

Background Paper No.4

School to adult life transitions through work and study: A select review of the literature

Ciara Smyth, Gianni Zappalà & Gillian Considine

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Research & Social Policy Team

**Background Paper
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By

Ciara Smyth, Gianni Zappalà & Gillian Considine

Preface

The Research and Social Policy Team provides an internal research capacity to ensure that The Smith Family's programs are evidence-based. A general theme that integrates all of our research activities is *social capability*, the capacities of communities and individuals in them to draw from their own strengths and social capital and to move beyond the limitations of disadvantage. We also investigate a range of issues with national and community relevance, such as trends in financial disadvantage, education and social policy. In addition, we also contribute to policy debates in government and the community sector. This is an integral component of our vision for a more caring and cohesive Australian community.

The Smith Family's strategy for program development is one of collaborating with a range of stakeholders that are interested in working for societal change. As well as conducting our own research, therefore, we also form strategic alliances with other research centres and social sector organisations.

A range of publications makes our research findings and activities accessible to those who have either an interest in or a commitment to The Smith Family's agenda for societal change. **Background Papers** identify areas to be researched as well as provide important pre-evaluation information of Smith Family programs and activities. **Working Papers** present research findings that contribute to the development of evidence based social policy and initiate professional dialogue on critical research questions. **Briefing Papers** provide analysis of Smith Family programs and wider social policy issues in a more concise timely manner. A regular **E – Bulletin** publicises the Team's publications as well as provides current updates on TSF research and policy. These publications, as well as occasional reports, submissions and monographs are either produced in-house, the product of collaborative efforts with other researchers or arise from commissioned research. All publications are subject to a refereeing process.

We trust that you find the following Background Paper a worthwhile contribution to evidence based social research and to the development of social policy that unlocks opportunities and builds capacity for all Australians.

Dr Rob Simons
National Manager Strategic Research & Social Policy

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Abstract

This paper presents a select review of the literature on school to adult life transitions through work and study. This review was conducted to inform and provide a context for a three-year longitudinal project being conducted by The Smith Family (TSF) and ACIRRT, University of Sydney on the school to work transitions of students in TSF's *Learning for Life* program. Appendix 1 provides a summary of several school to work transition programs run by nonprofit or community organisations. As much has been written elsewhere on Government run transition programs, these are not reviewed in this paper. Appendix 2 provides a summary of TSF's *Learning for Life* program and the TSF/ACIRRT school to work SPIRT project.

Structural changes in the labour market over the last two decades mean that the transition from school to work has become an increasingly complex and unpredictable process for many young Australians. For many, the transition is not a straightforward, linear process with a discernible start or end point. Those who leave high school before completing Year 12 are at greater risk of making an unsuccessful transition compared to those who complete Year 12.

The paper examines several conceptual issues relevant to the school to work transition area and provides a detailed discussion of early school leavers. Key school to work policy issues and developments are examined and key recommendations that have been put forward as ways of improving transition outcomes are outlined.

Introduction

Making the transition from school to work has become an increasingly complex and unpredictable process for many young Australians. Until the 1980s, those who left school early made the transition by securing apprenticeships or full-time employment, while those who completed secondary education secured full-time employment, undertook training or continued with tertiary level studies (Kellock 2000). Structural changes in the labour market over the last two decades, however, have resulted in a decline in full-time employment opportunities and an increase in part-time and casual employment. These labour market changes have led to an increase in youth unemployment, with those who leave school before completing Year 12 experiencing significantly higher rates of unemployment than those who complete high school.

It has been estimated that approximately 15 per cent of 15-19 year olds fail to make a successful transition to further study, training or employment (Sweet 1998). Those who do manage to find employment tend to find themselves in part-time, temporary jobs with few employment benefits, leading to a situation where post-school employment no longer represents a secure stepping stone to adult employment. For those who fail to make a successful transition to full-time work or study, there is a risk that they will become 'trapped in a cycle of unemployment, part-time work and labour market programs rather than constructive career development' (Sweet 1998: 7).

As several reviews of the school to work transition area exist, this paper presents a select review of the literature. This review was conducted to inform and provide a context for a three-year longitudinal project being conducted by The Smith Family (TSF) and the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research & Training (ACIRRT), University of Sydney. The project is funded by the Australian Research Council SPIRT (Strategic Partnership with Industry – Research & Training) grants. It commenced in 2001 and is based on data collected from students in TSF's *Learning for Life* program.

The paper has five main sections. First, several conceptual issues relevant to the school to work transition area are discussed. Second, is a more detailed discussion of early school leavers. Third, key school to work policy issues and developments are examined. Fourth, key recommendations that have been put forward as ways of improving transition outcomes are outlined. The final section provides a conclusion. Appendix 1 provides a summary of several school to work transition programs run by nonprofit or community organisations. As much has been written elsewhere on Government run transition programs, these are not reviewed in this paper.¹ Appendix 2 provides a summary of TSF's *Learning for Life* program and the SPIRT project referred to above.

What is meant by the transition from school to work?

The transition from school to work is generally understood as 'the period during which young people move from the principal activity being full-time schooling or its equivalent to that in which their principal activity is work' (Ainley et al 1997:12).² In Australia, this transition period is normally considered to begin at 16 years of age and end at 24 years of age, when the proportion of young people remaining in full-time education declines substantially. What this definition masks, however, is the complexity of the transition process. The transition from school to employment, education or further training is not always a straightforward, linear process with a discernible start or end point. The fluid nature of the transition process is

¹ For a review of Federal and Victorian Government-funded programs targeting young people who are unemployed or at risk of becoming unemployed, see Dearn (2001). An audit document is available at <http://chirs.infoxchange.net.au/library/>

² This definition is used in OECD planning documents.

evidenced by a recent OECD report which identified three major ways in which the school to work transition has changed in OECD countries over the 1990s (Kellock 2000):

- The school to work transition period is taking longer because many young people extend the length of time they remain in full-time education, employers prefer to employ older apprentices, and many young people choose to postpone their entry into the workforce;
- The boundaries between school and work are becoming increasingly blurred as many apprenticeships combine training with school, many young people work while in school and schools are introducing more integrated school and work activities;
- Perceptions of young people who are considered to be 'at risk' are broadening to encompass not only young people who fail to gain employment, but also those who experience short-term employment followed by periods of unemployment, and young people who complete high school but do not qualify for tertiary study.

Pathways

The idea that young people follow linear pathways from school to work has influenced most post-compulsory education policy in Australia since the 1980s. The 'pathways' metaphor was used in the Finn Review (Australian Education Council Review Committee 1991) to describe the link between education, employment and economic development. The report recognised that the route from school to work needed to be more clearly sign-posted and that multiple post-compulsory education and training pathways would have to be created if economic goals were to be met (Dwyer 1991). The committee stated:

The concept of pathways implies movement through a coherent set of educational and employment experiences leading to some identified destination, which may also be a link into a subsequent pathway. In a fully consistent system it should be possible to describe each pathway, how and when it links with other pathways, and to identify the destinations which can be reached before a young person starts out on the pathway (AEC Review Committee 1991:94, cited in Dwyer 1995).

The metaphor implies that the route from education to work is linear and that pathways exist or can be easily constructed. More recent research has questioned the assumed linearity of the school to work transition process and whether clear pathways actually exist for all young people. This research has also attempted to highlight the multi-dimensionality of young people's lives (Kellock 2000; Dwyer 1995, 1998; McIntyre et al 1999; Dearn 2001; Raffe 2001). Indeed, it has been suggested that the term 'uncharted territory' is a more appropriate metaphor than 'pathways' to describe the situation in which many young people find themselves when trying to navigate the transition process (Dwyer 1995).

While the linear pathways metaphor assumes that young people move from secondary education to employment, training or further education in a single, uninterrupted step, research suggests that the transition from school to work 'may be fractured, extended and uncertain' (Dearn 2001:14). Furthermore, many young people move in and out of different pathways throughout this period (DSF 2000). Several researchers have drawn on the work of German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) to distinguish between 'normal' and 'choice' biographies to shed light on the context in which young people make decisions about their lives (Dwyer et al 1999). 'Normal' biographies follow traditional linear patterns and the outcomes are generally quite predictable. This type of biography involves a relatively straightforward transition from school to work and youth to adulthood and characterises transitions of the industrial era. They 'developed within a social context shaped by the predictability and assumed permanence, over any one lifetime, of the established institutional structures of the family, education, industry and the labour market' (Dwyer et al 1999, Part 2: 1).

The social context in which young people make the transition from school to work and adolescence to adulthood has changed a great deal since the industrial era. Over the last 30 years alone, structural changes in the labour market have seen a decrease in full-time employment opportunities, an increase in casualisation and non-traditional employment.³ As a result of these changes, young people entering the labour force today can expect to experience a high degree of job mobility and are increasingly unlikely to find a job for life. Another indicator of the changing social context is the change in the traditional family structure as a consequence of increasing divorce rates, an increase in single parent families and declining birth rates.

