

Gauging the Value of Education for Disenfranchised Youth

Flexible Learning Options

Sue McGinty, Kimberley Wilson,
Joseph Thomas and
Brian Lewthwaite (Eds.)



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Gauging the Value of Education for Disenfranchised Youth

INNOVATIONS AND CONTROVERSIES: INTERROGATING EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Volume 7

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- policy
- higher education
- curriculum, pedagogies and assessment
- methodology and theory
- creative industries

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DALE MURRAY

FOREWORD

GAUGING THE VALUE OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING

Like many nations of the developed world, Australia continues to experience significant numbers of young people disenfranchised from education. The reasons for this exodus are a complex mix: a history of colonisation, persistent pockets of community poverty, on-going class struggle and the hegemonic forces of capitalism. Some years ago, a number of like-minded colleagues began conversations that reflected the growth in education service provision for this cohort of young people. In the main, these services identify collectively through their practice of relational, trauma-informed and enquiry-based pedagogy and curricula that share power with young people as a cornerstone to engagement. Comprising some 900 programs supporting 70,000 young people across the nation, these services provide excellent models of innovative educational engagement. In light of their growing scope, funding and compliance bodies are increasingly raising questions regarding the economic value of these services to community.

In 2012, I had been fortunate to visit Canada, the US and the UK on a Churchill Fellowship. Researching Flexible Learning Options (FLOs) in those countries, I discovered that many providers had completed social return on investment analyses, putting them in a position to evidence the value of these types of educational responses. To my knowledge, no such research had been undertaken nationally in Australia.

Thus began our journey to gauge the value of flexible learning options in Australia. Thanks go to Professor Sue McGinty for her insight and leadership when I first approached her with the idea for this research. Sue, as always, seized the challenge and began plotting the way forward. Thanks must also be offered to the excellent research team, Sue McGinty, Brian Lewthwaite, Kitty te Riele, Hurriyet Babacan, Riccardo Welters, George Myconos, Valda Wallace, Kimberley Wilson, Joseph Thomas, Luke Swain and Jyotirmoy Podder. Thanks as well to our partner organisations, Edmund Rice Education Australia—Youth+, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Catholic Education of Western Australia, Northern Territory Government, Victorian Government and Centacare North Queensland, who enthusiastically embraced the project. We also extend our appreciation to the Australian Research Council, who supported our application for this Linkage Project.

The result of this nationwide undertaking provides a deepening epistemology of flexible learning and its value to our community. Although likely significant,

D. MURRAY

public financial returns to educational re-engagement are by no means the only measurement of positive outcomes of FLOs. There are also many so-called ‘soft’ values, including enhanced civic participation, deepening personal agency and community connection. These and other important benefits of FLOs are explored in depth throughout this text.

Finally, to all the young people who participated in the research, thank you. Thank you for re-engaging in education. Thank you for sharing your stories with us. Thank you for the insight you bring to our communities and thank you for fulfilling your potential.

Dale Murray
Director, Youth+ Institute
Edmund Rice Education Australia

SUE MCGINTY

PREFACE

Around 2010, when the Youth+ Flexible Learning Centres were at the height of being established across Australia, I had a conversation with Dale Murray, Director of Edmund Rice Education Australia—Youth+. Dale recounted that a lack of empirical evidence concerning the value of flexible learning options (FLOs) compromised his efforts to convince governments, city councils and private benefactors of the returns on their investments. Such evidence would need to be both qualitative and quantitative. Thus, the seed was sown for our Australian Research Council Linkage Project (LP130100344), “The value of Flexible Learning Options for disenfranchised young people and the Australian community”. This book is among the results of that endeavour.

Engagement in schooling is a key factor in producing equitable social and employment outcomes for all Australian young people. Through the Melbourne Declaration, Australian state and territory governments have committed to greater equity and excellence in schooling with an emphasis on improving outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians, particularly Indigenous youth and those from low socioeconomic circumstances (MCEETYA, 2008). This was reinforced by *The National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions*, which included specific targets to increase young people’s educational participation and attainment (CoAG, 2009), as the consequences of disengagement from education are seen to be significant.

