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How Young People are Faring symposium
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The Youth Pathways Taskforce actually came out of the previous youth homeless task force where it became quite obvious that young people in some communities weren't doing that well and families were confused about pathways through school and beyond. We stupidly made a suggestion at the end of the homelessness taskforce that the Commonwealth should develop a five year action plan and bring together a group of people to do it and that's how we ended up doing this taskforce.

The youth pathways Taskforce

The taskforce role was to consult and advise on the scope of the five-year action plan, which never eventuated in the report. It was aimed at:

- improving support for young people and their families during young peoples transitions to independence, and
- strengthening pathways for those who don't go through school to further education and training or full-time employment, or those not engaged with their communities.

We decided not to focus purely on disadvantaged young people because we thought that if you improve systems for all young people, less young people would become disadvantaged. We broadly looked at three cohorts of young people and their pathways. Our conclusion was that we think about 70% of young people get through and with support from families and others they achieved a destination that they are comfortable with. And 20% young people were at serious risk of falling out of the system and 10% of young people just don't get through.

The process of the report was a complicated strategy that involved:

- a youth and parent questionnaire that was designed by young people
- a submission process, and about 170 submissions came in
- regional workshops including consultations with Indigenous communities
- consultations with bureaucrats, ministers and others
- 60 community consultations across Australia
- bi-lateral discussions (that's a discussion that you don't know what to call).

- attendance at the National Youth Roundtable in the year 2000. It was particularly useful to engage with a group of young people who were applying their minds to the issue that we were talking about
- commissioned some research and had some good practise budgeting.

The key issues

The years I spent with the Taskforce really were quite transforming for me: let me tell you that I am over welfare. And I say that considering the uniform that I am wearing and the commitment of my life. We can't keep focusing on young people's issues as problems. There needs to be a purpose to what we do and we have to have a strong positive focus. And my focus right now is to keep young people learning; in situations where they are learning, taking on knowledge, participating in the community and where the support that is provided is not just to help them deal with their problems. The more we focus on something positive and productive and move young people through situations where they can learn, the more useful it is for them, and for us.

In talking to young people and their families it became clear that the support available and received in the transition process is not adequate. They told us clearly the transition process was not producing the right outcome. Some people say that we have the highest level of qualifications ever, but the proportion of young people leaving work earlier and not going into full-time work is still too high, and the DSF reports reflect this. We are just not doing well enough with a significant number of young people leaving school unprepared for participation in life and in the future.

There is a lack of good information about transition. Some of the career guidance and support teachers expressed enormous frustration. They actually liked what they were doing; but they were often there by chance because there was a vacancy, or for a variety of accidental reasons. These teachers are committed to the job of guidance and support, but they often don't have the specific skills or access to training, and there were no resources.

One of the challenges that emerged is that as a community, we identify and act on these issues too late. Problems and issues are joined up in the young person, but our responses are not joined up. The availability and acceptability of appropriate guidance and information is an issue. The current support arrangements are truly fragmented. No one agency is responsible for transition outcomes. Who or what is the body accountable for transition outcomes? Is it the Commonwealth government? Is it the state government? In my view local governments could play an extremely important role developing transition indicators for their community focused around school outcomes, labour market, provisional services, a whole range of things, because at that level you can start addressing some of the issues. How we report and measure more exactly actual outcomes needs more thought and has to be a greater priority. So the way forward is to ask the Commonwealth Government to make a commitment to all

young people, to ask the Commonwealth Government to connect young people, and their family and the community.

I want to get back to the issue of partnerships at local, state and national levels. Too many partnerships are rhetorical, they don't do the hard yards of delivering something locally to people. 'Partnership' is a great term, but what does it exactly mean when you're actually doing business? ECEF and others have been doing rich work on this and exploring the life cycle of partnerships, and different models of partnering. How do you build partnerships? How do you nurture them? How do you keep it going?

Prevention, early recognition and intervention need to be organised locally. And again, there has been a lot of talk and a lot of development of programs in prevention and early intervention. But what about locally? What about an early response plan where we can say "look in this school when we identify an issue, we can say this is the agency or these are the agencies we call in." What about knowing these things in advance. We know in schools there are going to be young people who are going to be sexually abused, and this will impact on their education. We know that there are going to be young people who are homeless. We know also that they don't all leave school. But we make them live in horrific circumstances and try and study and keep up with their work because we focus on our homeless and welfare support systems rather than keeping young people connected to education and learning.

Our policy approach needs to take responsibility for all transition outcomes in all sectors, not just education. It's not the job of a teacher to find a kid a house. Our systems need to connect up so that every stakeholder takes responsibility for their contribution to a successful transition by young people.

The youth commitment

What is the package that we asked the Commonwealth to consider? A national commitment to all young people, and professional career and transition support were central. What we learnt was that if you can get good transition workers into schools, issues are picked up earlier: the right connections are made for young people. The further back you go to pick up issues in a breakdown, the more likely you are to affect a more positive transition for young people.

Schools that have had transition workers have certainly come alive with other programs available that could meet the needs of young people. Suddenly they recognise that there are a percentage of young people in Year 10 and Year 9 and Year 8 who have transition issues, and now they realise they can play a role to do something about it. And schools have started to act through a dedicated person independent of the classroom teaching role and able to provide a broader vision of the young persons issues. We need a national commitment to transition support for all young people. ECEF and others have pushed this agenda forward

to a more sophisticated level. Professional career and transition support and follow up, pathways plans and robust transition indicators are needed.

