



Education and Training

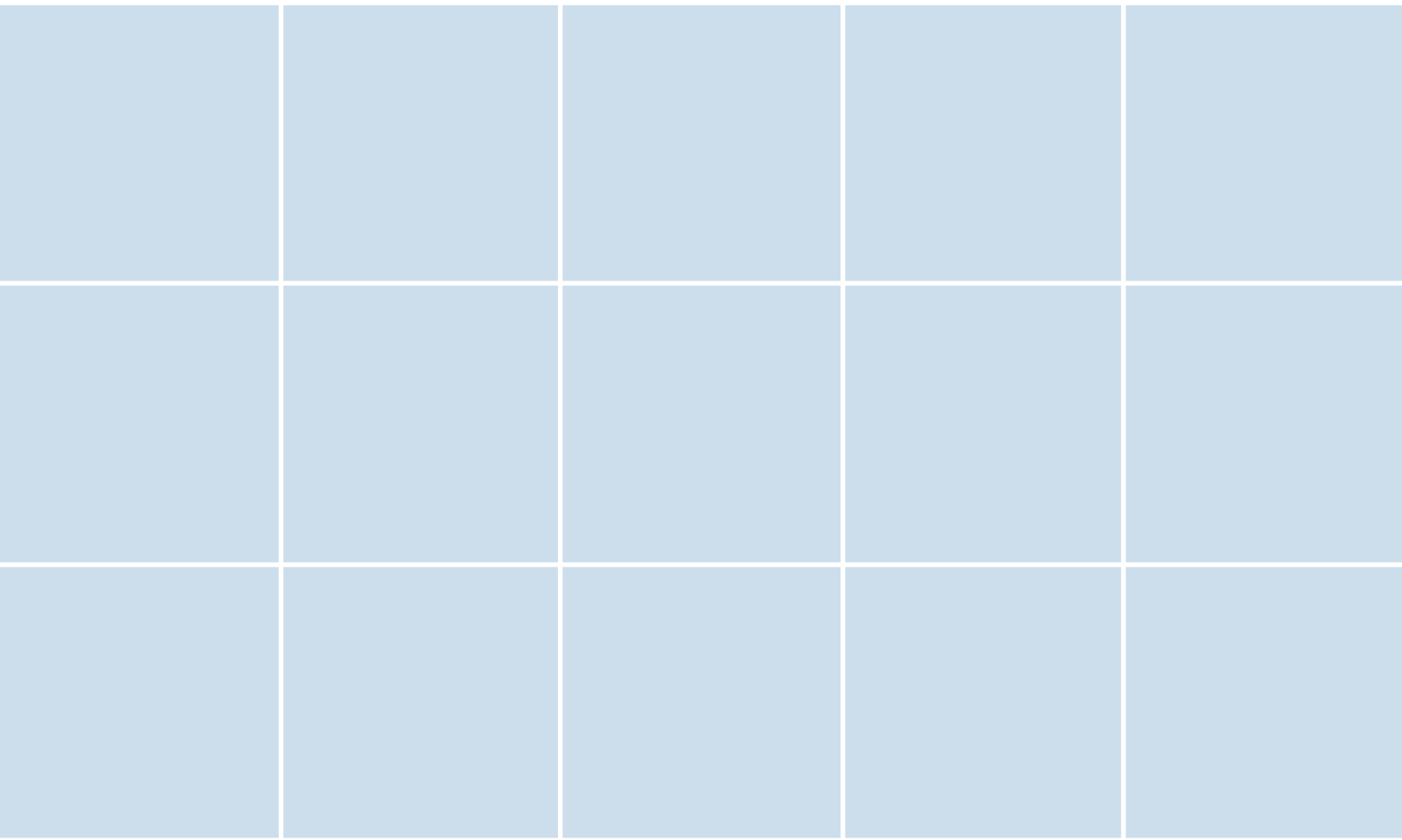
Pathways to the future

A consultation paper on increasing young people's engagement in education, training and work



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Message from the Minister

The ACT Government is committed to helping all young people make a positive transition from school to further education, training and work. The purpose of this paper is to ask young people, their parents and teachers and the wider ACT community about how this should best be done. This includes asking whether the ACT school leaving age, which is currently 15 years, should be raised.

