

Assisting young people who leave school early - the Transition Project

In April 1997, 153,800 15 to 19 year olds looking for full-time or part-time work were unemployed - an unemployment rate of 20.4 per cent (ABS 6203.0). At that time, 78,100 young unemployed people were attending neither school nor a tertiary institution (ABS 6203.0). Persistent unemployment is a likely prospect for those young people who are unemployed and not engaged in training. The Transition project seeks to work intensively with small groups of students who decide to leave school early in order to enhance their labour market opportunities.

Background to the project

The Transition project arises out of the Brotherhood's concern about the long term disadvantage experienced by young people who leave school early, particularly those who do not complete Year 11 or gain post-school educational or training qualifications. It involves a partnership between the Brotherhood and Brunswick Secondary College which is aimed at improving the transition by young people who choose to leave school early into post-school training and employment. This first stage of the project started early this year, and it is intended to extend the project to a second school in the Westernport region in late 1997.

Two project officers, one at each school site, will work closely with a small group of students who decide to leave school before completing Year 11 and their teachers to identify and implement ways of assisting the young people to:

1. make informed choices about vocational pathways while still at school;
2. access relevant information about the available options for education, training and personal support when they actually decide to leave;
3. maintain ongoing contact with the project officers during the time when they leave school to when they enter a training program or employment; and
4. access structured training options, such as an apprenticeship or traineeship, or other programs.

Underpinning the project is the assumption that the pathways from school education to post-school training are unclear for many students and disjointed and this precludes many early school leavers from accessing appropriate training which is linked to employment. In vocational education reform, the Senate (1992) has asserted 'the importance of establishing clear pathways from secondary education into further education, training and employment can hardly be overemphasised'.

In the Transition project, the project officers establish contact with students while they are still at school and assist the students to identify an appropriate vocational pathway before leaving. This will involve working with the school and family, where appropriate, and providing information on community services and resources at the time the young person leaves school.

Commencing at school, an intensive case management approach is envisaged between the project officers and young people. This will involve maintaining an ongoing relationship during the period between leaving school and beginning training or employment, and providing mentor support during the initial stages of participation in the labour market.

Who leaves school early?

Young people who do not complete secondary school are now a minority, however, their numbers are on the rise again. Reported Year 12 retention rates in Victoria were 85.9 per cent in 1993, but had declined to 76.3 per cent in 1997 (Department of Education, in *The Age* 1997). In the northern metropolitan region, the location of one of the project's schools, retention rates over the same period had declined 10.9 per cent to 75.8 per cent in 1997 (Department of Education, in *The Age* 1997).

The situation of those young people who leave school early is of concern because of the subsequent personal and labour market disadvantages they may experience if they become unemployed, not engaged in structured training opportunities, or otherwise marginalised in the community.

The reasons for leaving school early are diverse. While 'there is no typical early school leaver', different types of 'at risk' and early leavers have been characterised by Dwyer et al (1990) as:

- 'leavers who make a positive choice to take up an alternative career path;
- opportune leavers, those who have found a job;
- would-be leavers, whose preference is to have a job but who are subject to forced retention because they would otherwise be unemployed;
- circumstantial leavers, forced out of school for non-educational reasons;
- discouraged leavers, whose experience of schooling has not been rewarding;
- alienated leavers, those who have found the school environment to be highly negative' (in Batten and Russell 1995, p.54).

Early school leavers in the last three categories are of particular concern in this project. It is these young people who are at risk of leaving school and becoming marginalised in the labour market due to the collapse of full-time employment opportunities for young people over the last 25 years and the associated decline of opportunities for structured training.

Changing prospects for employment

The disappearance of full-time employment opportunities for young people over the last decade has only partially been offset by the growth in part-time jobs (Wooden 1996). Furthermore, in their analysis of the Australian Youth Survey, Flatau and Simpson (1996) indicate that 60 to 75 per cent of all part-time jobs for non-students were casual and were therefore less secure and carried fewer benefits. These part-time workers had the lowest incidence of formal training; and any training they did receive was likely to be on-the-job and firm specific (Flatau & Simpson 1996). Part-time and casual work is concentrated among young and female workers in the retail and wholesale trade sectors (Austen 1995).

