

# A foot in both camps: School students and workplaces

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## Abstract

*It is now uncommon for young people to leave school without having had experience in workplaces. Sometimes such experience is arranged by schools - through work experience, structured work placements or other programs. Increasingly young people are also getting workplace experience as part-time student workers. This experience may be quite extensive. A research project funded by the National Research and Evaluation Committee has been examining the different types of learning experienced by students in the different modes of experiencing the workplace. The project also examined the question of whether certain students find access to such experiences more difficult than others do.*

*These questions are of vital importance because workplace experience assists young people in their transition from school to full-time work; and also because the foundations for lifelong learning through work may be set down in early workplace experiences. It is therefore essential to have some understanding of the nature, extent and methods of workplace learning for school students. This paper presents the findings related to the extent and nature of school students' learning in the workplace, a significant proportion of the project.*

## Introduction

An important development in the post-compulsory education system has been an increased involvement of secondary school students in learning in workplaces both in work experience and vocational placements in VET in Schools programs. In addition, an increasing number of school students are now in formal paid employment, including around 4000 in employment as part-time apprentices and trainees (MCEETYA, 2000). These changes encourage debates including: the suitability of school students having paid work; the desirability of recognition for the skills gained in paid work; inequities of access to all types of workplace experiences, and whether work experience and placements encourage an uncritical acceptance of workplace values which need to be challenged. However there has been little explicit examination of what students learn in workplaces and how they learn it. This paper gives some of the results of an NREC-funded project which examines the extent and nature of learning which students in years 10, 11 and 12 gain from their experiences in workplaces (Smith & Green, forthcoming). Relevant literature will be examined briefly as well as key findings from a survey which was carried out among students from Years 10, 11 and 12 in thirteen schools and the results of follow up focus groups and interviews with students, teachers and employers in NSW and South Australia.

## Literature review

### a. Part-time work

The proportion of school students who work part-time is generally agreed to be increasing, although the extent of student working is unclear. Somewhere between 30% and 50% of Australian school children of working age are generally believed to have formal part-time work (ABS, 1997<sup>1</sup>; Robinson, 1999, Wooden, 1998; Yap, 1998). Much of the literature on student-working (especially the American literature) revolves around whether it is a 'good thing' (Hotchkiss, 1986; Hull, 1999) or a 'bad thing' (Greenberger, 1988). Robinson (1999) and others stress the link between student working and subsequent success in finding full-time work, although it is not clear that one causes the other. A

<sup>1</sup> ABS, The Labour Force, 6203.0

small number of writers have been concerned about equity of access to part-time work (Griffin, 1985; Yap, 1998).

There has been little research on training and learning among student workers. It is usually agreed that student working encourages the development of general, transferable skills (Hull, 1999). However there has been little attention paid to how these, or other, skills are actually learned.

#### b. Work experience and vocational placements

It is often difficult to untangle work experience from structured work placements in the literature, with the terms having different meanings in different educational systems. Work experience is generally used to refer to the typical 'finding out about work' week undertaken by Australian students in years 10 or 11 (Smith & Harris, forthcoming). During the late 1980s and early 1990s when training reform meant that skills development rather than work familiarisation became more favourably regarded (Sweet, 1995) work experience became the Cinderella of student workplace experiences. Vocational placements are increasingly common now that the vast majority of Australian schools offer VET in schools programs. In 2000, 90% of Australian schools offered such programs, involving over 130,000 students (MCEETYA, 2000). However not all VET programs require placements (MCEETYA, 2000).

The major themes in the literature appear to be:

- 'enthusiastic' literature extolling the virtues of work placements (e.g., Frost, 2000);
- concern with role of employers and availability of placements (e.g., Figgis, 1998a; Miles Morgan Australia, 1998; Misko, 1998; Smith & Smith, 1996);
- resourcing issues including staff development of school teachers (eg Keating & Zbar, 1994; Ryan, 1997; Sweet, 1995);
- a large amount of literature on 'how to' administer programs (e.g., Misko, 2000);
- critical literature (e.g., Shilling, 1989; Wellington, 1992; Petherbridge, 1997); and
- scoping literature (e.g., Ainley & Fleming, 1995 & 1997; Malley, Robinson, Keating, Hawke, forthcoming).