The transitions young people make today are far more uncertain and unpredictable than the transitions of the industrial era. Beck (1992) argues that individually determined 'choice' biographies characterise the transitions of this era. In contrast to the 'normal' biography where individuals followed a straightforward transition from school to work and youth to adulthood, individuals today have to proactively determine their own unique pathway because there are no apparent rules or guidelines to follow. Successfully negotiating one's transition in this context involves a degree of risk and uncertainty:

Thus, in the 1990s for young people, becoming adult is a negotiated reality and the transitions after high school do not form a predetermined and predictable sequence from one discrete type of reality to another beyond it (Dwyer et al 1999, Part 2: 1-2).

The distinction between 'normal' and 'choice' biographies highlights the increasing complexity and uncertainty of young people's lives.

These same authors also use the metaphor of a train journey and a car journey to highlight the differences between the transitions made by young people and their parents' generation. In brief:

The predetermined clearly structured, linear 'track' of the railway is taken to represent the traditional life-course of industrial society, whereas the self-navigated variable mapping of one's own course on a road 'journey' is offered as a more appropriate image of transition in our own epoch (Furlong & Cartmel 1997: 6, cited in Dwyer et al 1999).

The distinction between linear and non-linear pathways has been adapted and expanded to provide a typology of life patterns that describe the post-school experiences of young people. Table 1 suggests that there are five main 'life patterns' that capture the experiences of young people (Dwyer & Wyn 1998).⁴ The vocational focus and occupational focus are compatible with the 'normal' linear biography and the contextual, altered and mixed focus are compatible with the 'choice' biography.

³ Recent labour force statistics indicate that since March 2001, Australia has lost 150,000 full-time jobs. Just over half of these (79,200) were lost in July 2001, 'the biggest monthly drop on record' (Tingle 2001).

⁴ This five-fold life patterns typology was developed in collaboration with Dianne Looker.

Table 1 Typology of post-school experiences and life patterns

Type of focus	Characteristic life pattern
<i>Vocational</i>	The individual focuses on gaining qualifications in order to pursue a particular career
<i>Occupational</i>	The individual prioritises finding a job
<i>Contextual</i>	The individual places emphasis on the 'life' context chosen such as family, community, lifestyle, or 'field' of work
<i>Altered</i>	The individual reassesses his/her original route and changes to a different destination
<i>Mixed</i>	The individual places equal emphasis on a number of activities or goals

Source: Adapted from Dwyer & Wyn (1998).

Overall, the concept of transitions needs to be expanded in order to capture the complexity and multi-dimensionality of young people's lives. It needs to move beyond the exclusive policy focus on the two dimensions of study and work (Dwyer et al 1999; Raffe 2001). The tendency to focus on these two aspects of young people's lives has also dominated much of the focus of 'transitions' research. Broader conceptions of what is meant by youth to adulthood transitions, however, are becoming more common and are also beginning to have an influence on policy.⁵ For instance, a survey of young people in their mid-twenties who left school in 1991 conducted as part of the *Life Patterns Project*, revealed that although having a steady job was the most important priority for them, so too were 'family relationships' and 'developing friendships' (Dwyer et al 1998).⁶ The study found that although having a steady job was an important priority, 'involvement in work as a career', 'doing well in studies' and 'earning a lot of money' were not necessarily related. Similarly, while 'family relationships' and 'developing friendships' were highly ranked, they were not necessarily related to 'marriage or living with a partner' or 'having children' (Dwyer et al 1999).

Defining a 'successful transition'

What constitutes a 'successful transition'? One of the recommendations put forward by the Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001) was the need for an annual national report on young people's transitions and the development of a set of indicators of successful transitions. Traditional indicators of an unsuccessful transition are usually seen to be the failure to secure full-time employment, or go on to further education or training. On this basis, it has been estimated that approximately 15 per cent of 15 to 19 year olds in Australia do not make a successful school to work transition (Sweet 1998; McIntyre et al 1999; Boston Consulting Group 2000; Curtain 2001).

Broader indicators of successful transition pathways include:

- Obtaining employment;
- Maintaining employment;
- Re-entering the secondary education system;
- Undertaking further education/training;
- The establishment of accommodation that is independent of the family (Holden 1992, cited in Dwyer 1995 & McIntyre et al 1999).

⁵ See for instance the report from the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001).

⁶ The *Life Patterns Project* is a longitudinal study which commenced in 1991 (original sample of 29,155) conducted by the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. A sample of 10,985 participants were followed up in 1995 and each year since then a detailed survey has been conducted using a sample of 2,000 and in depth interviews with a sub-sample of 100.

These indicators focus not only on employment and training but also acknowledge the importance of finding accommodation that is independent of the family. Re-entering the secondary education system is specific to early school leavers.

The probability of making a successful transition is influenced by the context in which it is made (McIntyre et al 1999). In other words, young people making the transition in areas characterised by high unemployment or limited youth employment opportunities are at greater risk of making an unsuccessful transition. Those most at risk of making an unsuccessful transition are typically students who:

- Leave school early;
- Have poor literacy and numeracy skills;⁷
- Come from low socio-economic backgrounds;
- Live in geographically isolated regions;
- Have had limited work experience;
- Are female (Boston Consulting Group 2000; Dearn 2001).

Early school leavers

Much of the school to work literature focuses on early school leavers (ESLs) as they tend to be at greater risk of making an unsuccessful transition compared to those who complete Year 12.⁸ Early school leaving is more prevalent among certain groups of young people. Table 2 shows the rates of early school leaving by a range of characteristics. The data suggests that males are more likely to leave school before completing Year 12 than females (39% vs. 27%).⁹ The gender difference in retention rates is usually explained by the fact that males are more likely than females to leave school to do an apprenticeship 'reflecting the larger number of apprenticeships available in occupations that traditionally attract men' (ABS 2001).

Young people born in Australia are almost twice as likely to leave school early compared to those born outside Australia (36% vs. 19%). Area of residence is also a significant factor contributing to high rates of early school leaving, with young people from areas outside capital cities far more likely to leave school early compared to their counterparts in capital cities (45% vs. 27%). Type of school attended is another factor influencing early school leaving, with students attending government schools more than twice as likely to leave school before completing Year 12 than students attending private schools (39% vs. 17%).

Other groups identified as having disproportionately high rates of early school leaving include Indigenous Australians¹⁰, young people from low socio-economic backgrounds, truants and homeless youths and young people with poor literacy and numeracy skills (OECD 1997; McIntyre et al 1999, Teese 2000; Marks & McMillan 2001). Students from families with higher socioeconomic backgrounds show consistently higher Year 12 participation rates compared to students from lower status backgrounds (Marks et al 2000). This relationship has

⁷ A recent study found that literacy and numeracy achievement in Year 9 has the strongest influence on tertiary entrance performance (Marks et al 2001).

⁸ Almost three-quarters (70%) of students who are considered 'at risk' of making an unsuccessful transition are early school leavers (Spierings 2000).

⁹ Since 1976, the secondary completion rate has been higher for girls than for boys. In 1995, it was 78 per cent for girls and 66 per cent for boys (Marks et al 2000). While girls have higher retention rates than boys as well as better overall performance while at school, this does not translate into better labour market outcomes for all girls (Kenway 2000).

¹⁰ The apparent retention rate for Indigenous students to Year 12, while comparatively low, has increased from 29 per cent in 1996 to 36 per cent in 2001.

weakened slightly as overall completion rates have risen suggesting a reduction in the social inequality of Year 12 participation (McIntyre et al 1999; Marks et al 2000).

Table 2 Early school leavers aged 15-24 years, 2000

	Left school before completing Year 12	All people aged 15-24 years ^a
	%	'000
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	39	1026.9
Female	27	972.5
<i>Country of Birth</i>		
Australia	36	1669.0
Outside Australia	19	330.4
<i>Area of residence</i>		
Capital City	27	1318.6
Balance of State	45	680.8
<i>Type of school</i>		
Government	39	1441.5
Non-government	17	557.9
<i>Total</i>	33	1999.4

Source: ABS (2001:100).

Notes:

a) Excludes 15-24 year olds still at school and 15-24 year olds who never attended school.

Why do some students leave school early?

While students leave school early for a wide range of reasons, Table 3 suggests that the most commonly cited reason for leaving school before completing Year 12 is work-related. Just under half of the ESLs (46%) surveyed cited work-related reasons for leaving school early compared to a quarter that said they left school early for schooling-related reasons. Just less than one-fifth of people said they left school early for personal reasons, with 'Other reasons' cited by 13 per cent of early school leavers.

Table 3 Main reason for leaving school before completing Year 12, 1997^a

Type of reason ^b	%
<i>Work-related reasons</i>	
Little difference to job prospects	4
Got (or wanted) a job or apprenticeship	43
<i>Schooling related reasons^c</i>	
Did not do well or failed subjects	6
Did not like school or teachers	15
<i>Personal or family reasons^d</i>	
Lost interest or motivation	14
Own ill-health, injury or disability	3
<i>Other reasons</i>	13
<i>Total</i>	100

Source: ABS (2001:100).

