Enhancing Victoria's Economic Performance and Productivity
Submission on Preparing Young Victorians for Work
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About the author

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Executive Summary

The Discussion Paper, Enhancing Victoria’s Economic Performance and Productivity, rightly identifies disengaged youth as an area of concern, noting particular characteristics in relation to young Victorians. These characteristics indicate entrenched challenges, but also need to be located in a wider need to better prepare all young Victorians for contemporary worlds of work. This submission argues that practice and thinking about teaching and learning tends to be confined to the learning that takes places within education institutions, which often operate in isolation, and sometimes disconnected from the realities of contemporary working life. The fluidity of labour markets suggests a need to re-examine certain aspects of Victoria’s education system, and their connection to what happens post-school in equipping young Victorians with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to learn and adapt to the challenges of the contemporary labour force. Ten recommendations are proposed:

1. Adversity capital and associated soft skills need to be taught more explicitly in schools. Schools routinely promote certain graduate attributes, which invariably feature some soft skills and competencies that are taught implicitly but, arguably, more systematic and explicit efforts are needed.

2. The P2P or gig economy presents additional challenges to young people who may not know their rights, risks and responsibilities when undertaking work in the new economy. A reimagining of career education is needed.

3. Students need to be connected to worlds of work in more extensive, embedded and meaningful ways. Through these connections, young people need to be encouraged to harness the necessary soft skills and literacies, actively, throughout school and other learning contexts.

4. Non-governmental organisations are doing some important work to develop approaches that integrate support with soft skills, vocational training and work experience, aimed at highly disadvantaged groups. We need to embed opportunities for hands-on learning of these skills through meaningful and sustainable community and industry partnerships.

5. Deepen and extend the professional dialogue between teachers, school leaders and other non-teaching professional communities.

6. While schooling tends to concentrate on learning within classroom settings, there are potential benefits to taking a wider view of learning that takes place formally, informally and non-formally beyond the school gates. Schooling tends to focus on getting students to completion of Year 12 or equivalent, but arguably more attention is needed to, and aligned with, what happens after school.

7. This submission urges greater consideration of how best to align education and training to the contemporary labour market.

8. More needs to be done not only to make VET more appealing, but to support what is an often fragmented sector lacking consistent long-term policy and resources.

9. Efforts to develop 21st century skills and adversity capital may be useful to navigate contemporary seas of working life, but desirable work needs to be available at the end.

10. In recent years, there has been growing attention to the importance of evidence use in education policy and practice. More needs to be done to recognise, measure and respond to the profound challenges facing young people’s transitions into the contemporary global economy.
PREPARING YOUNG VICTORIANS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY WORKFORCE: A Response to the Enhancing Victoria’s Economic Performance and Productivity Discussion Paper

The Discussion Paper, *Enhancing Victoria’s Economic Performance and Productivity*, rightly identifies disengaged youth as an area of concern, noting particular characteristics in relation to young Victorians, including: lower participation rate in Victoria compared to Australia, which is mainly due to a higher proportion of young Victorians in full-time education; and around 10 per cent of young Victorians are not working or not in full-time education, of which 53 per cent are female and a relatively high youth unemployment rate, which is double the average across all age cohorts. Amongst potential barriers to participation include poor skills, including foundation skills and disenfranchisement with finding work.

These characteristics indicate entrenched challenges, but also must be located in a wider need to better prepare all young Victorians for contemporary worlds of work. With 2017 ABS figures showing a continuing deterioration of the teenager labour market – particularly in relation to full-time work, combined with multiple job changes happening later in life – the idea of a secure career may be evaporating. A widely held view is that as pathways to work become more uncertain and less linear, young people need certain 21st century or soft skills to navigate the choppy seas of the contemporary workforce. Having analysed ‘over 20 billion hours of work completed by 12 million Australians’, a 2017 report by the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA 2017) argues that such portable skills and capabilities are vital to succeed in the increasingly automated and globalised workplace.

This submission agrees that these skills are vital. In addition, the utility of these skills needs to be located in relation to: 1. Structural changes to the economy; and 2. Young people’s perceptions of career and work in the emergent so-called ‘gig-economy’. The following discussion seeks to provide a wider lens through which preparing young people for Victoria’s changing workforce can be understood. It offers a brief discussion about the context of youth labour market change, young people’s attitudes to work and career, before exploring responses on two levels: at the student level; and in the ways that schools engage the complex social and economic ecologies in which they are situated at the systems level.

This discussion draws from the book, *Educating Generation Next: Young People, Teachers and Schooling in Transition* (2016a, Palgrave Macmillan) and a discussion paper commissioned by the Centre for Strategic Education entitled *Educating for uncertainty: Ideas and challenges for schooling in a post-industrial society* (Walsh 2016b). These monographs argue that thinking about learning, teaching and the teaching profession tends to be confined to the learning that takes places within education institutions, which in this submission focuses on schools. Schools and other formal education institutions sometimes operate in isolation and disconnected from the realities of contemporary working life encountered by young people today. The fluidity of labour markets suggests a need to re-examine certain aspects of Victoria’s education system, and their connection to what happens post-school in equipping young Victorians with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to learn and adapt to the challenges of the contemporary local and global labour force.
Context

During the last three decades, working life has undergone significant change. Nowhere is this more evident than in the worlds inhabited by young people. Getting a job is becoming more competitive and, once gained, working life is often more fluid. Nearly 74 million young people were looking for work in 2014 – an increase of nearly 3.5 million since 2007 (ILO\(^1\), 2015). Advanced economies are dogged by persistent unemployment and a proliferation of temporary jobs (ILO, 2013). Young people must rely on casual work and have less control of planning their lives both financially and socially. Large numbers change their job status more regularly, and pursue further study with less of a guarantee that it will lead to satisfying and secure forms of work (OECD\(^2\), 2010). The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007–08 accelerated these conditions.

