work experiences for all parties: *“Brokerage or agency support is essential. Employers get education and support, young people get education and support, and the agency gets a bird’s-eye view of how everything runs. A broker can help identify job opportunities. Case managers are on site with workplace managers, and they get to know how the business runs.”*

Brokers are also well placed to provide a wide range of services and events identified as beneficial in expanding the knowledge, awareness and understanding of work amongst young people. These services include, but are not limited to: mentoring; career exposure events; work-site observations and participation activities; and school-based career workshops and job role-playing sessions.

Stakeholders did not advocate for a specific or preferred partnership model, rather a range of possible models were

highlighted to offer benefits. The *Work Inspiration*⁵ initiative for example, was identified by a wide range of stakeholders to be an effective means of supporting transitions from school to work for young people. Stakeholders emphasised that employer-led models, such as *Work Inspiration* and an industry-focused approach, such as the Group Training model, are particularly effective.

The core or good practice elements identified by stakeholders as defining positive partnerships or youth employment broker arrangements include:

- working closely with employer partners
- building enduring relationships with people, employers and schools
- offering opportunities for young people to participate in meaningful workplace placements and work experience sessions
- brokers must be mutually supportive to all parties engaged in the partnership
- brokers are best placed to offer intensive support, and it is important this occurs in a timely way, in line with the needs of young people identified as being at greatest risk.

Individualised case management for some at risk young people

“At the heart of it all is specialised support – individualised case management. This offers the best chance to understand the circumstances of a young person who is identified at risk. Customising the response, working out the areas where specific supports need to be given and working closely with the young person is the only way to deal with a poor transition and disengagement” (employment service provider).

Stakeholders note that individualised case management offers the opportunity to clarify and assess the obstacles inhibiting a successful transition to work for some of the most disadvantaged young people. While not all young people will require individual case management, stakeholders assert that for some, individualised support is required to understand the

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⁵Work Inspiration is an Australian-wide youth transitions employer-led campaign that aims to transform work experience into work inspiration. For more information see www.workinspiration.com.au

complexity of factors serving to create disadvantage, and to build a relationship between case worker and client. *“It takes time, and a high level of trust to identify and build the layers of support for some young people”*. In these cases, good rapport between case manager and client offers an additional source of personal and emotional support for young people particularly at risk of disengagement.

As one youth support and employment service provider notes *“I tend not to box young people in terms of their cultural group, their location etc. I believe there is one core dimension which is present in the circumstances of every young person who is at greatest risk of disengagement. This one dimension is defining because it cuts across all the other aspects of disadvantage. If a young person doesn’t have an adult in their life who is influential, who is trying to help – that’s what they need, above all else. A young person’s core source of support might not be perfect, and they might at times be misguided, but if they care and are trying to support – this is what matters...Individual case management can approximate this support, when there is no one else.”*

The success of a one-on-one case management approach depends on the provision of appropriately qualified case management staff, who can maintain an appropriate and manageable case load of clients. *“We have case managers who have anywhere from 150 to 200 young people as clients, and some case managers are only barely out of school themselves. This is the furthest thing from proper individualised case management”* (CEO of a national job service provider). The Interim Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform also acknowledges the value of mentoring in improving pathways to employment for a wide range of disadvantaged groups, including young people (Department of Social Services 2014).

Individualised case management can provide a level of institutional support which is not currently provided by any other institution. No single agent alone (family, school, employer or employment service provider) can help a young person to effectively undertake career pathway planning, because the labour market has become increasingly complex (Adult and Community Education in NSW 2011; Helme et al 2005). A qualified and judicious individual case manager however, can work closely with a young person to troubleshoot, and navigate institutional complexity.

“When an experienced case manager works closely with a young person it means that supports are more likely to be rendered in a timely way, before problems escalate or disengagement becomes entrenched. It represents the best example of a preventative approach to long term youth unemployment” (CEO of a youth support organisation).

Schools are a key player in enhancing transitions to work

Stakeholders strongly agree that schools must be involved in the formation of local, state and national responses to the labour market challenges facing young people as they are the key institutions with which young people engage. Teachers and school support staff are an important part of the network of mentors who will influence young people during their

formative years. Schools offer the ideal site to identify and initiate early interventions for young people likely to be at risk of a poor school to work transition. If appropriate supports can be provided to young people while still in school, the later need for intensive, individualised case management may be averted.