There is relatively little literature on the learning outcomes of either work experience or work placements. Athanasou (1996, p. 8) points out that 'school-industry programs' may have 'positive experiential by-products', as often cited in the 'enthusiastic' literature, but that more work needs to be put into determining the *intended* consequences of such programs. Three studies which did investigate learning are those by Figgis (1998b) in Australia, Stasz & Kaganoff (1997) in the US and Petherbridge (1997) in the UK.

#### c. Outstanding issues from the literature

The literature review revealed the following major points which raised implications for the current study.

- i) *There is little literature about student-workers in Australia, and the data from the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) are dated (1992). A scoping study to establish the current extent and nature of part-time work for school students is needed.*
- ii) *There is a large body of literature, both Australian and overseas, on work experience and work placements, but much of it falls either into the 'scoping' category or the 'enthusiastic' category. There has been relatively little empirical investigation of what school students actually learn in workplaces.*
- iii) *There is some concern over equity of access to part-time work and to work experience and placements, but there is little empirical research in this area.*
- iv) *Several writers allude to the superiority of placements compared with traditional work experience, but more exploration of the differences is needed.*
- v) *There is still some confusion over the outcomes intended from both work experience and structured work placements.*

- vi) *There is growing interest in capturing the learning from part-time working, although evidence suggests that policy-makers are more interested in this than students. (Billett, 1998; MCEETYA, 2000)*

### **Interviews with key stakeholders**

At the start of the research process, interviews were held with policy makers, employers and researchers in the area. These interviews confirmed many of the findings from the literature review. Many key stakeholders were struggling with implementation issues such as funding, staffing, availability of both work experience and vocational placements and equity issues. Learning, when discussed, was seen as very different from school-based learning. Stakeholders believed VET programs may offer students the opportunity to excel with alternative curriculum and different experiences. Various factors have caused both State and Commonwealth to increase the offering of VET subjects in senior school and include these subjects in senior certificates.

### **Survey method**

The project steering committee, stakeholders and officials from DET (NSW) and DETE (SA) assisted in selecting the schools for administration of the survey. The sample of 13 schools represented public and private schools, rural and urban locations, and students from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. At the selected schools, all students in Years 10, 11 and 12 were invited to complete the questionnaire yielding 1,451 useable responses. The response rate was much higher in non-government schools than in government schools, despite their being more of the latter in the sample. The results report on about half from each sector. The survey was administered in the second semester, when many students in Year 12 were unfortunately not available because of HSC (NSW) and SACE (SA) studies.

The survey instrument contained five parts: personal information; overview of the student's experiences in workplaces; detailed questions about work experience; detailed questions about one paid job; detailed questions about one structured work placement and learning and training questions. Students were asked to compare the different types of experiences, and this was investigated further in the case studies.

### **Case study method**

After the survey, nine case studies were undertaken to provide qualitative data. Five were held in schools in NSW and SA. In each school, one focus group consisted of 8 – 10 students who had participated in at least two workplace activities out of the three: work experience, vocational placements and paid work. A second group in each school was made up of VET teachers, careers adviser and the Principal or their nominated representative. Case studies were all in public schools to increase the representation of public schools in the project. Because it was difficult to access Year 12 students during the course of the case studies, as they were carried out in the second half of the academic year, a special focus group of year 12 students was also convened. Four groups of employers were also interviewed. A particular effort was made to incorporate discussion of vocational placements in this qualitative phase of the research since the survey had produced only a limited response from students undertaking placements.

### **Findings from the project**

This paper focuses on the project's first two research questions.

