

Developing a new regional education, employment & training agenda: early lessons from Whittlesea¹

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Despite sustained economic growth in Australia over the past decade, the number of people who have been unemployed for more than a year is at a level equivalent to the economic recessions of 1990-91 and 1982-83. According to the ABS more than 190,000 Australians are long-term unemployed, an underestimate because of the number of discouraged jobseekers not included in the official statistics. However the magnitude of long-term unemployment is probably better captured by the number of people on Centrelink 'temporary' benefits - new start, youth and mature age allowances (excluding full-time students) for more than 12 months. There are 386,000 people currently in these Centrelink categories.² The persistence of long term unemployment has many important implications for individuals and their well-being, and more generally for public policy, especially in terms of macro-efficiency and budget issues.³

A failed school-to-work transition is now recognised as an important risk factor in terms of propensity to long-term unemployment. An estimated one in five of Australia's long-term unemployed is connected to a failed school-to-work transition.⁴ Young people are in the frontline of the employment, education and training consequences resulting from the economic transformation involved in the development of 'the new economy'.

An important Business Council of Australia (BCA) report recently strongly linked the issue of long-term unemployment with the many difficulties that face young people as they experience the transition from school-to-work. The BCA analysis of services for young people in transition highlighted some major problems in service conceptualisation, planning and delivery. The capacity of central agencies under current arrangements to determine successful youth transitions is questionable. In particular the BCA pointed to:

¹ This paper is adapted from an address given to the Centre for the Economics of Education and Training, Monash University, May 2000.

² Boston Consulting Group, **Pathways to Work. Tackling Long-term Unemployment**, Business Council of Australia, Melbourne, 2000.

³B. Chapman & C. Kapuscinski, 'Avoiding Recessions and Australian Long-Term Unemployment', The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper No. 29, Canberra, June 2000.

⁴ *Ibid.*

- Unclear accountabilities of education providers such as schools and TAFE, and employment service agencies in the Job Network, reflecting broader confusion and turf warfare between the Commonwealth and States in the whole area of youth transitions.
- Inadequate measures of outcomes, so that local communities are unaware of or have great difficulty in ascertaining the participation levels and activities of their young people.
- Lack of knowledgeable buyers of employment, education and community services to assist young people. Program fragmentation, short-term funding, competitive pressures and lack of clear local accountabilities mean that collective knowledge is often not drawn upon, successes and failures are not documented and no-one locally has the power or authority to re-direct or re-prioritise resources.⁵

Some of the responses suggested by the Business Council such as re-configuring Education Departments as Departments of Youth Futures may be seen as contentious, but the BCA analysis of the key issues is nevertheless compelling.

An attempt has been made to address some of these issues, and others, through a process that has evolved in Whittlesea, an outer northern suburb of Melbourne, over the past two years. This paper aims to analyse what has been achieved to date, point to the key factors involved in building the regional partnership, and what still needs to be done.

A snapshot of young people 'at risk' in the school-to-work transition

Part of the context for what has emerged in Whittlesea was provided by data generated through a collaborative project co-ordinated by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF) over the past three years that documented the broad learning and work situation of young people in Australia.⁶ Some of the salient points include:

- in May 1999 more than 190,000 or 14.5 per cent of teenagers were either:
 - unemployed
 - working part-time and not in education
 - not in the labour force
- 115,000 or nine per cent were either unemployed or not in the labour force. For every teenager counted as unemployed, at least one more is not involved

⁵ Boston Consulting Group, **op.cit.**

⁶ Dusseldorp Skills Forum, **Australia's Youth: Reality and Risk**, Sydney, 1998 and **Australia's Young Adults: The Deepening Divide**, Sydney, 1999; A. King, **The Cost to Australia of Early School-leaving**, DSF, Sydney, 1999.

in full-time work or study. The proportion of teenagers in these categories in 1999 is the same as it was a decade ago.

- 70% of teenagers in these 'at risk' categories are early school leavers.
- 300,000 or 23.5 per cent of young adults were either not in full-time work and not in full-time education. Eight per cent of 24 year olds have not completed any higher education, or participated in TAFE or an apprenticeship, and been unemployed for 25 per cent of their time.
- By the age of 24 the incidence of unemployment experienced by early school leavers is twice that of school completers and they also experience significantly reduced hourly earnings
- The overall cost to individuals, governments and the rest of society due to the disadvantages of higher unemployment, lower incomes and other costs arising from early school leaving is \$2.6 billion every year.
- Full-time teenage jobs halved between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s.
- The teenage unemployment rate is three times the level of older workers.
- The young adult unemployment rate is double that of mature age adults.
- Casualisation is a growing feature of the youth labour market: 55 per cent of all teenage jobs, and 32 per cent of the non-student teenage jobs, are casual, and one in five non-student young adult jobs are casual.
- The proportion of young adults in low skilled jobs is increasing, even discounting for all the part-time/full-time factors and educational qualifiers, despite the rising level of qualifications held by this group.
- Compared to mature age workers, earnings of young adults have fallen by 20 per cent since 1976.
- School retention has fallen from 77 per cent in 1992 to 72 per cent in 1999, and is at 66 per cent in the government sector (84 per cent in the non-government sector). Just 66 per cent of teenage male are staying at school to complete Year 12.
- Teenagers as a percentage of those in training fell from 66 per cent in 1995 compared to 44 per cent in 1998.