The current political and economic climate has seen growth in both the demand for and provision of FLOs. According to a report commissioned by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, at least 33,000 of Australia’s most severely disenfranchised young people are currently being catered for by FLOs (Te Riele, 2012). On-going research by te Riele suggests the true figure is likely to be at least twice as high. Catering to a diverse clientele across the nation, the flexible learning sector has developed as a broad kaleidoscope of programs concentrated in areas of recognised social, economic and geographical disadvantage. As the sector burgeons, an increasing amount of research has been directed at mapping the extent, nature and reach of flexible learning provision. What remains missing from the research literature is a reliable measure of the impact of flexible learning options in relation to lifetime outcomes for the most disadvantaged groups of young people in Australia.

The primary aim of this research, then, was to determine if the flexible learning intervention has a measurable, discernible impact on individual life trajectories in relation to economic and social outcomes (e.g., employment, welfare dependency, wellbeing, disconnection and disengagement).

The research questions that drove this project were:

1. What life trajectories (and their associated individual and societal outcomes) do disengaged young people traverse in the Australian context?
2. What changes to these life trajectories (and associated changes to individual and societal outcomes) can be expected as a result of participation in Flexible Learning Options?
3. What mechanisms are at work in Flexible Learning Options that facilitate the reshaping of life trajectories of disengaged Australian young people?

There is high demand for quality FLOs to cater for the growing number of young people disengaging from the schooling system (Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011; Te Riele, 2012). Meeting this need is contingent upon government support, which is enhanced by sound evidence of the economic and social benefits of such educational interventions. Prior to this study, there was little empirical data to substantiate and quantify the value of this type of educational intervention for both the students who re-engage and the wider community. While it is a complex task to narrow down the economic and social benefits of student participation in FLOs, requisite financial and societal support of these programs requires evidence of how these programs benefit young people and strengthen Australia's social and economic fabric.

This study utilized a mixed-method approach, with three primary components:

1. A qualitative component examining the impact of FLOs on young people's life experiences (Chapters 3–6);
2. A quantitative component utilising a matching estimators technique (Chapter 7);
3. A social return on investment (SROI) analysis (not included in this volume).

With the support of our research partners—EREA Youth+, Catholic Education of Western Australia; Northern Territory Government; the Brotherhood of St Laurence; the Victorian Government; and Centacare North Queensland—we chose eight FLO sites as case studies according to the following criteria:

- The program supported the attainment of credentialed formal education;
- Attendance was by choice (that is, the FLO did not serve as a behaviour management centre);
- The program's core functions were to educate and support disenfranchised young people aged 12 to 20 years.

As part of the qualitative component, 157 teachers, parents, young people and other staff from the partner sites were interviewed. Of these, 61 were young people. This data formed the basis of the analysis conducted for Chapters 1 and 3–6. The data used for the quantitative analysis is outlined in Chapter 7.

This book is divided into three sections. Part One, comprising the first three chapters, explains the context in which FLOs operate in Australia. In Chapter 1, Kitty te Riele introduces the reader to the young people at the centre of our research. Although mainstream education has not worked for them, they are keen to learn with

Table 1. FLO sites

<i>Name</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Status/governance</i>	<i>Years established</i>	<i>Enrolments (2015)*</i>
Blue Gum	Victoria, outer urban	non-government program	<5	<100
Waratah	Victoria, inner urban	government auspice	<5	<100
Bottle Brush	Victoria, inner urban	non-government school	>5	>300
Acacia	Queensland, regional	non-government	>5	>100
Grevillea	Western Australia, urban	non-government school	>5	<50
Wattle	Western Australia, urban	non-government school	>5	<200
Desert Rose	Northern Territory urban	Government auspice	<5	<50
Sturt Pea	Northern Territory, regional	non-government school	<5	<150

