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Work Experience, Work Placements and part-time work among Australian secondary school students

Introduction

LSAY Briefings is a series produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The aim is to bring summaries of findings from ACER research to a wide audience in an accessible format and language, identifying some of the implications for policy and further research.

In particular, *LSAY Briefings* draws on data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) program, which studies the experiences of young people as they move from school into post-secondary education, training and work.

This issue focuses on the labour force experiences of secondary school students, and is based on the research reports from the LSAY series listed at the end of this paper. Some international perspectives of young people's workplace experiences are also included.

Definitions

Most secondary school students across Australia participate in programs that provide them with experience in the workplace. The programs vary, but those referred to here as Work Experience are usually short in duration, organised as blocks of time towards the end of the compulsory years of schooling, and aim to give full-time students a "taste" of the world of work and a particular job.

More intensive workplace experience is provided to some students through programs of Structured Work Placement, also referred to as Structured Workplace Learning. These programs aim to provide enhanced linkages between schools, students and businesses and to facilitate the transitions from school to work. Work Placement is a growing area in schools, but is difficult to survey as there is great variety across State and local programs and the programs tend to involve only small numbers of students.

In addition to these more formalised workplace programs, many students also undertake part-time and casual employment while still at school.



Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth BRIEFING

HIGHLIGHTS

- Students who undertake short work experience programs benefit in terms of learning skills appropriate to a particular job.
- Work placement programs are encouraging some students who might otherwise leave school early to remain and complete Year 12.
- Students perceive part-time jobs as useful for developing general employment skills.
- Part-time jobs of less than 10 hours a week do not interfere in the academic performance of students in Years 11 and 12.
- Students who hold part-time jobs during Years 11 and 12 are less likely to be unemployed at age 19 than those who did not work part-time while at secondary school.

Work Experience and students

Work Experience programs began in Australian secondary schools in the late 1960s and early 70s. By the 1980s, such programs were a well-established feature of the (predominantly) Year 10 curriculum.

Fullarton (1999) investigated Work Experience in a sample of 10 000 students who were in Year 11 in 1997. Work Experience involved short periods – one or two weeks – in workplaces during Years 10 or 11. It was not very common for schools to integrate the Work Experience into the teaching and learning program in a structured way.

Participation in Work Experience varied widely across the States (see Table 1, below), ranging from 96% of students in South Australia to 66% in Queensland. Female students were slightly more likely than male students to participate in Work Experience programs at both Years 10 and 11.

Students' choice of workplace for their Work Experience often related to their career plans, and the students saw Work Experience

as a means of learning about potential careers and jobs. In general, they considered Work Experience to be beneficial to them for looking at work conditions and the skills required for a particular job. The students considered Work Experience to be more useful in this respect than part-time work.

The positive views of the general value of Work Experience expressed by these students are consistent with the findings of other studies (OECD, 2000). According to some researchers, potential exists for enhancing the value of Work Experience further by increasing the amount of reflective activity in schools and by extending the time spent in the workplace (Evans & Poole, 1992).

Structured Work Placements and students

Structured Work Placements, or Workplace Learning programs, require senior secondary students to spend time in a workplace setting in a manner that is recognised and accredited as a part of their formal studies.

These programs are commonly aimed at Year 11 students, and tend to attract those students who have difficulty with the traditional senior secondary school curriculum. Work Placement usually involves students spending an extended period of time in a workplace, gaining experience, skills and often qualifications in a specific occupational field.

School provision of such programs is rising- from 46% of secondary schools in 1995 to approximately 67% in 1997. Provision rates vary across the States and Territories, with the highest rates recorded in South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and the lowest in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory. Access to programs, however, is not the same as participation- in 1997 only 8% of Year 11 students surveyed participated in a Work Placement program (Fullarton, 1999). It should be noted, however, that with steady increase in the provision of work placement programs, participation rates would most likely have risen since this cohort was surveyed.

Figure 1 shows the estimated probability of students participating in Work Placements. Those students who live in rural or remote areas are more likely to undertake a Structured Work Placement, as are those with lower achievement in the areas of literacy and numeracy. In contrast, students from a non-English speaking background, high achieving students and those whose fathers are in upper professional jobs are all less likely to participate in these programs.

These findings suggest that Work Placement programs may be encouraging some students to remain at secondary school, when otherwise they would leave without completing Year 12.