The last time the school leaving age was raised was in 1943, when ACT schools were part of the NSW system. Our society and economy have changed dramatically since then, and so have our schools.

ACT schools provide high quality education and training. Our students continue to demonstrate their high level of performance against national literacy and numeracy benchmarks. The ACT continues to have the highest year 12 retention rate and the highest percentage nationally of vocational education and training (VET) graduates employed or in further study after training.

In senior secondary education, our schools and colleges offer flexible pathways that lead to tertiary study and to recognised VET qualifications. Students can begin apprenticeships while they are still at school. Young people are also able to complete school qualifications through the Canberra Institute of Technology. Innovative programs, many in partnership with business and industry, increasingly link school studies with the worlds of work and community.

Despite these achievements, the ACT Government recognises that there are some students who leave school without engaging in another education or training pathway. Such young people remain at risk of long-term disengagement from the labour market and from satisfying participation in our community.

Research shows that if early school leavers move into a pathway that leads to a recognised VET qualification the outcomes are positive. As a recent national report stated, “Disengagement from school is not the same as disengagement from education.”

Raising the school leaving age, or introducing a policy of compulsory participation in education, training or work, are options that the Government is considering to support successful pathways for all students in the ACT.

I encourage you to consider the options presented in this paper and provide your comments. Input from all members of the ACT community will assist the Government to improve the educational outcomes and positive transitions through and beyond schooling for all our students.

Andrew Barr MLA

Minister for Education and Training



Introduction

In April 2008, the ACT Skills Commission presented a report to Government, highlighting economic and demographic change and the need to increase the skilled workforce. The Government responded with *ACT Skills Future: Key initiatives in a long term strategy to address the skills challenge*.

Among the initiatives outlined in *ACT Skills Future*, the Government reiterated its commitment to increasing to 95 percent the proportion of 19 year olds with a Year 12 Certificate or equivalent vocational qualification by 2013. The ACT Government also announced that it would review the school leaving age.

In March 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) also agreed that all states and territories should aim to lift the year 12 or equivalent retention rate to 90 per cent by 2020.

This paper identifies the issues in raising the school leaving age and outlines different options to increase young people's engagement in education, training and work. Comments on the options in this paper can be made by completing the Community Response Form available from the ACT Department of Education and Training website at www.det.act.gov.au

Copies of the consultation paper and the Community Response Form can also be downloaded from the website.

Consultation closes on 31 October 2008.



The current situation

The ACT

In Australia, the ACT has the highest apparent retention rate from year 10 to year 12 (full time students). In 2006, the retention rate was close to 90 percent for all schools (public and non-government)¹.

At the beginning of 2004, 4 678 students enrolled in year 9. At the end of 2007, from the same cohort of students, 3 919 received Year 12 Certificates². Because of the inclusion of a number of students from interstate, the figure of ACT resident students leaving school before the end of year 12 is somewhat higher than these figures suggest.

Very few students leave ACT schools at 15, the current compulsory leaving age. A comparison of the numbers of ACT resident 15 and 16 year olds in ACT schools suggests that around six percent, or around 250 students, left school before the age of 16 in 2007³. Some of these students may have enrolled in the Canberra Institute of Technology or taken up an apprenticeship or traineeship.

Achievement of the Year 12 Certificate is not the only important attainment measure that needs to be considered. Both the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) and the Australian Government Productivity Commission use the same broader attainment measure for young people. This is the number of 20-24 year olds who have completed year 12 or equivalent (for example, an overseas or international school qualification) or achieved at least an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Certificate II.

