ISSUES PAPER

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

May 2010
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1. **INTRODUCTION**

1. Reducing youth unemployment and youth underemployment is a matter of national importance that is a common objective of business, unions, community organisations and governments. It is a goal which, if achieved, serves our economy and our objectives for social inclusion. It value-adds to the public and private investment that the community makes in primary and secondary in education.

2. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), as the nation’s peak council of business organisations, is committed to this goal. In a myriad of ways, we and our member business organisations support the interests of employers who employ and invest in young workers. We also work with governments and organisations to establish conducive frameworks for youth employment, helping secure foot-holds for young people in the world of work, and in skills development and career pathways.

3. In the wake of the global financial crisis it is timely to reflect on the impact which the economic downturn has had on youth employment, and in particular current levels of youth unemployment and underemployment. This Issues Paper is part of that work.

4. The Australian Government has recently provided material on youth employment to the new industrial relations tribunal, Fair Work Australia, as part of its first review of minimum wages.¹

5. Notwithstanding the relative strength of the Australian labour market during the global downturn, the material provided by the Government highlights the reality that disproportionately higher levels of unemployment exist amongst younger Australian, not only generally, but also in particular geographic regions across Australia.²

6. The Government’s *National Strategy for Young Australians*, released on 14 April 2010, outlines key priority areas and strategies to achieve an overall goal of: all young people to grow up safe, healthy, happy and resilient and to


have the opportunities and skills they need to learn, work, engage in community life and influence decisions that affect them.³

7. An extract from the National Strategy on one out of eight key priorities, “equipping young Australians with the skills and personal networks they need to gain, and be successful in employment” is attached to this Issues Paper. The following paragraph highlights the benefits of employment for young persons and the community, but also points to the challenges that young Australians face.

### Why is Employment a Priority For Action?

Being in work is critically important for individuals as well as the broader economy. While a job can lead to economic security, it is more than just income. Having paid work contributes to a person’s sense of identity, connectedness and wellbeing, and is an opportunity to connect with others and participate in society. Unemployment can contribute to disadvantage across several dimensions of life, including ill health, a loss of skills, psychological distress and harm, social exclusion, housing stress and criminal behaviour. Young people are an important part of Australia’s working age population. Working people pay income taxes that support government spending, including on health and aged care, the social safety net and education. Young people’s participation in the workforce will become increasingly important to the economy as the population ages.

This generation of young people face some additional challenges in employment. Emerging technologies and the fast pace of change mean that many of the jobs in 2050 don’t exist now. Young people (15 to 24 year olds), who have grown up during a period of prosperity, are now feeling the effects of the global economic recession—the youth unemployment rate rose to 11.8 per cent in March 2010 from 8.7 per cent in September 2008 at the onset of the global financial crisis. It is worth noting, however that the youth unemployment rate has declined from its peak of 12.2 per cent in June 2009.

8. ACCI has also provided Fair Work Australia with detailed information on youth employment which confirms this disproportionately high degree of both youth unemployment and underemployment.⁴

9. Following the recent global financial crisis, the OECD also indicated in a working paper that it too is concerned at the disproportionate effect economic downturns have on younger persons.⁵ ACCI commends the OECD report, which in summary said:

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The global economic crisis has hit youth very hard. In the OECD area, the youth (15-24) unemployment rate rose by 6 percentage points in the two years to the end of 2009, to reach almost 19%. There are currently nearly 15 million youth unemployed in the OECD area, about four million more than at the end of 2007. And in countries like France and Italy, about one active youth in four is unemployed, while in Spain more than 40% of them are jobless.

An economic recovery is already ongoing in a number of OECD countries, but the short-term prospects for youth unemployment in the OECD countries remain rather gloomy. The recovery is expected to be rather shallow in 2010 and to strengthen only in 2011. And given the large spare capacity accumulated by many firms during the recession, job creation is likely to lag significantly behind this modest recovery. In this context, the youth unemployment rate is expected to stay at a high level over the next two years and many unemployed youth are likely to experience a prolonged period of joblessness.

Coping with a job loss in a weak labour market – when job offers are scarce and competition among jobseekers is fierce – is difficult for anyone. But for disadvantaged youth lacking basic education, failure to find a first job or keep it for long can have negative long-term consequences on their career prospects that some experts refer to as “scarring”. Beyond the negative effects on future wages and employability, long spells of unemployment while young often create permanent scars through the harmful effects on a number of other outcomes, including happiness, job satisfaction and health, many years later.

10. In considering policy responses by OECD member nations, the OECD went on to say:

4. Key short-term challenges and policy options

The current economic downturn is putting these disadvantaged youth under even greater stress

... 