Notes:

a) 15-24 year olds only

b) Respondents nominated one reason only

c) Includes people who gave other school-related reasons

d) Includes people who gave other personal or family reasons

Similarly, findings from longitudinal surveys also suggest that the majority of those who leave school early do so to find employment (Marks & McMillan 2001). Table 4 for instance, shows

that four-fifths of non-completers said getting a job or apprenticeship was an important reason in their decision to leave school and nearly half said this was their main reason for leaving school. Three-quarters of early school leavers indicated that another work-related reason, earning money, was an important factor in their decision to leave school early, however, only five per cent said it was their main reason. A smaller proportion of young people cited school-related reasons for leaving early, and while one-fifth of students said that financial difficulties was an important reason for leaving school early, few nominated this as the main reason.

Table 4 Reasons for leaving school early

Type of reason	Important	Main
Work-related reasons		
I wanted to get a job/apprenticeship	79	48
To earn my own money	76	5
I wanted to do job training that wasn't available at school	45	5
School-related reasons		
I didn't like school	50	13
I was not doing very well at school	42	9
The school didn't offer the subjects/courses I wanted to do	38	6
Teachers thought I should	16	2
Other reasons		
Financially, it was hard to stay at school	19	1
Other reasons	-	11
<i>Total</i>	-	<i>100</i>

Source: Marks & McMillan (2001)

Some of the key non-work related reasons or situations found to be associated with early school leaving include:

- Truancy, absence from classes, habitual lateness, school refusal;
- Lack of interest in schooling, low valuing of school completion;
- Homelessness;
- Alienation from school, loathing of teachers, anger, resentment and hopelessness about school;
- Poor academic performance, failure to complete or do homework;
- Disruptive behaviour in class, often in trouble, suspension, expulsion;
- Quiet/withdrawn in class;
- Frequent changes of school;
- Feelings of school not being supportive, lack of family support;
- Enrolled in default of a job, desire to pursue practical course/career, lack of interest in obtaining satisfying full-time job;
- Drug/alcohol abuse, unsafe sexual practices, self-injury;
- Social isolation;
- Pregnancy and motherhood;
- Lack of language competence;
- Very poor self-image, low self-esteem (Batten & Russell 1995, cited in McIntyre et al 1999).

The post-school outcomes of early school leavers

The main cause for concern surrounding early school leaving is that early school leavers typically have poorer employment outcomes than those who complete Year 12 and those who go on to further education and training. Entry requirements for many jobs now increasingly demand high levels of educational attainment meaning that 'twelve years of schooling are now considered a basic requirement for an educated population' (Bagnall 2001). Those who leave early are more likely to be unemployed, obtain low skilled work, earn less money and have a

higher probability of not being in the labour force compared to those who complete Year 12 (Fullarton 2001). It has been argued that the skills individuals need to participate successfully in the labour market over a lifetime 'are best acquired through formal education and/or through structured workplace learning to Year 12' (Spierings 2001:22). Consequently, those who do not complete Year 12 are more likely to face labour market disadvantage. It has been estimated that the overall cost to individuals, governments and society of early school leaving in Australia is \$2.6 billion per annum (Spierings 2001:22).

Table 5 shows that 15-24 year olds with post-school educational qualifications are most likely to be working full-time, followed by early school leavers (63%) and those who completed Year 12 (46%). Early school leavers, however, experience significantly higher rates of unemployment compared to those who completed Year 12 and those who have post-school educational qualifications. Although those who completed Year 12 were least likely to be working full-time, half of this cohort was engaged in some form of post-school education or training and consequently not looking for full-time employment (ABS 2001). It is important to note, however, that not all early school leavers enter the labour force on leaving school. In 2000, for instance, one-fifth went on to vocational education and training compared to 47 per cent of young people who completed Year 12 (ABS 2001).

Table 5 Educational attainment and labour force status, 2000^a

Labour Force Status	Highest level of educational attainment			Total (%)
	Post-school (%)	Year 12 (%)	Left before Year 12 (%)	
<i>Employment rate</i>	92	90	81	88
Full-time	74	46	63	59
Part-time	18	44	18	29
<i>Unemployment rate</i>	8	10	19	12
Looking for F/T work	7	6	18	9
Looking for P/Twork	2	4	2	3
<i>In the labour force</i>	100	100	100	100

Source: ABS (2001:101).

Notes:

a) Includes only people aged 15-24.

Analysis of the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) suggests that while leaving school early does not signal the end of formal education and training for all young people, the likelihood of engaging in education or training is higher for those who complete Year 12 (Marks & McMillan 2001). In 2000, only 35 per cent of early school leavers were engaged in some form of education or training compared to two-thirds of school leavers who completed Year 12. Those who did not complete Year 12 were more likely to engage in apprenticeships, traineeships and other TAFE/non-degree studies, whereas those who completed Year 12 were significantly more likely to engage in studies leading to bachelors and higher degrees. The authors concluded that the 'differential amount and type of education and training undertaken by completers and non-completers are likely to influence how the two groups fare in the labour market' (Marks & McMillan 2001:9).

When the post-school activities of early school leavers and those who completed Year 12 but did not go into higher education were compared, it was found that the majority of non-completers were in full-time employment (67%) and less likely than school completers to be engaged in full-time study. Early school leavers in full-time work were less likely to be in white-collar jobs and were more likely to obtain trades and semi/unskilled manual work than those who had completed Year 12. The majority of early school leavers and completers in part-time work had clerical/sales/personal service jobs. Few had jobs in the highest occupational categories or in skilled trades positions (Marks & McMillan 2001).

The study did not reveal any differences in work satisfaction between early school leavers and those who completed Year 12. The majority of employed early school leavers displayed high levels of job satisfaction and over half were in the type of job they would like as a career. They did find that early school leavers experienced a high degree of job mobility, however, the level of job mobility decreased the longer they were in the labour market. They did not consider this high degree of job mobility necessarily problematic as 'for many, the post-school period represents a 'settling in' period, where they move between jobs in an attempt to find the types of work or careers they most like' (Marks & McMillan 2001:11).

Nevertheless, many early school leavers often face difficult transitions, especially those that leave school because of negative experiences and end up 'drifting' into the decision (Dwyer 1995). These types of ESLs face difficulties such as:

- Trying to return to school;
- A lack of alternatives to the secondary school system;
- A lack of information on national, regional and local youth labour markets;
- A lack of information about health, welfare and recreational services;
- A lack of awareness of available services;
- Increased drug and alcohol abuse;
- Poor working conditions;
- Lack of support;
- Irregular incomes.

Research by Dwyer (1995) also suggests that few early school leavers follow linear pathways. For these ESLs there was no 'systematic movement through education, training and into employment; the pattern instead has been one of short-term, low-paid jobs (when they are available), mixed with living on unemployment benefits and with the support of friends and family' (Dwyer 1995:270). The research on outcomes suggests that there is a need to ensure non-completion rates are minimised and that those students who do leave early and are experiencing difficulties (disproportionately those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds) are assisted (Marks & McMillan 2001).

A more balanced view of early school leaving

In spite of the adverse outcomes that often result from early school leaving, some have argued that there is a need to redress the view that early school leaving is a uniformly negative phenomenon (Teese et al 2000). It is suggested that the perception that high retention rates are positive and that early school leaving is negative 'masks poor quality outcomes and experiences, just as early leaving may conceal good transition outcomes and positive experiences' (Teese et al 2000:5). While these researchers accept that early school leaving can be problematic in terms of outcomes, they also recognise that for some students 'the quantity of additional years of schooling may not be matched by quality of learning and may even be negative to future learning' (Teese et al 2000:6). Taking a more critical view of the ESL concept 'keeps the focus on quality of schooling for all young people, and it also highlights the situations in which early school leaving may relieve economic insecurity' (Teese et al 2000:6). The implication is that schools need to provide more flexible learning programs to enable students to 'satisfy their economic needs' without having to leave school.

This more balanced view of early school leaving has received support in recent research. One study based on 40 in-depth interviews with Year 10 school leavers from government schools in the Central Coast region of NSW, concluded that early school leavers are not a homogenous group and that their post-school experiences vary (McIntyre et al 1999). The remainder of this section summarises the key findings from this study. The authors drew on many of the insights of the non-linear pathways literature discussed earlier (see Table 1) to argue that the type of school leaver and their life-patterns need to be taken into account before making any

judgements on whether their transitions are successful.¹¹ They were able to categorise early school leavers according to the typology in Table 6.