The ACT also leads Australia in this attainment measure. In 2006, over 90 percent of ACT 20-24 year-olds had

¹ Source: Report on Government Services, 2008

² Source: ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies data (Note: figures do not include students at the Canberra Grammar School, which uses the NSW Higher School Certificate, or students repeating year 12)

³ Source: ACT School Census data and Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data

completed year 12 or equivalent or gained at least an AQF Certificate II. This compares with a national figure of just over 80 percent.

Despite these achievements against national performance measures, there is a group of students who leave school without engaging in another education or training pathway. These young people remain at risk of long-term disengagement from the labour market and from satisfying participation in the ACT community.

Other Australian states and territories

In an effort to improve student outcomes and contribute to economic prosperity, all Australian states and territories have policies and programs that support student retention, flexible pathways and qualifications. Some states have introduced 'learn or earn' strategies. These require young people to be engaged in school, training or meaningful work until at least the age of 17.

In addition, all states have raised (or are proposing to raise) the school leaving age from 15 to 16 or 17. This will leave the ACT and the Northern Territory with a school leaving age of 15. However, the ACT and the Northern Territory have very different profiles. The ACT is an urbanised community with a highly educated population, higher than average income levels and high student retention and participation rates. The Northern Territory has a low retention rate, influenced in part by the remoteness of many of its communities.

Table 1 summarises the situation in other states and territories in relation to school leaving age and compulsory participation requirements.

Table 1: Current minimum school leaving age and participation requirements

| <i>State / Territory</i> | <i>School leaving age</i> | <i>Participation requirements</i> |
|---|--|---|
| ACT | 15 | None |
| Northern Territory | 15 | None |
| New South Wales | Currently 15, but the Government has proposed raising the leaving age. | Consultation currently taking place on participation options. |
| Queensland Tasmania (from 2008) South Australia (from 2009) | 16 | In Qld, Tasmania (from 2008) and South Australia (from 2009) all young people are required to be in school, education or training or full-time work until age 17. |
| Victoria | 16 | No additional participation requirements. |
| Western Australia | 17 | From 2008, all young people are required to be in school, education or training or full-time work until age 17. |

Other countries

Out of 30 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, 22 have school leaving ages of higher than 15 years. Belgium, The Netherlands and a number of states and provinces in the USA and Canada have compulsory education until age 18. This may include non-school education pathways. The UK is currently legislating to introduce compulsory participation in education or training until 18 years of age.



Why do some students leave school early?

The term 'early school leaver' is widely used to cover all students who leave before the end of year 12. In some cases the term is used more narrowly and applies to the small number of students who leave without a Year 10 Certificate or after completing year 10.

Across Australia, the reasons young people leave school before the end of year 12 are complex. Students less likely to complete year 12 are males, Indigenous Australians, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds and from non-English speaking backgrounds. National data indicates that Indigenous students start to leave the school system after year 9. This trend is reflected in the ACT.

One of the strongest predictors of non-completion is a low level of literacy and numeracy. Research suggests that young people in the bottom 25 percent of the literacy and numeracy tests in year 9 at school, are four times more likely to leave school early, than those in the top 25 percent (Business Council of Australia, 2003).

Some research, for example McMillan and Marks (2003), suggests that the main reason students do not complete year 12 is work-related. Factors such as not liking school appear less common. Students want 'to get a job', 'earn my own money' or 'start an apprenticeship.'

On the other hand, a report for MCEETYA (Lamb et al, 2004) suggests that while economic pressures play a part, students will stay on at school if they are engaged in learning that is meaningful to them and through which they experience success. For a small number, disengagement from schooling is also connected with being adrift from family and other support systems, with no sense of a way forward.



Is it important to stay on at school?