As the OECD (2010) pointed out shortly after, young people disproportionately felt the brunt of the GFC, with over three million more young people becoming unemployed in the third quarter of 2010, compared with the corresponding quarter of 2007. Youth unemployment soared throughout Europe. In countries such as Spain the rate surpassed 55 per cent. Reports emerged of a great swathe of young people – numbering in the tens of thousands – migrating across Europe in search of work (The Economist, 2013); but, as the OECD further pointed out, ‘unemployment does not capture the full hardship for youth, as many of those who have left education do not even appear in labour market statistics’ (OECD, 2010, p 1).

A more recent OECD (2016) report, *Investing in Youth - Australia*, highlights persistent struggles faced by many young people in Australia. The report is a reminder of the persistent problems facing certain young people who: leave school early, are female, live in remote areas (particularly Indigenous youth) and are migrants from non-English-speaking countries. It highlights that in 2015, one in five Australians aged between 16 and 24 spent at least a year out of employment, education or training. At the extreme end, 11.8% of all 15 to 29 year olds, totalling around 580,000 young people, were not in employment, education or training (NEET). This figure is more than 100,000 higher than in 2008. Nearly two-thirds of these young people were not even seeking work.

Overlaying these trends are other transformations that are shaping the job-futures of young people. Technology, demographic change and tectonic geopolitical shifts are reshaping employment trajectories, in ways that compel a rethink of the role of schooling in preparing young people for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (popularly collected under the acronym VUCA).

Echoing international trends, young Australians’ post-school futures are increasingly characterised by uncertainty, insecurity and fluidity in relation to working life (ACTU\(^3\), 2012). Their participation in the labour force has been considerably affected by both long-term and, as suggested above, more recent changes following the GFC. Six features are worth noting. Firstly, there is a disproportionately high level of young people unemployed. Figures published in 2014 suggested that youth unemployment represented just under 40 per cent of all unemployment in Australia. More than one in three unemployed Australians was aged between 15 and 24 (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014, p 4).

Secondly, the number of full-time job opportunities for teenagers has been declining steadily since the 1980s (Robinson and Lamb, 2009; Robinson et al, 2010). There has been an increase in the uptake of casual and part-time work by young people aged 15–24. One-fifth of all casual workers is aged 15–19. From 2001 to 2011, the prevalence of casual work increased significantly for this age group and, to some extent, for 20–24 year-olds for the period, but far less for older age groups (ACTU, 2012). Researchers from the University of Melbourne have found that, while some young people prefer casual and part-time work because of the benefits that flexibility offers, the overarching context of labour market change has challenged the ability of young people to plan their lives and maintain close social relationships (Woodman, 2012). Many want to work more but are unable to do so.

Underemployment, defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as part-time workers who are available to do more work, rose significantly following the GFC – a trend that has not
While employment conditions generally improve after the age of 25 (Stanwick et al., 2013), it would appear that for many young people, options to secure full-time work are increasingly out of reach. Precarity is identified particularly with young women (Wilson, 2013).

Thirdly, demographic change is reshaping the constitution of the workforce. Between 1960 and 2010, the proportion of the population aged 65 years and over grew from 8.5 per cent to 13 per cent. This proportion is expected to swell to a quarter of the population by 2056 (ABS, 2013). A growing share of Australian workers aged 55 and over is staying in the workforce (Birrell and Healy, 2013b). Between May 2003 and May 2013, the percentage of those aged 60–64 participating in the workforce increased from 39 per cent to 54 per cent. This increasing competition for work particularly affects young people who are seeking work and are qualified but lack experience. The aging of the population is not confined to Australia. Globally, one estimate suggests that by 2070 there will be only three working-age people to every two people aged 65 and over (Cohen, 2011, cited in Hugo, 2012).

Fourthly, the globalisation of labour markets is intensifying competition for work. This affects those with and without qualifications, and is creating challenges for young people seeking work in Victoria. The trends behind this are complex and often interconnected, but following are some examples.

In 2012–13, the number of Working Holiday Maker (WHM) visas, issued to enable people from overseas to enter and work in Australia, was roughly equivalent to the number of young Australians who leave school and enter the workforce each year (around 250,000). All these WHMs were aged 30 or less and included significant numbers fleeing downturns in foreign job markets (eg, Taiwan and Ireland). Many were seeking work in Australia rather than a holiday supplemented by work (Birrell and Healy, 2013b). As a consequence, some young Australians without post-school education must compete against these WHMs for less skilled entry-level work (Birrell and Healy, 2013a).