Table 6 Typology of early school leavers

Types of Early School Leavers	Description
Positive	These students leave school with a career goal in mind and actively seek or take up employment in their chosen area
Opportune	Opportune leavers take an opportunity to leave school on finding a job or establishing a personal relationship
Would-be	Would-be leavers are not early school leavers in the strict sense, as they reluctantly stay in school because there are no other options open to them
Circumstantial	Circumstantial leavers are forced to leave school for largely non-educational reasons such as need for income
Discouraged	These early leavers leave school because they are not doing well at school and have little interest in being there
Alienated	Similar to discouraged leavers but often displaying behavioural problems or have been expelled or suspended

Source: McIntyre et al (1999:47)

Using the typologies in Tables 1 and 6, the authors were able to differentiate between two broad groups of school leavers:

- 1) ESLs who were positive and focused on pursuing a vocational interest or getting a job;
- 2) ESLs who had negative schooling experiences and left school with no definite plans.

The positive leavers who had a vocational focus, left school with a clear well-defined career goal in mind or to take up a job offer. Having worked part-time or taken part in work experience while at school were significant factors in their decision to leave and some had participated in courses while they were still in school. Some of these positive leavers were unemployed for periods but remained focussed on their career goals and consequently were not considered to be at risk. Nevertheless, 'vocational motivation is not enough to guarantee transition, and continuing disappointments could put them at risk' (McIntyre et al 1999:49).

The positive leavers who had an occupational focus were similar to the above group but were highly focused on getting a job as opposed to pursuing a particular line of work or career. The authors found, however, that 'experience of the job market may spark a vocational interest and lead to a preference for a certain kind of work' (p.49). Many had experienced part-time and casual work by the time they left school and opted to do short courses to enhance their employability rather than prolonged study. Their knowledge of what it takes to succeed in the workplace and the qualities valued by employers came from participation in the workforce rather than from school.

For opportune leavers, leaving school was 'more by chance than by design' and in many cases was triggered by a particular event. Their patterns of transition tended to be quite varied and they were often unsure about the work and study options open to them. In some cases, negative-schooling experiences had also influenced their decision to leave.

¹¹ The report contains vignettes of the 40 in-depth interviews, with details on the type of school leaver and life pattern they were following.

'Would-be leavers' were excluded from the analysis because they are not actually early school leavers in the strict sense. They stay in school for want of a better alternative. In other words, they are 'reluctant stayers'. This raises the issue of 'forced retention' where students only remain at school because the alternatives open to them are limited. There is a danger that reluctant stayers who remain in school because they are effectively 'forced' to do so, may find the experience alienating and become marginalised.

The circumstantial leavers were 'forced out of school by non-educational factors, including income, housing or relationship problems' (p.52). Among the circumstantial leavers, issues such as pregnancy, sexuality, eating disorders, bullying, homelessness and abusive relationships at home made continuing with normal schooling too difficult and triggered the decision to leave. These leavers experienced varied patterns of transition.

Discouraged and alienated leavers were characterised by low levels of achievement and low interest in school. They had negative schooling experiences, with alienated leavers tending to feel 'picked on' and consequently rebel. Discouraged leavers were more passive and accepting of the negative aspects of school. Their patterns of transition varied and their transition was difficult because they may not have had the skills or self-confidence as a result of their negative schooling experiences. Many of these leavers wanted to get an apprenticeship but had difficulty accessing one. Their experience of the labour force was discouraging and many wished to return to school. For those who wanted to continue their schooling, the TAFE general education option was crucial and regarded as an important 'second chance'.

The contrast between the experiences of positive leavers and those who left school in negative circumstances attests to the fact that not all early school leavers can be considered to be at risk of making an unsuccessful transition. Early school leavers who leave in negative circumstances are more likely to be considered at risk if they left:

- Before Year 10 or without their School Certificate;
- Without any part-time work experience or knowledge of what employers look for;
- With no clear post-school plans;
- Without motivation to persist in achieving goals, including a strong vocational interest or career goal.

Those who were employed in marginal activities, unemployed long-term, not trying to enhance their employability or who had poor living circumstances should also be considered to be at risk. The authors argued that there are varying degrees of 'at risk-ness' and that several of the early school leavers drifted between being at risk and not being at risk. They concluded that making the transition from school to work:

[I]s very much a negotiation of options by young people. This negotiation of transition is not presently helped by the lack of clearly delineated pathways for early leavers, and finding a pathway was found to be more a culmination of factors than a conscious decision (McIntyre et al 1999:85).

This research also highlights that although early school leavers are most at risk of making an unsuccessful transition to employment, training or further study, school completion does not necessarily guarantee a successful transition. Early school leavers are not a homogenous group and their post-school outcomes vary considerably. Not all can be classified as being at risk of making an unsuccessful transition. Similarly, the post-school experiences of those who complete school vary considerably. School completers who do not have clearly defined post-school plans and remain in school for want of a better alternative are likely to experience a difficult transition. In other words, there are varying degrees of 'at risk-ness' for both early

school leavers and those who complete school alike, depending on their particular circumstances.

The policy framework

Although the education, employment and training of young people have been key concerns for Commonwealth and State governments during the 1990s, a significant proportion of young people fail to make a successful transition from school to work. This suggests that for many, the pathways from school to work are not clearly visible or easily constructed. In response to this situation, numerous Commonwealth and State programs have been set up with a view to assisting young people make the transition. Overall, the objectives of these government policies and programs have been 'few and simple' (Sweet 1998). The key objectives were to:

- Reduce youth unemployment;
- Improve access to and outcomes from vocational education and training (particularly through apprenticeships and traineeships);
- Improve Year 12 retention rates; and
- Increase the number of young people going on to university.

The evidence suggests that the situation for young people has not improved as a result of these measures (Sweet 1998):

- Youth unemployment has not decreased;
- Full-time employment opportunities for young people have decreased;
- A large proportion of young people in the workforce are in part-time work not linked to training or education;
- Young people in full-time employment tend to be concentrated in low-skilled, low-paid work;
- The number of young people receiving in-house training halved between 1989 and 1993;
- Young people's earnings have fallen.

Early school leavers have been more adversely affected by these trends than students who stay on to complete Year 12. As outlined earlier, early school leavers are more likely to enter part-time work that is not linked to study and are more likely to be engaged in marginal activities for a longer period than those who complete Year 12.

A focus on retention

One of the major shifts in education policy since the 1980s has been the greater emphasis placed on increasing post-compulsory participation rates. Policy developments to make school completion more attractive included the abolishment of unemployment benefits for those under 18, increasing 'at school' allowances,¹² and the promotion of curriculum and certification reform (Dwyer & Wilson 1991). The assumptions underpinning this shift in policy towards higher participation rates were that young people who remained in school would benefit from the experience by gaining skilled employment, contribute to economic development and 'find an assured pathway to adulthood' (Dwyer & Wilson 1991:9).

Retention rates more than doubled between 1982 (36%) and 1992 (77%) partly as a result of fewer full-time youth employment opportunities. Despite an increase in employment opportunities in the 1980s, however, the retention rate continued to increase, suggesting that

¹² A recent report by Brown et al (2001) found that the introduction of Youth Allowance encouraged young people to participate in education and training. It has also improved access to education and training for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

the rise was largely attributable to policy initiatives (Marks et al 2000). Surprisingly, despite an increase in youth unemployment during the 1990s, the retention rate fell to 72 per cent in 1995 and remained stable until 1999 (ABS 2001). In 2001, however, the retention rate increased to 75 per cent, although females had significantly higher retention rates than males (80% compared to 71%) (ABS 2002).¹³ Nevertheless, Australia ranks 17th place out of 28 OECD countries in terms of upper secondary school completion (Curtain 2001). Furthermore, the current school retention rate suggests that the Government set target (in response to the Finn Review) – that 95 per cent of 19 year olds should be participating in or have completed Year 12 or an equivalent level of education or training by 2001 – has not been met.

The policy emphasis on increasing retention rates has generally been positive, primarily due to the fact that unemployment rates are higher for those who do not complete Year 12 (OECD 1997; ABS 2001). Nevertheless, some researchers have identified a number of long-term negative consequences of this emphasis on retention (Dwyer & Wilson 1998). First, increasing participation rates at a time when the youth labour market was in crisis masked the issue of 'forced retention', that is, students only remaining at school because the alternatives open to them are severely limited. Second, there is a danger that young people, who remain in school because they are effectively 'forced' to do so, may find the experience alienating and become marginalised. Third, the continuing policy focus on universal participation in post-compulsory education and the lack of alternative post-compulsory pathways marginalises young people who are unwilling to remain in school (Dwyer 1995). While there are several programs and services in place for early school leavers, these initiatives are largely uncoordinated and inconsistent and young people are often unaware of their existence. Ironically, despite the policy goal of universal participation in post-compulsory education, there are no measures in place to facilitate young people who wish to re-enter the education system. There is an assumption 'that there is an uninterrupted linear progression through school and on into the post-compulsory years either at school or by transfer into an appropriate apprenticeship or training program' (Dwyer 1995:276). Finally, the evidence suggests that the advantages associated with Year 12 completion narrowed during the 1990s, particularly for males. An increase in youth unemployment has meant that those who complete school and enter the labour market have difficulty securing good jobs and are now taking up the type of jobs that were once reserved for early school leavers (OECD 1997).