**According to data published on the My School website (2015)*

the assistance of wraparound support services. Many of these young people come from backgrounds of poverty and disenfranchisement. Te Riele then explores the context of Australian policy with regard to keeping young people engaged in schooling. In Chapter 2, Joseph Thomas delves into the neoliberal pushes and pulls driving educational policy in Australia, including a national and international emphasis on standardised assessment. Thomas recounts how these pressures have reinforced disparate educational outcomes, exacerbated socioeconomic divisions and pushed many of the country's most disadvantaged young people to seek refuge in FLOs. In Chapter 3, George Myconos enumerates the defining features of FLO programs, including: an inclusive ethos and corresponding approach to governance; tailored, flexible pedagogy and curriculum; and youth wellbeing and relationship building at the core of operations. Myconos emphasises the pivotal role played by wellbeing support in fostering the stability students require if they are to renew their education.

In Part Two, the authors of Chapters 4-6 analyse the interviews conducted across Australia to unpack the value of flexible learning from the perspectives of FLO participants and staff. In Chapter 4, Valda Wallace describes how Australian educational policy and practice have long disenfranchised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Wallace demonstrates that education does not occur in a vacuum—sustenance, shelter and support are integral to a young person's wellbeing and ability to learn. Through the voices of Indigenous participants and staff, she

advocates the holistic approach to schooling offered in FLOs as a way to foster improved educational access for Indigenous Australian young people. In Chapter 5, Sue McGinty, Suzanne Bursey and Hurriyet Babacan investigate what young people say they value in their educational experiences. Most young people interviewed emphasise having the right staff to work with them. That is, educators able to show them a future, take care of their current needs, and provide learning that meets their particular circumstances. The young people greatly appreciate such care in the context of gaining an education. In Chapter 6, Kimberley Wilson frames her reading of what FLO staff value about this type of education through the theoretical lens of Gert Biesta's work, namely, obtaining a qualification, socialisation (in particular, coming to feel as though one belongs), and subjectification (i.e., the process by which a young person develops a particular sense of self and social being). Although subjectification has received little attention in the research literature, Wilson's analysis of staff interviews shows the vital importance of this concept to the FLO experience.

Part Three comprises the quantitative aspect of our research. In Chapter 7, Joseph Thomas and Riccardo Welters use a matching estimators methodology to elucidate the impact of young people's educational experiences over a ten-year period. Using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY), they show that young people who experience a weak sense of belonging at school at age 15–16 tend to report lower levels of life-satisfaction and wellbeing as young adults. As pointed out, belonging is one of the cornerstone mechanisms at work in FLOs.

In Chapter 8, Brian Lewthwaite, Hurriyet Babacan, Kitty te Riele, Dale Murray and Joseph Thomas conclude our effort to gauge the value of FLOs by outlining the study's broader implications for policy and practice. The overwhelming evidence, supported both qualitatively and quantitatively, is that investment in flexible learning provides enormous value to the lives of disenfranchised young people and the wider Australian community.

It is with pride that I present to our partners and community this significant and necessary compendium of empirical evidence on the value of FLOs.

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KITTY TE RIELE

1. THE CONTEXT OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING OPTIONS

ABSTRACT

This introductory chapter provides a context for the book from two perspectives: at the micro level, the previous lived experiences of young people in Flexible Learning Options (FLOs), and at the macro level, economic and policy pressures. The persistent impact of social background on educational experiences and achievement is widely recognised. For students in FLOs, mainstream schooling has not worked well due to one or more factors of social and educational disenfranchisement. FLOs respond to this with approaches underpinned by social justice.

Demand for FLOs has increased in recent decades. High levels of youth unemployment and under-employment mean that education is an alternative to entering a precarious labour market. Moreover, policy initiatives in Australia and elsewhere are aimed at increasing educational attainment. These conditions particularly impact on disenfranchised young people, and on the FLOs that aim to offer them an engaging, high-quality education.

INTRODUCTION

In developed countries across the globe, completion of upper secondary education has become the norm over the past few decades. National and international policy directions have focused on raising educational attainment and reducing ‘drop out’ before school completion. At the same time, economic conditions have led to deterioration in the youth labour market. These dual policy and economic pressures to stay in school and gain upper secondary credentials have most impact on those young people, usually from disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom school does not work well.