- Australia has one of the lowest proportions of the post-compulsory age group in apprenticeships or vocational education of all the OECD countries.

The Power of the Regions

The emergence of a 'new economy' that places a higher value on personal and intellectual skills, often gained through academic study and training, and the simultaneous decline of processing and manufacturing industries has changed the employment outlook for young people during the closing decades of the twentieth century. The massive recent growth of part-time and casual work in entry-level jobs in the service industries, while making it easier for many young people to pursue study and to gain valuable workplace skills, has also eroded the stock of full-time jobs available to young people. Increasingly young people are required to stay in education for extended periods in order to gain a toehold in those jobs that do offer a sustainable future and career path. The transition to economic independence is taking longer, and with it young people are being forced to rely on their parents for longer periods as well. For young people not linked to this trajectory or unable to construct an alternative pathway, the prospect of rotating through precarious employment or entering long-term unemployment is real.⁷

However this aggregate picture of what is happening in learning and work among young people only captures part of the landscape facing young people. The pattern of advantage and disadvantage in different communities is much more complex than the collaborative project could reveal. A clutch of recent studies has pointed to the significance of regional issues in influencing economic and educational opportunities.⁸ The Victorian post-compulsory education review examining the situation of young people not in education or employment has clearly highlighted "a trend towards greater regional disparity....consistent with the growing gaps between the better and worse off in the State."⁹

The disadvantage of place is now quite profound. In the 70s and 80s it seemed that issues of gender, ethnicity and disability took prominence in debates about opportunity and inequality. But in the late 1990s it is the consequences of a flight of public and private capital (both financial, infrastructure and skills) from local

⁷ As Peter Lewis observes, "For school leavers ... imagination is just as important as formal qualifications ... it is the ability to think clearly, solve problems, come up with new ideas and skills and be prepared to change that will lead them through a satisfying working life ... education and training must become an ongoing process, pursued through both formal and informal channels, focussed on creating confident all-rounders who can change with their environment." P. Lewis, **Tales from the New Shop Floor**, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000, p9.

⁸ See L. Ling et al., 'Empowering Communities. A Tool Kit for Action. A Report to the Dusseldorp Skills Forum', unpubl. paper, Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities, La Trobe University, 2000.

⁹ 'Post-compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria. Ministerial Statement', Dept of Education, Employment and Training, Melbourne, January 2000.

economies to the global economy that is drawing concern. This is happening at two levels: from Australia as a nation-state to other international centres; as well as internally. The metropolitan centres of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane and the coastal economies of NSW and Queensland have prospered while other centres have declined. And within Sydney and Melbourne the inner city and the east (and the north shore in Sydney) have benefited at the expense of most other suburbs.

Recently DSF commissioned the Centre for Sustainable Regional Development at La Trobe University to analyse findings about young people in a number of recent reports tracking the impact of growing inequalities between regions and localities in Australia. The study concluded that “the poorer performing regions of Australia have a range of economic and social issues that are impacting on the educational and employment attainments of their young people.”¹⁰ Young people living in rural and remote locations clearly tend not to fare as well as students living in metropolitan areas – however locality alone is not the sole reason for a student’s success in the education and work situation. The opportunities available to young people and their patterns of participation tend to be more dependent on the general economic performance of a region than on youth specific factors.¹¹

The State of the Regions report recently noted: “The inequality in the distribution of wealth, infrastructure, skills, knowledge based workers, emerging industries and access to strong labour markets and commercial centres means that deprived regions are more likely to continue to lag behind. Around half our population live in communities that are equipped to handle the economic pressures of the early 21st century. The rest live in either marginalised communities or communities that without strong action to upgrade their economic fundamentals run a strong risk of becoming marginalised.”¹²

Recognition of the importance of regional outcomes comes at a time when there is strong tension between ‘the centre’ and ‘the periphery’ in policy and funding debates, and when the primary lines of accountability to funders or purchasers rather than local people (whether seen as customers or citizens) are open to contest. Many communities have come to realise that they need to become more self-directed and self-initiating, not just to compete against the drift of public and private resources but simply in order to survive.

For example they are realising that they can no longer look to a key employer to save a town or a community; equally they are sceptical about the capacity and

¹⁰ L. Ling, et al., **op.cit**, p51.