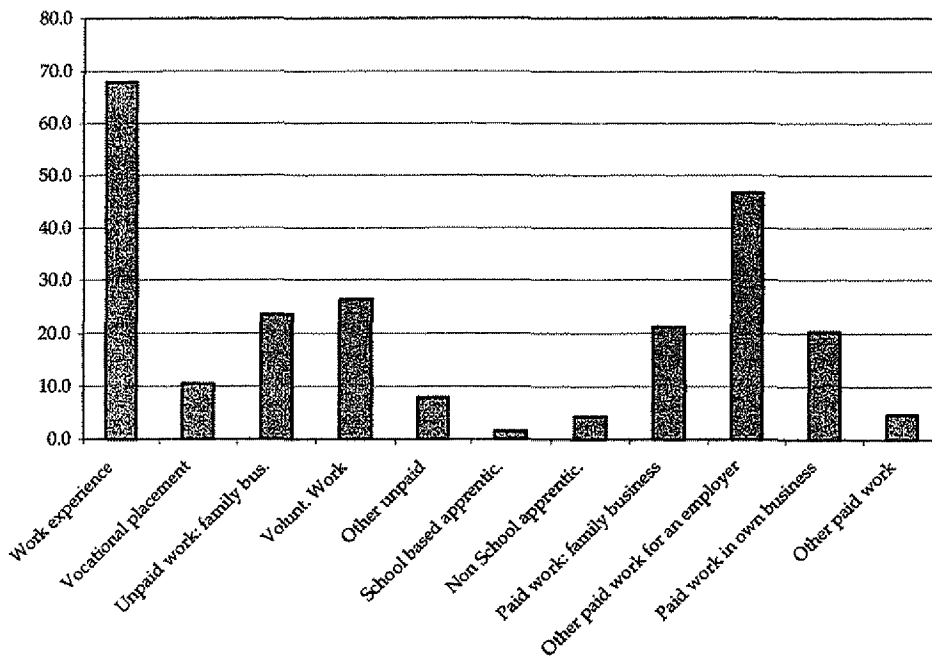
*'What is the extent and nature of the way in which Years 10, 11 and 12 school students experience the workplace?'*

*What is the nature and relative importance of learning gained from these experiences?'*

## The extent and nature of the way in which Years 10, 11 and 12 school students experience the workplace

The paper can only present a selection from the huge amount of data gathered in the survey. As the process has revealed a dearth of information on learning from work for school students, this takes priority. Qualitative data from the focus group interviews are included. The mode of experiencing the workplace by school students in Years 10 – 12 is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Involvement in different modes of experiencing the workplace (% of all students)



The results show that just over two-thirds of the respondents had done work experience, but only 10.5% had done vocational placements. There were very small numbers involved in part-time apprenticeships and traineeships, with more of these students arranging their own (4.4%) than participating in schools-based programs (1.6%). Almost half (46.7%) of the students had 'ordinary' part-time work for an employer and one-fifth had their 'own business', which appeared predominantly, but not exclusively, to be babysitting. These data were also analysed by equity groups.

The case studies indicated that most school students in Years 10 to 12 had a considerable amount of workplace activity.<sup>2</sup> Work experience was almost universal in the schools in the case studies; vocational placements were, of course, only undertaken by students who had selected VET courses. Paid work was less universal; generally, schools estimated that around half of students of working age had jobs, as was found in the data.

Table 1 shows the industry area<sup>3</sup> in which students' workplace activities took place. The students were asked to answer for their *longest-lasting* period of work experience, paid job or vocational placement. Some students had difficulty allocating their responses to an industry area; where possible, researchers made appropriate allocations during the data entry process.

<sup>2</sup> Work experience (in some schools) and vocational placements (in most schools) may not be available until Year 11.

<sup>3</sup> The industry areas were slightly adapted from ANZIC codes.

Table 1: Industry area of workplace activities

	Work experience		Paid work		Vocational placement	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Farming, forestry, fishing, mining	31	3.0%	38	5.1%	1	1.4%
Manufacturing	84	8.2%	24	3.2%	16	21.6%
Building including electrical & plumbing	45	4.4%	14	1.9%	7	9.5%
Retailing	183	17.9%	237	31.7%	9	12.2%
Fast foods, cafes, or restaurants	71	6.9%	233	31.2%	27	36.5%
Cultural, recreational or sporting	63	6.2%	45	6.0%	-	-
Banking / real estate / insurance	34	3.3%	6	.8%	-	-
Govt admin' including education & defence	141	13.8%	3	.4%	5	6.8%
Health, personal & community services (including child care)	203	19.9%	29	3.9%	5	6.8%
Communications / media / computing	118	11.5%	16	2.1%	1	1.4%
Babysitting	N/a	N/a	51	6.8%	N/a	N/a
Newspaper delivery	N/a	N/a	22	2.9%	N/a	N/a
Other	49	4.8%	29	3.9%	3	4.1%
Total	1022	100.0%	747	100.0%	74	100.0%