One consequence has been an increased demand for alternative educational pathways that better enable these young people to engage with school-level learning. We call these initiatives ‘Flexible Learning Options’ or FLOs. Other scholarly and policy literature may refer to similar educational provision as alternative education, second chance education, re-engagement programs or flexible learning programs. Despite the different terminology, what these initiatives have in common is a commitment to enabling young people who have been rejected by mainstream high schools to gain positive experiences of learning as well as valuable educational credentials, which they otherwise would have been less likely to achieve.

This introductory chapter begins by providing insight in the forms of disenfranchisement experienced by young people before they enrol in a FLO. This section draws on interviews conducted as part of the research project “Gauging the Value of Flexible Learning Options for Disenfranchised Youth and the Australian Community” (see Introduction), which forms the basis for the entire book. We then briefly outline the nature of FLOs before analysing the economic and policy contexts in which these FLOs have gained prominence as a sector of educational provision for some of the most disenfranchised young people in society.

DISENFRANCHISEMENT

The impact of social background on educational experiences and achievement is widely recognised as a persistent problem (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). In our research project title we refer to students in FLOs as ‘disenfranchised’. This disenfranchisement has several interconnected, social and educational elements. The first one we discuss, and perhaps the primary element, is poverty. This is not only about a lack of money, but also about insecure life circumstances. The Brotherhood of St Laurence (2016), in its work on measuring social exclusion, explains:

Understanding and measuring poverty and disadvantage has moved beyond a person’s income and assets, such as owning their home.

It now includes other essentials for their participation in society, such as access to education, health services and transport, and non-material aspects such as stigma and denial of rights.

The concept of social exclusion captures the many overlapping factors that may exclude a person from society, rather than income alone.

For young people in FLOs, the financial component of poverty impacts directly on their school experiences (McGregor et al., 2017). Although state schools are nominally free in Australia, the annual cost of full participation for a secondary school student has been estimated to add up to almost AUD\$4000 (Bond & Horn, 2009, p. 26). This covers a range of essential and ‘optional’ items, such as textbooks, transport, excursions, food, internet access, and extracurricular activities. Families with children at a FLO echo the impact of such costs from their lived experience:

More and more parents and families that we’re getting here are saying “we can’t afford to go to School A”, which is a state-run education school, “we can’t afford to go to School B because the uniform fees, we don’t get an ID card unless we pay your school uniform fees”. And I’m like, “you’re going to a state school, what do you mean you have to pay school fees?”, and all they’re saying, all said and told “it’s costing us about 1,000 dollars a year to go to state school and that’s including uniform, textbook allowance, ID cards

and different excursion allowances” and all of that sort of stuff. Yes, they find it quite tough. (Nelson and Jill, staff, Acacia Flexi)

School uniform can be a particular focal point (Skattebol et al., 2012, p. 119). Although many mainstream schools have strategies such as cheaper second-hand uniforms or payment by instalments, the emphasis on ‘proper’ appearance impacts disproportionately on students living in poverty, who may not be able to replace a lost jumper or torn trousers (Myconos, 2011, p. 13). A student illustrated this:

My experiences were that the school focuses on mainly just on their appearance, how they look as a school, and not on the kid’s education whatsoever. You get in trouble for wearing the wrong-coloured socks. [...] you go to school and then you come in different-coloured socks and you get sat in the office all day. (focus group 3, Blue Gum Flexi)

Financial strain can thus lead to punitive discipline, which takes young people away from learning. It can also lead to emotional strain, as a staff member at another of the sites in our research explained:

Even though we prided ourselves on the wellbeing approach [at a mainstream school] that we had and that sort of thing, young people would come in, be given a uniform and then wouldn’t be able to come back two days later with that same uniform. There were things going on that young people just weren’t coming to us for no other reason other than probably just were overwhelmed by the demands of a mainstream school I guess and the small stuff like coming in and not having the right equipment and feeling a bit ashamed about that. (Wesley, staff, Sturt Pea Flexi)