¹¹ **Ibid.**

¹² National Economics, **State of the Regions 1999. A Report to the Australian Local Government Association**, Melbourne, 1999, p7.

willingness of governments to support them as services are lost and industry drifts away. There is a sense that total faith in either governments or markets is misplaced. A mix of instruments and approaches is required that might include both public and private capital, and most importantly, ingenuity, adapted to particular circumstances and responses. The work of 'civic entrepreneurship', of combining people and resources – both public and private - in new ways as a means of delivering better social outcomes, higher economic value and more social capital, is becoming increasingly important.¹³ More can be achieved by working together rather than battling away in isolation.

In addition the knowledge that people's pathways are now no longer linear – people flow between activities (eg. learning/work/family/travel) means that no one program will meet the needs of individuals or raise the well-being of the community. This is especially true of young people. Consequently there is a need to take advantage of all the funding opportunities that are available, and for the need to integrate and link discrete programs. There is a growing realisation that responsibility for integrating these opportunities can only come from the local level, not from the central employment, education and training agencies at the State or Commonwealth level. Communities are trying to respond creatively to the short-termism of these agencies, to the restrictive targeting of many programs and the habit of the funding tap being turned on and off.

The adoption of a purchaser-provider model of policy development, funding and service delivery has meant that labour market and training programs, while being based in communities (eg. Work for the Dole, Jobs Pathway Programme, JPET) are controlled centrally in terms of where and how they fit. For example, local communities were unable to input into the recent Job Network tender round and determine the type, location and style of assistance required in their local economy. In reality the Job Network operates less like a web of co-operation and more like a series of competitive enterprises – there is little sharing of knowledge about interventions to develop common understandings about how to assist people back to work and there is almost no combined effort in local communities to achieve locally desirable outcomes.

The 'turf warfare' between the Commonwealth and the States over the provision of services, the distribution of resources and the primacy of their respective legislative jurisdictions, has serious local consequences, especially in the areas of vocational education and training and school-to-work transitions. In the area of school-to-work transitions where the Commonwealth has primary responsibility for employment outcomes and the States have primary responsibility for educational outcomes, there is bound to be conflict over the roles of the respective spheres. As a result local communities are becoming increasingly

¹³ C. Leadbeater & S. Goss, **Civic Entrepreneurship**, Demos, London, 1998, p17.

assertive, and cobbling together arrangements to give them greater access and planning over services for young people.

Some of the most severe difficulties between 'the centre' and 'the periphery' emerge over program funding. Examples include:

- Restrictions on the use of the funds, often making it necessary to seek funding from multiple, small buckets of opportunity
- Rarely are funds available for meeting both recurrent or capital costs even in the establishment phase
- Onerous - even inappropriate - accountability requirements, and
- Relationships with the various funders that in effect remove many aspects of control from the very people who designed and run the program.

The recent OECD thematic review of transition provides an interesting insight into how these relationships can be better managed. It praised those countries with tight safety nets at the local level and pointed to Scandinavian countries such as Denmark where a wide range of learning options exist, and great efforts are made to ensure that education is moulded to suit the particular circumstances of individual young people. In Denmark each municipality is legally obliged to follow up all young people under the age of 20 who opt out of education without obtaining a qualification. The municipal guidance service works with each 'at risk' young person to enable them to develop and follow an individual action plan involving work, education and training. The main goal is to re-engage them into mainstream education as soon as possible so they can gain a qualification; government provided income support is contingent on the pursuit of the personal action plan. The OECD review points to the importance of customisation of services, funding and institutions around individuals and local communities rather than prescriptive central models.¹⁴

In Australia one of the strongest examples of local stakeholders working in concert to enrich the transition experience of young people is through the structured workplace learning partnerships of schools and industry. Originally established as vehicles to provide students with better avenues to develop generic workplace and life skills, and to encourage innovative modes of learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom, a number of these partnerships are now evolving as platforms connecting young people to entry level employment and vocational training. They are packaging and integrating a range of local support services including pre-employment training, apprenticeship placement, employment brokerage, literacy and numeracy education, and so on in ways that challenge government agencies that only take responsibility for a fraction of the

¹⁴ OECD, **Review of the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life. Final Report**, Paris, 2000.

transition experience or the youth cohort.¹⁵ The Whittlesea Youth Commitment is just one example of how new holistic platforms to assist young people in transition are emerging. While it gives us some interesting insights, each community's response to the transition needs of young people will reflect their own peculiar circumstances and capacities.