Vocational education and training

The rise in retention rates over the 1990s led to a reconsideration of the emphasis of senior secondary schooling, which had traditionally been oriented towards university study. With more students staying in school to complete Year 12, it was recognised that there was a need to cater for a broader range of students. The introduction of vocational and educational training (VET) in schools in the 1990s was seen an alternative educational pathway for students who were not academically inclined. During this period there was a drive to increase the numbers of young people participating in vocational education and training. Yet between 1990 and 1996 the number of 15-19 year olds participating in VET remained largely unchanged. The failure to substantially increase participation in VET may be explained by the fact that the policy emphasis on post-compulsory education and the setting of targets coincided with a transformation of higher education. There was an assumed link between completion of Year 12 and university entry, and participation in VET or entry to TAFE was regarded as a subordinate option (Dwyer & Wyn 1998). Thus although participation in vocational education and training did not increase significantly during the 1990s, entry to higher education increased (Sweet 1998). In other words, post-school pathways in the 1990s did not cater for a diverse range of students. Although participation in VET has been lower than anticipated, findings from longitudinal surveys suggest that participation in VET in schools benefits a significant

¹³ This figure is the apparent retention rate from Year 10 to Year 12 (ABS 2002).

proportion of students and that it makes a difference to post-school pathways (Fullarton 2001).

Another key area of concern for successive Commonwealth governments since the 1980s has been to increase the numbers of young people participating in apprenticeships. Between 1989 and 1996, however, the number of young people beginning apprenticeships declined and the increase in uptake of traineeships has largely been accounted for by adult enrolments (Sweet 1998). When one compares the employment outcomes of young people in other forms of education, new apprentices fare very well, leading one commentator to claim that 'New Apprenticeships are now an effective pathway for young people to a much wider range of occupations beyond the traditional trade occupations' (Robinson 2001:46). His research showed that over 90 per cent of new apprentices are retained in employment or gain new employment within 3 months of completing their apprenticeship.¹⁴ The employment outcomes for those who do not complete their apprenticeship are also good with over two-thirds of 15-24 year olds being in an unsubsidised job within three months of leaving their apprenticeship.

Fragmentation and lack of coordination

Over the last decade, several reports have concluded that the school to work program environment is fragmented, complex and poorly co-ordinated. A key factor contributing to the confusing and fragmented school to work policy and program environment is Federalism. As education is a state responsibility, there are essentially eight separate education and training systems. Large variations on a State basis exist in terms of student numbers, funding arrangements and public/private mix. As an OECD report concluded, 'the terrain surrounding young people's transition from education to work still seems to be crowded in terms of policy making and service delivery...conflicting agendas and program priorities from Commonwealth and State government authorities' (OECD 1997:4).

The most recent report to reach this conclusion was based on the findings of the Creating Employment Pathways project, a partnership project of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Hanover Welfare Services, Melbourne Citymission and the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (Dearn 2001). The first stage of the research process involved an audit and analysis of 40 Victorian and Commonwealth Government funded school, adult, community and further education and employment programs targeted at young unemployed people or those at risk of becoming unemployed.¹⁵ The second stage involved an examination of the issues affecting young people's participation in existing programs and program development strategies.

The main problems identified with respect to the school to work program environment were the 'gaps and the barriers in program provision, overlaps, lack of coordination and the lack of opportunities to participate in employment outcome focussed programs' (Dearn 2001:5). These gaps and overlaps were due to:

- Differing age and eligibility restrictions;
- Lack of co-ordination and accountability for young people's needs;
- Limitations to types of programs offered;
- Difficulties re-entering education and training programs;
- Lack of support and guidance for young people;
- Difficult access for marginalised young people.

¹⁴ The employment rate for 15-19 year olds is 90 per cent, 92 per cent for 20 to 24 year olds and 96 per cent for adults over 25.

¹⁵ The 'Creating Employment Pathways Audit' document produced as part of this study provides a review of employment, education and training programs available to young people between 15 and 24 years who are unemployed or 'at risk' of long-term unemployment.

The report notes that the fragmentation of the program environment is partly due to the fact that programs are provided across different sectors – schools, Adult Community Education (ACE), TAFE, and in employment services. Another factor contributing to the fragmented and confusing nature of the program environment is the fact that different departments from Commonwealth and State governments fund programs.

It also notes that ‘there is increasing recognition that despite the number and range of programs, the systems are not providing a comprehensive response to young people’s transition needs’, meaning that many young people are often unaware of the opportunities available to them (Dearn 2001:12). While there are numerous community sector and government programs for youth at risk (see Appendix 1 for instance), ‘the pathways are not well organised and there is no guarantee that programs will be available at points in young people’s transitions when they need them most’ (Dearn 2001:15).¹⁶

A report by the Boston Consulting Group (2000) also addressed the fragmented and uncoordinated nature of the school to program environment. This found that ‘young people are the recipients of a largely uncoordinated set of initiatives and funding from federal and state governments as well as from the non-government welfare sector’ (BCG 2000:30). The report argued that fundamental organisational deficiencies are missing from the way the school to work transition process is managed, namely, ‘unclear accountability, poor measurement of outcomes and the absence of a knowledgeable buyer’ (BCG 2000:26). While it acknowledged that there are numerous school to work transition programs and initiatives, it is often the case that outcomes are not measured effectively, programs are not tailored to the needs of young people and funding is not targeted at programs with the most productive impact. They argued that a compounding factor was the lack of accountability for outcomes to one single agency or individual (BCG 2000:29).

Improving school to work transitions

This section reviews some key recommendations that have been put forward to improve the school to work transitions of young Australians:

- Better policy and program co-ordination;
- More effective management of the school to work transition process;
- Timely assistance for those identified as being at risk;
- Monitoring transition outcomes;
- Reform of secondary education;
- Employment generation;
- Strengthening Partnerships;
- A national commitment to all young people.

Better policy and program co-ordination

If the school to work transitions of young Australians is to improve, it is critical that policy makers address the fragmentation and complexity that characterise the school to work program environment. While this will require some innovative thinking, the implementation of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) in the US may provide some valuable lessons. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) was enacted in the US in 1994 with a view to helping young people in the formative years of high school prepare for the transition from school to further education, employment and self-sufficiency (Hughes et al 2001). The legislation was enacted in response to the growing awareness that the US did not have a

¹⁶ An audit document of Federal and Victorian Government-funded programs targeting young people who are unemployed or at risk of becoming unemployed is available at <http://chirs.infoxchange.net.au/library/>

coherent system linking education to employment where a four-year degree is not required. The purpose of the Act was to facilitate the establishment of a school to work transition system by providing the funding to 'expand existing programs, strategically add new ones and link them to create more powerful systems' (Hughes et al 2001:5). It is this system-building objective that sets the Act apart from other school to work initiatives. As the purpose of the Act was to 'generate activities that could be incorporated into the ongoing and normal functioning of the education system', funding was only provided on a short-term basis and was due to run out in 2001. However, it was anticipated that other education and workforce development funding streams would continue to support the newly created systems once federal funding ran out.

An evaluation of the effectiveness of this strategy concluded that the STWOA had generally positive results for students, teachers and employers.¹⁷ Findings from research conducted on students participating in School-to-Work suggest that it supports academic achievement through improved grades and improved attendance. Moreover, students participating in School-to-Work had better graduation rates and were more likely to attend college compared to non-participating students. The research also suggests that participation in School-to-Work supports career preparation. Students learn career-related skills, the work-placements are of a higher quality than the types of jobs typically held by teenagers and they get the opportunity to work with adults who are interested in their professional and educational development. Preliminary evidence also suggests that participating students have better initial labour market outcomes than non-participating students. Participation in School-to-Work also supports youth development through providing young people with opportunities to explore a variety of options and develop career goals with the assistance of adult mentors in the workplace and teachers at school.

The evidence also suggests that teachers feel they gain professionally through participation in School-to-Work and consider it a very worthwhile initiative. Similarly, employers are enthusiastic about participating in School-to-Work, because they see the benefits for the students, for society and for their own businesses. The authors of the report conclude that while it is still too early to fully evaluate the effectiveness of such a broad and complex initiative:

the findings of the research so far are more than optimistic enough that parents, educators, private funders and policymakers should continue to develop and study the school to work strategy despite the reduced federal role (Hughes et al 2001:39).

More effective management of the school to work transition process

A more coherent, integrated approach is required to ensure that post-school pathways are more clearly signposted. A report by the Boston Consulting Group (2000) outlined a number of organisational deficiencies in the management of the school to work transitions of young people. In order to redress this deficiency, the report recommended the appointment of Local Directors of Youth Futures, as part of a suite of recommendations, to provide a comprehensive response at a local level.

