

YOUTH PATHWAYS TO PROMOTE LIFELONG LEARNING

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Paper presented to the CEET conference on

Mobilising Resources for Lifelong Learning

Ascot House, Melbourne

30 October 2000

ABSTRACT

Australia, along with most other OECD countries, has been engaging in "pathways engineering" over the past decade. Countries have been attempting to make the pathways by which young people move through education and training and into work more attractive, open and flexible, and to provide more opportunities to combine vocational learning with general education. A common motivation in these policy initiatives has been to better prepare young people for an increasingly uncertain economic and social future. There is a growing recognition that a successful transition to work depends on having a sound foundation for further learning, as well as having skills that the labour market requires now. This paper reviews recent attempts in Australia to design pathways that achieve the dual objectives of providing young people with immediately relevant skills and the foundations for lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

Two of the most commonly used terms in Australian education policy circles in recent years have been "pathways" and "lifelong learning". Pathways first started to be used widely with the publication in 1991 of *Young People's Participation in Education and Training* (the Finn review), and has been a powerful organising concept behind much education and training reform during the 1990s. The primary age group to which much of this activity has been directed has been *young people*, aged from around 14 or 15 to the mid to late 20s.

Lifelong learning started to be extensively used in Australia around 1995 stimulated in part by reports from the OECD (1996) and Unesco (1996). Major Australian reports on the future shape of higher education (West, 1998), the development of a training culture (ANTA, 1998), and the National Goals for Schooling (MCEETYA, 1999) have been framed in terms of the need for continual learning over the life span.

What has been particularly interesting about the lifelong learning concept is how from the very outset its proponents have focused debate on what it implies for the young. By contrast, the earlier incarnations of many of the ideas underpinning lifelong learning – such as recurrent education in the 1970s and 1980s – placed their major focus on educational provision for *adults*, especially second-chance opportunities for those with limited formal education (eg OECD, 1978).

It would only be a slight exaggeration to say that the main focus of lifelong learning in current policy debate is more on what it implies for *today's young people* -- tomorrow's adults – than what it implies for *today's adults*.

Lifelong learning has been placed firmly on the agenda of schools through the *Adelaide Declaration on the National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*. This key document endorsed last year by Education Ministers declared that:

Australia's future depends upon each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is central to achieving this vision ... The achievement of the national goals for schooling will assist young people to contribute to Australia's social, cultural and economic development in local and global contexts. Their achievement will also assist young people to develop a disposition towards learning throughout their lives so that they can exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens of Australia. (MCEETYA, 1999)

Among the key *National Goals for Schooling* is the following:

When students leave schools they should:

have employment related skills and an understanding of the work environment, career options and pathways as a foundation for, and positive attitudes towards, vocational education and training, further education, employment and life-long learning. (MCEETYA, 1999)

The result is that the terms "pathways" and "lifelong learning" are now being increasingly used together in policy circles: how can pathways be organised so that they help young people develop the skills, knowledge and motivation to be active lifelong learners?

No one is seriously arguing that this is not the right question to ask. The pace of economic and social change is so rapid that that young people will need to acquire new skills and knowledge throughout their adult lives to maintain their employability and capacity to engage effectively in society. Indeed, some would argue that this is what schools and other educational institutions have long been aiming at anyway.

However, such a question is difficult to answer in the short-term. The very essence of lifelong learning is that its presence or absence may not become evident for many

years. By contrast, if the goal of pathways policy was limited to (say) ensuring that all young people gain a qualification that enables them to obtain a full-time job within six months of leaving initial education it would be relatively easy to develop indicators of whether this is occurring or not. However, the intertwining of pathways and lifelong learning objectives –helping young people to find work and teaching them specific skills as well as helping them to become effective learners throughout their adult lives – requires a broader set of indicators, and a longer time horizon, than is commonly used.

To some extent we are in uncharted waters in knowing what sorts of pathways frameworks are most likely to maximise the likelihood that extensive lifelong learning will result. As expressed by the OECD in its recent review of education-to-work transition in Member countries:

(I)t will be another generation before the impact of today's transition policies and programmes upon lifelong learning becomes fully apparent. Only then will it be possible to judge whether the reforms put into place during the 1990s will help the students of today to be successful as the lifelong learners of tomorrow. Lessons based upon today's adults, educated in the schools of a previous generation, provide at best minimal guidance. We know that more initial education encourages and allows greater participation in formal and informal learning by adults, and that less education in the initial phase results in less participation in education and training later on ... But we do not know enough about what kind of initial education makes the greatest difference. Nor do we know which institutional frameworks are best suited to make lifelong learning a reality. Different countries have been experimenting with partly similar and partly different strategies, but all are still at the stage of trial and error. (OECD, 2000, p. 137)

The rest of this paper reflects on the nature of the strategies being used in Australia and the early evidence of their impact.