Those with qualifications also face less certainty in the workforce. Graduates are typically moving into full-time work later in life, and sometimes not in their field of study or training. A combination of an increase in the number of university graduates, combined with greater mobility of qualified workers across countries, is intensifying competition for skilled work, which appears to be driving ‘credential inflation’. In this more competitive labour market, employers can demand higher qualifications (Foster et al., 2007; Modestino, 2010). This in turn drives out of the labour market those without post-school qualifications, such as graduate degrees. In the US, studies show that the ‘college premium’, that is, the income power of college graduates, is largely enjoyed by those with postgraduate and professional degrees, rather than those with undergraduate qualifications. Employability is even more precarious for those without post-school qualifications. The annual earnings of males aged 20–29, and not enrolled in educational institutions in the three decades leading up to 2009, declined by 15 per cent. This was in contrast to a 31 per cent increase for those with master’s degrees, while those with a bachelor’s degree only experienced a 5 per cent increase (Côté, 2013, p 8; Sum and McLaughlin, 2011).

One of the perverse outcomes of this competition is illustrated compellingly by Phillip Brown, Hugh Lauder, and David Ashton in their book: The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Incomes (2011, p 5). They note the use of the Dutch auction, which sees those with brightest résumés competing for jobs by offering to accept the lowest paying wage. This is happening now in advanced economies such as Germany. These inflationary pressures may be striking at the core promise or ‘opportunity bargain’, of national education systems in countries such as the US and UK, that gaining higher qualifications will lead to desirable work.

Returning back to Australia, a fifth and related trend concerns the country’s geo-political place within the region. About 3.6 billion of the world’s 7.1 billion people reside in South and East Asia, within a region that encompasses an area about four times the size of Australia, but has 157 times its population. It is estimated that by 2030 two-thirds of the world’s middle
class will reside in Asia (Kharas, 2010). This will place additional pressures on the labour market in Australia – especially where off-shore labour is a cheaper alternative.

The flipside is that the Australian economy has an opportunity to benefit from this growth. Even today, over 70 per cent of Australia’s total export earnings come from Asian markets – its exports, and consequently broader engines of employment, are now linked to this growing middle class’s demand for goods and services, such as education, food, healthcare and tourism (AusTrade, 2014); and yet Australia’s cultural engagement with the region is patchy and uneven.

As organisations like the Asia Education Foundation have shown consistently, educational responses to the Asian century have been lacking – particularly in the area of Asia languages, which have failed to grow and even declined during the last 20 years (eg, in the case of school studies of Indonesian). A need to develop cultural competencies more explicitly in young people is arguably necessary, to which we will return in a moment.

The last (but by no means only other) macro-level driver of change that is salient to this discussion concerns technological change. Another FYA report suggests that 70 per cent of young people entering the labour market will be affected by automation, with more than half of the workforce as a whole requiring the skills to ‘use, configure and or build digital systems in the next 2–3 years’ (FYA, 2015). The wider ubiquity of technology throughout life suggests a need for greater digital literacy, but other data indicates low levels of competency amongst too many students. In 2014, NAP–ICT4 results suggested a decrease in students’ digital competence, with only 52 per cent of Year 10 students meeting or exceeding the ‘proficient’ standard – a decrease from the 65 per cent recorded in 2011 (ACARA, 2015, p 32).

These changes, challenges and opportunities are, of course, immensely significant to schooling, and to how well education and training systems more broadly are preparing young people to meet them. This is also a concern of business. Recent surveys of business affirm a perception that young people are underprepared for working life to the extent that many lack foundational skills in literacy and numeracy, as well as ‘soft’ skills such as communication and problem solving (CCIQ, 2011; Mission Australia, 2013). This perception is problematic from a number of perspectives, one of which is that rapid changes, such as those intensified by technology, are making it difficult for some businesses to predict exactly what will be required of future employees. A question for Premier’s Jobs and Investment Panel therefore is: ‘What skills and knowledge are required to adapt to change?’

Similar concerns are raised in education policy. As one ACARA document points out: ‘There is concern that the gap between education and the work readiness of young people is widening. Early and intense educational intervention is needed to help young people develop the work readiness, career development and work knowledge’ (ACARA, 2013, p 4).

Again, however, career development is challenged by the very idea that, for the current generation of students, having a career scarcely resembles what it did for generations moving from school to work last century. Careers remain desirable but seem less attainable. A survey of 5029 Australians aged 18 to 29 found 67% expressed concern about getting a career related job (Co-Op BDO, 2015). A majority (56%) believed that job prospects in their field are not very strong. While most (69%) were happy to have multiple careers, nearly the same number want ‘a career, not just a job.’ The FYA report suggests ‘It’s more likely that a 15-year-old today will experience a portfolio career, potentially having 17 different jobs over 5 careers in their lifetime’ (FYA, 2017).