The main argument used to encourage students to stay on at school is that they will be better prepared for an economy that requires higher skill levels than in the past. Those with low educational qualifications are at particular risk of economic marginalisation. (OECD, 2007)

Some research suggests that early school leavers are more likely to become long term unemployed adults at later stages of their lives and to earn less when they are employed. Researchers also claim that productivity growth will be significantly raised by investments in school retention. For example, Access Economics (2005) cites research suggesting that if Australians had one further full year of schooling, productivity growth would be at least 0.3 percentage points higher every year. The Access Economics report outlines the benefits to individuals, the economy and to Australian society from young Australians either completing school or an apprenticeship.

If early school leavers move into a pathway that leads to a recognised VET qualification, the outcomes are positive. One research study noted that the long-term outcomes for early school leavers were very similar to the outcomes for students who completed year 12 but did not go on to higher education. As McMillan and Marks state, “Disengagement from school is not the same as disengagement from education, as evidenced by the level of participation by non-completers in post-secondary education and training” (2003, page xi).

When examined closely, most of the research about the disadvantages suffered by early school leavers actually refers to young people who have neither a school qualification, nor an equivalent VET qualification. Some commentators place a high value on the benefits of schooling, which include participation in school life and the support that pastoral care provides. Others recognise that formal schooling does not suit all students. They

emphasise the need for participation in worthwhile education, training or workforce pathways.

Dockery (2005) is one researcher who questions the assumption that all students would gain better outcomes if they stayed on at school. Alternatives such as employment or apprenticeships should not be ignored for the sake of accumulating years of schooling. Some ACT students leave school during their senior secondary years because they have already established a strong VET pathway.

In the ACT, young people have a number of VET options within and outside the school system. ACT senior secondary schools offer a wide range of VET courses, in partnership with business and industry. Options for students include commencing apprenticeships and traineeships while they are at school. In 2007, VET certificates were awarded to 2 403 students (from year 10 to year 12), and there were 359 Australian School-Based Apprenticeship commencements in the ACT. To date in 2008, 216 students have commenced an Australian School-Based Apprenticeship.

Young people may also pursue vocational education and training outside the school system, through Registered Training Organisations, including the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT). The CIT Vocational College offers flexible options for people with varying backgrounds and experiences. These include Year 10 and Year 12 Certificates and vocational qualifications.

While VET pathways offer a positive transition for many school leavers, there remains a group of students who do not make such a transition. These students are likely to become unemployed, under-employed or employed in work that provides no real opportunity for further skills development or training pathway. They may be engaged in training that offers little hope of long-term benefit.

Such early leavers are also more likely to have poor health outcomes, a greater likelihood of substance abuse and greater dependence on government income support. Inter-generational disadvantage in families may become entrenched.

The *Review of ACT Government Secondary Colleges* (2005) noted that the transition from high school to college involves movement from a generally supportive and structured environment to one that expects a much greater level of responsibility and autonomy from students. While many students flourish in a young adult learning environment, some struggle.

Such students need support in their transition from high school, early identification of difficulties in their adjustment to college life and strong pastoral care programs. Most importantly, the teaching in colleges needs to engage these young people in their learning and strengthen the skills that will help them into productive pathways.

Nonetheless, even if these supports are in place, formal schooling may not be appropriate for some of these young people. It may be a disservice to such students, their peers and the broader community if they are required by law to remain at school when the school environment is not addressing these learning needs and interests.



What should be done?

Maintain the status quo

One option for the ACT is to maintain the existing school leaving age. In other Australian states, the leaving age has been increased so that retention rates will improve. The ACT already has the highest school retention rate in Australia.

Raising the leaving age could have negative effects on young people for whom the formal school system may not be the best option. Any change to the leaving age would place greater responsibilities on parents and, for some students, could result in student absenteeism and truancy. There would also be implications for legislative requirements and arrangements for young people, such as the legal employment age.

If the status quo were maintained, the ACT Government would continue to promote flexible pathways through school and VET, support students in their schools and communities, and help them make positive transitions to further education and training or meaningful employment, regardless of the age at which they left school.