A major responsibility of the Local Director of Youth Futures would be to deliver local accountability for young people making the transition from school to work. This would involve assuming responsibility for the post-school outcomes of all young people at a school cluster level and aim to increase the rate of participation in education and training. The Local Director would also work closely with a Community Board 'comprising local businesses, school

¹⁷ The authors acknowledge the difficulty associated with evaluating the effectiveness of the Act as it has only been in operation since 1994 and was only ever intended as a short-term measure. At the time of conducting the evaluation, research was still being carried out on the effectiveness of initiatives implemented under the terms of the Act. The authors thus advise caution in making judgements on the initiative.

principals, vocational education and training (VET) representatives, health professionals, welfare specialists and youth representatives' (BCG 2000:32). With respect to ensuring accountability, Local Directors would be responsible for:

- Raising awareness and motivation in the community to reduce youth marginalisation;
- Organising the application of a risk profiling tool in local schools to identify those most at risk of becoming marginalised;
- Identifying the major causes of youth marginalisation in the region, through consultation with the Community Board;
- Evaluating existing and potential programs which address youth marginalisation;
- Developing plans to purchase existing and potential programs and services;
- Seeking local business sponsorship for targeted initiatives;
- Purchasing and monitoring the results of programs and services;
- Working with local businesses to improve local employment prospects for young people;
- Sharing best practice with peers in other areas.

The Local Director would also be responsible for measuring the post-school outcomes of their students. A 'youth participation ratio' which measures the proportion of young people in education, training or employment, should be used at school, local and regional level in high-risk areas to track young people until they are at least 20 years old. The Local Director would also act as an informed and knowledgeable buyer of services for youth at risk. The report outlines a number of issues the Local Director might tackle in order to address this, including:

- Directing young people to programs that meet their needs;
- Encouraging a particular school in their cluster to develop a stronger vocational focus and direct the appropriate students to that school;
- Ascertain what types of interventions are most effective for particular students at risk;
- With the help of school staff identify which students are most likely to drop out by Year 10 and introduce a timely intervention before they leave school.

The report outlines in detail how the role of the Local Director should be implemented, funded and the span of control the Local Director should have.

McIntyre et al (1999) suggest the following measures for improving the management of the school to work transition process:

- Agencies need to work together at a local level;
- Government transition to employment policies need to become more integrated and effective;
- Ensuring that 'there is an established quality entry-level structured training arrangement in places for all occupations/industries/enterprises' so that those who do not go on to further study would be able to secure employment through participation in the programs;
- There is a need for a range of appropriate and accessible labour market programs particularly for disadvantaged young people;
- Pathways to mainstream vocational education and training and higher education need to be created;
- Adequately resourced and co-ordinated case management for the most disadvantaged young people is needed.
- Having a well-resourced and effective public employment and training agency to work with contracted providers to ensure access to appropriate quality programs;
- Recognise the part-time work experience of young people and incorporate into school program, and in training and labour market programs.

Addressing the needs of 'at-risk' youth

As early school leavers are most at risk of making an unsuccessful transition, much attention has been focused on how their transitions could be improved. Increased funding for 'drop-out' prevention programs is required so that potential early school leavers could be identified and provided with appropriate assistance or encouragement to stay (Sweet 1998). For those who do leave it is essential that early leaving is managed, by having in place a 'range of strategies that come into play at different points in the transition process' (McIntyre et al 1999:89). These strategies include exit interviews conducted by schools, providing advice and information, preparing an exit plan, case management and youth counselling. Another recurring recommendation in the literature is the need to assist young people who have left school early but wish to re-enter the education system at a later stage (Dwyer & Wilson 1991; OECD 1997; McIntyre et al 1999). These re-entry routes need to be more clearly sign-posted.

As the problems faced by early school leavers are typically multi-faceted, schools need to be able to put young people in touch with the appropriate services (OECD 1997). The development of full-service schools that cater for a diversity of needs could 'provide access to a broad range of health, employment, counselling and social services for young people and their families'. Such schools normally have extended hours of operation, including evenings and weekends and they can provide a focus point for families in neighbourhoods with poor resources (OECD 1997:23).

A number of commentators recommend that young people who leave school before completing Year 12 should be eligible for a training entitlement. This entitlement would be equal to the amount of public funding that would have been spent on them had they remained in school up to Year 12 (OECD 1997; Sweet 1998; McIntyre et al 1999; Boston Consulting Group 2001). This recommendation was not part of the recent suite of measures unveiled in the 2001 Federal Budget to tackle unemployment, which included an \$800 training credit for mature age and indigenous job seekers. Other long-term unemployed individuals have to complete four months of Work for the Dole before they are entitled to claim a \$500 training credit or 26 weeks in order to claim an \$800 training credit. While this measure is to be welcomed, it is not consistent with an early intervention approach whereby those most at risk of falling into long-term unemployment are assisted before they become unemployed. A report by the Boston Consulting Group (2000) argued that tackling long-term unemployment effectively requires a 'focus on active prevention at crucial life transitions', namely, the school to work transition and the termination-back-to-work transition. A generous training entitlement for early school leavers would provide such assistance at a crucial life-transition phase.

Monitoring transition outcomes

The importance of monitoring the post-school pathways of all school leavers is addressed by a number of commentators (Sweet 1998; McIntyre et al 1999; Boston Consulting Group 2001). The report from the Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001) suggests that this should be done on an annual basis. Monitoring outcomes will help institutions and agencies improve the effectiveness of their programs, contribute to improved government policy and identify areas for future activity (Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001).

Continuing reform of secondary education

Most schools do not cater for the significant proportion of young people who do not make successful transitions from school to the work place. Some commentators argue that the fact that a significant proportion of young Australians 'are sufficiently disenchanted and disconnected from their schooling to throw it in, even though their chances of finding a job have shrunk enormously', suggests that radical reform of secondary education is required

(Bagnall 2001). Schools must be able to cater for a diversity of outcomes and move away from regarding university entrance as the most desirable outcome for all students. This could be achieved by:

- Broadening the secondary curriculum through the more effective integration of academic, general and vocational curricula;
- Making schooling more relevant and effective; and
- Linking the worlds of school and work through employer input in curriculum activities and developing alternative ways of participating in education and training (McIntyre et al 1999; Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001).

A single credential incorporating academic and vocational studies, which could lead to a diversity of outcomes, would be one effective strategy (OECD 1997). Other strategies to make school more attractive and meaningful to young people would be the creation of senior high schools/colleges as the dominant model of upper secondary schooling with a broad curriculum and a more adult learning environment (Sweet 1998). He also recommends an increased provision of career guidance and counselling, particularly for those who do not plan to go to university. Other recommendations made by the Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001) include changes to teacher training, an emphasis on the development of basic education skills and competencies and clear definition of what is meant by 'key competencies' or employability skills.

Employment generation

Efforts to improve the skills and qualifications of young people will have limited impact if there are not enough jobs to match demand. Some have argued that increasing the number of full-time jobs is not necessarily the way to address the labour market disadvantage of young people (Sweet 1998). One recommendation is that public funds be invested in equipping young people with the education, skills and qualifications to enable them to secure employment. Although governments during the 1990s have pursued such policies, they have been relatively ineffective. Other recommendations include:

- Policies which encourage employers to hire young people;
- Reviewing policies that discourage employers from recruiting new labour market entrants;
- Limiting the public subsidies and incentives applying to traineeships and apprenticeships to youth and adults who are disadvantaged in the labour market.

Strengthening Partnerships

The responsibility for achieving successful outcomes for young people needs to be shared by schools, families, community organisations, governments and local business (McIntyre et al 1999; Boston Consulting Group 2001; Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001). The partnerships between these different stakeholders need to be strengthened. Employers and industry need to become more involved in education, training, and transition programs because 'business and industry-education organisations that understand the relationship between educational reform and economic prosperity can be powerful allies and advocates for change' (OECD 1997). Another benefit that would ensue from a strengthening of relationships between schools and employers is that students could get a more realistic picture of employment opportunities and the labour market in their local area (McIntyre et al 1999).

A national commitment to all young people

The key recommendation of the Report from the Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001) is a national commitment to all young people that would be developed by the Commonwealth,

State and Territory Governments. The aim of this commitment would be to support young people in their transition to independence. This commitment would provide young people with the opportunity to:

- Complete 12 years of schooling (or equivalent vocational training);
- Undertake vocational education training programs and structured workplace learning while still at school and beyond;
- Acquire employment and life skills which enable them to be independent, confident and active members of their community;
- Have access to a professional career and transition support system;
- Return to affordable and relevant education and training programs in a range of community settings if people leave school before completing 12 years of schooling;
- Have available in their local community a range of support, which offers them early intervention with problems, crisis assistance and suitable long-term help; and
- Take part in local cultural, recreational and community services activities.

This commitment incorporates a number of recommendations found elsewhere in the school to work transition literature and has some elements of the youth guarantee approach adopted in Norway and Sweden (Durand-Drouhin et al 1998). The youth guarantee approach is based on the notion of 'social responsibility towards young people's integration into the labour market' (Durand-Drouhin et al 1998:7). All 18 to 20 year olds are offered a place in education, training or employment and attempts are made to match the interests and needs of the young people to the positions. This approach has helped reduce youth unemployment and increased the number of young people in education and training in Norway and Sweden. It has also encouraged partnerships between schools, communities and business.