The nature of young people’s attitudes to work may also be changing. The idea of the ‘self as enterprise’ has been noted by RMIT’s Peter Kelly (2016, p 2), arising from ‘cultural, technological and economic transformations that have changed the nature and meanings of work and the sorts of behaviours and dispositions imagined as being necessary for ongoing participation in paid labour’. For example, in a book just published entitled Down and Out in the New Economy, US anthropologist Ilana Gershon (2017) suggests that where labour has conventionally involved a transaction of the employee’s time and effort for money, young people increasingly define themselves - and are defined by employers – as a business with
a brand. In today’s economy ‘it is no longer sufficient for a young person identifying as an employee seeking to get hired’ – an ‘enticing personal brand’ is seen to be required.

Gershon’s study of employers and jobseekers in the San Francisco Bay area found young people marketing themselves as a business working within and across other businesses. A CSIRO report notes that in ‘peer-to-peer (P2P) economy’, companies are shrinking staff, ‘with many other roles provided by the freelancer or portfolio worker community’ (Hajkowicz et al, 2016, p 36). Though freelancing ‘has not yet taken hold in Australia’, it has become more common in other countries, and its growth in Victoria seems inevitable.

Working freelance demands an entrepreneurial self. While being entrepreneurial is a potentially valuable disposition, risk and responsibility is transferred to individual workers. People working in sectors such as cleaning and hospitality (a big employer of youth) are increasingly asked by employers to provide business numbers; that is, to provide their services as a business. In doing so, labour protections can be bypassed. It has been pointed out, for example, that if Deliveroo delivery riders do not receive an order in an hour, they’ll earn less than the delivery courier award rate ($18.31 per hour of work), with ‘no superannuation, no annual leave, no penalty rates and no insurance if they have an accident on their bike’ (McVeigh and McCormack 2016).

It is also worth noting here that leading a business is not for everybody. The Co-Op BDO survey above found only half (51%) of respondents want to be their own boss. If young people are not thinking about themselves as a business, then in the current climate and associated policy appetite for ‘agility’, cultivating enterprise skills in young Australians such as digital literacy, critical thinking and presentation skills will be important.

The changing nature of the economy, and greater VUCA of life in general, affirms the need for a more explicit development of literacies, beyond numeracy and literacy, to skills such as problem solving, oracy and cultural competency. One challenge is to develop these skills and literacies more explicitly (alongside numeracy and literacy), in ways that connect meaningfully with the everyday lives of young people and their current and future working lives. Policy makers, educators, businesses and third sector organisations can play an important role in ensuring that the development of these skills is embedded in all parts of teaching and learning, and in ways that purposefully engage young Victorians.

At a deeper level, these challenges strike at the very heart of contemporary education and training. These changes suggest a need to reflect on how well schools and other formal education institutions have adjusted to the more fluid conditions of contemporary life. With conventional pathways from school to the life beyond relying on industrial models of education, much of what takes place in schools has not changed significantly during the last century. In an increasingly post-industrial society, preparing young people requires new approaches and relationships with external actors, alongside existing approaches that seek to build capabilities relevant to the 21st-century workforce.
Enhancing Victoria's economic performance and productivity: two lenses

The changes above urge reflection on educational responses at two levels: at the student level and in the ways that schools engage the complex social and economic ecologies in which they are situated at the systems level. The following discussion draws on recent conceptual thinking about young people, education and work.

Thinking about responses at the student level

The need to develop skills and competencies beyond literacy and numeracy becomes pronounced in light of the trends and drivers of change outlined above. They include social intelligence and emotional resilience (Roberts, 2009) problem solving and oracy that equip young people to navigate fluid and changing labour markets (IYF, 2013). Also sometimes referred to as 21st-century skills and competencies, they also include critical thinking, creativity, ICT literacy and global awareness, amongst others (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). Cross-cultural competency involves ‘the ability to move across cultures comfortably and fluently’ (Zhao, 2009, p 173). A related term, ‘global competence’, involves ‘understanding other cultures, which offers up for scrutiny our sense of our own identities, core values, and cultural practices’ (Hannon et al, 2011, p 4).

These new skills and competencies seem ‘more related to the needs of the emerging models of economic and social development than with those of the past century, which were suited to an industrial mode of production’ (Ananiadou and Claro, 2008, p 5). Though often called soft skills, this term is inadequate because it seems to diminish their significance in relation to ‘harder’ skills and conventional literacies and numeracy, for which measures are more readily available. They are essential, not only for workplace readiness but also for participation in other areas of life, and for the cohesion of communities more generally (Kahn et al, 2012).

They are particularly important to navigate a world characterised by VUCA. These skills, competencies and literacies (terms which overlap) form part of what is called ‘adversity capital’. This term has been adapted from elsewhere in youth sociology (Pavlidis, 2009) to an educational context. It suggests that young people should develop personal assets that promote economic mobility, in a world characterised by increasing levels of insecurity. It applies to those at risk of marginalisation, as well as those who might experience adversity when confronted by challenging circumstances (eg, high-performing secondary students who struggle to adjust to independent learning in higher education). It also promotes an ability to move critically across different cultural, technological and face-to-face contexts. It signifies that not only will these skills help young people to get a job but also describes them as subject to VUCA. It comprises forms of capital that can be productive of other forms of capital upon which young people can critically confront and navigate uncertainty and potentially build a better life. Tomlinson’s (2017) Capital Model illustrates five forms of capital that inform adversity capital:

- Cultural capital arises from the opportunities created through higher levels of credentials.
- Human capital – Credentials are seen to provide positional advantages in accessing work (Tomlinson 2008). The competitive labour market is intensified as employability is measured against employability of others (Tomlinson 2009; Saw forthcoming) on a globally competitive scale.
- Social capital is about ‘who I know’ through networking; that is, using one’s contacts and human capital to access labour markets.
- Psychological capital is a form of capital based on the psychological resources that would enable graduates to adapt and respond proactively to inevitable career challenges (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 347). Feelings of self-efficacy, for example, are important to their capacity to navigate challenging labour market conditions.
- Identity Capital relates to ‘who I am’. People curate their identities and sense of vocation (Tomlinson, 2017).
Adversity capital also has a sociological dimension that understands the young learner, within a social ecology that acknowledges the valuable role that actors such as parents, teachers and peers can play in assisting the learner to bounce back from adversity. Overlaying this is an understanding of schools and learning settings as being enmeshed in an ecosystem of actors and agencies seeking to improve learning outcomes. (More about these actors in a moment.)

The skills, literacies and competencies described above are not new. They are routinely developed in areas such as vocational education and have been on the agendas of Western governments for decades; but Australian schools could be doing more to develop these within a more nuanced understanding of, and engagement with, the social and educational ecologies in which young people live and learn. The learning of these skills becomes more meaningful and powerful when linked to authentic, applied and efficacious learning experiences – particularly in relation to preparing for working life. Achieving this requires an approach to learning that is both learner-centred but embedded within a wider ecology of learning experiences and support networks. Given that so much of learning in schools continues to be school-centric suggests a need for reappraisal of where learning takes place.

Reappraising where learning takes place is also by no means new but has renewed significance in light of the trends and drivers outlined above. As previous papers published by the Centre for Strategic Education have noted, there has been a shift towards thinking about where and how student learning should take place in ways that enable students to link conceptual thinking to their own experiences, and through learning that relates to the individual learner and her or his needs.

The OECD and other non-school actors such as Cisco have argued for greater attention to educational practice in which the learning environment recognises that the learners in them are the core participants. A learning environment oriented around the centrality of learning encourages students to become ‘self-regulated learners’. This means developing the ‘meta-cognitive skills’ for learners to monitor, evaluate and optimise their acquisition and use of knowledge ... It also means to be able to regulate one’s emotions and motivations during the learning process (Dumont et al, 2010, p 14).

The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation’s Innovative Learning Environments project explored the role of emotions, technology, collaborative learning and organisational routines as a way of embedding learning in daily practice (OECD, 2012). It is argued that effective learning environments encourage student engagement and are where learners come to understand themselves more explicitly and better as learners. That learning is social and often collaborative is emphasised in this approach, as well as being attuned to learners’ motivations and recognising the importance of emotions. Learning environments are learner-centred; that is, highly focused on learning as the principal activity, and personalised with the learning environment, acutely sensitive to individual and group differences in background, prior knowledge, motivation and abilities.

The OECD’s Andreas Schleicher (2012, p 35) suggests that ‘[t]he world is also no longer divided into specialists and generalists’ The goal of the past was standardization and conformity, today it is about being ingenious, about personalising educational experiences; the past was curriculum centred, the present is learner centred, which means that education systems increasingly need to identify how individuals learn differently and foster new forms of educational provision that take learning to the learner and allow individuals to learn in the ways that are most conducive to their progress’ (Schleicher, 2012, pp 34–35).

The Innovative Learning Environments project also worked from the assumption that learning is effective when it takes place in group settings, where learners can collaborate and when there is a connection to community (Istance, 2011, p 5–6). This connection to community is important, as it suggests possibilities for a more outward-looking set of aims and practices for educators, schools and other actors.

This focus on learner ownership is not new and is evident in high-performing systems. That learners have strong agency and influence in learning and learning environments has, for
example, been promoted by The Finnish National Board of Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2011). It has also been promoted in other conceptual approaches, such as Cisco’s ‘Education 3.0’ approach, which seeks to draw from ‘the insights of learners themselves who, for the most part, have been treated as the objects rather than subjects in the process of learning. It takes into consideration the progressive development of the learner through stages of schooling and beyond, as well as different levels of understanding... Emphasis is placed on skills and concepts rather than specific content. It is argued that learning needs to be purposeful and provide depth of understanding and application, whilst not being crowded by content.’ (Hannon et al, 2011, p 13)

While a significant part of learning is skills-/thinking-based, content, of course, remains important. Learning opportunities involving co-construction and deep engagement by learners can pay enormous dividends in terms of improved outcomes.

Soft skills are implicit in these approaches. Cisco Global Education, for example, recognises the importance of thinking skills, such as problem solving, synthesising evidence and constructing an argument, as well as non-cognitive ones, such as resilience and persistence, which are often developed beyond school gates (Cisco Systems Inc, 2010).