23. The current economic downturn can also be an opportunity to tackle some of the underlying problems that many youth face in their transition from school to work and early career progression. In particular, governments should prevent youth from dropping out of education and address some of the asymmetries in the labour markets present in many OECD countries that put youth at a disadvantage. In a number of countries, the main demand-side barriers faced by youth include high labour costs, partly due to relatively high minimum wages, unbalanced employment protection legislation between temporary and permanent contracts and, for youth from ethnic minorities, persisting discrimination practices.

\(^6\) Ibid, p.21.
2. JOBS

2.1 YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

11. In Australia, during the global financial crisis the deterioration in labour market conditions had a disproportionate impact on the job prospects of young workers. The rate of youth unemployment rose to an almost six year high by mid-2009 and despite the general improvement in employment since that time, the rate of joblessness amongst young people has been slow to improve and remains not far below its recent peak. The increase in the youth unemployment rate has been more severe than the rise in unemployment across the broader labour market and the employment of young workers still remains considerably below pre-crisis levels in absolute terms.

12. Minimum wage jobs and apprenticeships offer young workers vitally important opportunities to gain skills and work experience, enabling eventual transition to higher paid positions. Given the current elevated rate of youth unemployment, decisions by governments or industrial tribunals should aim to minimise the attendant loss of jobs opportunities for young people brought about by increasing the cost to business of employing young workers. Decisions should also not exacerbate the severe levels of underutilisation in this vulnerable section of the labour market.

Youth Unemployment Rate

Source: ABS Cat. No. 6202.0
13. In the period leading up to the global financial crisis, the rate of youth unemployment was slowly trending downward and by August 2008 had reached a generational low of 7.8 per cent. While this was broadly favourable relative to past history, it was nevertheless still double the recent cycle-low achieved in the national unemployment rate. Indeed, for the past three decades, the rate of youth unemployment has on average been roughly twice the broader unemployment rate. Young workers at all points in our recent history have suffered disproportionate rates of joblessness and underemployment and improving labour market conditions have done little to ameliorate the relative degree of disadvantage.

Youth and Total Unemployment Rates

Source: ABS Cat. No. 6202.0

14. Following the intensification of the global financial crisis in late 2008, labour market conditions began to weaken markedly. Job creation in the economy stalled and the unemployment rate began to climb as the labour force continued to expand. Youth unemployment deteriorated even more rapidly as entry level positions became scarcer and mature employees with better skills and qualifications began competing with younger jobseekers for positions. After reaching 7.8 per cent in August 2008, the rate of youth unemployment increased 4.4 percentage points in under twelve months to peak at 12.2 per cent in June 2009. The improvement in the youth unemployment rate since that date has been modest, with the present rate of 11.8 per cent recorded in March 2010 still 4.0 percentage points above the August 2008 level.
15. The increase in the rate of youth unemployment has far exceeded the rise in the broader rate of unemployment in the labour market. The trough-to-peak rise in the unemployment rate was 1.8 percentage points, less than half the magnitude of the deterioration in the rate of youth unemployment. That pattern is consistent with past economic downturns and reflects the fact that when jobs become scarce, young jobseekers tend to fare worse when it comes to successfully securing employment. During the recession of the early 1990s, the rate of youth unemployment increased 9.3 percentage points from trough-to-peak against a 5.3 percentage point rise in the total unemployment rate.

### Change in Youth and Total Unemployment Rate Since January 2008

![Graph showing the change in youth and total unemployment rate since January 2008.](source: ABS Cat. No. 6202.0)

16. The above graph outlines the change in the unemployment rate and the youth unemployment rate since the beginning of 2008. It shows that both began to increase sharply in late 2008, but that the scale of the deterioration in the rate of youth unemployment has been much more pronounced. Improving labour market conditions over the past eight months have led to a slight reduction in the two measures but both remain elevated relative to their pre-crisis lows.

17. The impact of the economic downturn has been harder on young male jobseekers than young female employees. As is often the case in periods of recession, it is often demand for blue-collar workers that suffers most. Ongoing structural adjustments in the economy are accelerated as a result of
more difficult financial conditions and precipitate decisions to abandon business activities that have no long term viability. Men are typically more likely to be employed in, and seek work in, blue-collar industries that suffer disproportionately as a result of a recession.

**Youth Unemployment Rate: Male versus Female**

![Graph showing youth unemployment rate for males and females from March 2005 to March 2010.](chart)

Source: ABS Cat. No. 6202.0

18. Until recently, the male and female rates of youth unemployment were broadly similar. While the mild recession experienced in the second half of 2008 led both to rise sharply, the increase in the rate of male youth unemployment has substantially exceeded that experienced by females. The male youth unemployment rate over the past twelve months has on average been more than 2 percentage points higher than the female rate. The recent slowdown in the pace of job creation has not only disadvantaged young jobseekers disproportionately, but also young males in particular.

