

**Australian Youth Policy and Action Coalition
and
Australian Council of Social Service**

Response

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Mistakes are often useful highlights of where we need to improve. In sitting down to write a policy commentary on the Learning and Work: The Situation of Young Australians seminar I mistakenly typed 'The Situation for Young Australians' not, 'of Young Australians'.

Apart from the need for my typing to improve perhaps the title of the seminar highlights our most significant policy mistake. The situation **of** young people and the situation **for** young people are in fact different things and reflect different view points. The first reflects a process where young people are the subjects of examination and policy response; a process where others examine their situation from a distance.

To my mind the most important challenge in using the quite excellent research material presented at the Learning and Work: The Situation of Young Australians seminar is to begin to understand the situation for young people from their view point and construct policy responses which give life to their visions, aspirations and dreams.

Before assessing what policy implications we draw from the changes presented in the papers we must clarify why it is we are seeking to do anything in response. Our policy intentions when responding to changes in young peoples lives must be clearly identified. Too often policy makers leave too much unsaid and assume that we are all seeking to achieve the same objectives and have the same interests in mind; I suspect that too often we don't.

In my view it is important to distinguish between the issue of unemployment and the rights of the unemployed. It could be argued that our policy responses to youth unemployment are responding to concerns or issues other than the needs, aspirations and rights of the young unemployed.

Consider the following list of community concerns and issues related to unemployment and the policy responses that follow.

- That employers are unable to sufficiently access teenage labour at a wage level they believe matches their view on what young people are worth.
(Policy response: Junior Rates/Youth Wages)
- That other members of the community find the presence and visibility of unemployed young people difficult to cope with and threatening.
(Policy response: Increased school retention rates/ Activity testing/Labour market programs)
- That high levels of youth unemployment are a political embarrassment and have the potential to undermine public support for elected governments.
(Policy response: Increased school retention rates/Dole diaries/Work for the Dole/ Tighter activity testing/ Social security fraud crackdown)
- That school systems are unable to service the needs of a larger and more diverse range of young people than they were previously required to when youth employment levels were higher.
(Policy response: alternative school programs/Vocational education in schools/Industry programs)
- That families, parents and guardians are stressed and have difficulty in understanding why young people in their family cannot access employment when this was not as significant a problem for their generation.
(Policy response: family mediation and reconciliation programs)
- That unemployment amongst young people contributes to a decline in community cohesion.
(Policy response: Activity Testing/Work for the Dole)
- That unemployment is more prevalent amongst low skilled young people than those with post compulsory qualifications who are relatively well off and privileged.
(Policy response: User pays fees in education and training/ HECS)
- That young people who are unemployed may become disinterested in employment.
(Policy response: Activity Testing/Work for the Dole)
- That young people who are unemployed and have plenty of time to spend but not much money will reject dominant political, social and cultural norms and develop alternative sub cultures and economic systems which others find threatening.

(Policy response: Activity Testing/Work for the Dole/Curfews/ Restrictions on access to public space/ law and order interventions/Police harassment)

- That young people who are marginalised from paid work will be at greater risk of self harm through a variety of means including the misuse of drugs. (Policy response: Youth work/at risk programs/activity testing).

Now the above list is not presented as an argument that these policy responses to youth unemployment have been entirely cynical exercises. It suggests though that vested interests drive policy responses and further that none of the policy responses listed have been driven by the young unemployed or an agreed position on their rights.

As a group the young unemployed have not sought policy interventions such as tighter activity testing, dole diaries, youth wages, work for the dole schemes, below poverty line income support, coerced or forced participation in school, being recycled through training or labour market programs, stereotyping by the media, victimisation by the State through police and other enforcement mechanisms, case management (public or private), family stress and breakdown or precarious casual and part time employment.

In essence all that the young unemployed have requested is what previous generations took for granted; the security that access to full time paid employment from their early teen years can provide. Their concern and policy response would produce a list which might only have one item ie;

- Access to paid employment is insufficient to the extent that young people are unable to complete the transition from dependence to independence and fully participate in the social and economic development of their community. (Policy response: Job creation)

In my view that fundamental demand from the young unemployed confronts us, (ie those that participate in these debates), with our own policy failures.

Youth unemployment and the young unemployed have been the subjects of our policy concern for over two decades. Yet arguably we start each year in a worse position than the year before. Young people's access to secure full time employment continues to decline dropping from 58.5% of this group in 1966 to 15.9% in 1997. Some analysts suggest that by the end of decade there will be insufficient full time work for teenagers to enable it to be statistically measured; there will be zero per cent of the teenage population in full time employment.

The major policy implication that I draw from the papers presented at the seminar is that we are failing. The paper presented by the Brotherhood of St Laurence reveals that we are more than likely going backwards with marginalisation and endemic poverty affecting substantial numbers of young people beyond those that are unemployed. Underemployment, intergenerational poverty and the rise of the working poor are the new phenomena we must tackle in the context of having spent over 20 years failing to address unemployment.

From my perspective some of the key policy questions that flow from the papers which we need to consider are as follows.

- **Young people and labour market**

How do we create new full time entry level positions which young people can access after completing the compulsory years of schooling ?

How do we ensure such positions provide a pathway to on going employment through skills development rather than a dead end in low paid low skilled jobs ?