Table 1: Participation in Work Experience Programs in Year 10 (1996) and Year 11 (1997), by State

State	Participation in Work Experience Programs (%)		
	Year 10	Year 11	Neither Year
Australian Capital Territory	49	45	24
New South Wales	80	26	12
Victoria	81	31	6
Queensland	20	54	34
South Australia	55	89	4
Western Australia	63	35	24
Tasmania	73	24	21
Northern Territory	76	23	16
Total	62	44	16

This is a noteworthy result, given the finding that completion of Year 12 has long-term employment benefits, even for those students who do not perform well in literacy and numeracy whilst at school (Marks & Fleming, 1998)

Part-time work and students

Part-time and casual employment amongst secondary school students is not uncommon, and may be beneficial for students, both in terms of school participation and performance and later employment.

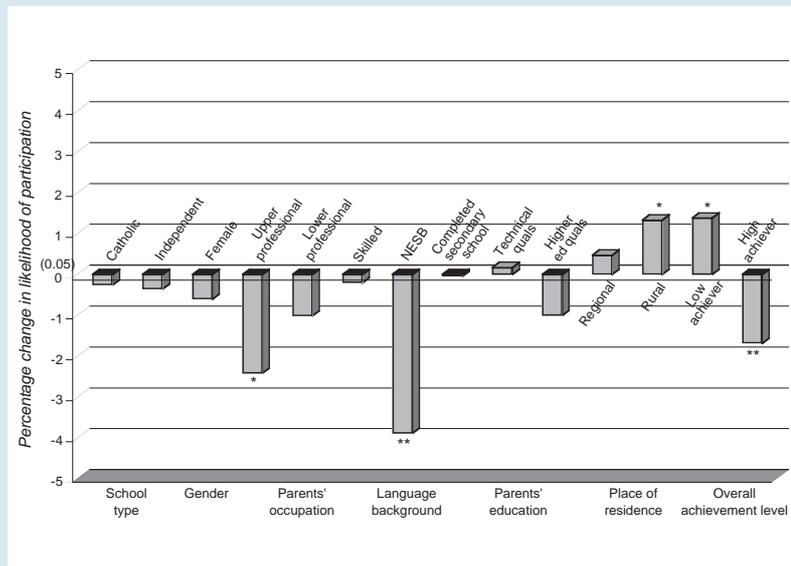
Research conducted on a sample of 3 000 students found that around a third had been in part-time employment as 17 year olds. Part-time work is not particularly onerous for students. They spent nine hours a week on average working part-time (Robinson, 1999). More recent surveys have found that almost a quarter of the 1995 LSAY cohort worked six hours a week or less whilst at school, and around 70% worked for ten hours or less (Marks, Fleming, Long & McMillan, 2000).

Most students, especially average and low achievers at school, reported that they worked to gain independence, enjoyed the work, and believed part-time work would help them to gain employment in later life (Robinson, 1999).

The fact that students held a part-time job did not, in itself, reduce the likelihood of them completing secondary school. In fact, part-time work during Year 11 seemed to have a positive effect Year 12 participation.

Nor did part-time work affect academic performance in Year 12 (Robinson, 1999). Results in

Figure 1: Probability of Students Participating in Workplace Learning Programs



From Fullarton, 1999, p. 14

Year 12 were slightly lower for student workers than for non-workers, but only where the students worked for more than ten hours a week during Years 11 and 12. Year 11 students who worked for more than ten hours a week were slightly less likely than non-workers to complete Year 12, but this relationship may be indicative of reduced engagement and/or achievement in school. Concern about the adverse impact of part-time work on students' schooling appears, therefore, to be largely unfounded.

Students in part-time employment were more likely to report being happy with many aspects of their lives- particularly the money they earned, their social lives and their independence- than were those who did not work.

In contrast with Work Experience programs, part-time jobs are commonly held in fields where students do not intend to

make their careers. Robinson (1999) found that more than half of the students in her sample were employed in sales jobs and a third were working as manual workers, with twice as many females as males working in sales and retail and many more males than females in manual jobs.

Many students see part-time jobs as more useful than their Work Experience in developing general employment skills- particularly in working with other people, gaining self confidence and following instructions (Fullarton, 1999).

Table 2 shows that having a part-time job can help young people achieve smoother transitions from education into later full-time employment. Students who work part-time during Years 11 and 12 are less likely to be unemployed at age 19 than those who did not work during secondary school. Students who work part-time while at school

gain knowledge of the labour market and develop skills and contacts that provide them with some advantage in the labour market, at least in the early years after leaving school.