Conclusion

The nature of the school to work transition process in Australia has altered significantly over the past two decades. In the past, youth to adulthood transitions generally followed a predictable linear sequence and young people moved from education to employment, training or further education in a single, uninterrupted step. In light of recent labour market changes, however, there is less evidence of clear linear pathways from school to work. Young people can no longer expect to follow an established, predictable pathway from youth to adulthood but have to proactively determine their own unique pathway. Making the transition, however, can be a complex, extended and uncertain process for many. Those who fail to make a successful transition to full-time work or study are potentially at risk of falling into a cycle of part-time, low-skilled, low-paid casual work or unemployment and are more likely to be outside the labour force.

Much of the school to work literature focuses on early school leavers because they tend to be at greater risk of making an unsuccessful transition and typically have poor employment outcomes. Research has shown that rates of early school leaving are higher among certain groups of young people. Males, young people born in Australia, young people from areas outside capital cities and students attending government schools are most likely to leave school before completing Year 12. Indigenous Australians, young people from low socio-economic backgrounds, truants and homeless youths and young people with poor literacy and numeracy skills also display high levels of early school leaving.

The main cause of early school leaving is work-related, namely, young people want to get a job or apprenticeship or feel that staying in school to complete Year 12 will not enhance their post-school employment outcomes. While early school leavers tend to have poorer transition outcomes than those who complete Year 12, recent research has highlighted the importance of taking a more balanced view of early school leaving. In other words, not all early school leavers

are at risk making an unsuccessful transition. Some leave school to actively pursue a vocational interest or get a job whereas others leave school with no definite plans and are therefore considered to be 'at risk'. It is important to note that although early school leavers tend to be considered at risk of making an unsuccessful transition, school completion does not necessarily guarantee a successful transition. Those who complete school without clearly defined plans or who may reluctantly stay in school are likely to experience a difficult transition.

The school to work transition outcomes of young people in Australia have not been adequately addressed by government policy. Research shows that a significant proportion of young people fails to make a successful transition. Retention rates in Australia lag behind most other OECD countries and suggest that the pathways from school to work are not clearly visible or easily constructed. The fragmented, complex and poorly co-ordinated school to work program environment compounds this confusion. Shortcomings of the school to work program environment include: a lack of co-ordination and accountability for young people's needs, poor measurement of transition outcomes, age and eligibility restrictions in access to programs, limitations to types of programs offered, and difficulties re-entering education and training programs.

If the school to work transition outcomes of young Australians are to be improved it is essential that the fragmentation of the school to work program environment is addressed and that the transition process is managed more effectively by transition co-ordinators. An early intervention approach is required to ensure that those identified as being at risk of making an unsuccessful transition are assisted *before* they drift into long-term unemployment and labour market marginalisation. Other issues that need to be addressed include monitoring transition outcomes and reforming secondary education to provide more flexible learning programs and facilitate students to satisfy their economic needs without having to leave school.

Appendix 1 School to work transition programs within the community sector

This Appendix reviews a number of school to work transition programs run by organisations (generally not-for-profit) within the community sector. While this is by no means an exhaustive list of school to work transition programs run by community sector organisations, it does give an overview of the range of programs in which they are involved. Some of the programs are targeted at young people who have already left school and have failed to make a successful transition. Others can be classified as preventive/early intervention programs targeted at young people who are at risk of making an unsuccessful transition.

An early intervention approach not only applies to interventions targeted at early childhood (e.g. between 0-5 years of age), but also to programs that identify individuals that are at risk at any crucial life transition point. In other words, 'early intervention means 'early in the pathway', not necessarily in life' (Homel et al 2002). An early intervention approach is crucial to ensure that young people who are at risk of making an unsuccessful transition are identified before they leave school to ensure that they do not drift into long-term unemployment and labour market marginalisation.

While there are numerous Commonwealth, State and non-government agency programs designed to assist young people with the school to work transition, many are post-school interventions that target those who have already left the education system and have been unable to find secure employment or training. In other words, many of these programs assist young people who have already fallen through the cracks as opposed to intervening at an early stage to prevent such a situation occurring. This is not to suggest that such post-school intervention programs are irrelevant or unimportant, but simply to highlight the importance and benefits of assisting those who are at risk of making an unsuccessful transition before they leave school and become marginalised (Sullivan 2001).

Interviewing Your Future

The Interviewing Your Future program is run by Youth At Risk, a community-based organisation located in Victoria. The first program was run in October 1998 and each program is targeted at 30-50 unemployed 16-25 year olds from 'at risk' backgrounds. The program consists of five days of seminars and workshops during which participants are taught presentation and communication skills, problem-solving skills, interview techniques, and life skills to help them find employment. After the 5 days, participants become involved in a two-month mentoring program designed to support them through the transition into the work place. To date the program has proven very successful:¹⁸

- 60 per cent of young people secure jobs within two months of completing the program;
- 90 per cent of young people are either in employment or have returned to study within one year of completing the program.

The program actively involves local businesses, schools and government organisations, including councils, police and local companies.

¹⁸ http://www.volunteer.com.au/users/org_profile_display.asp?LoginID=482

The Island

The Island is a work education program based in Victoria targeted at 15 to 18 year olds at risk of long-term unemployment (BCG 2000). The aim of the program is to match participants' interests and skills with ongoing training and education. Participants receive tutoring in literacy and numeracy and are trained by trades people in building, mechanics, cooking, visual arts, metal and computers. Each course lasts for six months and caters for up to 48 people. To date the program has proven highly successful with 65 of the 67 young people who participated in the program in 1999 going on to TAFE, find employment or commence an apprenticeship.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence Transition Project

The Brotherhood set up the 'Transition Project' in 1997 as an independently funded two year pilot in partnership with two Victorian secondary colleges. The aim of the project was to design and implement a service model to assist early school leavers make the transition from school to further education, training or employment. The intervention was targeted at students who planned to leave school before completing Year 12 and those who had already left school.

The objectives of the project included:

- Helping students make informed choices about the range of options available to them while they are still at school and at the point when they leave school;
- Helping students maintain contact with supportive agencies in the period between leaving school and securing employment or training;
- Helping students access pre-apprenticeship training;
- Assisting the project's research through the identification of best practice.

The aim of the project was to provide 'a bridging process' by providing ongoing support between the point when the young person leaves school and when they find employment or secure a place in training. The project involved the employment of project officers who were located in the school for three days a week and at BSL for two days a week. This arrangement enabled students who had already left school to have access to the project officers. The officers introduced themselves to the students at school assembly and explained that they were available for consultation. Students could self-refer at both schools however at one school referrals were initially made by key staff. The four components of the program were:

- School-based vocational and personal support and counselling;
- School-based referral and support at the time the student exits the school;
- Post-school follow-up and support with the young person;
- Post-school placement in an employment or training program.

By September 1998, 106 students had participated in the program. However, outcome information was available for only 81 students. More than three-quarters of the young people in the project went into training, education or employment after leaving school. A higher proportion of students in the project (one-third) went into employment compared to earlier cohorts of students who had not been on the project (one-quarter). There was no difference, however, between the number of students in the project who went into training or education compared to earlier cohorts of students who had not been part of the project.

The improvement in the post-school outcomes of the students is largely accounted for by the number of young males who went straight into employment. This may reflect overall increasing levels of employment. However, young women were more likely to leave school to look for work as opposed to going straight into a job and were less likely to go into education or training.

According to Macdonald young women's 'low employment outcomes suggest the need for extra attention to their situation in the labour market' (1999: 36).

The project provided intensive ongoing support to young people. They valued the support and responded positively to the voluntary non-judgemental and flexible nature of their relationship with the project officers. Another key strength of the project was the officers' knowledge of the youth labour market and the range of local post-school options. The project provided a bridging process that was not previously available and has provided the impetus for a number of initiatives that seek to improve the transition process.

Melbourne City Mission School to Work Information Project

The School to Work Information Project (SWIP hereafter) was a school-based initiative designed to identify potential early school leavers before they left school and provide them with assistance, support and information about their post-school options.¹⁹ It was developed by Melbourne City Mission and Djerriwarrh Employment and Education Services in response to the confusing, fragmented environment in which young people have to make the transition from school to work. The objectives of the program were:

- To provide students who are considering leaving school before completing Year 12 with information on employment, training and education options;
- To provide students with a realistic understanding of the difficulties they may face in the job market, entering further education and training;
- To provide young people with a better understanding of employment, training and education services;
- To help early school leavers develop a career plan and labour market access skills;
- To work with key school staff in supporting young people;
- To provide school staff with information on early school leaving issues.