There were clear differences between paid work and work experience. As might be expected, 62.9% of paid student-workers worked in retail or fast food outlets, cafes and restaurants, while only 24.8% of work experience students were in those industries. Work experience placements were far more likely than paid work to be in 'career'-type industries such as education, health, personal and community services. These are industries which do not offer much opportunity for part-time teenage employment. Vocational placements showed a different pattern again. The relatively small number of placement students were clustered in certain industry areas. Retail and fast food/cafes/restaurants covered 48.9% of students so the industry distribution was not unlike paid work.

Many of the employers in the focus groups and interviews had well-developed programs for work experience and vocational placements, and took large numbers of students each year<sup>4</sup>. These employers obviously spent much time liaising with schools and local placement coordinators organising programs for students. One employer commented that block periods for vocational placements would enable her to fit in more work experience students in the year, as students on one day a week placements meant those weeks were not available for work experience. She was clearly intent on being as accommodating as possible to students wishing to experience workplaces. In general the employers displayed great willingness to help young people and their schools and derived satisfaction, in most cases more satisfaction from vocational placements than from work experience.

The survey also examined how much responsibility students had in their experiences of work. Paid work offered the greatest opportunities for responsibility, which could simply be related to the length of time spent in that job. Work placement offered more opportunity than work experience for responsibility, but still below paid work. While the fact that some students were only allowed to observe during work experience is to be regretted, the percentage of 4.5% is lower than some commentators have suggested. The quality of what was observed is also of some importance; one student on work experience observed a woman giving birth, which is obviously a profound and important learning experience.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that in many cases employers had been recommended to the researchers by schools or education departments and hence may have been examples of 'good practice' host employers.

Section 3 of the questionnaire included general questions concerning paid work. These related to how the students found out about their job; why they were working; their employment arrangements; issues about fitting in their school work around their job. Informal methods of job seeking were the major means of finding work – 30.9% found their jobs through a family member, 21.5% through a friend; and 20.6% approached the employer directly. Only 6.9% saw the job advertised in the newspaper; 1.7% on a notice board; 4.9% found out about the job through the school and 13.4% used 'other' means of finding out about the job. The most important reason for seeking the job was overwhelmingly to get spending money: 57.6% cited this reason, 13.1% citing 'general experience of work' as the most important, and 9.0% 'to be more independent'. A further 9.3% of students worked mainly for money for living expenses, 4.2% because they would enjoy it and 4.0% to get specific experience in an industry they thought they might work in later.

The case studies showed that schools, local coordinators and employers displayed great commitment to organising work experience and vocational placements for school students. Work experience was an almost universal part of school students' curriculum, with only special circumstances preventing participation. Rural schools appear to offer a more flexible and tailor-made approach to students in relation to work experience and vocational placements. This may relate to perceived difficulties in school-to-work transition and, related to this, to perceived difficulties in finding part-time jobs to gain experience of the workplace. In fact, the rural students did not seem to have a lower participation in paid work than the metropolitan students. Some students committed a great deal of time to their part-time jobs while others' participation was only sporadic. Student workers were seen as an integral part of many companies' work forces but in general no special attention was paid to them compared with adult workers.

Employers had comments and criticisms about the way work experience and vocational placements were organised by the schools. They wanted school students to be better prepared, and generally felt that the presence of a third party (for instance Compact coordinators in NSW) assisted students in their preparation and enabled better matching of students to placements. Several of the employers also employed part-time student workers but did not appear to see much link between this and other programs with school students.