In summary, these reports have found that there are a number of positive outcomes for students who either have part-time jobs or participate in work experience or work placement programs. All provide some experience in the workplace for students and assist them in making the transition to

the workforce. Students perceive the value of work experience/ work placement and part-time work quite differently. Work experience is seen as providing skills relevant to a particular job, while part-time work is seen as providing more general employment skills. Part-time work was not found to interfere with students' academic performance, and students who had held part-time jobs were less likely to be unemployed at age 19 than those who did not.

International perspectives of workplace experience

A recent international report (OECD, 2000) considered different ways in which experience in the workplace can be combined with education, and the value of such experiences. In most countries, the benefits of such experience are manifold.

It is difficult to make international comparisons of the outcomes of workplace experience because of the various ways in which such experience is combined with education in different countries. However, OECD research indicates that:

- In countries in which substantial numbers of teenage students (15 to 19 year olds) participate in the labour market, the proportion of young adults (20 to 24 year olds) who are in work is higher than in countries in which few teenagers do so.

It also suggests that:

- Several forms of participation in the labour market by teenage students can be associated with strong employment rates for adults.

Table 2: Percentage of time spent unemployed since leaving school, by labour force participants at age 19

% time unemployed since leaving school	No Part-time work at school	Part-time work at school
No time unemployed	52	69
Less than 10%	16	15
11-20%	7	7
21-30%	8	4
31-40%	5	1
41-50%	5	2
More than 50%	7	2

From Robinson, 1999, p. 29

The opportunity to combine education with workplace experience can be important for several reasons:

- *It can allow young people and employers to get to know one another. This can help to make both young people's job search and employers' recruitment more efficient.*
- *It can facilitate job search, because young people with work experience are believed to have acquired important generic work skills as well as positive attitudes and habits.*
- *It can improve the efficiency, effectiveness and pleasure of learning by providing opportunities for contextual and applied learning.*
- *Depending upon its nature, it can be essential in developing expert skills which cannot be acquired as well in the classroom.*
- *It can have a positive effect on the firm as a learning organisation through the additional skills and knowledge gained by young people's in-firm trainers and mentors.*

OECD, 2000, pp. 91-92

Policy implications

Both the LSAY research in Australia and the international research cited by the OECD show:

...a clear relationship between part-time employment while at school and a lower incidence of unemployment in the post-school years...upper secondary school graduates who have had part-time and summer jobs have employment rates in the year after leaving school that are twice as high or more than those who have not combined their studies with work.
(OECD, 2000, p. 103).

In terms of structured programs, the OECD report notes that workplace experience of itself does not ensure that workplace learning will take place. Improving and monitoring the quality of programs is vital if students, schools and employers are all to benefit from co-operation between education and the workplace. Figure 2 presents several features of programs that have been identified by international research as imperative for ensuring that school-managed workplace learning programs result in substantial learning by students.



Figure 2: Making school-organised workplace experience a success

High quality workplace learning programs are characterised by:

- Work placements that are long enough for real learning to take place.
- Systematic analysis of the training capacity of the workplace, to see what it can realistically supply.
- A formal training plan, setting out what has to be taught and learned, and clarifying the work-based and school-based parts of a student's program.
- Employer involvement in student selection for work placements.
- The presence of a trained program co-ordinator, able to liaise between the school and the firm and troubleshoot when problems occur.
- The use of qualified, highly competent workers as workplace trainers or mentors.
- Regular face-to-face contact between the co-ordinators and employers and in-firm supervisors.
- Monitoring of the students on the job by the program co-ordinator.
- The evaluation of student performance against the training plan at the end of the placement, with the evaluation carried out by the job supervisor and co-ordinator jointly.
- Deliberate efforts by schools to relate what has been learned at work to students' school-based learning.

From OECD, 2000, p. 105

The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

The *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth* (LSAY) is a research program jointly managed by ACER and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

The program includes more than 20 years of data on young Australians as they move through school and into tertiary education, the labour market and adult life.

LSAY commenced in its present form in 1995 with a national sample of 13 000 Year 9 students. Another sample of Year 9 students was drawn in 1998. Data is collected via mail and telephone interviews.

Advice and guidance is provided by a Steering Committee, with representatives from DEST, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, the Australian Education Systems

Officials Committee (AESOC), the Conference of ANTA Chief Executive Officers, non-government schools, academics and ACER.

The data collected through LSAY are deposited with the Social Science Data Archives for access by other analysts.

Further information on the LSAY program is available from ACER's Website: www.acer.edu.au

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Australian Council for Educational Research
ABN: 19 004 398 145
19 Prospect Hill Road (Private Bag 55)
Camberwell Victoria AUSTRALIA 3124
Phone: (03) 9277 5555 Fax: (03) 9277 5500
www.acer.edu.au



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