Housing insecurity further contributes to social disenfranchisement, since poor families may be compelled to move house to chase work, or because their landlord ends their tenancy. Experiences of homelessness and placements in out-of-home care are also common among FLO students. Claudia recounted her experience of being ‘kicked out’ of home by her mother:

She got a new boyfriend but she was always quite mentally abusive anyway and so it was quite hard to live at home. And then, yeah, one day I don’t—I don’t know what really happened—she just told me to get out and not come back and so I did. [...] I couch-surfed for a year and a half. Like, in and out of different people’s houses and then I got sick and went into hospital and [...] they got me into crisis accommodation. (Claudia, student, Grevillea Flexi)

As a result of such housing insecurity, young people in FLOs talk of having been to numerous primary and secondary schools (Mills & McGregor, 2014). This impacts financial cost (such as new textbooks and school uniform), adjustment to different curriculum and pedagogy, and socio-emotional wellbeing. For example, Bella, an early school leaver who changed schools every year between Year 5 and Year 9 due

to difficult family circumstances, “was worn down by continually having to break into social groups in new schools” (Skattebol et al., 2011, p. 126).

For some young people, a symptom of social disenfranchisement is involvement in crime. One staff member estimated that “maybe 75 per cent have had some issues with juvenile justice” (Tyler, staff, Desert Rose Flexi). Axel, a student at Waratah Flexi, said he had been “running amok, getting in trouble with the police” and almost as an afterthought commented: “I just didn’t have anything to look forward to really”. Staff in our research point to a range of causes for engagement in crime:

He has a really sad story in terms of the domestic violence that he’s witnessed as a young person. He’s only 13 years of age. He is now a perpetrator of domestic violence—mum has needed to take out a restraining order. (Molly, staff, Desert Rose Flexi)

His crimes were not violent: stealing, because he was homeless. (Alexis, staff, Bottle Brush Flexi)

He has ADHD and the only thing he can do to get rid of his energy—the only thing that sort of satisfies his cravings for adrenalin—stealing cars. (Catherine, staff, Bottle Brush Flexi)

Encounters with juvenile justice are also connected with educational exclusion, summed up by the metaphor of the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ (Wilson, 2014). An Australian study on an initiative aimed at re-connecting young people coming before a Children’s Court with education found that among their clients of compulsory school age (12 to 16 years old) almost 40 per cent were not enrolled in school (Te Riele & Rosauer, 2015, p. v).

The “dense and complex web of interrelated, interacting, multi-directional forces” (Batten & Russell, 1995, p. 50) of disenfranchisement that young people enrolled in FLOs experience is evident from the previous pages. Moreover, social disenfranchisement tends to be intergenerational. As Sophia (staff, Blue Gum Flexi) put it, “Many come from homes where it’s second or third generation welfare”. Brett argued that mainstream schools can exacerbate problems stemming from family experiences:

From a very early age, a lot of our kids here are disadvantaged because of the choices that the adults in their life have made and the cycle can sort of repeat itself. [...] their home life might be quite traumatic, so when they come to school it’s much easier to exist in trauma because that’s what they know, rather than a calm sort of climate. So, they bring that trauma with them and they unravel things that are—because they’re not used to that kind of stuff. So, that challenge for them, that thing just tends to snowball and then the school rings the parents and says, “We’re going to suspend your kid, keep your kid at home”, or, “You’re going to get expelled”. And then the parents start to think, “Oh, stuff it, I’ve got no faith in the education system. What’s wrong with my child? Why don’t they want them?” (Brett, staff, Waratah Flexi)

In particular, Indigenous Australians continue to be shamefully over-represented in generational cycles of poverty (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2014) and all too often, Indigenous parents have negative memories of their own schooling (Te Riele, 2008). Miles commented specifically that:

Many of the urban [Aboriginal] kids are stuck between a rock and a hard place, as we know. They've got a foot in both camps—their own culture and the white culture they are trying to survive in. So they seem to me to be the most disadvantaged. (Miles, staff, Wattle Flexi)

Perhaps as a result, FLOs (especially in regional and remote Australia) enrol relatively many Indigenous students (Shay & Heck, 2015).