## The nature and relative importance of learning gained from these experiences

### What students learned

The first aspect to consider is what the students learned in their time in the workplace. Tables 2 and 3 report on students' perceptions of their generic and 'employability' skills.<sup>5</sup>

Table 2: 'Did you develop the following general skills in this period of work experience?'  
(by work experience and paid work)

	A lot		Some		A bit		Not at all	
	Work exp	Paid work	Work exp	Paid work	Work exp	Paid work	Work exp	Paid work
Communication/writing	7.4%	13.0%	21.7%	15.2%	19.0%	18.1%	51.8%	54%
Verbal communication	43.9%	63.8%	31.8%	20.8%	18.0%	9.9%	6.4%	5.5%
Planning & organising	22.3%	34.0%	35.8%	35.5%	25.6%	20.1%	16.4%	10%
Working in teams	34.3%	47.5%	28.8%	25.8%	20.9%	13.4%	16.0%	13%
Using your initiative	37.9%	56.2%	34.7%	27.2%	17.9%	11.6%	9.5%	5.0%
Solving problems	23.6%	35.7%	35.9%	32.9%	23.7%	21.2%	16.9%	10%
How to behave at work	46.9%	57.5%	29.0%	22.5%	14.3%	10.3%	9.7%	9.7%

<sup>5</sup> The list of skills in the survey combined Mayer Key Competencies (AEC/MOVEET, 1993) and 'employability skills' in Sections 3, 4 and 5 of the questionnaire.

Table 3: 'Did you develop the following general skills in this period of work experience?'  
(by work placement)

	A lot	Some	A bit	Not at all
	%	%	%	%
Communication/writing	22.5%	21.1%	26.8%	29.6%
Verbal communication	50.0%	34.7%	9.7%	5.6%
Planning & organising	30.0%	42.9%	12.9%	14.3%
Working in teams	47.9%	28.8%	12.3%	11.0%
Using your initiative	34.7%	40.3%	18.1%	6.9%
Solving problems	24.7%	34.2%	21.9%	19.2%
How to behave at work	47.2%	22.2%	20.8%	9.7%

The results show that similar types of generic skills were developed in the three types of workplace activity, with 'behaving at work', 'verbal communication' and 'using your initiative' all scoring fairly highly, and 'written communication' scoring the lowest. Paid work and vocational placements both had verbal communication as the highest-scoring generic skill, while 'how to behave at work' was equal first for work experience. Overall, paid work appeared to be the most effective in developing generic skills, with vocational placements not far behind. The findings represented in Tables 2 and 3 were used to create a generic skills index for each young person.<sup>6</sup> The mean generic skills indices for each type of workplace activity were as follows:

work experience	12.33
paid work	13.98
vocational placements	13.81

Students were also asked about the 'special skills' involved in the 'jobs' they did. This gave some insight into the type of work they were doing. This was an open-ended question and responses were diverse, but some common responses were gathered together into categories during data analysis.

Table 4: Special skills involved in the three types of workplace activities

	Work experience special skills	Paid work special skills	Structured work placement special skills
Communication skills	10.5%	5.4%	8.9%
Dealing with customers	16.7%	48.8%	17.8%
Dealing with clients	4.5%	4.7%	n/a
Displaying patience	3.5%	2.3%	n/a
Operating a cash register	1.0%	4.4%	4.4%
Operating a computer	18.4%	5.9%	15.6%
Operating other	6.3%	4.1%	11.1%
Other	39.1%	24.3%	42.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Paid work involved more students in face to face contact with the public than was the case with students in work placements and work experience. As the table shows, dealing with customers is the priority for students in paid work. When students were asked how well they learned their special

<sup>6</sup> This was calculated by allocating a weighting from student responses – eg 'they learned a lot' was given a weighting of 3 down to 'they learned a bit' at a weighting of 1. This was then multiplied by the 3 types of workplace activities, giving a possible range of 27 to 0.

skills, vocational placement and paid student workers gave approximately the same results. Work experience was significantly lower.

### How they learned

The focus now moves from what students learned to analysing how they learned in the workplace. The survey instrument gave students a number of options about how people learn at work and asked them to pick the three most important for them in the job or experience which they were discussing then rank them in order of importance. Table 5 shows the responses for the first most important only.