HOW DO PATHWAYS AND LIFELONG LEARNING MESH?

The Finn Report (1991) did not use the term "lifelong learning" directly but its recommendations on pathways were framed with that orientation in mind. The report argued that both individual and industry needs were leading towards a convergence of general and vocational education, and that there was a related process of convergence between work and education: "as regular updating of skills and knowledge becomes essential to maintaining and enhancing productivity in the workplace, the concepts of working and learning will converge" (Finn, 1991, ix).

In the Finn Committee's view the convergence of vocational and general education was needed so that all workers had the general competencies needed to be adaptable and to continue learning in the face of accelerating economic and social change. The report argued that in Australia up to that point such adaptability was, in effect,

expected only of those working in occupations for which higher education is the usual form of preparation.

To help bring about the necessary convergence of vocational and general education for young people, Finn argued that the pathways concept provided a useful mental image to explain the various combinations of education, training and employment activities which individuals may undertake over time to reach a destination such as a desired qualification or type of employment.

The imagery of the pathway had five main elements as used by Finn (1991):

- a set of *interrelated* experiences providing for *progression*;
- education and training should have a *sense of continuity* even when individuals cross institutional and sectoral boundaries;
- young people should have access to a *range of different pathways* and should be able to move from one to another *without losing ground*;
- there is a need for effective credit transfer and articulation arrangements to provide *smooth bridges* between pathways; and
- *signposts* (information and career advice) are needed at the start of each pathway and at each junction between pathways.

Each of these elements of a coherent structure of pathways through education and training and into work has figured in various ways in the policy reforms of the 1990s. The Finn Committee's analysis suggested that in each of the above respects the-then scope and structure of pathways in Australia was deficient. The Committee proposed wide-ranging reforms, including the greater provision of vocational learning opportunities for secondary school students, the facilitation of student movement between the school, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and university sectors, and the establishment of national targets to help lift young people's educational participation and attainment.

The pathways framework developed by Finn can be seen as going a fair way to avoiding the seven main pitfalls that the OECD has identified as preventing the transition stage between secondary education and the world of work laying down an adequate foundation for lifelong learning (OECD, 1998, p. 84):

1. low levels of attainment and qualification among young people;
2. large numbers of early school leavers in low skilled work that is not linked to education and training;
3. vocational curricula containing limited general education subjects and which focus upon narrowly defined specific occupations;
4. general education programmes that provide neither occupational qualifications nor skills and motivation for further education;
5. limited opportunities for young people to combine classroom learning with learning outside of the classroom, whether in the workplace or the community,

- and learning environments that do not allow for applied learning, be it in the classroom or in programmes that span the classroom and the world outside it;
6. insufficiently developed pathways between initial vocational qualifications and further and higher education due to separate entry requirements, qualification structures and financing mechanisms for secondary, tertiary and adult education; and
 7. a lack of readily available pathways back into education for school drop-outs, including the absence of individualised assistance for young people experiencing difficulties in the labour market and a lack of financing mechanisms encouraging them to return to organised learning.

Indeed, the OECD has used the Australian experience of the 1990s to illustrate the types of structural reforms to young people's pathways that are consistent with providing the foundations for lifelong learning (OECD, 2000, p. 142).

Finn's identification of key employment-related competencies that all young people should develop, irrespective of the education and training pathway that they follow, and the later development of these competencies by Mayer (1992), also forms an important part of the interconnection between pathways reform and lifelong learning objectives. The concepts of key, generic employability skills and competencies derive from a view that the types of skills that workers need cannot be readily predicted, and are subject to on-going change. What is important, therefore, is the capacity to continually adapt and upgrade via core or generic skills that can be readily transferred across different settings.