Early response plans are critical, and we suggested a collaborative plan built locally in coordination with local, state and Commonwealth governments. Well resourced local partnerships can make a difference, as demonstrated through the experience of ECEF. Where they work well, they are sensational, and they do enlarge their responsibilities beyond the job that they get paid for.

The Partnership Outreach Education Model (POEM) is a pilot program developed by the Commonwealth being trialled at the moment with some success. It provides relevant education experiences for young people who have been disconnected from school including homeless young people such as those in a number of our centres. My experience over the years of seeing teachers in welfare settings is not positive, what you get is often second-rate education. Having an active partnership between TAFE's or schools and community agencies, enables education to occur in settings where young people are comfortable, the education is accredited and can continue to a stage where young people have more possibilities of somewhere positive to go to in learning or work. A number of POEM pilots have turned around young people in ways that welfare does not achieve very often. To see a young person realise that they can learn and that they can be a part of the education system in a positive way is a powerful experience.

The New Apprenticeship scheme is good but there are still some important barriers to disadvantaged young people. For some there is a generation gap in expectations and aspirations: I am not sure all parents see the new entry systems into apprenticeships as positively as young people do.

There are large gaps in the way young people are perceived and portrayed. In general they have not been given opportunity for leadership; adults in the past have restricted these opportunities to lead. Where these opportunities do exist, young people grab them and they do it well and other young people want to join in.

We were also conscious of the need for alternative education and clearly signposted re-entry points. Re-entry policy has to grapple with the costs being imposed in some states, and the lack of a national approach. This is an area that is underfunded and where there can be significant barriers and disincentives.

The Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) has a renewed interest in young people, which is interesting given that DEWR closed most of the youth specific employment assistance centres a few years ago. The renewal of interest is welcome but not if job agencies are encouraged to trawl through schools, pulling all of the best students out to get them into the labour market. Long standing research tells us that the best

outcome for young people is to stay in school for as long as possible. That does not mean schools should not have a strong relation with work - they can and do, but more needs to be done, especially in terms of improving the knowledge and preparedness of young people about work and the cultures of work. Employability is a notion that needs to be embraced by parents and young people, and in ways that will enable young people to be better prepared.

Young people need real opportunities to participate in work environments like those provided by European intermediate labour market programs. In a number of EU countries young people can access six, and in some cases 12 months of subsidised work - in Scotland two years work is available - based on a training wage and where participation in literacy and numeracy improvement programs is strongly encouraged. In my experience, these types of programs, that were common under *Working Nation*, have always managed to achieve 60-70 percent outcomes in terms of employment or further learning.

Teachers play a vital role in the transition of young people and we need to invest more in their training and professional development. Sometimes teachers lack a common purpose, which ought to be to assist the transition of young people through school and into outcomes that are acceptable.

Four priorities

So from the experience of the Taskforce, what are some key points that we need to prioritise? I would suggest:

1. Improving the quality, diversity and retention of young people in schools. More exciting work enterprise-based learning opportunities in schools. DSF's work backs this up - it's not going to cost us a fortune, and we just need to do it. It's vital to make schools more inclusive, more committed to retention, because in general they have the resources to do so.

2. Building effective local early response networks, which focus on keeping young people involved in learning. Outlaw things like suspension and expulsions because we should feel a sense of failure every time someone drops out of school. School exclusions reflect a system that seems and feels unsupported - which means it cannot deal with difficult young people. I think we need to have early response networks with schools and TAFE's jointly focused on keeping young people learning. And then community and government agencies need to be supporting young people to stay in learning settings. That would mean community agencies and networks have a clear role to provide support to teachers and schools as well as families and young people to stay committed to this learning pathway.

3. We need a range of relevant and accessible re-entry points for young people who have become disconnected from both education and their community. I think that we could learn a lot from Indigenous communities, who are looking I think at

a much younger age for getting their youth involved in hands-on activity. There are kids who don't do academic learning well or easily, for a range of reasons, but they do take to other ways of learning; in the broader community we just don't have the tools in place to acknowledge or provide for this.

4. In terms of Indigenous communities - we need to liberate the potential of Indigenous communities. We are guilty of not understanding indigenous communities - so we become confined, and often confused, and overly bureaucratic. We don't quite understand what is going on, so we put up boundaries all of the time to actually stop communities from feeling that sense of liberation, and developing energies that might enable them to have locally based responses. Responses that we need in both communities - Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Locally based responses with wide a range of opportunities within a clearly identified and supportive national transition system.

Conclusions

The big question is "how do young people and their families negotiate their transition through school and where do they go for assistance?"

If I want to get income support I go to Centrelink.

If I want to find a job I go to Job Network.

Where do you go to get transition support, where is the system?

So we need a good education system - no in fact I think we have a good education system. But it's not drawn together, the sectors don't talk to each other. It's a system that needs to be supported by a transitions approach that that relies on schools, that reaches out and supports those schools that focus on good transition. With good local partnerships, we will build good transitions for young people.

Finally, what's happened since *Footprints*? A number of pilots have been developed, involving organisations like ECEF and others that have pushed the agenda farther. ANTA is looking at some of the issues around employability. But I'd like to believe that the Commonwealth is just resting, comparing the pilots, before a long burst of activity and resourcing. And when I come back in three years we'll have a sensational transition program that we're all proud of, that will be right up the top of the OECD charts.