Social and educational disenfranchisement are intertwined, for example when poverty means not being able to afford text books or internet, and therefore not being able to do well in school assignment tasks. In addition, students and staff in our research talked about schooling itself working in exclusionary ways, for example by a lack of learning support, negative relationships with teachers or peers, or curriculum that was not engaging.

FLEXIBLE LEARNING OPTIONS

Alternative education has a long history in North America, Europe and Australasia. These initiatives were often related to progressive and humanist movements, and aimed at families able to make a choice for a different kind of school experience for their children. Examples include Steiner education, Summerhill in the UK and Big Picture schools in the US. Just like these schools, FLOs intend to 'do school differently' (Te Riele, 2009) from conventional schooling. Unlike these schools, however, FLOs are aimed at young people who (usually) have relatively little choice and have experienced some or many of the elements of social and educational disenfranchisement outlined above.

Importantly, the response of FLOs to these complex and inter-related features of disenfranchisement is based on notions of social justice. Drawing on the use by Mills et al. (2015) of Nancy Fraser's framework, these responses can be understood to relate to distribution, recognition and representation.

Distributive justice relates to addressing economic disenfranchisement, for example, by providing free breakfast and lunch, transport to and from school, and assistance for accessing housing services, health services, and income support (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2014). As a FLO staff member from another research project explained, "We do breakfasts and lunches and camps at no cost. We do not have student fees. We do everything to increase access and equity to education" (Te Riele, 2014, p. 67).

FLOs also work positively with cultural difference, for example, offering recognition of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning, and for young people who identify with particular youth subcultures. Finally, many FLOs take the political dimension of social justice seriously, offering opportunities for representation and

young people's agency. This may involve community meetings (see Baroutsis et al., 2016) and genuine choice and input into curriculum (Te Riele, 2014).

Other chapters in this book provide further insight into the ways in which FLOs work to offer genuine educational and life opportunities to disenfranchised young people. The final two sections of this chapter discuss the economic and policy pressures that shape the environment in which FLOs operate.

ECONOMIC PRESSURES

In the late 1940s and 1950s, severe labour shortages meant there was strong competition for teenage labour in Australia, and leaving school at age 15 was the norm. The youth labour market remained buoyant until the mid-1960s, when structural changes in the economy, such as technological change and internationalisation of product markets caused major upheaval. The decline in employment opportunities in the manufacturing industry and in skilled office work especially affected young people. Such trends in the labour market have continued to the present day, resulting in relatively bleak employment prospects for young people. In particular, young people were hard hit by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008, leading to a spike in both unemployment and under-employment rates for 15–24-year-olds in Australia (ABS, 2015). Between early 2008 and mid-2009, the youth labour force under-utilisation rate (combining the numbers for unemployed and under-employed 15–24 year olds) jumped from about 19% to almost 27% (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014). Although Australia was not as badly affected by the GFC as other countries, youth employment has not bounced back (OECD, 2016). On the contrary, it was even worse by 2014, with more than 580,000 young Australians either under-employed or unemployed (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014).

It is evident that many young people struggle to get a toehold in the jobs market. Continuing with education is not only an alternative to entering the precarious labour market, but also a prerequisite for many jobs—including low-level work. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2016, p. 19) points out that “low educational attainment is the most important driver of NEET [Not in Employment, Education or Training] status, in Australia as in other OECD countries”. Unsurprisingly, key OECD (2016) suggestions for policy responses focus heavily on addressing early school leaving and improving educational outcomes as solutions to unemployment and NEET status more generally. This follows the OECD's (2009a) earlier, somewhat cynical, advice to the Australian government to “capitalise on the propensity of youth to stay longer in education during economic slowdowns to raise educational attainment” (p. 6).