Nevertheless, despite the substantial reforms during the 1990s that drew in large measure on the Finn Committee's pathways imagery, analyses and recommendations, it is perhaps fair to say that a decade later there is still considerable disquiet in Australia about the nature and functioning of the pathways open to young people. As discussed below, on a range of indicators, Australia's performance can be described as middling at best.

AUSTRALIA'S PERFORMANCE

The OECD identified 14 indicators of the performance of education-to-work transition systems. The results are summarised in Table 1 for Australia relative to the average for other OECD countries, along with Australia's ranking on the indicator concerned. The data relate mainly to 1998. The main conclusions are as follows.

Teenage unemployment: Australia performs particularly badly in regard to teenage unemployment, with the second highest unemployment to population ratio, and the fourth highest ratio of non-student unemployed 15-19 year-olds to population ratio. However, the proportion of the teenage unemployed who are out of work for more than six months, although high at 42 per cent, is at the OECD country average, which suggests that there are not relatively high numbers locked into long-term unemployment.

Nevertheless, the longitudinal analyses by Lamb and McKenzie (in press) show that teenagers whose initial experience after leaving school is either unemployment, a part-time job, or being outside the labour force altogether, are much less likely to be in full-time employment over the next seven years than those whose principal activity in the first year after leaving school was either an apprenticeship/traineeship, full-time employment, full-time study, or part-time work and study. A good early start in the labour market seemed to be particularly important for young women.

Table 1: Education-to-work transition indicators, Australia and other OECD countries

	Australia	OECD average ¹	
<i>Unemployment, 15-19 year-olds</i>			
1. Unemployment to population ratio, %, 1998	10	6	
2. Non-student unemployed as % of all 15-19 year-olds, 1996	6	4	
3. % of unemployed out of work for 6 months or more	42	42	
<i>Unemployment, 20-24 year-olds</i>			
4. Unemployment to population ratio, 1998	10	9	
5. % of unemployed out of work for 6 months or more	45	48	
<i>Employment, 20-24 year-olds</i>			
6. Employment to	71	57	

population ratio, 1998			
7. Per cent of non-students employed, 1996	78	72	
8. Ratio of 15-24 unemployment rate to 25-54 rate, 1998	2.3	2.3	
9. % not in education one year after compulsory schooling	3	12	
<i>Education outcomes</i>			
10. Apparent upper secondary graduation rates	n.a.	87	
11. % of 16-25 yos at document literacy level 4/5, 1994-5	19	23	
12. % of 20-24 yos with only lower secondary education, 1996	26	23	
13. % of 25-29 year-olds with tertiary qualifications, 1996 ³	25	25	
14. Ratio of low qualified 20-24 year-olds' share of total unemployment to their share of total employment ³	1.8	1.7	

Notes

1. This column shows the unweighted mean average for the countries for which data were available. The number of countries for the Indicator concerned is shown in the final column. In all, data were available for 25 of the 29 OECD countries on at least one of the Indicators. Data were not available for Iceland, Luxembourg, Mexico or Turkey on any of the Indicators.

2. This column shows Australia's position when the countries for which data were available were ranked from highest to lowest value on the Indicator concerned. For example, 2/25 for Indicator 1 signifies that Australia ranked 2nd highest on this ratio for the 25 countries for which the data were available. An equals sign (=) indicates that at least one other country had the same value as Australia on the indicator concerned.
3. In the OECD publication from which the table was derived, Indicator 14 was numbered 13, and vice versa.

Source: OECD (2000).

Curtain (1999) has shown that despite the strong employment growth Australia has experienced in recent years the proportion of 15-19 year-olds not in full-time education or full-time employment was still around 15 per cent in May 1999 – almost exactly the same as the proportion in May 1988. Admittedly this proportion of teenagers who could be considered most at risk of long-term labour market difficulties has fallen since the peak of 17 per cent in the recession of 1992, but the rate of decline is tapering off.

Young adults' employment: Australia performs at about the OECD average in terms of unemployment among 20-24 year-olds, and significantly better than average in getting 20-24 year-olds into work. Sweet (2000) argues that a major reason for Australia's success in having relatively large numbers of its 20-24 year-olds in work is the relatively open and flexible nature of the Australian labour market and the relative absence, compared to many other OECD countries, of barriers to the entry of new job seekers. It may also relate to the fact that tertiary education courses in Australia are relatively short, and comparatively responsive to labour market changes. The longitudinal work by Lamb and McKenzie (in press) suggests that the greatest employment difficulties among 20-24 year-olds are experienced by those who left school early and who lack the general educational skills and knowledge to take advantage of structured training and tertiary education opportunities.