The implications for young people who leave school early and who experience marginal attachment to the labour market in part-time and casual employment are that lower training outcomes will reduce their wages compared to full-time permanent workers, and fewer training opportunities will limit their chances of accessing better paid full-time or permanent employment (Austen 1995). In the Australian Youth Survey, over 60 per cent of those who were employed part-time did not obtain full-time work over a three year time period despite wanting to work longer hours, according to Flatau & Simpson (1996).

Trends for young people in structured training

The changing fortunes for young people in apprenticeships and traineeships have been driven by the broader changes in the youth labour market. While full-time employment opportunities for 15 to 19 year olds have declined dramatically over the last 25 years, employment in apprenticeships has grown for young men as a proportion of full-time employment. Total male full-time employment in apprenticeships has increased from less than 30 per cent in the early 1970s to over 70 per cent in the early 1990s (NBEET 1996). Young women have not benefited to the extent of young men in apprenticeships because of the gender based labour market segmentation of that system.

At the same time, Sweet (1996) shows that 'in June 1995 the number of apprentices and trainees, as a per cent of total employment, was the lowest it has ever been'. This suggests that while apprenticeships may have increased as a proportion of full-time employment for young people, structured training opportunities have also declined as overall employment opportunities for young people have diminished. Sweet's (1996) analysis of this poor record include a decline in full-time employment opportunities which are likely to include apprenticeship training arrangements, and the growth of part-time and casual employment in the service sector which militates against expansion of structured training.

In the last 2 years greater importance has been afforded to school-industry based programs. With adequate resourcing, careers education, work experience programs and greater links with industry and employers are all positive trends in assistance for young people at the school level. The current Government is committed to expanding vocational education training opportunities for students in senior secondary schools. This, together with programs such as the Jobs Pathway Program to improve student's transition from school to work, expansion of apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities, and other integrated assistance such as the Job Placement, Employment and Training scheme are useful opportunities being offered by the Government to enhance the labour market outcomes for young people.

But much more than this is needed to assist young people to make successful transitions from secondary school to structured training and employment and to prevent their marginalisation in the labour market and the community more broadly. In its inquiry into the employment situation of young people, the Senate (1992) found that 'resources devoted to case management and support of individual young people at risk will reap enormous benefits both to the young people themselves and to the community in terms of substantial cost savings in subsequent health, welfare, legal and other costs'.

Evaluation of the project

It is in the context of these changing employment and training opportunities for young people who leave school early that the Transition project has been designed. While project workers will be working closely with some young people who decide to leave school, in order to link them into appropriate training, employment and community support, a Research Officer from the Brotherhood will also document the progress of the project from the perspective of the participants.

There are two purposes of the research component of the project.

1. To inform the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the participating schools on the usefulness of the pilot project in facilitating school to post-school employment, education and training activities for young people who leave school early.

2. To contribute to the development of policy and programs for young people who leave school early by making the results of the project available to a broader audience.

It is anticipated that this pilot project will contribute to our understanding of the factors which assist young people to complete satisfactory transitions from secondary school to further labour market opportunities.

Further information about the Transition Project is available for John Forster and Helen MacDonald.

References

Austen, S 1995, *The growth in part-time employment: implications for training policy*, Discussion Paper 96/2, The Centre for Labour Market Research, Curtin University of Technology, Perth.

Department of Education February School Census, 'Fewer stay at school in bush: survey', in *The Age*, p.5, 6 June 1997.

Dwyer, P, Wilson, B, Wyn, J & Stewart, F 1990, 'Early school leavers. Research Report No. 4', in Batten, M & Russell, J 1995, *Students at risk: a review of Australian literature 1980 - 1994*, ACER Research Monograph No. 46, ACER, Camberwell.

Flatau, P & Simpson, M 1996, *Part-time youth employment and training: evidence from the Australian Youth Survey*, Working paper series No. 137, National Institute of Labour Studies Inc, Flinders University of South Australia, SA.

NBEET 1996, *The good, the bad and everything in-between: the quality and relevance of Working Nation training*, AGPS, Canberra.

Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1992, *Wanted: our future. Report into the implications of sustained high levels of unemployment among young people (15-24 years old)*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Sweet, R 1996, 'How well do our entry level training models fit the labour market of the 1990s?' paper presented to the Tasmanian Education Consortium National Conference on *Rethinking work - Re-inventing education*, October 10-12, Hobart.

Wooden, M 1996, *The youth labour market: characteristics and trends*, Australian Bulletin of Labour, Vol. 22, No. 2, June 1996, pp.137-160.

words=1855