Raise the school leaving age

The second option for the ACT is to raise the school leaving age. The leaving age could be raised to 16 or to 17 years. Raising the leaving age to 16 would be consistent with most Australian states' legislation. It could also send a signal to young people and to the ACT community that social and economic circumstances and expectations have changed.

If the school leaving age were increased, programs to support adolescent students who may be feeling alienated from schooling would need to be strengthened. The ACT Government is already committed to reforms that will, over time, improve the participation and outcomes of all young people.

These include initiatives in early childhood education, curriculum reform, quality teaching and middle years programs. There is increased support for students from year 9 onwards, through student pathways planning, pastoral care programs, careers advice and transition programs. Providers of education and training would continue to work closely with youth and community groups to support young people experiencing difficulties in transition to productive and satisfying adulthood.

In some states and territories, legislation to increase the school leaving age provides for exemptions, for example for students who are enrolled in a VET program in a TAFE or with another registered training provider. At least one state stipulates that students can leave school when they turn 16 or when they complete year 10, whichever comes first. These sorts of options should also be considered.

Introduce a compulsory participation age

Another option for the ACT is to introduce a 'compulsory participation' age. Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia are all using this approach, in addition to raising the school leaving age.

In these states, 'compulsory participation' means that young people are required to be in education, training or full-time work until they turn 17 years of age. The work option should be one that contributes to young people's long-term employment prospects. The pathway for each student, particularly those at risk of disengaging from an education pathway, is in some cases formalised through a pathway plan or agreement. Students thought to be at greater risk of disengagement from learning are managed on a case-by-case basis.

The advantage of this approach is that students are encouraged and supported to remain at school, but are not required to do so if this is not the approach to learning that meets their needs. On the other hand, young people are required to participate in some form of education, training or meaningful work. This is intended to protect them from the negative consequences of dropping out altogether from the education system and the labour market.

The ACT has previously provided a Training Guarantee, which provided a guaranteed training place for young people who had left school and were not in education, training or work after six months. The last time the guarantee operated was for the 2006 cohort. While it was successful for a small number of young people, there were difficulties in locating young people who needed services.

A more productive approach would be to support all students who wanted to leave school after the compulsory leaving age, and to help them make appropriate choices and positive transitions in their learning. This would protect young people against a period of failure. Such an approach would also accommodate young people who wanted to take advantage of short-term opportunities in a buoyant labour market, but who intended to return to school or another education option at a later time.

A compulsory participation age in the ACT could be introduced either without changing the current school leaving age or could be introduced in addition to changing the school leaving age.

Other measures

The ACT Government will continue to support all young people in worthwhile education and training pathways.

The foundation for successful pathways is set at an early age. Early childhood initiatives, combined with strong literacy and numeracy programs and support for family-school partnerships, will continue to be a priority. So will the Government's commitment to improving the outcomes of Indigenous students.

Student pathways planning, career advice and transition support, particularly from public high schools to colleges, will continue to be given a strong focus. The 2008-09 ACT Budget has provided additional funding to these areas. The CIT's Vocational College has also been given additional resources to provide support to students at risk of not completing their studies.

Vocational education and training, including increased support for Australian School-Based Apprenticeships, will continue to be a priority for the ACT Government. This consultation, in response to the report from the ACT Skills Commission, recognises the increasing importance of vocational pathways for young people in the ACT.

The ACT also has many successful programs that help students who are identified as being at risk of dropping out of education. Many of these programs operate in schools through partnerships between schools and government and non-government agencies. The Government highly values the contribution that non-government and community organisations make to the welfare and future success of young people.

In considering what else should be done to improve young people's retention and success in education and training pathways, the Government welcomes further suggestions through this community consultation. For example, the opportunities that young people in the ACT have to re-enter the education system after they have left it for a period of time, and the take-up of these opportunities, need to be considered. If the leaving age is to be increased, the role of the Year 10 Certificate, which marks the formal end of the compulsory phase of schooling at present, may also need to be reviewed.