At the same time, the OECD exemplifies a broad policy consensus among developed nations that educational attainment at upper secondary and tertiary levels needs to be lifted to fill the need for more highly skilled people in the contemporary, knowledge-based economy and, therefore, educational attainment at upper secondary

and tertiary levels needs to be lifted (OECD, 2009b). Within this discourse of the knowledge economy, NEET status is perceived as the result of a deficit in young people's qualifications: "many NEETs lack the basic cognitive and non-cognitive skills needed in the labour market" (OECD, 2016, p. 19).

As a result of these economic pressures and perceptions, governments around the world, including in Australia, have adopted initiatives aimed at increasing educational attainment.

POLICY PRESSURES

Policies from the European Union (EU) serve to provide some international context. The EU agreed on five 'headline targets' for the whole EU, in relation to employment, innovation, climate change, poverty and education (European Commission, 2012). The education headline target is about raising attainment, specifically:

- reducing early school leaving (ESL) rates below 10%
- at least 40% of 30–34-year-olds completing tertiary-level education

Our interest here is in the first part of the education headline target. This target is linked both to economic and social inclusion purposes. In the current economic climate, young people are seen as especially vulnerable, due to rising youth unemployment as well as in the proportion of young people considered NEET. The European Commission (European Union, 2012) argues:

Against this backdrop, the Europe 2020 target to reduce the share of 18–24 year olds having left education and training prematurely to less than 10 % by 2020 becomes particularly critical. [...] However [...] Bringing the ESL rate down below 10 % is a difficult challenge. (pp. 10–11)

Specific advice is provided in the 2011 *Framework for comprehensive policies to reduce early school leaving* (European Union, 2011). The framework notes that "Early school leavers are a heterogeneous group" and that "Member States should select the detailed components of their strategies according to their own circumstances and contexts" (p. 4). With these provisos in mind, a combination of prevention, intervention and compensation policies is recommended. Prevention measures are intended to "optimise the provision of education and training in order to support better learning outcomes and to remove obstacles to educational success" (p. 4) and may include a greater variety of educational offerings and pathways. Intervention may take place at the level of the educational institution (e.g., early-warning systems for pupils at risk) and at the level of individual students (e.g., mentoring and financial support). Finally, compensation is about re-engaging early leavers with education through second chance education programs—in other words, through FLOs.

In Australia, a target was set to "achieve a national Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate of 90 per cent by 2015" (CoAG, 2009, p. 4). Year 12 is the final year of senior

secondary education. This target is based on an agreement negotiated between the Australian federal, state and territory governments, the *National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions*. The key justification for the target is that:

The Parties agree that, especially during the downturn, young people should be supported to attain qualifications in order to be competitive in the labour market both now and when the economy recovers. (CoAG, 2009, p. 7)

This argument is reinforced through the agreed communication strategy, which focuses on the benefits of attaining higher levels of qualifications in terms of higher lifetime earnings, reducing economic disadvantage and providing a more skilled workforce for industry (CoAG, 2009, p. 25). New requirements have made it compulsory for all young people to stay in school until completion of junior secondary education, i.e., Year 10 (or until they reach age 17), and upon completion of Year 10 to “participate full-time (defined as at least 25 hours per week) in education, training or employment, or a combination of these activities, until age 17” (CoAG, 2009, p. 6).

The implementation of this policy has a strong punitive component. Young people under age 17 are not eligible for unemployment benefits and access to welfare benefits has been restricted for young people under age 21, if they have not yet attained the target qualification (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010a). Like in the UK (Watt, 2013), this has led to the ‘learning or earning’ tag for these policies as well as further tightening of young people’s access to unemployment benefits (Parliament of Australia, 2017), aimed to “provide incentives for young unemployed people to obtain the relevant education and training to increase employability”. Missing from these policy discussions are considerations of structural labour market problems, i.e., a lack of appropriate jobs.