Whittlesea

The **State of the Regions** report describes Darebin, Moreland, Hume and Whittlesea as “a production region with low labour utilisation, poor job creation and poor job prospects and higher than average barriers to employment but it has reasonable infrastructure and a growing skills base.”¹⁶

However Whittlesea is probably more advantaged than its immediate inner urban neighbours. It is a fast growing outer suburban and semi-rural municipality of more than 120,000 people in Melbourne's northern corridor. Across so many dimensions – age structure, income, health status, and employment levels – it typifies the outer suburban localities of Australia's capital cities. Its families are aspirational, both for themselves and their children; sport is one of the powerful glues that bind the community together; and a modest affluence can be detected that sometimes masks pockets of real disadvantage. It faces all the community building, skill and employment development, and infrastructure provision issues confronting every expanding suburban cluster.¹⁷

Its young people generally attend one of the eight local schools (seven public and one Catholic). Mostly built in the 1960s and 1970s, the public school infrastructure is beginning to show signs of age and sustained wear and tear. The social and economic indicators - in terms of school retention to Year 12, youth unemployment, and access to higher education - for young people in Whittlesea are comparable to those in nearby municipalities in northern Melbourne. However the population growth expected over the next decade will put great pressure on an already strained public education system and on the creation of new employment opportunities.

¹⁵ See for example, **Bright Futures for Young Australians**, Australian Student Traineeship Foundation (ASTF), Sydney, 2000; J. Malley, T. Frigo, L. Robinson, **Case Studies in Australian School Industry Programs**, Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Melbourne, 1999.

¹⁶ National Economics, **op.cit.**, p85.

¹⁷ See **Improving the Lives of Young Victorians in Our Community**, Department of Human Services (Victoria), Melbourne, May 2000. In terms of so-called overall 'risk factors' related to serious problem behaviour – poor family discipline, family conflict and the availability of drugs - Whittlesea ranks close to the metropolitan average. However in terms of so-called overall 'protective factors' concerning serious problem behaviour – opportunities for positive community involvement, rewards for positive family and school involvement, and belief in moral values - Whittlesea ranks below the metropolitan average.

Young people in Whittlesea in full-time employment are predominantly in low skilled jobs, in sales, service and clerical positions and in labouring. More than half of the youth jobs are in these three categories - and there is a lower proportion of teenagers in trades than the metropolitan average. Most of the jobs in Whittlesea are in manufacturing, in retailing, in construction and house building, and in education. There are significant employers in mushroom cultivation, tool making, furniture making, glue manufacture, and small-scale textile, clothing and footwear businesses. The likely growth in jobs will be in metal manufacturing, retailing, health services, and furniture manufacturing. Particular skill shortages have been identified in the northern region in the stainless steel industry, machine operations, and printing industries, predominantly male fields. However teenagers in Whittlesea aspire to work in hospitality, in art and design, and so on - their ambitions extend beyond the range of jobs immediately on the horizon in their local community.¹⁸

The Whittlesea Youth Commitment

In the past eighteen months some key steps have been taken by the local community to identify the position of young people in Whittlesea:

- an environmental scan of youth participation in employment, education and training and the broader community services available to meet their needs
- a destination survey of school leavers
- an audit of career teaching and vocational guidance in the local public secondary schools
- a regional skills audit to identify skills strengths and weaknesses in local industry
- a study of the likely impact of the introduction of the Youth Allowance on school participation and community services such as Centrelink
- a funding map to chart the distribution of resources in employment, education and training from all sources, across the dimensions of school completers and early school leavers .

Key findings of the funding map¹⁹ were:

- average per capita resources for school completers in Years 11 and 12 is \$5600 pa (compares to Commonwealth estimate of \$8300 pa)
- average per capita resources to assist early school leavers total \$2900 pa to reach post-school employment, education and training destinations
- average per capita resources to assist early school leavers in TAFE total \$4200 pa

¹⁸ NIECAP, 'Young People in the City of Whittlesea. A Scan of Employment and Education Issues', RMIT, 1999.

¹⁹ P. Kellock, 'Map of Funding Provision for Youth in Whittlesea', unpubl. paper, DSF, 1999.

- average per capita resources to assist early school leavers in new apprenticeships total \$4500 pa
- average per capita resources to assist early school leavers in the Job Network totalled just \$760 in 1998-99.

The map estimated that up to 260 young people are leaving school with an unknown destination, and this was likely to double in the next four years.²⁰ Reasons young people are giving for being 'at risk' vary from family bereavement, homelessness, depression, and learning difficulties, to simply not liking school: "I need to be hands on, I just can't sit down and learn, I just drift off."²¹

During 1999 a collaborative partnership involving education, employment, and training providers; government, and community agencies in Whittlesea evolved in response to the immediate situation of young people not in full-time education or employment and to plan a more integrated set of approaches to Whittlesea young people in the future. The initial impetus came from a local education sector concerned about rising levels of youth disengagement, a sense that an increasing number of students still at school were 'reluctant stayers', and the knowledge that new income, employment assistance and training arrangements were unlikely to arrest the number of young people at risk of failing through the social safety net.²² The participating organisations came together "believing that by doing so the sum total of their efforts will be greater than if they had continued to work separately. ... [To provide] a common framework, a clear focus and a collective means of developing the life skills and active citizenship of each young person in Whittlesea. To achieve this we need a strategy that builds and sustains a skilled and stable workforce."²³

As a result the Whittlesea Youth Commitment (WYC) partnership emerged, with an official partnership agreement being signed in March 2000.