The SWIP was implemented as a twelve-month pilot-project in five schools from June 1999 to June 2000. An evaluation of the project conducted by the Institute of Youth, Education and Community (IYEC) at Victoria University of Technology, found that the decision to leave school early was influenced by a range of factors, including chronic school refusal, social isolation, low literacy levels, lack of personal support, and an absence of significant role models. Parents' education/literacy levels, employment status and financial situation also had an indirect impact on the importance that students placed on continuing their education and the difficulties they were facing. It also found that early school leavers were unprepared for the labour market, had unrealistic expectations of the options open to them and that most students had a limited understanding of the support, income and employment assistance services available.

The evaluators concluded that SWIP could be useful for all students by providing support, information about the realities of the labour market, assistance with career planning and information on available services. However, it also highlighted a number of difficulties faced by the schools in setting up a SWIP within schools. The two main limitations identified were the short-term nature of the program (12 months) and the fact that the program did not address the structural issues that affect youth unemployment. Recommendations for improving the program and effectively managing school to work transitions are listed in the manual along with information for teachers about identifying potential early school leavers and referral services to assist them.

¹⁹ http://www.mcm.org.au/EETU%20fact%20sheets/school_to_work%20manual.htm

Plan-it Youth

Plan-It Youth is a preventive program set up in response to early school leaving on the Central Coast of New South Wales.²⁰ It is a mentoring program targeted at young people in Year 9 and/or 10 who plan to leave school before completing Year 12. Students explore the post-school options available to them if they leave school early with the help of community mentors who receive training through TAFE. This allows them to 'plan their exit from school into a positive way and discover the many ways that his/her goals can be realised' (DSF 2000). Some of the students who participate on the program opt to go on to Years 11 and 12 and those who do intend to leave are better prepared and receive support from their mentor for up to six months after leaving.

The first phase of the program is the recruitment and training of mentors, followed by the introduction and matching of students and mentors. Once matched, the student and mentor explore post-school options on a weekly basis at the student's school. The mentoring support continues for up to twelve months. One of the merits of this program is that it does not try to convince young people to stay in school if they have positive reasons for leaving. This underscores the importance of recognising that staying in school to complete Year 12 is not a universally desirable outcome for all students. An evaluation of the program is being undertaken by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum and should be available on the DSF web site in early 2002.

Whittlesea

A collaborative partnership was set up in Whittlesea, an outer Melbourne suburb, in response to the shortcomings of the school to adulthood transitions system (Spierings 2001).²¹ This partnership developed a 'Youth Commitment' which aimed to assist all young people with completing Year 12 or its equivalent, develop new learning, training, further education and employment options for young people and track the pathways and destinations of school leavers.

A mediating structure was set up in 2000 involving staff working (four Equivalent full-time) with local schools, TAFE, training organisations, Centrelink and the Job Network. The goal of this mediating structure was to provide support for all potential early school leavers and ensure that those who did not complete Year 12 had a place in employment, training or education or were actively looking for employment. The staff surveyed all students in Years 9, 10 and 11 to gauge how many students intended to leave school before completing Year 12. Those who indicated they planned to leave were interviewed by the EFT staff and most decided to stay in school. Initial findings indicate that this mediating structure has had a positive effect on school retention rates and training participation:

- The number of early school leavers declined by a third;
- 39 per cent of those who left went into a positive training or employment destination;
- There has been a decrease in the number of unknown destinations;
- There is a better understanding of the pathways taken by early school leavers;
- There has been an improvement in training participation.

Other preliminary findings suggest that students' need assistance with literacy and numeracy problems, the employment outcomes of early school leavers need to be improved, and Job Network, Centrelink and training organisations need to have more input in equipping young people with better job search skills.

²⁰ Plan- It Youth is a Partnership between, NSW TAFE Commission Board, Hunter Institute of Technology, NSW Dept. of Education & Training, Central Coast Active Retirees & Mentors, Hunter Valley Training Company Limited, Central Coast Adult & Community Education and Dusseldorp Skills Forum.

²¹ This partnership included representatives from local schools, TAFE, RMIT, local businesses, training groups, Federal and Victorian government departments, Centrelink and other local groups.

Appendix 2 The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* Program

The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program, is an intervention that provides both material and non-material support to families and children in financial disadvantage (see Zappalà and Parker 2000 for a brief history of the program). The program currently supports 16,000 students with a target of 70,000 by 2004/5. The key objectives of the program to date have been to:

- ensure that students from financially disadvantaged families are able to take part in all mainstream school activities;
- provide information to the parents which may help them secure a better education for their children;
- encourage students to stay at school and to undertake tertiary education or provide them with information regarding other vocational training options;
- provide any further information and support to parents and students which may help them develop their confidence and self-esteem;
- provide a range of support activities for students to assist them in their learning;
- build up research information about problems which students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience in the school system.

An implicit value of the program is that by giving children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to participate more fully in the educational process, their life opportunities and self esteem will improve and they will have a better chance of not falling into a cycle of disadvantage.

The program provides 'scholarships' for students from financially disadvantaged families from primary through to tertiary level, and operates in NSW, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the ACT. The program is also being expanded to include pre-school aged children of financially disadvantaged parents, and give students on the program completing secondary school access to LFL scholarships for a broader range of further education and training options. The aim is to also increase the availability of LFL scholarships to students in regional and rural areas. Eligible students are awarded scholarships that entitle them to financial assistance at the rate applicable to their school year, as well as advice and support in relation to educational issues and referrals to specialist services for any other family issues.²² Scholarship holders may also apply for additional financial assistance to meet specific additional costs that are not usually encountered by all students. Therefore, at each level the program provides financial and other resources that the students would otherwise not be able to access.

The financial assistance is used by parents for their child's educational expenses which may include the purchase of school uniforms, textbooks, attendance at school excursions, and participation in school electives that may involve the purchase of particular materials and equipment. The financial assistance for tertiary students is to be used by students for course fees, textbooks and related items, transportation costs and equipment. LFL program staff audit the expenditure of the financial grants to parents and students on a regular basis.

For tertiary students, the scholarship also provides access to a mentoring program. Each tertiary student is matched with a mentor from their chosen field of study, who can assist by

²² The amount of financial support provided is \$204 per year for students in Primary (Kindergarten to Yr 6 or 7); \$324 per year for students in Junior Secondary (Yr 7 or 8 to Yr 10); \$504 per year for students in Senior Secondary (Yrs 11 and 12); and \$2000 per year for tertiary students.

providing professional support in the areas of the course of study, setting realistic study and career goals, work experience or part-time employment and general problem solving.

Although the program has benefited from some Commonwealth government funding, the program has always been dependent on non-government sources. The Smith Family secures sponsorships and donations to fund the costs of program delivery, which include large donations from corporate sponsors. Funds for the scholarship payments to students are derived entirely from an individual sponsorship program.

The LFL program has been the subject of several small-scale external evaluations since it formally commenced in 1988 (see Zappalà & Parker 2000; Zappalà & Considine 2001; Zappalà et al 2002). Overall, these have revealed a high degree of support for the program from parents, especially the financial aspect. Parents have also ranked highly the advice received from the Education Support Workers (ESWs). Evaluations have shown that students were participating in a wider variety of school activities and in some cases choosing electives that would otherwise have been unavailable to them because of cost. They have also revealed evidence that students show signs of better adjustment and academic progress, with the improvement mainly due to increased self-esteem, increased participation in school activities (e.g. electives, excursions) and working harder.

A key aspect of TSF's change in directions in early 1999 was a commitment to evidence-based practices and adopting an early intervention approach across all programs. Over the last few years there has been a strengthened focus on the evaluation and development of the LFL program. One of the key areas is examining how the program can develop a more effective early intervention approach to managing student 'transitions'.

At the end of 1999, The Smith Family and ACIRRT, University of Sydney were awarded a SPIRT (Strategic Partnership with Industry – Research & Training) grant from the Australian Research Council for a three-year research project – *The Changing role of Not-for-Profit Organisations: School to Adult Life transition through work and study*.²³ A key component of the project is tracking a sample of LFL students as they make career choices and enter the labour market.

The main aims of the project are to:

- Fill the substantial empirical gaps that exist regarding the role played by community sector organisations in facilitating the transition from school to adult life for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Provide longitudinally-based research on school to labour market transitions that can assist in identifying how the program can be developed and enhanced to better meet the transition needs of students;
- Inform policy on school to work issues in State and federal governments and regulatory bodies;
- Assist in the development of a pilot 'school to work transitions' program for LFL.

In 2001, the first of the three annual surveys was conducted with a sample of students in Years 8 and 11. It was sent to 1959 students in Years 8 and 11 in September 2001.²⁴ Of these, 1242 were returned, giving an overall response rate of 63 per cent. This is very high for a mail questionnaire. The first detailed analysis of the 2001 data will be available at the end of 2002.²⁵

²³ The research team in 2001/2 has comprised Dr Gianni Zappalà and Ciara Smyth (The Smith Family), and Dr Ian Watson and Gillian Considine (ACIRRT).

²⁴ This represents 83 per cent of all students in Years 8 and 11 on the program.

²⁵ For a preliminary analysis of the 2001 data with respect to the effectiveness of the LFL program see Zappalà et al (2002).

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Background Paper No.4