Education outcomes: the data in Table 1 suggest the proportion of young Australians performing at the highest levels of literacy is below the OECD average while the proportion of 20-24 year-olds with low qualifications is higher than average. Although Australia has made substantial progress over the past 15 years in lifting educational participation rates, most other OECD countries have been doing the same, and Australia's relative ranking has changed little. Indeed, the flattening of Year 12 retention rates since the early 1990s means that Australia still faces considerable challenges in reaching the 2001 targets set for young people's educational attainment agreed by Education Ministers following the Finn report (see Table 2).

Table 2: Attainment of the Finn targets for qualifications and participation, 19 and 22 year-olds

	Estimated actual		
	1990	1995	1999
19 year-olds	73	82	83
22 year-olds	43	50	52

Notes

The target for **19 year-olds** was based on the per cent who (a) have completed Year 12 or an initial post-school qualification, or (b) are participating in formally recognised education and training. The Australian Education Council (AEC) modified the original Finn target for 19 year-olds to include an additional requirement that those still in education or training had completed Year 10 or 11, and agreed that participation in a labour market program constituted formally recognised training.

The target for **22 year-olds** was based on the per cent who (a) have attained a vocational qualification at Level 3 or higher, or (b) are participating in an education or training program which leads to Level 3 qualifications, or (c) are participating in or have completed a diploma or degree. The AEC increased the original Finn target for 22 year-olds from 50 to 60 per cent.

Source: O'Reilly et al (2000).

MAIN POLICY CHALLENGES

From a lifelong learning perspective, the longer and more fragmented process of school-to-work transition now experienced by many young people poses three main challenges for policy makers: (a) how to ensure that the extended period of initial education provides skills and competences that enhance employability; (b) how to minimise the risk of some young people being excluded from the labour market on a long-term basis; (c) and how to ensure that learning continues during and after the transition process, and is subsequently recognised for employment and educational purposes.

The Australian approach to education and training offers great flexibility to young people, especially in the tertiary education sector. It is comparatively easy for students to move between different institutions and sectors, young people's options are kept open until late in secondary education and into tertiary education, there are extensive second-chance educational opportunities at tertiary level, and labour markets are relatively open to new entrants.

On the other hand, Australian education and training seems to offer less certainty for young people than in countries where there is a tighter connection between the education and labour market systems. Those who leave school early in Australia without any recognised qualifications can tend to struggle to find stable work. Because of the relatively strong emphasis on general education programmes up to the end of secondary school, early school leaving tends to be associated with a disadvantaged social background and difficulty in coping with school.

Perhaps the clue as to why the framework developed by Finn and the structural reforms of the 1990s has not led to all of the hoped-for changes lies in "pitfalls" 1, 2, 5 and 7 in the OECD's list outlined above. To avoid these pitfalls requires strong connections to be made between the education and training sectors, the labour market and the wider community. Australia does not have well-established traditions in these regards.

There is substantial research evidence that early school leaving involves more than educational issues, and is best tackled where schools are able to form effective partnerships with families, local communities, and other agencies with responsibility for young people's welfare (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 1998).

There has been increasing awareness at policy level of the need both to reduce early school leaving and to have effective safety-net measures so the problems of early school leavers in the labour market do not intensify earlier disadvantages. However, it can be difficult to gain the necessary policy co-ordination across different levels and portfolios of government in Australia to put effective safety nets in place. There is also a lack of means for quickly identifying young people at risk in the transition process and in putting effective re-integration programs into place.

As the OECD review noted, the responsibility for helping young people make a successful transition from initial education to working life cannot be left to any single institution. Clearly the schools have a major role to play, but so do many other agencies and organisations.

In this respect it is significant that the recent review of post-compulsory education and training in Victoria (Kirby 2000) pays substantial attention to ways for schools to build more effective partnerships at local level, and to take greater responsibility for tracing their exit students and helping coordinate appropriate responses for those who are struggling. Although the report of the Commonwealth's Youth Pathways Action Taskforce is not yet released, its cross-sectoral and cross-portfolio membership suggests that it will also be adopting a much broader perspective on how to equip and sustain young people and their families as they navigate increasingly complex lengthy and pathways.

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