Partners in the Commitment include:

- 8 Schools
- Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE
- RMIT
- Whittlesea BusinessLink, representing more than 80 local employers
- Individual businesses including Bostik Australia, Tieman Industries, Graphics Unlimited and Anderson Multiplex

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ NIECAP, *op.cit.*

²² See Northern Area Consultative Committee (Victoria), **Youth Allowance Impact Project. Final Report** Melbourne, 1999; DSF also played a catalytic role in energising this sector and in facilitating relationships with local employment, training and community sector providers.

²³ NIECAP, 'What is the Whittlesea Youth Commitment', unpubl. paper, RMIT, July 1999.

- Inner Northern Group Training
- City of Whittlesea
- Victorian Department of Education, Employment & Training, and agencies
- Federal Department of Employment, Workplace Relations & Small Business
- Northern Area Consultative Committee
- Centrelink
- 3 Job Network brokers
- Kildonan Child and Family Care
- Plenty Valley Community Health Centre
- Jobs Pathway Programme in the North

The WYC objectives are to:

- Provide all young people with the opportunity and support to complete Year 12 or its equivalent.
- Be flexible about the nature of this equivalence, which will be defined by the needs and aspirations of young people themselves.
- Develop new learning, training, further education and employment options for young people to achieve these goals.
- Provide new workplacement, work opportunities, skill development, and community support structures for young people to achieve these goals.
- Establish a school and community based mediating structure that will assist young people to meet their knowledge, learning, the labour market needs during the transition to adulthood.
- Develop and customise the curriculum provision of schools, TAFE and other training providers to better support the aspirations of young people.

Financial and in-kind contributions have been made to the community partnership by a range of members and a secretariat or ‘fulcrum’ has been established through NIECAP-RMIT, an education resource centre promoting partnerships in the northern suburbs in Melbourne.

“A fulcrum is an entity, independent of the stakeholders that can serve the interests of members yet focus their attention upon the big picture and its common vision and aims. It is the legs and lynchpin upon which associated activities hinge. This vital role provides the following services to the stakeholders and their shared vision:

- Develops a work plan for the partnership
- Helps to share ideas and build relationships
- Focuses members and management group on effective business
- Assists stakeholders in translating ideas and intent into practical action
- Interprets and links policy and funding so that local action can meet local needs

- Provides an administrative service
- Aggregates data for purposes of internal monitoring
- Recruits and inducts additional members, including employers
- Facilitates the voice of young people”²⁴

Actions in 2000

An action plan was been approved by the WYC, at the beginning of 2000. This is what is happening ‘on the ground’ this year:

- Baseline measurement of the activities of all early school leavers
- Adoption of indicators that will track each young person in education, employment and training, and identify the performance of each of the partners in meeting their needs
- Annual reporting to all stakeholders and the Whittlesea community about these indicators and benchmarks
- A dedicated transition broker or teams of teachers in each secondary school to support exiting early school leavers (currently one dedicated broker, with teachers also assigned to a brokerage role in other schools)²⁵
- Transition passports documenting the academic, workplace learning, part-time work and generic skills of each young person in the senior years of school that will enable these skills to be easily recognised by employers, educators and Centrelink
- A Community Team has been formed with members from each school and community agency charged with following up young people disengaged from education and employment; individual team members also act as change agents in each WYC organisation
- Employer roundtables with education, training and community service providers, and the development of training targets over time
- A Council initiative, the Whittlesea cyberbus (a converted bus fitted with portable computer and multimedia technology) is enabling disenfranchised young people to learn information technology and other skills

²⁴ D. Turner, ‘Documentation of the Whittlesea Youth Commitment. Relating the Initiative to the National Youth Commitment’, unpubl. paper, DSF, April 2000.

²⁵ Transition brokerage involves making sustainable systematic connections between individual needs and the existing array of supports and resources, with clear points of contact and responsibility. A recent model program auspiced by the Brotherhood of St Laurence has demonstrated the effectiveness of transition brokerage. The program involved attaching project officers or brokers with two contrasting Victorian schools, working part of the week on the school site, and the remainder at the Brotherhood’s local employment services offices. Four components were involved, including school-based vocational and personal support and counselling; school-based referral and support at the time of exiting; post-school follow up and support for the young person; and post-school placement in an employment or training program. Intensive and long-term case management was the main approach adopted by the project workers. See H. MacDonald, **Bridging the Gap. Assisting Early School Leavers to Make the Transition to Work**, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne, 1999.

