The implications of leaving school early

"Combining work with study is a much better option than leaving school altogether" says Chris Robinson.

Over the last 30 years, Australia has seen a massive increase in the numbers of young people staying on at school, and going on to vocational education and training (VET) or university. However, in very recent years we have seen a drop-off in the proportions completing Year 12 and entering university. Only in TAFE and VET have the proportions of young people continuing their study continued to rise.

Despite all the efforts to encourage young people to stay on in education and training for longer periods, the lure amongst some young people to take the step to leave school and try to get a job remains as strong as ever.

Factors such as financial independence from parents or just a plain aversion to staying on in classrooms are powerful motivating factors for some young people. After all the gaining of work has traditionally been viewed by our society as a 'right of passage' from adolescence to adulthood.

Research about the impact on young people of leaving school early is featured in this issue of the Australian Training Review. This and other research is summarised in the 'Research at a glance' liftout in this issue on Early school leavers and VET.

It is clear that young people who leave school early face problems of decreasing availability of full-time work for teenagers, and an uncertain economic and social future if they do not find a pathway to acquiring the skills needed in today’s labour market.

The issue of why young people leave education early is a complex one. The research done by McIntyre et al. (1999), *Early school leavers at risk* (reported in the 'Research at a glance'), shows that school leavers fall into different categories. In fact, some 28 per cent of early leavers are positive leavers with a vocational focus (that is, towards a particular line of work such as taking up a new apprenticeship), 20 per cent are positive leavers with an occupational focus (that is, towards winning a particular job rather than a specific career path), 25 per cent leave to look for work without having any job lined up at the time of leaving, or for non-educational reasons such as family need/responsibilities etc., and 28 per cent are discouraged or alienated leavers who have had very low levels of success in their schooling.

Overall nearly 40 per cent of these early school leavers are classified as being 'at risk'. The main problem is that the labour market for teenagers has collapsed in terms of full-time jobs.

The Youth Research Centre, in their study by Dwyer (1996), *Opting out: Early school leavers and the degeneration of youth policy*, identified at least six 'types' of early leaver:
- positive leavers, who choose to take up employment, apprenticeship or alternative career paths
- opportune leavers, who haven't decided on a career path, but leave to take up a job or perhaps a relationship in preference to school
- would-be leavers, or 'reluctant stayers', who prefer to leave but lack opportunities beyond school
- circumstantial leavers, who leave school for non-educational reasons, for example, family need
- discouraged leavers, who have not had success in their schooling, and who have low levels of performance and interest
- alienated leavers, whose needs may be similar to the discouraged students, but which are more difficult to meet

Despite this trend overall employment opportunities for teenagers have not fallen. Some 46 per cent of all teenagers were employed in 1983 and some 43 to 45 per cent are employed today. The big difference is the lack of full-time employment opportunities for young people. Today over
two-thirds of teenage employment is part time, whereas 20 years ago two-thirds of it was in full-time jobs.

The trick today is to find ways of combining work with study instead of leaving education and training altogether. There are now record numbers of new apprenticeships for young people, with over 70,000 teenagers in new apprenticeships by September 1999. Even more importantly there are over 280,000 teenagers in Australia today who are working and studying full or part time at school, TAFE or university. This is a new phenomenon. Two decades ago teenagers either left school for full-time work or stayed in full-time study.

Combining work with study is a much better option than leaving education altogether. It provides those teenagers with the urge to get out into the workforce with some paid work (that is, part-time work), while at the same time ensuring they are developing skills through education and training upon which longer term careers can be built.

Chris Robinson is managing director of NCVER

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