19. In contrast to the broader labour market, a key reason for the sharper increase in the rate of youth unemployment has been a net loss of employment amongst 15 to 24 year-olds. The level of total employment in the economy broadly tracked sideways over the twelve months to mid-2009, with firms responding to the downturn in labour demand by pausing recruitment and negotiating temporary reductions in working hours in order to avoid job losses. The number of 15 to 24 year-olds employed in the economy on the other hand has actually fallen considerably, with young workers finding
themselves increasingly unable to secure employment as businesses cut back on the number of entry level and other positions offered.

20. The level of youth employment peaked in January 2008 and declined sharply over the ensuing eighteen month period before reaching a low point in August 2009. Over this period the number of 15 to 24 year-olds employed fell by more than 110,000 persons, a decline of 5.8 per cent and of a magnitude unprecedented since the severe recession of the early 1990s. Employment outside of the youth labour market actually continued to increase at the same time, underscoring the extent to which the burden of the downturn has been disproportionately borne by young jobseekers. Moreover, despite a modest upswing in youth employment since August 2009, in line with the broader labour market, the number of young people in jobs was still -3.5 per cent below its peak in March 2010.

Youth and Non-Youth Employment: Change since January 2008

![Graph showing youth and non-youth employment changes from January 2008 to January 2010.]

Source: ABS Cat. No. 6202.0

21. Had it not been for a sizeable decline in the youth participation rate, the increase in the rate of youth unemployment would have been far more considerable. As labour market conditions worsened, young jobseekers became increasingly discouraged and responded by abandoning their efforts to find employment. The youth participation rate reached a recent high of 71.8 per cent in January 2008 before falling 3.6 percentage points to a low of 68.2 per cent in August 2009 and at present is only marginally above that level in spite of an improving jobs market. The last time the youth
participation rate reached these sort of low levels was during the recession of the early 1990s, which serves to re-emphasis the highly subdued nature of the jobs market facing young people.

Youth Participation Rate

2.2 YOUTH UNDEREMPLOYMENT

22. The sharp rise in the rate of youth unemployment has also been accompanied by a similar sized increase in the rate of young workers in employment but unable to find sufficient hours of work. The rate of youth underemployment heading into the economic downturn was already significantly higher than that experienced in the labour market on a whole and has been exacerbated significantly by the reduction in labour demand for low-skilled workers in particular. The surge in both youth unemployment and underemployment has led to a marked increase in the rate of labour force underutilisation amongst 15 to 24 year-olds.

23. A slow downward trend in the rate of youth underemployment was arrested suddenly in the second half of 2008. The youth underemployment rate briefly touched a cycle low of 10.8 per cent in the May quarter 2008 before surging 3.7 percentage points higher over the next twelve months to reach 14.5 per cent. The current rate of underemployment of 14.8 per cent recorded in the February quarter 2010 is a full 4.0 percentage points above the recent trough and is only fractionally below the highest ever level recorded in the previous
quarter. The rate of youth underemployment has eclipsed even that seen during the severe recession of the 1990s and points to work opportunities for the low-paid having been greatly diminished as a result of the recent economic downturn.

**Youth Underemployment Rate**

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<th>Month</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb-09</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb-10</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Source: ABS Cat. No. 6202.0

24. Those aged 15 to 24 have constituted roughly one in three of all underemployed people over the past three decades, with that proportion fluctuating within a fairly narrow band.
In recent years the rate of youth underemployment has consistently been almost double the rate of underemployment experienced in the broader labour market. The problem of youth underemployment has never really been solved and this section of our workforce persistently suffers relative disadvantage in terms of employment outcomes.

Moreover, that degree of disadvantage has worsened recently as a result of the economic slowdown. The deterioration in the rate of youth underemployment experienced over the past two years has been significantly more pronounced than that seen in the workforce as a whole. Total underemployment rose 1.6 percentage points over the past two years to February 2010, whereas the rate of youth underemployment pushed 3.8 percentage points higher over the same period, an increase more than twice as large. The current 14.8 per cent rate of youth unemployment is significantly higher that that experienced by other age groups, which ranges from 5.1 to 6.3 per cent.
27. The underemployment rate of young female employees has exceeded that recorded for young males throughout the entire history of the series. This likely reflects the fact that young female workers are more likely to seek jobs in industries that tend to employ on a casual basis whereas young male workers are more likely to seek full-time employment. Over the past two years the rate of female youth underemployment has on average been more than 4 percentage points higher than that for males of the same age. The current female youth underemployment rate is 17.4 per cent, compared to the equivalent male rate of 12.3 per cent. High rates of underemployment in the retail trade and accommodation & food services industries feature amongst the key factors explaining the divergence.
28. The combination of a high rate of youth unemployment and underemployment leads to a disturbingly high rate of labour force underutilisation amongst 15 to 24 year-olds. Labour force underutilisation is the sum of unemployment and underemployment, currently measured at 11.4 and 14.8 per cent, respectively, in the February quarter of 2010. In total, that leaves the present rate of youth labour force underutilisation at 26.2 per cent compared to the 12.8 per cent rate in the labour market as a whole. This also represents a considerable deterioration relative to the youth underutilisation rate of 19.0 per cent recorded just two years ago.