- Spirit of Co-operation Agreement linking the partners to a common vision and actions

What has been achieved so far

During 1999 and 2000 the momentum for change and attuning key local providers to the needs of young people has been building.

- A common exit procedure for all students across all schools has been established
- An extensive survey of needs and attitudes of young people not in full-time education or employment has been undertaken
- A school leavers guide to regional employment, education, training and community services has been developed and circulated
- A dedicated Centrelink staff relationship has been developed with each school
- NMIT and NIECAP are working closely with schools on curriculum reform and articulation between courses and training
- There has been record growth in VCE VET enrolment, with Whittlesea Secondary College now the largest provider in the state
- There has also been record growth in alternative VET participation (non-accredited courses)
- A number of employers are now committed to skills formation and dedicated relationships to local schools (adopt-an-employer/ adopt-a-school programs)
- Business mentoring is beginning for new employees/apprentices in the local furniture industry
- Local government has emerged as a key player in education and employment facilitation and in monitoring skill and employment outcomes for young people
- A fulcrum has earned the respect of the partners and is charged with driving change across education providers and employers in particular
- Improved trust, co-operation and social capital has emerged within and between sectors, reflected in collaborative tendering and information sharing

What has been crucial in taking the first steps

Six of the key ingredients among stakeholders seeking to develop more integrated and comprehensive school-to-work services in Whittlesea have been:

- ❑ Leadership from a key sector
School principals and TAFE were aware that a narrow concentration on just academic and post-school student destinations added to the likelihood that young people not in full-time education or employment would continue to experience high levels of social disconnectedness.
- ❑ Role of local government

The willingness of the local government to see the connection between sectors (especially education, employment and community services) and to provide a manageable planning framework for the process.

❑ Attitudes of employers

Local employers have been keen to take practical steps by themselves and in partnership to improve the skill level of young people, and not just push this responsibility onto the education sector.

❑ Seed funding

Funding buckets (eg. the Commonwealth's Regional Assistance Program and state sources through the Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training) were available to be accessed that enabled stakeholders to initiate some initial change on the ground swiftly, and to establish the role of the fulcrum.

❑ External agent

The close involvement of an external catalyst, acting in a brokerage and advocacy role, helped to cement initial trust between sectors and stakeholders.

❑ Local data and research

Local data and research on those young people not engaged in full-time education or employment has enriched the national perspective, and given the issues a local immediacy that was otherwise lacking.

What could happen

The steps that have been taken in Whittlesea can be built on and enhanced. A five year plan of development for the WYC is being formulated and DSF has suggested a number of future measures to strengthen the capacity and potential of the WYC. These can be summarised as:

❑ Stronger safety nets and local accountability

The dedicated transition brokerage which is currently based in one school needs to be extended so that a comprehensive and inclusive service is offered across the Whittlesea cluster.

Underpinning the local accountability of the participating organisations should be an annual local social audit, with a focus on WYC outcomes, co-ordinated and released by local government.

The partnership has been highly dependent on external funding from a variety of federal and state government sources during the initial stages. Stakeholder pooling of resources with local organisations contributing a greater share of the funding required over time, would improve the sustainability of the WYC.

- ❑ Mentoring

Schools and businesses in Whittlesea have engaged in mentoring projects in the past but there is an opportunity to develop more comprehensive and inclusive systems of support for young people in both schools and in workplaces.

- ❑ Customised learning and pathways: in schools, TAFE and learning beyond the classroom

Project and team based learning in enterprises, community organisations and local government that develops both accredited and generic skills are important strategies that could assist in improving school retention rates and in opening vocational pathways. One step would be to assess the value of part-time employment undertaken by students and the potential link between part-time employment and school curricula and accreditation.

- ❑ Community learning centre

Developing a community learning centre based on an existing school or perhaps designing an integrated school and community centre in one of the new growth areas in the municipality would represent a transformational change in Whittlesea. The idea of the community learning centre is in effect the creation of a one-stop hub of learning and engagement extending across age groups, which would operate at all hours of the day and night, award a range of qualifications and certificates, all the while being locally driven and managed. Services like municipal libraries, TAFE, apprenticeship centres, Job Network providers, skill centres and neighbourhood houses would be either physically co-located or virtually networked into the community learning hub.

- ❑ An employment umbrella

Australia's Youth: Reality and Risk found that one of the problems of the youth labour market is not so much that young people cannot get jobs, but that many of the jobs that they get are not taking them very far. "With increasing numbers of young people, and in particular early school leavers, finding themselves locked into frequent spells of insecure temporary work, unemployment or labour market programs a central challenge is to build protective umbrellas that can connect and link a set of fragmented employment and learning experiences."²⁶ Schools or the local community learning centre might develop new opportunities and economic relationships so that individuals can move between periods of labour market engagement, community work, and periods of learning and skill formation, while receiving a rewarding and sustainable form of income.²⁷

Some of the key features of group training could be integrated into the framework of community learning. In the same way that group training companies currently

²⁶ R. Sweet, 'Youth: The Rhetoric and the Reality of the 1990s', in **Australia's Youth. Reality and Risk**, DSF, Sydney, 1998, p17.