Schools are a key player in the provision of work placement or work experience programs which are considered to form the cornerstone of a positive school to work transition. A work placement program can help students gain valuable exposure to workplace environments and how they operate, give them exposure to networks of employers (in many cases for the first time) and help them explore different forms of learning. As a recent report by Group Training Australia (2014) notes *“Work placement programs need to be clearly positioned amongst the range of options available to students. They have the advantage of not requiring a long-term commitment from the student, and allow students to try out different vocational pathways.”*

Stakeholders similarly stressed the importance of school-based work experience programs in improving the knowledge and understanding of young people around issues of work. *“Young people need to be able to experience and understand what work is, and work experience programs offer an opportunity to do this in a safe and supervised environment”* (youth advocacy organisation). *“Successful programs need to have the school on board and engaged. They are the ones that know the students the best”* (employer organisation).

Schools offer the ideal site to identify and initiate early interventions for young people likely to be at risk of a poor school to work transition.

An employment service provider also noted that well-developed and successful school-based interventions and better coordinated work experience, could produce profound longer term social and economic benefits *“When young people are better equipped to understand and cope with the responsibilities that come with work, and know how to job search and make contact with employers that will lead to quality work, the need for sustained contact with employment service providers will be reduced.”*

For some young people who have struggled to adjust to school life, a work placement program can help to inspire and re-connect them. School-based apprenticeships for example, have been identified as an important vocational pathway for young people who wish to enter the labour force immediately after leaving high school (Department of Social Services 2014). A recent report also highlights that a vocational program within a school can help to lift the level of school

engagement and attendance amongst young people who had previously expressed a sense of disaffection with school and exhibited high levels of truancy. *“Participation in industry programs is motivating for students at risk of dropping out of school, including many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. A number of case studies noted improved school attendance on days when the programs were run and improved retention for senior school students”* (Group Training Australia 2014).

Schools can help identify areas in which young people may need additional support, because schools understand the family circumstances, community contexts, socioeconomic circumstances and peer groups which surround young people. While schools are not typically resourced to provide these supports, they are well placed to identify the external supports that individual students may need. These might range from: counselling which serves to strengthen existing family supports; sourcing supportive and age-appropriate health care including youth mental health services; and greater engagement with other training and vocational pathways where this is deemed appropriate (European Commission 2013).

Greater synergy between school-based supports and the network of supports beyond school is recommended by stakeholders. Youth advocacy bodies identify a need for more effective communication between and coordination of, in-school and post-school support services for young people identified to be at risk of a poor transition experience. The schooling system often exhibits great flexibility and care in the provision of services to students with additional needs or students facing geographic isolation. However these supports often abruptly end when a student leaves school (Wakeford & Waugh 2014). For students facing additional disadvantages, continuity in the provision of these support services could help to facilitate more positive transitions to work.

In the disabilities sector for example, better synergy between school and non-school based supports are advocated in the form of “transition-oriented networked partnerships” (Wakeford & Waugh 2014). The need for greater levels of consistency in the administration of supports surrounding young people is echoed in the Interim Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform which states there is generally “poor support for young people transitioning from school”, and the multiple payment systems and inconsistent rules surrounding welfare entitlements for dependants “create further complexity” (Department of Social Services 2014: 49).

Stakeholders did not always agree that schools need to be the ‘driver’ of a work experience program or a transition to work initiative. An external partner or broker can play an important role in managing and administering arrangements between industry and school, and provide additional resources and supports. However, stakeholders agreed that the most effective programs are those in which schools remain active and highly engaged partners.

Conclusion

This report highlights that while research documents a range of challenging labour market conditions confronting young people, there is a body of evidence on how institutional responses to these challenges might be improved. On leaving high school, young people face the dual challenges of high unemployment and underemployment. Entry level opportunities for young people have narrowed significantly and pathways into the labour market have become more complex and difficult to discern. While a wide range of issues create the prevailing labour market conditions which serve to disadvantage young people, there is remarkably strong consensus on the core drivers and preconditions which underpin successful transitions to work.

Five core preconditions are necessary for the positive and sustainable engagement of young people in the labour market including: stable economic supports; supportive relationships and networks; a capacity to assess new employment opportunities on both the supply and demand sides of the labour market; provision of supports for the formation of job readiness and employability skills; and the opportunity to undertake skill development which is formally recognised and valued by both the labour market and the jobseeker.

A range of sources confirm that the preconditions for successful transitions to work for young people can be cultivated. Key stakeholders identify four key elements are critical to improving transitions to work for young people. Greater collaboration and coordination between all levels of government and the complex network of programs and policies impacting young people is required. Facilitated partnership or brokerage between young people, the labour market, and employers is essential. There must also be scope for individualised or customised case management. Finally, schools must remain a key player in any approach designed to enhance the transitions to work experience for young people.



Greater collaboration and coordination between all levels of government and the complex network of programs and policies impacting young people is required...

Greater synergy between school-based supports and the network of supports beyond school is recommended...



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The Smith Family partners with the Beacon Foundation and the Foundation for Young Australians to support positive transitions for young people.

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