Conclusion

A Community Response Form is included in this consultation paper. This provides a framework through which members of the ACT community can express their views on young people's engagement in learning and work. The form asks respondents to consider a range of options, including raising the school leaving age and introducing compulsory participation in education or work pathways.

The ACT Government is committed to supporting all young people to gain qualifications that will enable them to lead productive and satisfying lives. The Government welcomes all views on how to ensure that all young people in the ACT are engaged in relevant learning, are connected to their communities and are able to make a positive transition to further education, training or work, at whatever age they leave formal schooling.



References and websites

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Lamb, S, Dwyer P & Wyn J 2000, *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report Number 16: Non-completion of School in Australia: the Changing Patterns of Participation and Outcomes*

McMillan, J & Marks, G 2003, *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report Number 31: School Leavers in Australia: Profiles and Pathways*, ACER

NSW Government 2008, *Raising the School Leaving Age: Consultation Paper*

OECD 2007, *Education at a Glance*

Report by the States and Territories 2007, *Federalist Paper 2: The Future of Schooling in Australia*

Relevant websites from Australian states and territories

NSW:

<https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/reviews/schleavage/index.htm>

Queensland:

<http://education.qld.gov.au/etrf/seniorphasecomp.html>

South Australia:

<http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/portal/students.asp?group=stayingschool&id=leavingage>

Tasmania:

<http://www.education.tas.gov.au/school/educators/guaranteeing-futures/requiringparticipation/faq>

Victoria:

http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/directions/reviewleg_minimumage.htm

Western Australia:

<http://www.det.wa.edu.au/schoolleavingage/detcms/portal/>

Pathways to the future: Community Response Form

The Government has a number of options it is considering to support positive transitions for all young people from schooling to further education and work.

The response form provides a framework through which members of the ACT community can express their views. Additional comments are welcome.

Please indicate your personal or professional role and the sector in which you work or have a particular interest. You may mark more than one box.

| | Schools | CIT/VET sector | University sector | Employment |
|-----------------------------------|---------|----------------|-------------------|------------|
| Young person (up to 15 years) | | | | |
| Young person (15-24 years) | | | | |
| Parent / carer | | | | |
| Teacher / Trainer | | | | |
| Principal / Senior Executive | | | | |
| Employer | | | | |
| Administrator | | | | |
| Union representative | | | | |
| Agency, organisation or peak body | | | | |
| Member of the public | | | | |
| Other stakeholder | | | | |
| (please specify) | | | | |

The following information is **optional** for personal submissions:

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Name | |
| Phone contact | |
| Postcode | |

If you have completed this response on behalf of an organisation, please complete the details below:

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Name | |
| Position | |
| Organisation | |
| Contact details | |

Please indicate your preference for one of the following options for the school leaving age and/or a compulsory participation age.

| Option | | Your preference (please indicate by X) |
|---|--|---|
| No change to the school leaving age | 15 years | |
| Increase the school leaving age | To 16 years | |
| | To 17 years | |
| | To 18 years | |
| Introduce a compulsory participation age (requiring young people to be in education, training or work) | School leaving age 15 years, with compulsory participation to 17 years | |
| | School leaving age 15 years, with compulsory participation to 18 years | |
| | School leaving age 16 years, with compulsory participation to 17 years | |
| | School leaving age 16 years, with compulsory participation to 18 years | |
| | School leaving age 17, with compulsory participation to 18 years | |
| What are the reasons for your preference? | | |
| What other measures should the Government consider to support pathways for young people? | | |

How to submit your comments on the options:

- A. Complete the Community Response Form online from the Department of Education and Training website: www.det.act.gov.au
- B. Print off the Community Response Form and post your completed form to:
Pathways to the future project, ACT Department of Education and Training,
GPO Box 158 CANBERRA ACT 2601

The closing date for submissions is 31 October 2008.