²⁷ See **Beyond the Fragments?**, DSF and ACIRRT, Sydney, 1999.

employ apprentices and sub-contract them to individual employers, schools or community learning centres could employ those students who wished to work part-time while completing a full or part-time course of study. These working students would be matched to the available casual job opportunities and provide a real link for schools to the hundreds of employers who now employ them directly.

Such an umbrella would enable young people to move between periods of labour market engagement and structured learning, with students simultaneously connected to school and the workplace. It would extend the idea of school based apprenticeships and enable schools and communities to influence the distribution of part-time work, helping to ensure that those young people desiring a vocational pathway had first call on the available job opportunities.

As a first step, a clearinghouse of Job Network brokers could be developed, easing the tangled web of employment services arrangements for young people and for employers. Through such a clearinghouse arrangement brokers would contribute their local knowledge and data about recruitment patterns, entry-level vacancies, and training opportunities and needs. Schools would be able to access the clearinghouse on behalf of their students and employers would be able to better meet their training and skill development requirements.

□ Employer training targets and goals

The goodwill and interest of employers in the goals of the WYC needs to be more concretely harnessed, and focused on increasing the number and quality of local training places.

□ Active and powerful young people

The options that are developed by education providers and other stakeholders need to reflect the voices and experiences of young people themselves. One of the key benchmarks for practice must include respect for the views of young people and the development of means by which they help to determine choices and options. It means acknowledging young people as equal stakeholders, and involving them in the WYC in a variety of ways including management decision-making, acting as mentors for others, and so on. Their choices and options for involvement will depend on ensuring young people are informed, knowledgeable and skilled in their approach to the WYC. Linking the WYC to programs that provide training in community leadership, and projects that recognise their rights as active citizens may help to do this.

□ Better informed and more accountable services

The framework developed through the WYC demonstrates the potential for agencies to work in stronger collaboration, despite diverse funding sources and competitive tendering arrangements. However there is scope for developing

stronger local accountabilities about who does what and when, and the sharing of information about service delivery problems and effectiveness. Better systems to provide comparative data about what does and does not work in terms of education and employment services need to be developed.

What needs to happen, locally and externally

The cultural values and form of community partnership that have emerged through the Whittlesea Youth Commitment process suggest that stronger safety nets, more engaging learning environments and a healthier youth employment market should be possible in the future.

Local stakeholders recognise the value of:

- Deepening the local process, especially by the stronger engagement of various stakeholders including young people, employers, school communities.
- Improving the participation of young people in meaningful activity has been the primary focus, and this needs to shift now to the quality of the educational and employment experiences of young people.
- A commitment by the partners to the financial sustainability of the project.

Meanwhile, projects like the WYC will be enhanced and encouraged if there is a re-appraisal of the effectiveness of the existing youth employment, education and training policy mix at state and federal government levels. This is currently happening through the Eldridge taskforce of youth action plans and pathways at the federal level and in some states like Victoria which is reviewing its post-compulsory education and training services and public education structures. The outcome of this work is likely to result in a significant shift in vocational pathways policies for young people. This shift could embrace a number of principles that provide a stronger foundation for community partnerships such as the WYC:

- Recognition of the needs of all marginalised or excluded young people – the unemployed, those outside the labour market and those in precarious part-time or casual work.
- Developing future skills, labour market competitiveness, and social connectedness is best enhanced, in the case of young people, through the provision of clear entitlements by governments to solid learning and employment services. DSF's suggestion is that this is best done by ensuring that all young people have guaranteed access to either education or equivalent employment related training (such as a TAFE certificate or an apprenticeship, or a full-time entry-level job linked to education and training) to the level of Year 12 completion. The critical shift here is in moving from the present random opportunity to access these services (with the onus on individuals) to providing a guaranteed level of education or employment related training customised to meet the needs of each individual young

person (with the onus on providers). An important related step would be to specify, in creative rather than overly mandated ways, the nature of Year 12 equivalence in vocational pathways. This would further legitimate vocational pathways as a genuine and valued alternative to the predominant academic stream.

