



Spotlight on Work Experience

‘Inspiring young people on their journey from education to work is about more than just covering the basics. Young people need time and space to make and explore their interests, and multiple opportunities to try things out.’

Helen Connolly, Commissioner for Children and Young People

My role as Commissioner for Children and Young People is to promote and advocate for the rights, development and well-being of all children and young people in South Australia. I am committed to advocating for children and young people’s involvement in decision-making that affects them, with particular consideration given to the needs of vulnerable and at-risk children and young people across the state.

My key objective is to position children and young people’s interests, development, and wellbeing front and centre in public policy and community life, and to advocate for laws, policies, systems and practices to change in their favour.

Since commencing, I have spoken with thousands of children and young people on a wide range of issues that are important to them. Across South Australia, in regional towns and in metropolitan centres, children and young people have told me about the pressures and challenges they face leaving school and transitioning to work. This not only includes the core issue they face of high youth unemployment, but also those relating to making the transition from school to work and how they are supported to explore and achieve individual short term employment opportunities and/or long term career aspirations.

“ Young people, regardless of their background, location and circumstances have consistently told me, that being prepared for adult life, and more specifically for entry into the world of work, is very important to them. This includes knowing how they can best prepare for this transition, either by pursuing further education and training, or by joining the workforce via apprenticeships, internships, casual jobs, or volunteer roles that provide them with work experience in areas and industries in which they have an interest.’

Not only have I heard that many young people are worrying about life after school, many parents and carers have also told me they don't feel well equipped to support their children adequately through this stage.

These conversations have prompted me to look more closely at work experience. I've sought to obtain and examine the views and practices of schools, educators and industry through a series of surveys, structured interviews, and targeted focus groups with each of these critical stakeholders.

A key focus of this work has been on identifying barriers and challenges that currently exist, and on developing solutions that will enable better outcomes for young people in the future; solutions that will help young people navigate post school short term employment opportunities, as well as pursue further education pathways with confidence.

A secondary focus has been on developing ideas on ways adults can be supported to help young people make this transition more easily and successfully. Given the school to university pathway is already well understood it has not been a strong focus of this exploratory work.



Report Context

'When disruption and uncertainty are the dominant motifs of the times, it is more important than ever to listen to what children and young people are saying they need.'

This spotlight report aims to bring the voices of young South Australians to the fore, combining their ideas and insights with those of their parents, educators and business leaders across South Australia. The aim of the report is to encourage stakeholders to collaborate on the development of a significantly better system of support for young people moving from school into the working phase of their lives; developing a system that is co-designed and co-implemented to offer benefits and rewards for all who make up what I refer to as South Australia's 'school to work ecosystem'.

Not only is the transition from school to work tending to take longer, it is now considered much more precarious. Youth unemployment remains high, particularly in regional centres, and fewer young people are finding full-time ongoing work as 'casualisation' of the workforce continues to increase.

Neither do the traditional pathways from university offer the employment rates they once did, with many young people struggling to find roles in the fields they studied and trained for, suggesting a mismatch between study decisions and employment opportunities.

Governments, educators, and industry are all playing their part to try and align these factors more closely for the obvious benefits this would

bring, however, the rapid pace at which change is occurring makes keeping up with this moving target an increasingly difficult task.

From a young age, children are asked 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' As children get older, this question takes different forms such as 'what are you doing after school' or 'what are you studying for now?' These simple questions, often asked by supportive parents trying to gain insights into favourite subjects, are now posed against a background of significant and rapid societal and technological change.

Examples include the rapid advances in artificial intelligence, machine learning, automation and robotics, which continuously impact on the way we do things, while the environmental crisis, space exploration and globalisation continue to have a dramatic impact on what we do. The jobs of today, will not be the same as those available in 10 to 20 years' time. Neither will the skills young people need to succeed in these future jobs likely to be anything like those that needed by their parents less than a generation ago!

Preparing young people for the world of work is no longer a traditional linear progression from school to work. It has become a complex journey full of twists and turns that require flexibility, adaptability and a high level of self-confidence to navigate with success. Through a series of interactions young people have at school and with family, friends, career advisors and educators in their senior school years, they attempt to navigate this increasingly complex environment with what appears to

be less and less practical support. They are required to do this while simultaneously trying to determine whether their choices are leading them to a career that reflects their true interests and aspirations instead of unwittingly narrowing their options. Work experience is one of the ways in which young people can be supported to navigate this journey more easily.

In fact, evidence shows that for many young people, work experience is an important part of this journey. It helps them to determine whether their ideas about career choices match with the reality. The hands-on, practical exposure work experience offers them away from the classroom environment, assists young people to work out what is important to them and what is not. It helps them choose appropriate high school subjects that broaden their opportunities, while simultaneously helping to determine whether their ideas about a particular job or industry match with their direct experience.