This work points to an attitude to learning that places the learner at the centre, within a potentially more outward-looking ethos, in which non-school actors play a larger role in education. It suggests expanded landscapes of schooling, teaching and learning in which educators develop new and more effective ways to work more in partnership with community and non-school actors – such as business and not-for-profit sectors – to improve student outcomes. As with mass education systems elsewhere in the world, most Australian schools have to do more with fewer resources, and partnerships are seen as a way of leveraging opportunities to build capacity. They can also provide work experience and develop skills in students to improve work readiness (CCIQ, 2011).

Thinking at a systems level

These approaches suggest possibilities for an extension of the educational landscape beyond conventional schooling. In countries such as Australia, the landscape of schooling is shifting, towards an environment in which schools are increasingly seeking ways to work with community actors and stakeholders, to address entrenched challenges and improve student outcomes. This approach amplifies Michael Fullan’s (2000, p 5) observation that ‘Schools need the outside to get the job done ... The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with them a productive one.’ This is where it becomes important to think of schools and school systems as ecological in nature; that is, they are made up of numerous factors, discourses and forces that interact in complex ways to influence the nature of school practice. As John Eggleston pointed out many years ago (2012, p 109), it is ‘the ecology of the school and the creation, distribution and use of resources that determines it is clearly a partnership between all who live and work within it.’

Beyond the school, another approach proposes an analogy of mass education as a kind of platform or reef upon which a range of actors and stakeholders interact in a learning ecology or ecosystem. According to this model, the conventional notion of the school, as an organisation that works in isolation, gives way to one in which the school becomes a ‘base-camp’ from which educators engage with other key actors and stakeholders to improve student outcomes, adopting more flexible and adaptive modes of practice and building their school’s capacity to work beyond the conventional boundaries of the school gates. Within this model, ‘system leaders need to reposition themselves so that rather than being primary providers of education, they provide a platform for a diversity of providers’ (Hannon et al, 2011, p 2–3).

Vertical and horizontal forces shape these ecologies. Vertical forces include state, national or international policies and initiatives that are transmitted through education systems, such as Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership’s (AITSL) Australian Professional Standard for Principals. The model included in this Standard describes the context in which leaders operate across school, sector, community and education systems at local, regional,
national and global levels respectively. It also emphasises the importance of school leaders being ‘always fully interdependent, integrated and with no hierarchy implied’ (AITSL, 2011, p 5). The Standard recognises that excellent leaders ‘engage with families and carers, and partner, where appropriate, with community groups, agencies and individuals, businesses or other organisations to enhance and enrich the school and its value to the wider community.’ (AITSL, 2011, p 11)

Central to these practices are school community partnerships. In Australia, the importance of school community partnerships has received increasing interest by recent federal and state governments. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG), for example, promoted the National Partnership Agreement, which sought to empower local schools and improve school leadership through community engagement (DEEWR, 2013). Another initiative, such as the Business–School Connections Roundtable, sought input from a range of actors – including the Australian Business and Community Network; IBM Australia; Microsoft Australia; Rio Tinto Australia; Principals Australia; Woolworths; the Foundation for Young Australians and Macquarie Group Foundation – which represents a step forward.

The Roundtable identified a number of opportunities for businesses to contribute as a partner with education institutions at a strategic level through ‘more significant school–business relationships’. Other forms of engagement proposed included ‘adding value’ to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum and supporting improved school retention through work experience (DEEWR, 2011, p 34–40).

Policy initiatives such as these and AITSL’s Standards reflect a broader international recognition of the need to elevate the capacity of schools to engage in horizontal engagement, through partnerships with other actors beyond the classroom. Schools need to be thinking more about what philanthropist and public education advocate Ellen Koshland has referred to as ‘surprising alliances’. These initiatives also represent positive steps.

At the micro level, these horizontal relationships and types of external engagement generally arise within the specific context of the local community (although technology potentially enables them to take place anywhere). These depend on the nature and needs of the community served by the school, and may include business, parents and carers. They might also include brokers, funders, social entrepreneurs and other actors and stakeholders who are seeking to work with schools and teachers to improve student outcomes. Examples of brokers in Australia include organisations such as National Australia Bank’s (NAB) former Schools First program, the Australian Business and Community Network and Social Ventures Australia (SVA). Providers include organisations such as Asia Education Foundation (AEF), The Smith Family, Beacon Foundation, High Resolves and Hands on Learning. Partnerships such as ‘Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills’ (jointly enabled by Microsoft, Cisco and Intel) have also been influential, as are research organisations such as the Grattan Institute and universities.

All of these organisations are part of the complex ecosystem in which schools increasingly operate. Growing numbers of schools are forming partnerships with or through such organisations, both to improve student outcomes and for the benefits that they bring in the form of knowledge, human and capital resources. These include in-kind support in the form of business expertise, opportunities for teachers to increase their skills through professional placement and collaboration and the provision of facilities. For many of these schools, a major incentive to undertake these partnerships is the reality that they have to ‘do more with less’. A challenge is to align the different values, goals, timeframes and approaches adopted by different partners across sectors.