More constructive was the establishment as part of the CoAG (2009) agreement of Youth Connections, a service for “eligible young people who are at risk of disengaging, or already disengaged from education, and/or family and the community” (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010b, p. 11). Youth Connections providers were required to provide young people with “access to education or training through an alternative learning facility” (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010b, p. 12). This approach resulted in increased

‘demand’ amongst students for alternative education pathways. This has prompted providers in public and private education markets to respond with the provision of flexible learning opportunities. (Dandolo Partners, 2014, p. 84)

While several of the FLOs in the research for this book pre-dated these policies, they were all affected by this increased demand and heightened profile of ‘alternative learning facilities’.

A separate set of state-level (rather than national) policies reflects punitive approaches and is in part responsible for increased demand for FLOs. These policies are focused on improving discipline (behaviour management) by giving school leaders more power to suspend and expel students (Department of Education [NT], 2014; Dixon, 2014; Langbroek, 2013). In conjunction, there has been an “enhanced commitment to alternative learning centres that provide highly specialised support to students with the most complex needs” (Langbroek, 2013, n.p.). These policies have a detrimental effect on young people and intensified educational disenfranchisement (YACVic, 2016; also see earlier in this chapter). They have also counterproductively set FLOs up “as a ‘dumping ground’ for unwanted students” (Mills, Renshaw, & Zipin, 2013, p. 13).

Finally, educational policies relating to high-stakes testing also have an impact on FLOs. Such testing regimes have been critiqued in the USA (e.g., Nichols, Berliner, & Noddings, 2007) and elsewhere (e.g., Eggen & Stobart, 2014). In Australia, the most relevant tests are the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which happens annually in Year 3 and 5 (primary education) and Year 7 and 9 (secondary education), and the end of senior secondary education (Year 12) exams and associated university entry rankings (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank or ‘ATAR’). A teacher in a FLO from another research project summed up his concerns about NAPLAN and the ATAR as follows:

I think things like the school ratings haven’t helped. I think things like NAPLAN are absolutely destructive to young people. And some schools do this better than others, but to instil a sense of identity and worth in the young people outside of what their ATAR was going to be, outside of what their NAPLAN results are, or what number they’re ranked in their school. I know it’s difficult for schools because that’s where the money comes from, but I think that’s something that young people are desperate for. And if they can’t achieve some kind of sense of identity through their academic performance in a mainstream school, well then where can they get that? There’s not really any other avenue for them to demonstrate who they are as people, and their worth to our community, outside of what their grades are, (Julian, cited in McGregor et al., 2017, p. 61)

The insidious effects of such tests extend from students to schools. NAPLAN results lead to rankings of schools on the ‘My School’ website and media outlets publish rankings of schools based on students’ ATAR every year. Gorur (2015, p. 41) refers to the performative politics of My School and argues that NAPLAN has become “a strong source of concern, a topic of discussion and bone of contention in schools”. The comparison of schools based on NAPLAN and ATAR results has put adverse pressure on school staff, making it harder to devote time and energy to the kind of supportive and caring work that drew many teachers into the profession in the first place (Kostogriz, 2012). Competition between schools to do well on academic league tables also has “provided less incentive for schools to support the engagement of students who appear to be at risk of achieving lower than average academic results”

(YACVic, 2016, p. 21). The comment that “the more ‘aspirational’ neighbouring schools were unable or unwilling to educate” disadvantaged students is not unusual (YACVic, 2016, p. 21). Considered unwanted or redundant in mainstream schools, such young people may end up—if they are fortunate, as this book argues—attending FLOs (also see McGregor et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

The need for FLOs is embedded in the social and educational disenfranchisement of young people. It would be better if society were more socially equal (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). It would be better if, in the phrase of Fielding and Moss (2011), the ‘common school’ truly catered for all students, regardless of their background, experiences, and interests. But neither of these ideals are the case. The demand for FLOs has increased over the past decade or so, in the context of social inequality, a precarious youth labour market, and educational policy pressures. The next chapter uses the lens of neoliberalism to further explore the landscape within which FLOs operate, and to set the scene for the core focus of the book: the returns of investing in educational engagement through FLOs.

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