- Related to the above would be the provision of a greater range of ‘second chance’ opportunities in education and training for early school leavers as one means of addressing the existing inequality of resources and assistance between school completers and school leavers.
- Equipping young people with knowledge and information on both vocational and academic pathways, options and the workplace through a comprehensive national careers information and guidance system.²⁸
- Placing the connectedness of individual young people to the labour market or education or training as a key goal for youth policy, in response to research findings that emphasise the crucial value of social participation.²⁹
- Funding the ABS to capture local youth transition data on employment, education and training participation and to make this data accessible to local community partnerships as part of a suite of planning and benchmarking tools.
- Facilitating and supporting the delivery of integrated education, employment and training arrangements through community partnerships perhaps by dissolving or replacing fragmented and competitive funding arrangements with pooled funding opportunities across departments and programs. The devolution of real decision-making power over resources and priorities, skills and energies to localities and regions in clever ways will be a test of public sector management in the next decade.

Conclusion

The value of partnership arrangements such as those emerging in Whittlesea is becoming apparent. ACER’s recent study of partnership transition platforms³⁰ identified some of the benefits:

- Catering for the needs of all students and a broader range of young people.
- A ‘one stop’ shop approach streamlines activity and creates efficiencies of operation for students and employers.
- Increased retention rates into senior high school for ‘at risk’ students.
- Strengthened community learning by engaging stakeholders through the medium of student transitions who then become involved in the wider landscape of community partnerships.

²⁸ See P. Kellock, ‘Learning from the Job Pathway Programme. A Report to the Dusseldorp Skills Forum’, unpubl. paper, DSF, June 2000.

²⁹ See DHS (Victoria), **op.cit.**

³⁰ See Malley et al., **op.cit.**

- The capacity for service integration is improved as the multiple facets of student needs are exposed to a wider range of stakeholders.
- Establishing the identity of the partnership program within the community engenders increased interest and support and the realisation that transitions are a school-business/industry-community and individual student responsibility.

It is too early to determine the extent to which the particular application of the WYC – stronger education, training and employment safety nets at the local level, better integration between sectors and clear, identifiable points of connection for young people – will result in more successful school-to-work transitions and lower levels of future long-term unemployment in Whittlesea. However the local stakeholders are evolving relationships that offer hope that key factors identified by the BCA – unclear accountabilities and dis-integration of services, inadequate measures, and a lack of knowledgeable buyers of services – can be overcome.

The broad loss of faith by both elites and ordinary citizens in the capacity of the state to achieve tangible and lasting improvements in the social condition is likely to result in increasing attempts to devolve responsibility for resources and outcomes away from centralised bureaucracies towards local communities. However can local communities successfully achieve in an arena when governments with more resources and legislative capacity are struggling? How can community partnerships at the local level engineer sustainable change when the issues they are dealing with arise from macro-forces in the economy and culture? What would lead us to expect that Whittlesea or any other community where similar efforts are being made can defy the way work is being re-assembled or the way families are evolving?

On its own, in isolation and divorced from the policy context around it, experiments like Whittlesea will raise unachievable expectations. However the values these efforts express, of genuine collaboration for common goals, of respect for young people as individuals, of stakeholder involvement in decision-making, for example, are powerful tools that can change ineffective practices. Moreover they can contribute to the development of a new style of 'partnership government', one that is more inclusive and structurally and intellectually prepared to harness the combined efforts of stakeholders. Implicitly the work of government is becoming that of resourcing and facilitating good practices between communities. Governments will increasingly be called on to guarantee benchmarks and universal standards, with a strong role for the public sector not just as a purchaser of services but also as a provider, oftentimes in combination with other public agencies and with private sector partners.

This is very different to the ascendant model of government in the 1980s and 1990s – an a priori view of the incapacity and ineffectiveness of the public sector which lead to widespread contracting out and privatisation of core services and social responsibilities. However, it is not difficult to see how ‘partnership government’ could be misinterpreted. Some governments will be increasingly attracted to the idea of partnerships because of the economic value to be gained - there are efficiencies that can be garnered by going down the partnership route. Communities will need to be watchful that ‘partnership’ does not become a new code word that masks an effort to further shrink the responsibilities of governments to citizens.

Clearly some of the current techniques of government, including open tendering, represent significant obstacles to the development of a policy culture built on the sharing of information, mutual benefit, collaboration and combined expertise. New instruments to encourage choice, flexibility and co-operation need to be found. As the ASTF recently noted, too often it seems the effort to attain universality (of purpose, standards, access, quality and viability) leads to the imposition of uniformity (of structure, composition and means).³¹

In order to make partnership arrangements and regional initiatives such as Whittlesea effective, governments will need to see the connections between program ‘silos’ that presently compartmentalise health, education, employment and economic development policy and funding. Pooled funding derived from multiple government agencies will need to be made available to communities building partnerships that are prepared to tackle unemployment, drug abuse, skill deficits and other forms of social exclusion. This is not a small agenda. Changes of this nature will require all the stakeholders to examine their common vision, how they relate to each other, what they currently actually achieve, and to develop new modes of working intended to reduce the social and economic risks facing young people.

³¹ See ASTF, *op.cit.*