And for those students who are looking to leave high school before the end of Year 12, especially those doing it tough or living in rural and remote areas, work experience can be a reliable pathway to finding rewarding employment in their local community. It can also be a great motivator toward pursuing more challenging career choices as confidence is raised, and experience and skills attained.

Some young people I spoke with about their career aspirations told me they are confident they are attaining the essential skills they will require for jobs of the future. Others said they felt they were missing out altogether, and had little or no idea how to go about attaining these skills. Although many were still exploring who they are and what they want to do, they all knew there would come a time when they needed to prepare themselves for their lives beyond the classroom.

The key 'domains' of education and family, provide the solid foundation from which young people operate at this challenging time, and they remain crucial to building their confidence and self-belief in their capacity to achieve employment over the longer term, ultimately lead to successful careers.

However, much more can, and needs to be done, to bring stakeholders into alignment. Alignment will help to ensure young people's ideas and aspirations match with future opportunities that are relevant to the one being shaped by industry and government now. A lack of alignment will lead to frustration for all stakeholders, higher unemployment, greater costs and ongoing knowledge and skills gaps.



Project Methodology

In 2019, I undertook research into the methods South Australian schools use to prepare students for work and over the longer term, their careers. This included an examination of the frameworks they offer to support their students' transition from school to work, including what career advice they offer, as well as what planning and education processes, exercises and activities exist to assist them make choices that match with their talents and interests.

More than 70 schools across metropolitan and regional South Australia were contacted. The findings identified a number of common problems that were placing pressure on students and educators alike, when it came to preparing students for transition from school to work. This research highlighted the major role work experience should play in familiarising students with the world of work and what it entails. Survey findings featured a significant variation in the perceived role and importance of work experience, with an over-reliance on 'work experience champions' to 'make it work'.

These findings led me to seek out a partnership with the Committee for Adelaide – an independent organisation whose membership base reflects the breadth and depth of industry operating in South Australia. I was interested to hear their members' views on the subject of work experience, and so asked them to also undertake a specially devised work experience survey, relevant to this audience.

The views expressed in the findings from this survey reiterated those found in the schools survey - i.e. there was a significant variation in the perceived benefits that work experience offers young people and that success often relied heavily on a 'workplace champion' to 'make it work'.

These findings were supplemented by a second briefer survey of randomly selected small businesses operating in South Australia, who I hoped might provide insight into commonly held perceptions and attitudes toward

the work readiness of young people. The findings from this survey showed a strong mismatch between industry expectations and reality.

When looking at the complex intersection of social structures, conventions and processes that work experience encompasses, it is helpful to think of these elements as part of one overall work experience ecosystem. Borrowing the term from biology, this helps to describe the complex way in which functionally interdependent entities become connected through their direct and indirect actions, and upon which varying degrees of reliance are consequently formed.

Applying this ecosystem lens to the area of school to work transition, I could see that although all these stakeholders - young people, parents, carers, educators, school careers advisors, business owners and government, are all endeavouring to operate interdependently to sustain the variety of formal, informal and semi-formal pathways and opportunities there are for young people transitioning from school to work – the reality on the ground is quite different.

In varying degrees they're all experiencing barriers to realising outcomes they are universally aligned with, but in principal they are all falling well short of their desired mark.

The need for an ecosystem that engages all stakeholders in the co-design of a more equitable, relevant and sustainable work experience system that matches more closely with the needs, expectations, interests and capacity of all stakeholders is clear; and with a particular emphasis on meeting the needs of young people whose input must be sought and whose benefit it must be designed to best support.

Challenges and Issues for Schools and Educators

It was disappointing to learn that many of the schools contacted have decided to cancel their work experience programs altogether, while less than half of those surveyed reported that they're only able to offer work experience opportunities to one-year level.

One school stated that work experience had been 'dropped' because it had been seen as a distraction for students working to attain their Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR). Schools reported challenges in balancing the focus on ATAR with the variable experiences and regulatory barriers that made the process of facilitating work experience, too difficult.

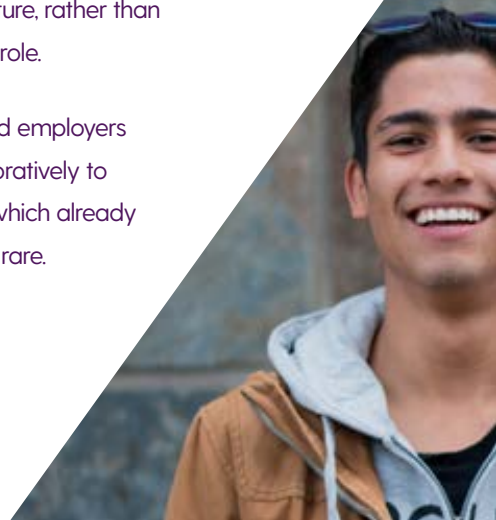
This points to the fact that many schools lack the knowledge or experience needed to engage with the business community in meaningful ways. In fact, through the survey some schools reported that their biggest challenge in relation to establishing a work experience program, was engaging with interested local businesses to support their efforts. Some schools surveyed said that changes in business policy had ultimately led them to cease seeking work experience opportunities all together.