One immediate benefit to opening up the school gates could be in the area of career counselling. Within schools, career counselling needs to be rethought drawing from the trends and thinking outlined above. Currently, it arguably has limited impact for a number of reasons. One is that it is often located at the periphery of school life and is often an ‘add-on’ to the curriculum. This can be seen physically in the ways that careers education is often located within schools. I have seen schools in Victoria in which the space provided for
students to learn about work is physically located out of the way from daily school traffic, often in areas occupied by final year students. This can be intimidating to younger students and sends a message to the wider school population that thinking about work happens towards the end of schooling. Any chance for students (arguably at any age) to see the possibilities for what lies beyond schooling can be valuable, and yet this is often deferred until subject-area pathways have already been determined. Careers advisers themselves may lack a wider awareness and experience of the current workforce and assume the demanding role alongside regular teaching duties. The work of advisers is typically internally focused and based within schools, delimiting opportunities for students to see what worlds of work look like. It is here that non-school actors such as not-for-profits and business could play a greater role. They can provide practical and relevant advice and experience to students and teachers. That schools could benefit from external partners is not confined to careers education, and there are enormous possibilities and benefits to developing education ecologies in which external actors can provide rich opportunities to improve youth transitions to contemporary working life.
Ten Recommendations

The argument here for change should be tempered by the many – and too often unrecognised – positive achievements of Victoria’s education system. At the systemic level there have been some solid gains during the last decade, particularly in educational participation as one critical means of improving opportunities and life chances of young people. At a national level, school retention rates have reached the highest level ever recorded. The evidence continues to affirm the benefits of completing Year 12 or equivalent. Educational attainment improves the labour market and broader life prospects of young people (Robinson and Lamb, 2012). However, we need to keep asking how relevant teaching, learning and schooling is to contemporary economies and society, and how educators can best prepare young people for working life in the 21st century.

Recommendation 1: Develop adversity capital in young Victorians

Adversity capital and associated 21st century skills outlined in this submission need to be taught more explicitly in schools. Schools routinely promote certain graduate attributes, which invariably feature some soft skills and competencies that are taught implicitly but, arguably, more systematic and explicit efforts are needed.

Recommendation 2: Reimagine careers education for young Victorians for the gig economy

The P2P or gig economy presents additional challenges to young people who may not know their rights, risks and responsibilities when undertaking work in the new economy. Part of adversity capital involves developing a critical mind-set that is aware of the challenges and opportunities for work. The major themes of this submission point to a possible reimagining of career education in general, one that places centrality on practical experiences of working life and its immense possibilities.

Recommendation 3: Connect students to working life in more explicit and meaningful ways

Part of these efforts is to connect students to worlds of work in more extensive, embedded and meaningful ways. Through these connections, young people need to be encouraged to harness the necessary soft skills and literacies, actively, throughout school and other learning contexts. Just as importantly, they should foster meaningful connections between these contexts inside and outside of school. Schools and other education institutions could better facilitate connections with experiential learning, resources and knowledge of worlds of work beyond the school gates. Partnerships with business and not-for-profit organisations are one way of providing more direct links. There is a diverse range of programs, organisations and individuals seeking to develop soft skills, although they generally operate across a range of locations, and often in isolation from each other. Some work within the existing curriculum frameworks (the International Baccalaureate’s Personal Project is a good example), while others provide alternative education programs.

Recommendation 4: Do not reinvent the wheel - draw from existing approaches and networks

Non-governmental organisations are doing some important work to develop approaches that integrate support with soft skills, vocational training and work experience, aimed at highly disadvantaged groups. Examples of these types of approaches are also undertaken by many individual schools and recognised in some policy. For example, in its 2010 report, Building Stronger Pathways for Young Aboriginal People, the Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs recommended a number of measures to improve retention and attainment, including:

- bringing the world of work through the school gate;
- developing partnerships between the private sector, philanthropic organisations and the Aboriginal community;
- offering enhanced career advice and managing Individual Pathway Plans from Year 7;
- targeting Aboriginal students using sport, art and culture;
- providing mentors and role models; and
In addition, with governments seriously considering greater corporate involvement in public schools, opportunities for such participation could better equip young people for working life. The development of essential literacies and competencies through these connections could improve their capacity to navigate changing worlds of work and life in general.

Given the value of authentic hands-on learning, in what ways can we embed opportunities for hands-on learning of these skills through meaningful and sustainable community and industry partnerships? Schools could engage more explicitly with developing these skills and providing opportunities for teaching and learning in the community, with industry and within the world at large.

**Recommendation 5: Invest in educators**

We also need to keep deepening and extending professional dialogue between teachers, school leaders and other non-teaching professional communities to connect their work to the wider working world.

**Recommendation 6: Think beyond the school gates**

While schooling tends to concentrate on learning within classroom settings, there are potential benefits to taking a wider view of learning that takes place formally, informally and non-formally beyond the school gates. In addition, schooling tends to focus on getting students to completion of Year 12 or equivalent – which, as suggested above, is rightly so – but arguably more attention is needed to, and aligned with, what happens after school. Preparing young people for life post-school is all the more significant as the world of work for young people is changing in relation to previous generations. Where some schools are doing this well, we need to find ways of making good practice, common practice.

This submission has deliberately focused on how schools prepare young people for fluid and uncertain worlds of work, but this, of course, is only one purpose of education, amongst many public and personal benefits. The need to develop well-rounded, critical and creative thinkers becomes all the more important to enable young people to navigate uncertainty and change as well as critique it, challenge it and, where necessary, develop alternatives. Critical thinking is a key component of adversity capital.