29. Around one in four young people are currently unable either to find work or a sufficient quantity of work, compared to less than one in five just two years earlier. ACCI believes the degree of underutilisation for young employees serves to counter any suggestion that the Australian labour market come through the economic downturn unscathed. As is clear from the above evidence, the burden of the reduction in labour market conditions has been particularly heavy when it comes to the circumstances of young workers. This vulnerable section of the labour force has suffered disproportionately are a result of weaker labour market conditions.
3. CONCLUSION

30. The degree of unemployment and underemployment amongst young workers carries important implications for decisions of governments and industrial tribunals. In light of the fact that 15 to 24 year olds make up a considerable proportion of those employed on awards made by industrial tribunals, and given the direct trade-offs that sometimes arise between employment and employment conditions, ACCI believes that decisions of industrial tribunals such as Fair Work Australia need to be particularly targeted in this current environment to promote and not deter youth employment in Australia, including regional Australia.
ABOUT ACCI – LEADING AUSTRALIAN BUSINESS

ACCI has been the peak council of Australian business associations for 105 years and traces its heritage back to Australia’s first chamber of commerce in 1826.

Our motto is “Leading Australian Business.”

We are also the ongoing amalgamation of the nation’s leading federal business organisations - Australian Chamber of Commerce, the Associated Chamber of Manufactures of Australia, the Australian Council of Employers Federations and the Confederation of Australian Industry.

Membership of ACCI is made up of the State and Territory Chambers of Commerce and Industry together with the major national industry associations.

Through our membership, ACCI represents over 350,000 businesses nationwide, including over 280,000 enterprises employing less than 20 people, over 55,000 enterprises employing between 20-100 people and the top 100 companies.

Our employer network employs over 4 million people which makes ACCI the largest and most representative business organisation in Australia.

Our Activities

ACCI takes a leading role in representing the views of Australian business to Government.

Our objective is to ensure that the voice of Australian businesses is heard, whether they are one of the top 100 Australian companies or a small sole trader.

Our specific activities include:

- Representation and advocacy to Governments, parliaments, tribunals and policy makers both domestically and internationally.
• Business representation on a range of statutory and business boards, committees and other fora.

• Representing business in national and international fora including Fair Work Australia, Australian Industrial Relations Commission, Safe Work Australia, International Labour Organisation, International Organisation of Employers, International Chamber of Commerce, the Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Confederation of Asia-Pacific Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the Confederation of Asia-Pacific Employers.

• Research and policy development on issues concerning Australian business.

• The publication of leading business surveys and other information products.

• Providing forums for collective discussion amongst businesses on matters of law and policy affecting commerce and industry.

Publications

A range of publications are available from ACCI, with details of our activities and policies including:

• The ACCI Policy Review; a analysis of major policy issues affecting the Australian economy and business.

• Issue papers commenting on business’ views of contemporary policy issues.

• Policies of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry – the annual bound compendium of ACCI’s policy platforms.

• The Westpac-ACCI Survey of Industrial Trends - the longest, continuous running private sector survey in Australia. A leading barometer of economic activity and the most important survey of manufacturing industry in Australia.

• The ACCI Survey of Investor Confidence – which gives an analysis of the direction of investment by business in Australia.
• The Commonwealth-ACCI Business Expectations Survey - which aggregates individual surveys by ACCI member organisations and covers firms of all sizes in all States and Territories.

• The ACCI Small Business Survey – which is a survey of small business derived from the Business Expectations Survey data.

• Workplace relations reports and discussion papers, including the ACCI Modern Workplace: Modern Future 2002-2010 Policy Blueprint and the Functioning Federalism and the Case for a National Workplace Relations System and The Economic Case for Workplace Relations Reform Position Papers.

• Occupational health and safety guides and updates, including the National OHS Strategy and the Modern Workplace: Safer Workplace Policy Blueprint.

• Trade reports and discussion papers including the Riding the Chinese Dragon: Opportunities and Challenges for Australia and the World Position Paper.

• Education and training reports and discussion papers including ACCI’s Skills for a Nation 2007-2017 Blueprint.

• The ACCI Annual Report providing a summary of major activities and achievements for the previous year.


Most of this information, as well as ACCI media releases, parliamentary submissions and reports, is available on our website – www.acci.asn.au.
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Future Directions

What is the Australian Government already doing to help?

Young People with Work?

What did the National Conversation reveal about Young People and Work?