Table 5: Most important way in which students learned in their workplace activities

	Work experience	Paid work	Work placement
Watching others	25.0%	19.1%	23.2%
Being shown by trainer or supervisor	35.9%	41.8%	44.9%
Being shown by fellow worker(s)	15.2%	14.9%	15.9%
Reading company manuals	.5%	1.7%	
Doing an off the job course	1.3%	1.9%	1.4%
Asking questions of a supervisor	9.2%	5.6%	4.3%
Asking questions of a fellow-worker	4.9%	3.6%	1.4%
Trial and error ('having a go')	4.5%	6.4%	5.8%
Other	.7%	1.2%	
I knew how to do it already from ...	2.7%	3.9%	2.9%

### Links between school and work

Students were asked whether they discussed their workplace activities at school, either in class time or informally with friends. As might be expected, since vocational placements were connected with a school course, placement experiences were discussed more in class time than work experience or paid work. Vocational placements were also discussed with friends more. Paid work was the least likely to be discussed in class time, with over two-thirds of respondents saying that they never talked about their work in class, and over a quarter never discussing their work with friends.

Students were asked how much their workplace activities had helped them at school. Placement students were asked explicitly about links between their placement and the related course. The data showed close linkages between the two, with a clear indication that the schoolwork helped with the workplace experience more than vice versa. Students were also asked how much their workplace activities had helped them at school more generally. Paid work appeared to be the least help in schoolwork. This could relate to the lack of 'processing' of paid work back in school. However even with paid work, a quarter of students said that their paid jobs had helped them 'a lot' or 'some' at school. Vocational placements came out top with 42.9% saying their placement had helped them 'a lot' or 'some' compared with 30.1% for work experience. Around two out of three students felt work experience was useful despite the fact that they also had a paid job.

In the student focus group interviews, students most often reported being shown by 'the boss' – a manager or supervisor - and by watching other workers. Watching another worker perform a task while explaining it was felt to be a useful learning strategy. An advantage of workplace learning, as opposed to school learning, was that it was generally one-to-one. One student noted that a co-worker could give individual attention and ensure understanding, whereas at school a teacher had to deal with other students simultaneously. The students frequently learned by teaching themselves. Other learning strategies included: trying jobs in different sections or departments, reading company



manuals, using a checklist, and formal training sessions. Employers noted that students asked questions, observed other workers, and modelled themselves on existing workers. Learning in the workplace was seen as different from learning at school. Many students appeared to prefer being in the workplace to being at school. Not all did, however, and some students reported increased motivation in schoolwork after periods in the workplace. This was variously because they began to have a clearer idea of what they wanted to do and how school could help them reach their goals, or because they learned that workplaces were hostile environments compared with school and thus appreciated school more.

## Conclusion

Generally, students, school staff and employers saw most experiences in the work force in a very positive way. Stakeholders believed that many positive outcomes result from the experience of work for many students while at school. Analysis of the data, found:

- around 60% of school students have had formal paid work;
- without including paid work in family businesses, this figure drops to 50.1%;
- a significant proportion of school students have paid or unpaid work in family businesses (32.6% in all);
- most school students (almost 70%) have done work experience, and both teachers and students saw value in this experience;
- the industries in which students have paid work and vocational placements tend to be different from those where students have work experience opportunities;
- schools, VET coordinators and employers are enthusiastic about school students participating in work placements as part of schooling;
- communication skills and finding out what workplaces are really like are the most important aspects of learning in the workplace;
- students reported that they learned much more in paid work and vocational placements than in work experience; and
- students learned experientially, by watching others and by being shown individually by a trainer or co-worker.

It was evident that students were not very focused on learning in workplaces in any of the three forms of workplace activity. In the focus group interviews, they had to be prompted to think in terms of learning. However, once prompted, some quite perceptive comments were made; for example one student noted the difference between 'people skills' as understood by her fast-food employer and the dentist with whom she did work experience. All of the participants – students, teachers and employers alike – paid less attention to learning in paid work than in work experience or vocational placements, although the period of training was longer in paid work.

When considering the policy framework in which work experience and vocational placements are constructed, the arrangements and opportunities for such vary remarkably. The practical arrangements of implementation occupy much of the energy and time of school staff. The unprecedented explosion of students taking up VET opportunities as part of their senior schooling has led to a focus on the pragmatics and on programs. Links between school and work, and the intended outcomes of such programs, need to be clarified and made explicit to students and host employers. However, all forms of experience in the workplace offer possible opportunities for students to develop their potential beyond school, which is particularly important for those students who fail to shine within the school system.

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