

Generation next: Where to for Australia's young people?

November 15 2012, by Lucas Walsh

A [new report shows](#) that one in four young Australians are not fully engaged in employment or training despite government targets aiming to get more young people qualified or into a job.

But compared to many other countries, Australia's young population has been shielded from the worst of the [global financial crisis](#).

In Greece, [youth unemployment](#) is at 53 per cent, and 55 per cent in Spain. [Some reports](#) suggest that there is a flight of young people from Spain seeking opportunities to work.

The potential damage to the social and economic fabric of these countries is significant. The [political implications](#) are already evident in widespread protests and unrest.

While unemployment levels in Australia are lower by comparison, there are other trends that should be cause for concern, including ones that challenge our assumptions about how young Australians are faring in their transitions from school to work, further study and training.

Figures from the 2012 edition of [How Young People Are Faring](#) published by The Foundation for Young Australians show that on the upside we see more young people participating in education.

This research by Lyn Robinson and Stephen Lamb from the University of Melbourne shows levels of school retention to Year 12 reaching an all-

time high (79 per cent). Furthermore, university-level attainment among 24-35 year-olds increased from 24 to 35 per cent between 2001 and 2011.

But if we look back at a range of data over the last few decades, we see declining numbers of teenagers in full-[time jobs](#).

Since 2008, the number of teenagers in full-time jobs has fallen from just under 270,000 to about 200,000 in 2012. In 2012 a quarter of 18-19 year olds were not in full-time study or work.

Many are seeking full-time work but can't get it. The [labour market](#) has become more fluid, with rates of part-time employment increasing significantly – in the case of teenagers this rate has tripled since the mid-1980s.

Unemployment amongst teenagers (15-19) is about three times higher than for all adults in Australia.

But in labour force terms, the game has certainly changed with both the mining boom (in which high demand for labour in the resource sector will probably slow following the peak in investment) and the orientation towards service industries and the knowledge economy. Overlaying this is the greater fluidity of the workforce.

After decades of uninterrupted economic growth, does prosperity need to be accompanied by insecurity, and if so, are we best preparing young people for the pathways ahead?

At a time when there is great emphasis on defining educational success according to certain measures (eg using NAPLAN data), we need to look at whether we are fostering the relevant skills for contemporary working life beyond "the basics" of numeracy and literacy.

These range from problem solving and communication skills, to digital and cultural competencies that will be so important to Australia's engagement with the region in the Asian century. The need for these skills has been acknowledged as important, but much of the work on this during last 15 years has been focused on adults, rather than young people.

While literacy and numeracy remain crucial, as important but undervalued are oracy, digital literacy and the learning of languages other than English. The Asian White Paper has rightly suggested that far more needs to be done.

In addition, time and time again young people are telling us that they want more hands-on learning and practical experience. They want to connect their learning to life.

Opportunities for practical experience outside the classroom or lecture theatre are by no means abundant and the ways we try to get young people into work need closer examination. We need to ensure that career advice and the ongoing professional development of teachers need to be aligned with changing environments of learning and labour.

The recent [COAG Reform Council](#) report cited above shows that access to career advisers at school can help with successful transitions. But we need to be doing more at both local and national levels.

In a society in which the majority of young people expect information and communications technologies to be infused in all aspects of their lives, can the same be said of their teachers and employers?

For example, too many teachers continue to struggle to work easily with digital media and "keep up" with their transformational impact.

These skills are important because the pathways that young people tread are changing. The events that usually mark the path towards adulthood are happening later in life, including when and if young people start families, purchase homes and get full-time stable work.

But this is not necessarily by choice.

The current housing market, for example, deters many new entrants. Many young people have part-time jobs but want to work more or be in more satisfying work.

The demands for greater flexibility in working life are not necessarily a problem per se for some young people, but it can impact on other aspects of life.

In his research on the Life-Patterns Project, Dan Woodman describes how some young people employed in retail and hospitality (huge employers of young people) that have to work a variety of hours, including late or irregular shifts, experience challenges in developing and maintaining stable and intimate relationships.

Many can maintain a social life through Facebook to connect with friends at irregular hours or at short notice. But working to an unplanned work schedule or at short notice makes it difficult to plan for things as elementary as a regular meal with family or the occasional birthday.

For others, obtaining a mortgage is tough because they do not have a stable income to qualify for a loan. As the markers of maturity, transition and security are reconfigured and pushed later in life, these challenges have potentially profound implications for work, family and social wellbeing as the rhythm of life, work and family changes.

Another challenge lies in developing skills to match economic need.

Predicting what the labour force will look like is extremely difficult. Just look at the ways in which technology has changed the workplace in the last decade or so.

But when asked to identify what the nature of workforce-readiness will look like in a generation, some people in business struggle to do so, while in the same breath suggesting that young people are ill-prepared for worlds of work.

At a fundamental level, these trends suggest that we need to rethink how we define successful transitions from school to work and further study.

And our conventional pathways from school to the life beyond rely on industrial models of education. This may have been fine a hundred years ago, but with an increasingly post-industrial society, preparing young people requires new approaches.

It's time to re-define these models and equip [young people](#) with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to learn and adapt to the challenges of this new world of work and education.

Provided by Monash University

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