Schools reported that they often struggled to link students with work experience opportunities, and generally students who

were well placed were those who had enrolled in a school-based vocation education and training program – mainly as they were able to consistently access direct contact with the relevant workplace or industry concerned.

The schools where students were most successfully linked to work experience outside VET opportunities were most often those where an individual champion from either the school or business made it work. These champions often used their own personal networks to assist students find a work experience opportunity. While this is commendable and does work at a contained local level, it often leads to highly variable outcomes. Individual networks cannot be guaranteed each year and are at risk of dissolving when the champions move on, become overwhelmed, or change their role. It also appears to be effort that is 'extra-curricular' in its nature, rather than embedded in a particular role.

In some cases, schools and employers were able to work collaboratively to extend the opportunities which already existed, however, this was rare.



Challenges and Issues for Business

CCYP partnered with Committee for Adelaide (C4A) to survey its member's on how they approached work experience. The views expressed reiterated those of schools. Member businesses emphasised the significant challenges and variance in the perceived benefits work experience offers both businesses and young people.

Of interest was the finding that C4A members from industries as diverse as mining, corporate services, manufacturing and social services reported that they mostly offered work experience opportunities to tertiary graduates (two thirds of the time), with high school aged young people offered less opportunities (one third of the time). About a third of businesses surveyed also said they offered work experience on an ad hoc basis, while another third did not offer work experience at all. There was only about one quarter of those businesses surveyed who currently have a work experience program in place.

These findings were supplemented by a brief survey of 70 randomly selected small businesses, providing further insight into commonly held perceptions and attitudes toward work experience and work readiness.

Of the 70 businesses surveyed only 37% currently offered a work experience opportunity. Of these, 27% were thinking about hiring young people aged 15 to 24 years in the future. Just 29% of businesses surveyed felt that young people had the skills required to be work ready, while 64% said they would be happy to assist young people in their local community with either excursions to their businesses, a work experience opportunity, or a talk presented at a local school explaining what their business looks for in future employees.

Whilst the concept of work experience is acknowledged by most businesses as being important to young people, business, industry and South Australia at large, many businesses are hesitant to offer work experience because of a set of perceived barriers that include allocation of staff time and resourcing, business risks, OHWS issues, legal implications, insurances, and the need to accommodate course requirements and school curriculums that may be inflexible.

A Way Forward

Clearly when it comes to work experience, redefining the relationship between schools and businesses is key to achieving better outcomes for young people. However, in order to make these relationships more viable and sustainable over the longer term, they need to be strengthened and developed in ways that will benefit schools and businesses alike.

Co-designing work experience opportunities with input from all stakeholders has the potential to alleviate the casual nature of current arrangements, and help build a more robust and regulated work experience system that could benefit all stakeholders.

Devising a framework within which young people, schools, businesses and government can all work together to achieve outcomes that meet respective stakeholder needs must be the aim.

The most commonly cited recommendation across parents, industry young people and educators was the development and maintenance of a dedicated work experience website. This independently run resource could act as a one stop shop to connect schools, employers and young people with each other with the aim of creating a work experience system that is world class; one that takes the current ad hoc approach and formalises it in a way that benefits young people, schools, business and industry and government alike. This would ensure the alignment between stakeholders that is necessary for the successful transition of South Australia's young people from school to work could be better met.

A dedicated SA Work Experience website would ideally:

- support industry and business leaders to promote the jobs and skills they require in the South Australian workforce now and over the next 10 years.
- support young people to identify potential pathways to employment via subject choices and post school work experience opportunities;
- develop links between schools and business through a central portal that would advertise current work experience opportunities as well as excursions, incursions, and availability of business and career representatives to visit schools and deliver career focussed talks and presentations.

Such a solution would need government support but could be orchestrated with assistance from private business organisations and industry.

This relatively easy solution would build the capacity of the ecosystem to work in a coordinated and systematic way. I strongly recommend that key cross sector stakeholders come together with government to build the relationships and infrastructure needed to embed work experience as a critical tool in preparing young people for post school opportunities.

Please note: This spotlight report is designed to be read in conjunction with the *Off To Work We Go* report and the *Spotlight on Parent/Carer Careers Advice* report available for download from ccyp@sa.gov.au/resources