Is there a need for an increased role from the public sector in entry level job creation particularly given the job losses flowing from the restructuring and re financing of state assets, instrumentalities and authorities ?

Why should young people accept anything less than equal pay for work of equal value, are all the little piggies equal but some more equal than others ?

Does acceptance of the youth wages position indicate that young people do not have equal rights as citizens ? If so can we expect them to act with equal responsibility as citizens and do we risk undermining citizenship if we promote diminished rights for certain groups in the community ?

How reasonable is it to argue that young people who have completed 13 years of schooling should now have their wages discounted back to a level commensurate with that of a 15 year old as suggested in the paper authored by Mark Wooden ?

Does cutting young peoples wages in this way indicate that we believe they have developed no additional skills of value to employers by staying at school and if so, then why do we encourage them to stay in the first place ?

Could we justify such a position to young people who may feel they had been sold a pup by staying at school only to be told they were then to be employed in a job on a wage level they could have got if they left school at 15 ?

For those involved in policy development how many of our current and former labour market programs are of such high quality that we would urge our own children to do them with the same enthusiasm we urge them to go to University ? (sincere apologies to readers who don't have children but I think you will understand my point)

If labour market programs and work for the dole are not good enough for your kids what makes them good enough for someone else's ? Apply this little test to all responses to youth unemployment.

- **Young people and participation in post compulsory education**

To what extent is our focus on school retention a poor substitute for the broader Finn targets and how likely are we to achieve the targets by 2001?

Why did we establish the Finn targets without assessing if they related in any way to the aspirations of young people ?

What if given the choice would most young people from age 15 rather be doing, working or going to school full time ?

Are higher rates of participation in school and training driven by unemployment and the lack of something else for young people to do or are they a genuine response to unemployment ?

Rather than focussing on increasing the vocational content in the latter years of schooling would we better off focusing on ways to take the school into the workplace rather than work into school ?

Have we done enough to assess and reform the structure, governance, physical environment and operation of schools to ensure they suit the massively expanded diversity and number of young people they currently deal with?

Should the post compulsory years of schooling be offering all their curriculum on a modular and part time basis, in the evenings and on weekends, so young people can realistically combine school and work rather than having to choose between the two ?

Why aren't schools designed to fit in with young people and their lives as opposed to the work patterns of teachers and parents ?

If we designed a school from scratch would it look anything like most schools that young people attend ?

Is the predominance of increased participation in education and training as a policy response to youth unemployment consistent with what young people actually want to do ? If not how do we determine whose views to place more weight on, ours or theirs ?

Why do we construct early school leaving as negative anti social behaviour instead of creating secure pathways to skills development outside of school and encourage young people to leave school early and make the transition to independence sooner rather than later ?

- **Young people and incomes**

In the context of an ageing population, earlier retirement and later entry to the workforce what implications are there for young peoples ability to earn sufficient income to meet life cycle needs when their work life is being cut at both ends ?

What overall impact is the Higher Education Contribution Scheme having on the other life cycle income and savings needs of young people and what impact is it having on other financial decisions, ie home ownership ?

Do you accept poverty ?

If we cannot provide access to secure paid employment sufficient in quality and quantity for all those young people that need and seek it should we provide them with secure incomes through income support which is above the poverty line ? (Keep in mind your answer to the previous question).

Summary and Conclusion

My own view is that as policy makers we are yet to confront our own failure to create the jobs and security that young people need in order to make the transition from dependence to independence. This is the common message in all the papers presented to the Learning and Work: The Situation of Young Australians seminar. The papers clearly outline that the changes which are impacting on young people are massive and structural yet by comparison our policy responses have been small and marginal.

Until we face our failure we will not invest the necessary intellectual energy and community resources required to create the jobs young people crave. It is

somewhat startling to stop and think about the enormous bureaucracy we have built in relation to education and training policy such as the Australian National Training Authority and layers of industry training boards and compare it to the lack of a national system to focus our best policy minds on job creation.

In concluding I am reminded of the Job for Young Australian's conference which took place in Adelaide in August 1995 and one of the keynote speakers, Jeremy Seabrook, who spoke passionately about the need to create real jobs and in particular the need to do it now.

What we urgently need to devise are not artificial schemes which savour of the occupational therapy ward, an institutionalised adventure playground to keep discarded human energies occupied and out of mischief.... [we need] labour intensive work, where people make, do, invent, exchange and give, where human need is answered as close to the point of consumption as possible, and where this cannot be done, looking further afield for the supply of necessities that are not available locally..... to enhance and validate, to raise up and exalt our capacities, not to see in labour an enduring obstacle to be overcome, a regrettable necessity which should in every way be done away with as soon possible, to celebrate our ability to do things, not to consign the answering of basic need to ghastly hell holes in the third world where people use up their lives for a pittance, whose identity is not even known to us. For their sufferings wind up being ours also; their invisible wasted hands join the wasted idle hands of our young in supplication to the leaders of a world who no longer know where they are taking us.... instead of passing over these issues, they should be at the heart of democratic debate; and not the least service we can render a new generation is to impose them onto the bland, managed and slippery agendas of those who are supposed to serve us.¹

¹ Jeremy Seabrook - Quotation from address to *Job for Young Australians Conference*, August 28-31 1995. As cited in conference outcomes; 'Investing In Australia's Future'. University of Adelaide.