**Recommendation 7: Join the dots between school and work**

It is suggested in this submission that the changes discussed urge reflection on educational responses at the student level and in the ways that schools engage the complex social and economic ecologies in which they are situated. In particular, this submission urges greater consideration of how best to align education and training to the contemporary labour market. In a labour market that not only pays for what young people know, but what they can do with what they know (Schleicher, 2013), the development of necessary skills, dispositions and competencies sometimes arises from places that some may find surprising. Johanna Wyn, one of the researchers on a major longitudinal study of Australian youth, has suggested that ‘the graduates most likely to be in full-time work by the age of 27 are those who have done an arts degree’, probably because they can ‘think outside the box’ (Ting, 2015).

Teachers, educational leaders, government, business and third-sector organisations working to support young people can play an important role in ensuring that the development of these skills is embedded in all parts of teaching and learning, and in ways that purposefully engage students and school staff in a synchronous partnership. The challenge for educators is to develop these 21st century skills and competencies in potentially innovative ways that connect meaningfully with the current and future lives of young people. Therein lies two challenges. To assure this, young people need to be aware of the nature of change and the consequent demands these conditions make on their transferable skill sets. Educators, too, need to be aware of these and be accountable for their development and demonstration among their students through innovative and purposeful teaching and learning.
Recommendation 8: Strengthen cohesive pathways to work

Another way that Victoria can join the dots is to improve non-university pathways to work. The OECD (2016) report cited earlier in this paper rightly suggests continued examination of the educational and training pathways available to young people post school. Importantly, the report suggests further establishing vocational education and training (VET) as an appealing educational pathway. Again this is a long-term challenge, and one whose barriers are, in part, entrenched in seemingly widespread cultural norms about preferred avenues post school. While systems that offer early streaming into non-university pathways, such as in Germany, are sometimes viewed with scepticism (and not without some justification), it is useful to remember that there is a social expectation or high valuation placed by many Australians towards one pathway: university. In 2014, while around 16% of Australians aged 20-24 had a bachelor-level qualification or higher, a greater proportion of young people (29%) had lower and higher level VET qualifications. But the provision side of training has been subject to criticism following the news that private providers have misled disadvantaged students about fees, while sometimes offering inappropriate training for long-term unemployed people with high needs. More needs to be done not only to make VET more appealing, but to support what is an often fragmented sector lacking consistent long-term policy and resources.

Recommendation 9: Jobs need to be there at the end

Efforts to develop 21st century skills and adversity capital may be useful to navigate contemporary seas of working life, but desirable work needs to be available at the end. Across the OECD, the majority of the jobs growth since the 1990s has been in roles that are temporary, part-time or self-employed. A corollary of these recommendations is a need to maintain protective mechanisms in the workforce and support the continued creation of jobs.

Recommendation 10: Responses need to be evidence-based

This submission has focused mostly on recent conceptual thinking. Any steps forward to engage young Victorians in education and work to boost productivity must be informed by evidence. Despite the widespread recognition of the need to use evidence-based approaches across policy and practice there is a striking lack of research into evidence use and the impact of reforms through evaluation in education systems throughout the world. A review published in 2015 by the OECD, for example, looked at 450 reforms carried out by the OECD’s 34 member countries between 2008 and 2014 and found that since 2008 only one in 10 education reforms were analysed by governments for the impact they had on students in schools (OECD, 2015). Two reasons why so few are evaluated for impact are the lengthy trajectories of reforms and complexity of measuring their educational outcomes (Ware, 2015). There is also a paucity of research on evidence-informed practice from the perspective of evidence-informed policy-making. There is a need to better understand and improve evidence-use by practitioners – from policy-makers to teachers, and other actors within the Victorian education ecology.

In May 2017, the Productivity Commission released its final report to inform policy development and improve education outcomes in early childhood and school education, which affirmed the need for better use of evidence to influence practice in education. One of their proposals was for existing data to ‘be collected and used more effectively’. Recent research in collaboration with the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) explored their use of evidence in policy development (Rickinson et al, 2017). The findings suggest a need to recognise that evidence comes in many different forms and can be used in a variety ways. The use of evidence is itself a highly skilled activity, and these skills need to be deliberately harnessed and developed. Researchers, not-for-profit organisations and other actors are seeking to better understand evidence use, such as Social Ventures' Australia’s Evidence for Learning, the William T Grant Foundation in the US and the Education Endowment Foundation in the UK. Building on these resources networks could improve delivery of services to youth at risk as identified in the Discussion Paper. Collectively, the kinds of approaches explored in this submission suggest that a combination
of adequately resourced systemic responses and a shift in thinking about how and where learning takes place are not foreign to education systems. However, more needs to be done to recognise, measure and respond to the profound challenges facing young people’s transitions into the contemporary global economy.
Endnotes
1. International Labour Organisation
2. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
3. Australian Council of Trade Unions
4. National Assessment Program – Information and Communication Technology
5. Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
6. Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Queensland
References


Samms, J (2010) Building Stronger Pathways for Young Aboriginal People, Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs, Department of Planning and Community Development, Canberra.


